

THE PRICKER

by lizzie Qnert

When I don my tall hat and dark cloak, no one dares to look too closely. The gentle swell of my bosoms, bound tightly under my robes, will not be noticed. The feminine timbre of my voice never questioned. All fear drawing attention to themselves. All fear being on the receiving end of my trade.

This is a merciless world I live in. Especially for my sex. Spinsters or widows toil in bone-wearing jobs—day in, and day out—for a pittance. Married women fare no better. And, as proven by today's proceedings, *all* women are subject to the capricious whims of men.

All women, but me.

I refuse to raw my hands for scraps of food. I refuse to be vulnerable to wild accusations. I refuse to submit to the undeserved authority of self-proclaimed righteous men.

But alas, the price of my freedom is dear. I have become what I loathe.

Isobel Simpson and Isobel Elder will stand before me, more victims of the puritanical patriarchy, and I will determine their fate.

I slide my small feet into the paper-stuffed worn leather boots, straighten my hat and gather my tools: a straight razor, shears, a knife, and my special bodkin needle.

The ministers, local lairds, church elders and the gawking, blood-thirsty public surround the quaking Isobels. The crowd quiets when I stride across the commons, parting to clear a path to the women.

Neither woman is guilty as charged. None of them have been. But the £6 apiece and the continuation of my exclusive contract in Morayshire has preordained the outcome of my tests.

The women's wrists are bound, hands lifted above their head and lashed to a rough wooden pole. I strip the muddied clothes from their bodies. The cold air goosepimples their flesh. Isobel Simpson folds into herself, doing her best to hide her nakedness from the judging, crazed stares. But not Isobel Elder. She squares her shoulders and lifts her chin, boring her hate into me with her ice-blue eyes.

I applaud it—her hate. I invite it in, wallow in it. An homage to my self-abhorrence.

Grabbing my razor from my worn, leather bag I begin with my valiant Isobel. I hack off her long, blonde tresses. Her jaw clenches with rage. She jerks when I attempt to bald her with the straight razor.

“Stillness,” I command. “Or you will be cut.”

“My blood is on your hands.” Her whisper is harsh. Her spittle flecks my face.

Sadly, she’s correct. And not only her blood. She is not the first, nor the last, I will condemn to death. Their convicted souls weigh heavily on me, but to stop is to end my own life. There is no choice but to continue.

A church elder squeezes her face in his meaty grip, as I remove every hair on her head. I wave him away when I begin shaving her body, scanning for marks as I go. Many moles dot her skin, making testing notably easier. She struggles and the razor nicks her white flesh. Blood drips from the tiny wound and a gasp rises through the crowd.

I lift my hand, and the crowd falls silent as I continue my painstaking task. Repulsive murmurs reach my ears as I open her womanly folds, removing every last speck of fuzz. Isobel Simpson whimpers beside her, but Isobel Elder’s head does not bow.

Her fiery breath burns my neck as I work. When every strand of hair has been shorn from Isobel Elder, I present her bare flesh to the crowd.

Repellant chants and taunts lash her with their vitriol. The more odious the words, the taller she stands.

Again, I raise my hands for silence. “Testing will begin.”

The blade of my knife glistens in the afternoon sun as I wave it in front of the salivating parish of Forres.

“I present you with reaction of normal flesh.” I slice the sharp metal across her thigh. Isobel Elder gasps and folds with pain. But within seconds, before blood seeps from the wound, she draws herself upright.

“You saw her pain. You see her blood,” I announce to the crowd.

“We do! We do!” they chant in unison.

I remove my special bodkin from my leather case, waving it in front of the frothing community. “Now we test her marks. The marks of the Devil.”

They roar their approval. The smell of bloodlust sickens me, but the spectacle must continue.

The metal shaft of my bodkin is as thick as the quill of a raven feather; the point sharp. I prick my fingertip. A drop of blood appears and I display the evidence to the crowd. “Normal skin will mark. Normal skin will bleed.” I point to a large mole in the pit of Isobel Elder’s arm. “This will not.”

I gently touch the tip of my bodkin to the brown blemish and push. To the masses, it appears as though the needle penetrates her skin deeply; sinking in to the hilt.

But my pricking tool is a cheat; my performance chicanery.

As I push, the needle retracts into the hollow wooden handle, causing Isobel no pain and leaving no mark. I retract it with a flourish and demand three elders to confirm the results.

At the nod of their heads, I make the declaration. “She is a witch.”

With those four words, I’ve condemned another woman to die. Better her, than me.

Christian Caddell, disguised as John Dickson, was an infamous witch-pricker in 17th century Scotland. She is responsible for at least six women’s death and is suspected to have taken part in at least ten positive convictions.

After wrongly accusing an influential court messenger, Christian was arrested and her gender was discovered. On May 4, 1663, she was banished to a fever-infected plantation in Barbados, the same day Isobel Simpson and Isobel Elder were burnt as witches.