

Excerpt from Chapter Three

Janet screamed in her head, convinced something had crawled over her during her waking. She sat up in her bed so fast the room appeared to keel over. ‘Who—what are you?’ she asked, seeking comfort from the sound of her own voice.

Penny slept on, her breath a gentle rhythmic purr.

Janet rushed to the window and threw it open, gasping for air: wholesome air drunk down in gulping mouthfuls. She stood there, trying to calm herself, but to no avail. Restlessness had consumed the night, with white clouds scudding across a moonless sky from west to east as if pursued by an unseen foe.

In the library, three floors beneath her, that knocking had started up again; its sound came and went on gusts of wind. Was the library window open, too? Why did the whole school sleep on oblivious? Was she the only person awake out of six hundred pupils, plus the twenty members of staff who lived in? Had the cook put sedatives in the supper, the same supper Janet had been too tired to eat earlier that evening?

Adrift in time and swimming in an unreality beyond her understanding, Janet had a powerful feeling of something catastrophic having just happened, a violent breach in the planet’s equilibrium.

Metal clattered across the courtyard below. The dustmen must have dropped a tin on Monday when collecting the rubbish; then again, boarding schools only had large catering tins—baked beans, syrupy plums and prunes, processed peas—and it would take a gale to hurl the empties of those around a courtyard sheltered by tall buildings on three sides.

Glass exploded outwards from a window and tinkled onto the tarmac. Janet looked down and saw a couple of figures running, hunched with their coat collars pulled up over their heads. For every three steps they advanced, the wind blew them back by two, indicative of a force-nine gale reserved for the courtyard alone. Up at Janet’s level, the air was calm and whatever had chased clouds across the heavens a few minutes earlier, had shepherded them away, leaving a clear star-studded sky in its wake.

Once the two figures had made it across the courtyard and disappeared around the front of the next building, laughter arose from beneath Janet’s window. It dug deep into her marrow, icy as her dream, yet suffused with amber light.

A new person moved on-scene, holding a lighted candle up high. *How could the candle be alight in that wind?* The person started to dance, first in an untrained long-legged lope, then spinning faster and faster into a crazy tarantella.

Still the flame refused to die.

Bare-chested and lithe, the dancer—a man—broke into song, his melody familiar to Janet, although subtly altered in a way that slipped and slid about her mind, a little out of reach, making it impossible to identify.

Three other figures appeared, drawn to the amber glow like moths, flitting, dipping, and seemingly high on alcohol or some other intoxicating substance.

With one elegant bound, the dancer leapt up onto the sundial in the middle of the courtyard. He froze for a minute—a tableau—and held his arms outstretched to the sky, candle in one hand and face illuminated, dark, handsome, but wild-eyed and a number of steps beyond stir-crazy.