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Opening extract from

Dark Spell

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PROLOGUE

I am living in a nightmare. There is nothing but fear and darkness and noise. I feel the weight of the earth above me, pressing down, waiting to devour me.

The candles flicker. Please, God, don't let them go out and drown me in darkness.

I would lay down the pickaxe and crawl out of this hole into the light, but the commander would kill me with as little thought as he would give to the killing of a rat. There is nothing I can do but dig.

Perhaps hell will be like this.

1. VALENTINE'S DAY

"Imagine what it must have been like," said Mr Davidson. "Kept in a dungeon for weeks, then dragged out and tied to a stake..." he paused for dramatic effect, "...and burned alive! That's what happened to George Wishart, just a few hundred metres away, in 1546. But why?"

He looked at the rows of faces in front of him, waiting in vain for some sort of response.

A hand went up.

"Yes, Evie?"

"Has anyone sent you a valentine card, sir?"

Mr Davidson flushed slightly. "This is a history lesson, Evie."

Evie Carroll gave a theatrical sigh. "I was only asking."

"You all live in St Andrews. Surely you know *something* about the history of the town?" Mr Davidson ploughed on determinedly.

The faces looking at him were perfectly blank. He swallowed nervously. There was a snigger from the back of the classroom.

Callie Hall, sitting near the back herself, thought, *Why are they doing this? He's only a student teacher, he hasn't done anything to them.*

"Come on, some of you must have ideas." Mr Davidson licked his lips and swallowed again.

It was like watching people torture a kitten. Callie felt her fingers start to tingle as her annoyance grew. She had had enough. She put down her pen which, strangely, kept rotating gently on the desk in front of her, and put up her hand to answer.

"It was religion," she said. "Protestants and Catholics."

Mr Davidson gave her a look of such naked gratitude that she was embarrassed. She looked down, caught sight of her pen, still turning by itself, and grabbed it.

"That's it exactly, Callie. Cardinal Beaton, who was Catholic, had Wishart, who was Protestant, burned as a heretic. But Wishart's friends took revenge..." He turned to write something on the board and half the class swivelled round to glare at Callie.

"You moron," hissed Jessica Langston. "Why did you spoil it?"

"She fancies him or something," said Evie under her breath. "*She* probably sent him a valentine card. She's such a loser."

Callie did her best to ignore them, and to ignore the prickling in her fingers, and stared at the board until the bell sounded for the end of the lesson and the start of lunchtime.

She contemplated eating outside somewhere, but although it was bright, it was pretty cold. It was only February after all.

The school cafeteria was full of girls giggling over valentine cards and eyeing up boys. Some of the boys were sniggering over cards too. Callie wondered fleetingly if Josh, her friend in Edinburgh, had sent

anyone a card or got one himself. She couldn't imagine him behaving like these prats, but maybe he was different in Edinburgh to how he was here.

She found a quiet table and fished her lunch and a book out of her bag. She was absorbed in both when she heard a voice in front of her.

"Got a date with Davidson yet then?"

It was Evie, lunch tray in hand, backed by the rest of the posse that seemed to travel everywhere in her wake. They all wore matching sneers.

Evie put her tray down.

"Next time there's a plan, don't screw it up, you freak." She picked up her cup of water and threw it in Callie's face. "Oops. Sorry."

A ripple of laughter ran round the room as Evie picked up her tray.

Callie watched through her dripping hair as Evie walked away, anger building inside, fingers, hands, every inch of her tingling now.

At that moment Evie seemed to slip, though there was nothing on the floor: no pool of water, no smear of ketchup, no uneven floorboard. She screamed as she went down hard on her back, the contents of her tray flying up, then falling, to land with improbable accuracy all over her.

The posse squealed in horror and hurried to help her.

Callie dried her face and her long, brown braid of hair with her scarf, and went back to her lunch, ignoring the pool of water on the table in front of her.

"What did you do to her, freak?" Callie hadn't seen Jessica stomping over. "How did you make her fall?"

Callie felt heat rising in her face as she looked at Jessica and beyond her to Evie, who was screeching and carrying on as the posse helped her to her feet. She seemed to be holding her wrist.

"How could I have made her fall? I was over here, you know that. She just slipped." Even as she said it, she could feel the treacherous prickling in her fingers again. *Not now, oh please, not now...*

The posse ushered the sobbing Evie past her, some of them shooting venomous glances at Callie.

"This is your fault, loser!" one of them shouted.

"I don't know what you did, freak, but we'll get you back for this. Just wait," Jessica spat at her as she turned to go.

Callie watched them leave, fighting the prickling, trying to calm herself. On the table, the spilled water bubbled and steamed unnoticed.

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As she sat on the bus to Pitmillie after school, she replayed the scene over and over in her head.

The way Evie had fallen... the way the food had landed all over her...

The aftermath, when people had realised she was howling because more than her pride was hurt and she was taken off to hospital with a suspected broken wrist.

It's not my fault. It's not my fault.

How could it have been her fault? She'd been nowhere near Evie. Evie had slipped, no one had pushed her, least of all Callie.

It can't be my fault.

IT'S MY FAULT.

They were right. She was a freak. And there was no one she could tell.



"Anyone in?" Callie called as she opened the front door. Chutney Mary, her tortoiseshell cat, came trotting to meet her, tail high, purring like an engine. She bent to stroke the cat's head absentmindedly as it butted against her legs in greeting.

"No one but us, puss?"

Callie made herself a cheese sandwich and settled down to work, or at least tried to. She found she couldn't concentrate, still seeing Evie's fall in her mind. After half an hour she gave up and set off for her grandparents' house.

Rose and George Ferguson lived in one of the oldest buildings in the village. It had been the smithy for at least two hundred years before they turned it into a house. Callie opened the front door – it was unlocked as usual – and peeled off her coat as she went in.

"Rose? George? Where are you?" She turned on the hall light.

There was a soft whine, and an enormous dog rose from his bed in the hall and came over to have his head scratched: Luath, the family's Scottish deerhound.

"Are they in the garden?" Callie asked the dog. He tilted his head to one side as though he was deciding how to answer her, then gave a short bark as he heard the back door open.

"Hello," Callie called.

"Hello dear," said Rose, appearing with an armful of old newspapers. "Cold today, isn't it? Go and light the fire and I'll put the kettle on. George is just finishing something in the greenhouse."

"Okay."

As Callie walked across the hall the lights flickered briefly. Rose glanced at them and pursed her lips, watching her granddaughter as she walked away. Luath pushed his massive head against her thigh.

"You can feel it too, dog, can't you? You're just too polite to say anything."

She got rid of the papers and several layers of clothing and bustled about with cakes and biscuits and the all-important teapot. Her mind, though, was elsewhere. *Callie. This can't go on much longer. The power is getting stronger.*

"I said, do you want a hand?"

Rose jumped as she registered the voice.

"Er... no, George. It's all fine. Go and see if Callie got the fire to light."

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An hour later, fortified by tea and lemon drizzle cake, Callie put her coat back on. She felt much calmer; being with Rose and George usually made her feel better. They understood far more about her than her parents did.

"School all right just now?" Rose asked casually, putting the remains of the cake back in the tin.

Callie made a face. "No worse than usual. But people are just... incredibly *annoying* sometimes. I hate the way you're not meant to show you're interested in class. It's just a few of the girls really, but everyone copies what they do. Well, not everyone, but a lot of people."

"Ah," said Rose. "It's easy for me to say, I know, but you go your own way. Don't follow them like a sheep."

"As if!"

Rose smiled. "I thought not. Away you go. Your mother will wonder where you are."

"She'll know I'm here."

"I suppose she will. Remind her about the cake sale in the church hall on Saturday. She said she'd make something."

Callie snorted. "That'll be the day."

'Now, now. Off you go."

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When Callie got home a few minutes later, the lights were on and the TV was blaring out the news. She could hear the shower going.

"Hello?"

"I'm in the kitchen." Her mother's voice competed with the newsreader's, and won.

Chutney Mary appeared at Callie's side like a familiar, and they went into the kitchen to find Julia, Callie's mother, bending to check something in the oven.

"What's for tea?"

"Pasta bake."

"Homemade?" asked Callie hopefully.

Julia shook her head ruefully. "There wasn't time. Sorry. We're only just in. Dad's in the shower. Have you been over at your gran and grandad's?"

Callie nodded. Although she always called her grandparents Rose and George, and had done so since she first learned to talk, her mother never acknowledged it. Weird.

"Rose said to remind you about some cake sale."

"Oh no. I forgot all about it."

"Just tell her you're too busy."

"No," said Julia, with a frown of resolve. "It's for the village hall roof. I'll find time to make something tomorrow. Clinic finishes early; I should be able to do it."

Callie's parents were both doctors. Her mother worked in the hospital in Dundee and her father was a GP. Cake making was not high on the list of priorities in their house.

"How was school?" Julia asked.

"Fine," said Callie.

"Anything interesting happen?"

"No."

"Did you talk to anyone today?"

"Of course. I don't go through whole days without speaking."

"You know what I mean, Callie. Don't turn everything into a confrontation. It's just a question."

Callie rolled her eyes. "*You* know I've got nothing to talk to them about." She headed out of the door. "I'm going on the computer to do my homework. Tell me when tea's ready."

She logged on to Facebook and found a message from her friend Josh.

Hi Callie

Your art trip sounded fun – not!!

Loved the skateboarding pig on YouTube – ta for the link. You should try to train Chutney Mary to do that ha ha.

Off on school ski trip tomorrow, and I've never skied (if that's how you spell it) before. Bet I break both legs.

Back end of next week.

Mum's talking about heading up to Pitmillie again this summer. Hope you're going to be around?

Josh

It was pathetic, Callie thought as she replied. Surrounded by people her own age five days a week, and her best friend was a boy who lived in Edinburgh who she'd met for two weeks last summer.

They'd been thrown together by circumstances and found they got on really well, although on the surface they had absolutely nothing in common. Since then, they'd kept in touch on Facebook and met up once, when Callie went down to Edinburgh to do her Christmas shopping. Maybe she could go down again at Easter.

Hi Josh

Try not to break too many bits!

Yeah I'm around most of the summer.

Might come down to Edinburgh at Easter to see you on your crutches ha ha ha.

Callie

Rose Ferguson stared at the water in the washing-up bowl. The face that stared back at her wasn't her own, but that of her friend and fellow witch, Bessie Dunlop.

"What's the matter, Rose?" said the wavering image.

"It's Callie. There's no doubt any more. She was here this afternoon. I could feel it crackling out of her like static and she made the lights go dim."

"But she doesn't know yet?" As Bessie tilted her head, the water sloshed to one side of the bowl.

Rose shook her head. "But she'd used her power today without knowing she'd done it, Bessie. You couldn't miss the traces. Even George could tell something was up."

Bessie Dunlop was not a woman to mince her words. "Then we have to – *you* have to – tell her as soon as possible so that we can get her trained. We can't have her ricocheting all over St Andrews leaking power everywhere."

"It's not so much telling Callie that worries me," Rose admitted. "It's telling Julia." She made a harrumphing noise. "If I didn't remember giving birth to her I'd find it hard to believe she's my daughter. I think she's still ashamed of me, you know. She certainly used to be when she was Callie's age and she'd just found out what I was. I thought she'd get over it when she inherited,

but when she didn't, it just got worse and worse. I don't want her making Callie feel like a freak."

"Keep calm, Rose. You're making the water steam at this end. She'll come round," said Bessie, trying to sound reassuring.

"You don't know how stubborn my daughter can be."

"Well, she certainly can't be any more stubborn than you."

Rose didn't rise to the bait.

"Will you tell Barbara and Isobel what's going on? We need to find a date when you can all come here, as soon as possible."

"Don't you worry, Rose. We'll all do this together."

"Thank you, Bessie."

"Who are you going to tell first?"

"Callie. If I told Julia she might up sticks and move just to avoid the truth."

"Surely not?"

"Well, maybe not, but I wouldn't put it past her to ship Callie off to some boarding school."

"Well, we can't have that. You know," Bessie mused, "it's a shame that Hogwash place doesn't exist."

"Hogwarts, Bessie, Hogwarts. And can you imagine what it would *really* have to be like? All those untrained children... they'd reduce the place to rubble in half an hour. It would have to be built like a nuclear bunker, not a castle."

They had a good laugh at that, causing little whirlpools to form in their watery images, before Rose said, "Well, I'd better go. Let me know when the others are free."

Bessie's image faded, and Rose was left staring at her own reflection once more.

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Callie pushed open The Smithy's garden gate and Luath rose from the frosty grass to greet her with a welcoming bark.

"Hello, dog. What are you doing out here in the cold?"

She waited for the dog to follow her in through the front door, but he lay back down.

"Suit yourself, you daft animal."

Callie dumped her coat on the bottom step. "Rose?" she called.

"In the kitchen."

"Oh – hello," Callie said in surprise when she went in, for not only was Rose sitting at the kitchen table, so were her old friends Bessie, Isobel and Barbara. Callie had known them all her life, but Rose didn't usually ask her to come over when they were there.

"Sit down, dear," said Rose.

She looks nervous, thought Callie. *What's going on here?*

"Have a piece of chocolate cake." Bessie pushed a plate towards her. "Isobel baked it, so it's delicious. Much better than Rose's. I'm sure Isobel would share the recipe if you asked her nicely, Rose."

Rose bridled visibly before she realised that Bessie was trying to provoke her, to distract her from her nerves. She poured Callie a cup of tea and watched as she cut herself a slice of chocolate cake.

Callie felt four pairs of eyes on her as she cut the cake. Why did this feel like an ambush?

She took a bite and made suitably appreciative noises. It *was* good, but not better than Rose's.

"How are things at school?" asked Bessie brightly. "Everything going well?"

"Same as usual," said Callie slowly.

What was going on? They *all* looked nervous now. Her fingers began to tingle.

Rose licked her lips.

"We wondered if you'd noticed anything... unusual... happening? You know... anything strange... any odd feelings?"

Callie stared at Rose and the others, trying to pretend she couldn't feel the prickling sensation surging up her arms now.

"No," she said, in a voice that didn't even convince her.

"It's all right. It's nothing to be frightened of," said Isobel.

"We've all had it," Barbara added.

Callie felt as though she couldn't breathe. She was going to pass out.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"You're like us, dear," said Bessie.

Callie looked helplessly at Rose through the cloud of sparks dancing in front of her eyes. The feeling of pressure in her head, her arms, her hands was becoming unbearable. She couldn't stop it... she felt as if she was going to explode.

"You're a witch, Callie," said Rose.

"No!" yelled Callie, slamming her hands flat on the table as she surged to her feet. There was a loud *crack!* and the table burst into flames.