Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Piper

Written by

Danny Weston

Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in 2014 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted
in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written
permission of the publisher.

The right of Danny Weston to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Copyright © Danny Weston, 2014

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 051 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

PROLOGUE

7TH SEPTEMBER 1874

It's the music that wakes Alison. She opens her eyes and is instantly alert, with only one thought in her mind: They are in the garden again.

She turns her head to look towards the window. There's a soft wash of moonlight filtering in, picking out the faces of the dolls that sit in a row on the window seat, watching her. Then the voice speaks, a soft, entreating whisper.

Tillie's voice.

Alison! Get out of bed. Go and look!

It must be past midnight, a time when she should be fast asleep, but how *can* she sleep when the music is still playing, that sweet, lilting refrain? High-pitched and reedy, it sounds to her like a flute or a recorder. She can't help herself. She pushes aside the covers and climbs out

of bed, then pads softly across the bare floorboards to the window.

Outside, the garden is wreathed in a thick grey mist that floats a foot or so above the grass. At first, the garden appears to be empty and she feels a jolt of disappointment spill through her. But then she sees them, dancing towards her along the avenue of trees at the top of the lawn, their jerky figures twirling and swaying in time to the music. It's the same two girls she saw the night before, she's sure of that, their faces pale in the moonlight, their long unkempt hair hanging into their eyes. Now they seem to become aware of her and one of them lifts a hand to beckon, just as she always does. Alison knows she wants her to join in the dance and she is tempted. So tempted. That's when Tillie's voice pipes up again.

Why not go out there? Just once? You know you'd love to.

'I shouldn't,' she whispers. 'It's late.'

But the music. Listen! Doesn't it call to you? Wouldn't you love to dance with the other children? Just this one time?

And she has to admit that she would. She is itching to do it, has been ever since she first started hearing that maddening tune a week ago – faint and distant at first, but getting closer every night. And besides, what would be the

harm? Who would even know? She turns away from the window and heads for the door. She opens it as silently as she can, but it gives a maddening creak as it swings back, making a noise that seems to reverberate throughout the house. She stands for a moment, breathing heavily, listening, ready to run back to bed if she hears the sound of somebody coming to investigate . . . but no, there's just a deep rhythmic snore coming from the room to her left and the ticking of the old grandfather clock down in the drawing room. She steals out onto the landing, placing her feet with care on the ancient wooden boards. She stands there for a moment, needing to be sure she won't be discovered out of bed. Then she goes down the stairs.

In a matter of moments, she is at the front door of the house. She slides back the big bolts, wincing at the scraping of rusty metal on metal. Then she pushes the door open and, taking a deep breath, she steps outside. It's a warm summer's night and a full moon hangs in the sky – bigger, rounder than she's ever seen it before. Her nostrils savour the tang of freshly mown grass. Out here, the music is so sweet, so compelling, it is irresistible. She looks across the mist-shrouded lawn and there are the girls, dancing together and still beckoning to her to join them. Not for the first time, she

wonders who they are, what has brought them out here to dance in the dead of night. She starts to walk towards them and, as she does, she throws a look over her shoulder at the house. Everything is in darkness. Nobody knows she's out here…

But she can't think about that now, she is intent on joining the other girls. Even as she runs towards them, she sees that they're moving away from her, heading back towards the avenue of trees at the top of the lawn. Far off, she thinks she glimpses another figure, a man, and she starts to think that the music is somehow emanating from him. But he too is moving away, striding purposefully towards the gates that lead to the marsh.

'Wait for me!' she whispers, but the girls pay her no heed, they keep dancing away through the mist as though intent on following the man, as though he is somehow drawing them like moths to a flame. Alison goes after them, determined to catch up, but at the same time aware that she is moving further and further away from home. She tries telling herself that she should turn back, but the music seems to fill her head now, it too is urging her to follow. And she knows she has to catch up with the girls somehow. She only wants that one quick dance.

In what seems like moments, they are out of the grounds and moving across the flat expanse of land beyond. She cannot see the grass beneath its cover of mist, but she can feel the lush summer growth flattening under the soles of her feet. She is beginning to feel annoyed. Every time she thinks she's close to catching up with the girls, they dance away again, keeping themselves tantalisingly just out of her reach. If she falls too far behind, thinking of giving up the chase, they pause to summon her onwards again.

She has no idea how long she's been following them or how much ground she's covered, but up ahead is the line of trees that follows the banks of the Military Canal. The two girls move to the edge of the water and then they wait there. They begin to sway and whirl in the shadows of the trees, as though abandoning themselves completely to the music. Now they are beckoning to Alison to join them, and this time nobody is moving away from her. This time they are waiting. Waiting for her to join them.

Delighted, she quickens her step. She reaches the girls and begins to dance with them, copying their strange, jerky steps, flinging out her arms and stamping her feet, her whole body thrilling to the swooping, soaring sound of the

flute. For a moment, she is transported. She has never known such joy, such pleasure.

And then, quite abruptly, the music stops.

She comes to her senses. She finds herself standing with two ragged strangers and suddenly, horribly, it comes to her how far from home she is, how very vulnerable. She looks at the girls and begins to see them in more detail. The first of them turns to stare at her and she sees that the girl's face is beyond pale. Her skin is the colour of bleached parchment and her mouth hangs open, wide, wider than she would have thought possible. A thread of drool dangles from her bottom lip. She takes a lurching step towards Alison. As Alison backs away she collides with the other girl standing just behind her. An overpowering stench fills her nostrils and, when she turns, she gasps in horror – the girl has no eyes and the empty sockets of her skull are writhing with clusters of glistening, grey worms.

She gasps again, pulls away and backs instinctively towards the bank of the canal, aware as she does so that the girls are walking slowly after her. She catches fleeting images of things she does not want to see – rotting flesh, lengths of exposed bone . . . and then she is standing by the canal bank, her bare feet teetering on the very edge, staring frantically

this way and that. She wants to scream, but can find no sounds within her. She wants to run, but her legs seem to have lost the power to do anything more than hold her upright. She knows how to swim and, if she has to, she will fling herself into the water and power her way to the far bank.

Then she becomes aware of a man, standing a short distance away, watching in silence. She has an impression of a mouldering uniform: grimy epaulettes, rotting gold braid, mildewed leather boots. Some last desperate instinct tells her to speak to him, that he alone has the power to help her.

'Please,' she whispers. Just the one word. It's all she can manage.

But he simply lifts a long white pipe to his lips and begins to play again, that same, mournful tune.

Then a pair of cold wet hands clamp tightly around her ankles. She looks down in mute shock to see that the hands have risen up out of the water behind her. They pull back hard and she has time for one, short scream, before she flops down hard onto her face, the impact driving the breath out of her lungs. She digs her fingers into the soft earth of the canal bank and tries desperately to hang on, but the force

pulling her is too powerful to resist for long. Her fingernails tear and she slides backwards into the water. Then she's under the surface, the oily olive green water is in her mouth and nostrils and she is dimly aware of more hands reaching up to her, clinging tightly onto her arms and legs as they take her down into the icy weed-choked darkness . . .

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

Helen turns her bicycle off the main road into the car park of the Summer View Care Home. She tries not to laugh at the irony of the name. It's late May, almost June, but it might as well be November; it's a cold, blustery day with dark clouds choking the sky and the threat of rain in the air.

It's not the best day for a bike ride, but with Mum out of the country on business and Dad down with one of his famous migraines, Helen's the only one capable of visiting Grandad Peter on his eighty-eighth birthday. Dad was supposed to be driving the two of them here this afternoon, but he claims to be feeling too ill. Helen's determined that somebody should visit her grandad. She's sure he has a soft spot for her, even if he isn't always good at showing it.

She chains her bike to some railings then heads towards the entrance, nodding to Eileen, the plump, friendly receptionist in the foyer.

'All on your own today?' asks Eileen, looking rather disapproving. She clearly doesn't think that a fourteen-year-old has any right to be out on her own.

'Dad's not feeling too good,' says Helen, by way of explanation.

'Very well, my dear. You know the way.'

Helen smiles and heads across the foyer, her feet making no sound on the thick pile carpet. Off the main corridor is Grandad Peter's door. She raps gently on it.

'Come in.' He manages to make the two words sound weary, and even Helen's spirits sink a little. This clearly isn't going to be much fun. She takes a deep breath and steps into the room, which is filled with that 'old person' smell – equal parts vegetable soup and Vick's VapoRub. There are a couple of rather pathetic-looking red balloons floating in one corner of the room, the nursing staff's attempt to add a sense of occasion, Helen supposes, but it has failed dismally. The room is about as jolly as a funeral.

Grandad Peter is sitting in his armchair in front of the window, gazing out at the well-tended gardens. He doesn't

even turn his head to see who's come to visit him and Helen feels a twinge of irritation. Strange old Grandad Peter, with his thin face and his haunted eyes and his odd, detached manner. Helen likes the old man, she really does, but he doesn't make it easy. Perhaps it's because she senses a terrible sadness in him, as though something happened to him back in the day and he's never quite managed to get out from under its shadow.

She's never understood why he and Dad don't seem to get along, the two of them so distant, hardly ever speaking to each other. Grandad Peter's wife, Emily, died more than a year ago, so Helen knows she needs to make a special effort with him because he must be so lonely. She unhooks the rucksack and takes out the slightly battered cake in its bright blue box.

'Happy birthday!'

He looks at her for a moment, his cold blue eyes seeming to study her, evaluate her. She realises that she hasn't really ever spent time with Grandad Peter on her own before. He's never shown her much affection, not like most of her friends' grandparents, but she's always felt that deep down he does care about her. She finds herself wondering what happened to him to make him like this – so cold, so distant.