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Opening extract from
The Witching Hour

Written by

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For the Laird family



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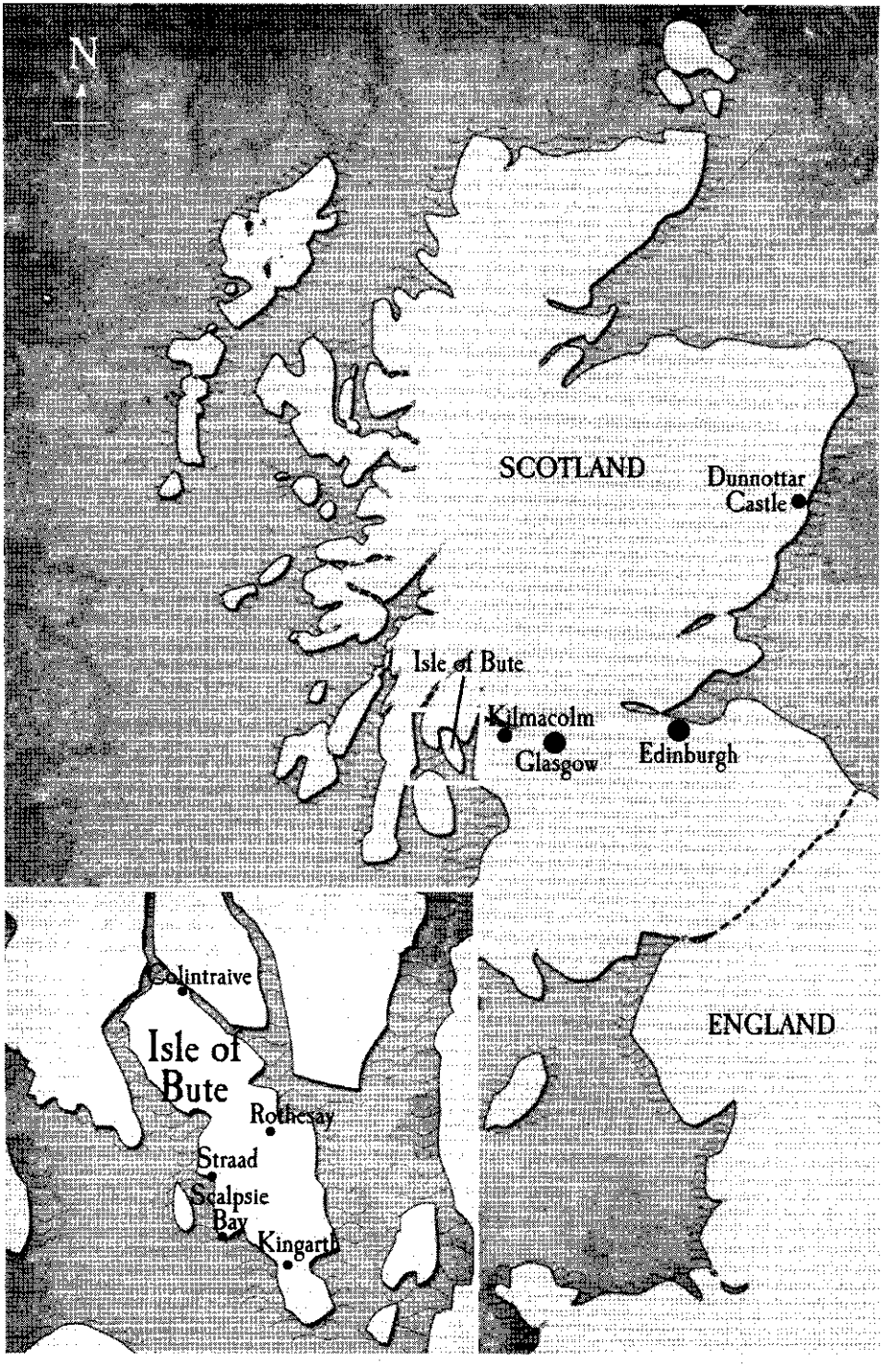
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Preface

Scotland was a rough and violent place in the seventeenth century. In the north, the Highland clans were at each other's throats. In the southern Lowlands, fiery Protestants had swept away the old Catholic religion and created their own Presbyterian Church.

These Presbyterians were filled with enthusiasm and a sense of their own rightness. They didn't want anyone else to appoint their ministers or interpret the Bible for them. They wanted to pray and run their Church in their own way.

Four hundred miles away, down in London, King Charles II and his government felt threatened. They saw the Presbyterians' spirit of independence as a rebellion. The King decided to choose bishops to rule the Church in Scotland so that he could control the turbulent Scots through them.

The Presbyterians were infuriated. The King had no right, they said, to interfere with their religion. The most determined of them banded together and signed documents called 'Covenants', in which they promised

to remain true to their Church and resist the King. These men and women were called 'Covenanters'.

The government in London decided to crush these rebellious people. As the years passed, and the Covenanters continued to reject the King's bishops, Charles's soldiers hunted them down with increasing cruelty. The Covenanters resisted, slipping out into the hills to worship in the open air in their own way. Those who were caught were imprisoned, fined and sometimes even executed. This tragic period in Scottish history is known as the Killing Times.

Several of my own ancestors were Covenanters, and three of them feature as characters in this novel. Their names were John Laird, Stephen Barbour and Hugh Blair. Of them all, most is known about Hugh Blair, who lived on a farm called Ladymuir near Kilmacolm in Renfrewshire. Most of what I've written about Hugh Blair happened to the real Hugh Blair.

When I visited the Riis family, who now live at Ladymuir farm, they showed me round their land and took me to see a hollow by the stream. It was here that the famous Covenanter preacher, James Renwick, came to speak one day in 1684 to a crowd of brave people who risked everything to hear him, even as the dragoons scoured the hills all around, their muskets primed to shoot.

The religion of both Catholics and Protestants in those days was harsh rather than consoling. Being in the

right and doing one's duty were seen as more important than showing love and mercy to others. Religious men and women believed that the Devil was a real presence, stalking the world, seeking to tempt people away from the truth, and that those who sinned in thought or deed would be sure to go to Hell and burn in everlasting fire.

At the same time that the King was pursuing the Presbyterian rebels with merciless violence, there was a fever of witch-hunting in Scotland. Scared by the violent forces at work in society, people turned on each other. Those most commonly accused of being witches were elderly women. Many were arrested, tried for the crime of witchcraft and strangled, after which their bodies were burned at the stake.

In my family there was a woman called Margaret Laird who was accused of being a witch in 1698. The records of the parish of Kilmacolm describe the fits and fainting spells she suffered. In those excitable times, that was probably enough to make people suspicious of her. Though the accusations came to nothing, it was the thought of her, and what she had suffered, that helped me to create my own Maggie in this book.

Chapter One

I was the first one to see the whale lying dead on the sand at Scalpsie Bay. It must have been washed up in the night. I could imagine it, flopping out of the sea, thrashing its tail and opening and shutting the cavern of its mouth. It was huge and shapeless, a horrible dead thing, and it looked as if it would feel slimy if you dared to touch it. I crept up to it cautiously. There were monsters in the deep, I knew, and a great one, the Leviathan, which the Lord had made to be the terror of fishermen. Was this one of them? Would it come to life, and devour me?

The sand was ridged into ripples by the outgoing tide, which had left the usual orange lines of seaweed and bright white stripes of shells. The tide had scooped out little pools around the dead beast's sides and crabs were already scuttling there, as curious as me.

It was a cold day in December, the sun barely risen, and I'd pulled my shawl tightly round my head and shoulders, but it wasn't only the chill of the wet sand beneath my bare feet that made me shiver. There was a strangeness in the air. The early mist was clearing. Across the water I could already make out the Isle of Arran, rearing up out of the sea, the tops of its mountains hidden as usual in a crown of clouds. I'd seen Arran a dozen times a day, every day of my life, each

time I'd stepped out of the door of my grandmother's cottage. I knew it so well that I hardly ever noticed it.

But today, as I looked up at the mountains from the dead whale in front of me, the island seemed to shift, and for a moment I thought it was moving towards me, creeping across the water, coming for me, wanting to swallow me up, along with the beach, and Granny's cottage, and Scalpsie Bay, and the whole of the Isle of Bute.

And then beyond Arran, out there in the sea, a shaft of sunlight pierced through the clouds and laid a golden path across the grey water, tingeing the dead whale with brilliant light. The clouds were dazzled with glory and I was struck with a terror so great that my legs stiffened and I couldn't move.

'It's the Lord Jesus,' I whispered. 'He's coming now, to judge the living and the dead.'

I waited, my hands clamped together in a petrified clasp, expecting to see Christ walk down the sunbeam and across the water, angels flying on gleaming wings around him. There would be trumpets, the minister had said, as the saved rose up in the air like flocks of giant birds to meet the Lord, but down here on the ground there would be wailing and gnashing of teeth as the damned were sucked down into Hell by the Evil One.

'Am I saved, Lord Jesus? Will you take me?' I cried out loud. 'And Granny too?'

The clouds were moving further apart and the golden path was widening, making the white crests on the little waves sparkle like the clothes of the Seraphim.

I was certain of it then. I wasn't one of the Chosen to

rise with Jesus in glory. I was one of the damned, and Granny was too.

'No!' I shrieked. 'Not yet! Give me another chance, Lord Jesus!'

And then I must have fallen down because the next thing I remember was Granny saying, 'She's taken a fit, the silly wee thing. Pick her up, can't you?'

I was only half conscious again, but I knew it was Mr Macbean's rough hands painfully holding my arms, and the gruff voice of Samuel Kirby complaining as he held my legs.

'What are you doing, you dafties?' Granny shouted in the rough, angry voice I dreaded. 'Letting her head fall back like that! Trying to break her neck, are you? Think she's a sack of oatmeal?'

Behind me, above the crunch of many feet following us up the beach towards our cottage, I could hear anxious murmurs.

'The creature's the size of a kirk! And the tail on it, did you see? It'll stink when it rots. Infect the air for weeks, so it will.'

And the sniping tongues were busy as usual.

'Hark at Elspeth! Shouting like that. Evil old woman. Why does she want to be so sharp? They should drop the girl and let the old body carry her home herself.'

Then came the sound of our own door creaking back on its leather hinge, and the smell of peat smoke, and the soft tail of Sheba the cat brushing against my dangling hand.

They dropped me down on the pile of straw in the corner that I used as a bed, and a moment later Granny had shooed them out of the cottage. I was quite back in my wits by then, and I started to sit up.

'Stay there,' commanded Granny.

She was standing over me, frowning as she stared at me. Her mouth was pulled down hard at the corners, and the stiff black hairs on her chin were quivering. They were sharp, those bristles, but not as sharp as the bristles in her soul.

'Now then, Maggie. What was all that for? Why did you faint? What did you see?'

'Nothing, Granny. The whale . . .'

She shook her head impatiently.

'Never mind the whale. While you were away, in the faint. Was there a vision?'

'No. I just – everything was black. Before that I thought I saw . . .'

'What? What did you see? Do I have to pull it out of you?'

'The sky looked strange, and there was the whale – it scared me – and I thought that Jesus was coming. Down from the sky. I thought it was the Last Day.'

She stared at me a moment longer. There wasn't much light in the cottage, only a square of brightness that came through the open door, and a faint glow from the peats burning in the middle of the room, but I could see her eyes glittering.

'The whale's an omen. It means no good. It didn't speak to you?'

'No! It was dead. I thought the Lord Jesus was coming, that's all.'

'Hmph.' She turned away and pulled on the chain that hung from the rafter, holding the cauldron in place over the fire. 'That's nothing but kirk talk. You're a disappointment to me, Maggie. Your mother had it, the gift of far-seeing, but you've nothing more in your head than what's been put there by the minister. You're your father over again, stubborn and blind and selfish. My Mary gave you nothing of herself at all. If I hadn't delivered you into this world with my own hands, I'd have thought you were changed at birth.'

Granny knew where to plunge her dagger, and twist it for good measure. There was no point in answering her. I bit my lip, stood up and shook the straws off the rough wool of my skirt.

'Shall I milk Blackie now?'

'After you've touched a dead whale? You'll pass on the bad luck and dry her milk up for good. You're more trouble than you're worth, Maggie. Always were, always will be.'

'I didn't touch the whale. I only—'

She raised a hand and I ducked.

'Get away up the hill and cut a sack of peats. The stack's low already, or had you been too full of yourself to notice?'

Cutting peats and lugging them home was the hardest work of all, and most times I hated it, but today, in spite of the rain that was now sweeping in from the sea, I was glad to get out of the cottage and run away up the

glen. I usually went the long way round, up the firm path that went round and about before it reached the peat cuttings, but today I plunged straight on through the bog, trampling furiously through the mass of reeds and flags and the treacherous bright grass that hid the pools of water, not hearing the suck of the mud as I pulled my feet out, not feeling the wetness that was seeping up the bottom of my gown, not even noticing the scratches from the prickly gorse as it tore at my arms.

'An evil old woman. They were right down there. That's what you are.' Away from Granny, I felt brave enough to answer back. 'I *am* like my mam. I've the same curly hair, so Tam says.'

Most people called old Tam a rogue, a thief, a lying, drunken rascal, living in his tumbledown shack like a pig in a sty. But he was none of those things to me. He'd known my mother and I knew he'd never lie about her to me.

I don't remember my mother. She was Granny's only child and she died of a fever, when I was a very little girl. I just about remember my father – he was a big man, not given to talking much. He was a rover by nature, Tam said. He came to the Isle of Bute from the mainland to fetch the Laird of Keames's cattle and drive them east across the hills to sell in Glasgow. He was only meant to stay on Bute for a week or two, while the cattle were rounded up for him, but he chanced on my mother as she walked down the lane to the field to milk Blackie one warm June evening. The honeysuckle was

in flower, and the wild roses too, and it was all over with him at once, so Tam said.

'Never a love like it, Maidie,' he told me. 'Don't you listen to your granny. A child born of love you are, given to love, made for love, and you'll not rest till you find it for yourself.'

'Granny said the sea took my father,' I asked Tam once. 'What did she mean?'

I'd imagined a great wave curling up the beach, twining round my father's legs and sucking him back into the depths.

'An accident, Maidie. Nothing more.' Tam heaved a sigh. 'Your father was taking the cattle to the mainland up by Colintraive, making them swim across the narrows there. He'd done it a dozen times before. The beasts weren't easy – lively young steers they were – and one of them was thrashing about in the water as if a demon was possessing it. Perhaps a demon was, for the steer caught your father on the head with its horn, and it went right through his temple. He went down under the water, and when he was washed up a week later, there was a wound from his eyebrow to the line of his hair deep enough to put your hand inside.'

There's nothing like hard work in the cold of a wet December day for cooling your temper, and by the time I got home I was more miserable than angry. My arms were aching from the weight of the sack. I was wet through. The mud on my hem slapped clammily against

my ankles, and I wished I'd been sensible instead of running through the bog.

I was expecting another scold from Granny as soon as she saw the state of my clothes, and the rips in my shawl, and my face all streaked with peat and rain and tears, but she only said, 'Oh, so it's you come home again, and a fine sight you are too. Running through the bog like a mad child – *I* saw you.'

She took my wooden bowl down from the shelf, ladled some hot porridge into it from the cauldron and put it into my hands.

'Take off that soaking shawl and put it to dry, and your gown too.'

It wasn't an apology exactly, but it was all I'd get. I could see that she was sorry for what she'd said by the way she set a stool and told me to sit down by the fire of peats that were smouldering on the hearthstone in the middle of the room. I was feeling chilled now, shivering, and I crouched low over the weak flames, never minding the thick smoke that curled up into my face, grateful for Sheba, who jumped up into my lap and let me warm my hands in her soft black fur.

The days are short in December. It was soon time to fetch Blackie in for the night and shut her into her byre, which was no more than a room beside the kitchen. For once, Granny went out to find her herself, and to milk her too. As she came back towards the cottage I could hear her talking to someone, and laughing. There was only one person who could draw such a happy sound from her.

Tam, I thought, jumping up with delight.

Blackie's hoofs clopped on the stone threshold of her byre, and then came a thud against the thin wooden partition at the end of the kitchen as she butted at her manger with her head. The kitchen door opened, and Granny and Tam came in.

Tam's shirt was dark with sweat, his short breeks were ragged at the ankles and torn at the knees and the plaid he wore wrapped round himself was so dirty and stained that the wool's once-bright colours had gone for good. But that meant nothing to me. His front teeth were as few as the posts of a rotten fence, his face was pitted and scarred with the smallpox, his long, tall body was as thin as a stick and the hair under his blue bonnet had mostly fallen out, but there was no one who cared for me as Tam did, and no one else that I loved.

'Look at the girl now,' he said, setting a black bottle down on the table. 'She summons monsters from the sea with the power of her beautiful eyes. It was you who sang to the poor whale, was it, Maidie, and lured it up to its death on the beach?'

'I did *not*.'

For once, I didn't like Tam's teasing. The whale had been too grand and strange for jokes.

Granny had gone outside again to fetch water from the burn.

'Why do you always call me Maidie?' I asked Tam. I'd meant to ask him often but never dared while Granny was around.

He looked over his shoulder but Granny was still filling the bucket.

'You know why, my pretty one.' He pinched my chin. 'It was what I always called your mother. Mary her name was to everyone else, but Maidie she was to me. And you are just like her. Even prettier, maybe.'

'But she had the gift, didn't she? Granny said so. The second sight. She was far seeing.'

'Oh, that.' He shook his head. 'You shouldn't mind your granny, Maidie. She speaks sharply, and who wouldn't, with the troubles life has brought her? She loves you in her heart.'

I shook my head and looked away from him, down into the red caves the fire had made in the burning peats.

'Anyway, be thankful that your mother didn't pass the gift on to you. It's not a comfortable thing, to foresee the future and know beforehand the manner of a person's death.'

Granny came back then, a heavy bucket in each hand, and Tam set about fetching down the beakers and pouring out the whisky, a good long slug for the two of them and a little drop for me. Then he put his hand inside his shirt, and with a flourish he pulled out a duck, holding it up by its webbed feet so that its bright feathered head hung down, its eyes dead and glazed.

'Will you look at this. A king's feast, that's what we'll have tonight. You'll want to save the feathers, Elspeth. Where shall I pluck the wee fellow?'

Oh, it was good, that night. The duck's feathers flew and the pot simmered and the whisky sank in the bottle. And Tam, as he always did, started on the old stories. They were stories of the sea, put into his head by the whale. He told my favourite, the one about the seal who shed her skin and became a beautiful woman, and married a fisherman. Her children were as pretty as she was, and she loved them, I suppose, but one night she found her old sealskin and put it on, and a longing for the sea overcame her. Back she went under the waves, a seal once more, and her children never saw her again.

Like I never saw my mam again, I thought.

Tam went on to tell tales of mermaids and sea horses and a monster that lived in a loch along with the hero who killed it. But what with the purring of Sheba on my lap, and the good food in my stomach, and the peat smoke in my eyes, and the whisky in my head, and the tiredness in my arms and legs, I couldn't stay awake.

'No, no, Elspeth.' I heard Tam say. 'It was Canola who invented the harp. She heard the wind blow through the sinews that clung to the ribs of a rotting dead whale, and it gave her the idea.'

Whales again, I thought. I was so sleepy I almost fell off my stool. Tam saw me nod, and laughed.

'Away to your bed, Maidie, and dream sweetly all night long.'