

Chapter 1

“Swot”.

“Teacher’s pet”.

“Leave me alone.”

“Why don’t ya go and cry to the teacher?”

Millie was almost in tears. The other children had never liked her ever since she had come to this awful school. It wasn’t her fault that her father had left, at least she hoped it wasn’t, and then her mum had had to move into a rented house because they’d had to sell the other one. That had been a nice house with a nice garden. She had liked it there and she’d had a pony called Trixie that they had kept in the paddock at the bottom of the garden.

She had liked her school too. The other children had been more like she had been, with nice homes and ponies, big four-wheel drive cars and holidays abroad. She had really liked it at that school and had worked hard. Her favourite subject had been history and she had got very good marks for the project she had done on the Roman invasion of Britain.

But at her new school, the other children didn’t seem to want to learn about interesting things and they made her life a misery because she did.

They made fun of her because she spoke differently from the other children. They had a funny way of speaking and she couldn’t always understand what they were saying. They said that she was ‘stuck up’ and ‘snobby’ and she didn’t know why, because she didn’t think she was. She had spoken just the same as the children at her

old school and no one had ever accused her of being ‘stuck up’, whatever that meant.

She had tried to speak like the other children, but they had only laughed more, so she didn’t know what she could do except keep to herself and keep quiet in lessons. Mind you, it wasn’t easy to say anything in lessons because the others made so much noise and Miss Watson just shouted at them. But they didn’t take any notice.

The latest trouble had been caused when she had asked Miss Watson about the Romans and the ancient Britons. She was particularly interested in Boadicea. She couldn’t imagine anyone teasing Boadicea. That was the sort of person Millie would like to be. But Miss Watson had just told her to go and sit down and had kept her back after class. She hadn’t been cross with her, but had told her that they weren’t doing the Romans and that she should pay attention to what they were doing, which was the civil war.

So, today she had tried to concentrate on the civil war and had answered a few questions. That was why they were all getting onto her now. They had formed a circle round her and were pushing her from side to side calling her names as they pushed. Then she tripped, or someone tripped her, and she fell onto the ground and grazed her knee and elbow. Someone kicked her while another one picked up her school bag and scattered the contents all over the ground and then jumped on them. She heard a scrunch as her inhaler was jumped on.

Then they were gone and Miss Blackwell was standing there. Miss Blackwell was the head teacher and wasn’t very easy to talk to.

“What’s going on here?” she demanded.

“I fell over,” said Millie, not wanting to tell tales.

“Well get up then,” said Miss Blackwell. “Pick all those things up and go and tidy yourself up.” So saying, she strode off to do something more important.

“Are you all right?” The voice came from behind her. It was Matt Smith. He was in another class.

“Does it look like it?” snapped Millie.

“Only asked,” said Matt.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Millie.

“What’ve they got against you?” he asked.

“They don’t like me.”

“Why?” asked Matt. “What have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything,” she said angrily. “I’m just here. They don’t like the way I speak. They don’t like it if I take an interest in lessons. They just don’t like me, and I don’t like them either.”

“Perhaps you should try to like them.”

“What’s to like?”

“Maybe you should just keep your head down for a bit,” said Matt. “Then, perhaps, they’ll get used to you.”

“Boadicea wouldn’t have done that,” said Millie. “She wouldn’t have given in to them.”

“Who?”

“Boadicea. You know, Queen of the ancient Britons. Fought against the Romans.”

“Bit before my time,” said Matt. “But I think I see why you’re having trouble. If you talk like that they’ll think you think you’re better than them.”

“So, I can’t be interested in anything, then?”

“I didn’t say that,” said Matt. “But don’t go on about it.”

“What do you know, anyway?” said Millie turning on her heels and marching off.

“Bye then.” She didn’t answer.

She didn’t take the direct route home because she knew they’d be lying in wait for her. They did that and stole anything she had with her. They took her dinner money, sometimes, and then she had to go without anything to eat all day, and if she had any sweets, they took those as well.

When she got home she let herself in and sat down in front of the television and switched it on. Her mother wouldn’t be home for quite a while yet so she had time to relax for a bit. There wasn’t much on the television, so she started to daydream, and after a while she dozed off. The television can have that effect.

Soon she was aware that she was drifting through some woods. She must be dreaming. She knew she was dreaming. Then she was walking and she could feel the scrunch of leaves and twigs beneath her feet. It was most realistic. She could even feel the cool breeze on her face and hear the birds singing in the trees.

“Do you have to make so much noise?” The voice came from nearby and startled her. She spun round to see a strange woman sitting on the ground leaning against a tree. She had bright red hair and wore strange faded looking clothes. She could almost have been a North American Indian.

“Sorry,” said Millie. “I thought I was being quite quiet.”

“You’d never make a hunter,” said the woman. “You’d frighten everything away before you had sight of it.”

“I expect so,” said Millie. “What are you doing?”

“I was listening to that blackbird,” she said pointing into the treetops.

“So?” said Millie. “What’s so important about that?”

“It had important news that I wanted to hear.” Now Millie knew she was dreaming, and dreams don’t have to make sense, but she felt she had to say something.

“And what did it have to say, then?” asked Millie.

“It was saying that there was a group of horsemen coming this way, but you frightened it off before I could find out any more.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?” said Millie.

“I don’t care what you believe,” said the woman. “But everyone knows that the blackbird has the most advanced language in the bird world. Have you never listened to it?”

“Well, of course I’ve heard them sing,” said Millie. “But it is just a song. There are no words.”

“There are words there for those that would hear.”

“Who are you?” asked Millie, suddenly inquisitive.

“You wouldn’t know my name,” came the reply. “But I know yours.”

“I bet you don’t,” said Millie.

“I do.”

“Then what is it?”

“Millie!” The name was shouted but the voice was different to the voice of the strange woman. Her lips were moving but a different voice came out.

“Millie,” it was louder now. “Millie!”

Suddenly she was awake and her mother was standing in front of her taking off her coat.

“Really, Millie,” she said. “At least you could have started getting the tea ready. Don’t you think I’ve got enough to do already?”

“Sorry,” she said and got to her feet.

“And what have you been doing with your clothes? Your jacket is ruined. I can’t afford new clothes for you every five minutes.”

“Sorry,” said Millie. “I fell over.”

“You really should be more careful. I’ve got enough to do without having to mend and wash your clothes every day. You never were like this at your old school.”

“I hate this school,” said Millie. “I really hate it. Why can’t I go back to my old school?”

“You know we can’t afford it,” said her mother. “We can’t afford to live in that area anymore, so we just have to make the best of it. Why don’t you like this school? You’re not being bullied, are you?”

“Of course not,” said Millie. “I can look after myself.”

“Well what is it then?”

“It’s boring,” said Millie. “No one listens to the teachers. They just make a noise and talk among themselves.”

“I think I’d better make an appointment to see your teacher then,” said her mother.

“No, you can’t do that,” said Millie in a panic.

“I think I can, and I think I’d better. We can’t have you failing your exams, can we?”

“Exams aren’t for ages,” said Millie. “It’s years before I have to take exams.”

“I don’t think so. You’ve got SATS this year and it all goes on your record. You need to do well at school if you want to make something of yourself.”

“It didn’t do you any good, did it?”

“There’s no need for that,” said her mother, crossly. “I haven’t had chance to make a career for myself, and now it’s too late to get a decent job. That’s why you have to think of your own future and take it seriously or you could end up like me. I’ll ring Miss Watson for an appointment in the morning, though I can ill afford the time off.”

Millie knew it wasn’t worth arguing so she decided it was best to help get the tea ready. That evening, Millie’s mother sat down in front of the television and set about mending Millie’s torn jacket.

“You really must be more careful with your clothes, Millie,” she said. “We can’t afford new ones you know.”

“I know,” said Millie. “I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful in future.”

“Good. I hope you are. Have you finished your homework?”

“Not quite,” said Millie. “I’ll take it up to my room and finish it before I go to bed.”

It was history, which Millie liked, but unfortunately it was about the civil war, which she was less keen on. She just couldn’t get in tune with any of the characters. King Charles seemed to be rather pompous, while Oliver Cromwell seemed a bit of a thug. Still, she would have to do it. It took her about three quarters of an hour after which she felt exhausted, so she got ready for bed, shouted ‘goodnight’ down to her mother before dropping her head onto the pillow.