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Opening extract from

Breaking the Spell
Stories of Magic and Mystery from Scotland

Written by

Lari Don

Illustrated by

Cate James

Published by

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For my mum, because lots of my favourite Scottish stories
are from the Borders and Skye. – *LD*

For PG and our travels here and there, all those years ago. – *CJ*



JANETTA OTTER-BARRY BOOKS

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Breaking the Spell

Stories of Magic and Mystery from Scotland



Written by **Lari Don**
Illustrated by **Cate James**

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS













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The Selkie's Toes

All around Scotland's coasts and islands, stories are told of selkies – seals who can shed their skins and turn into people.



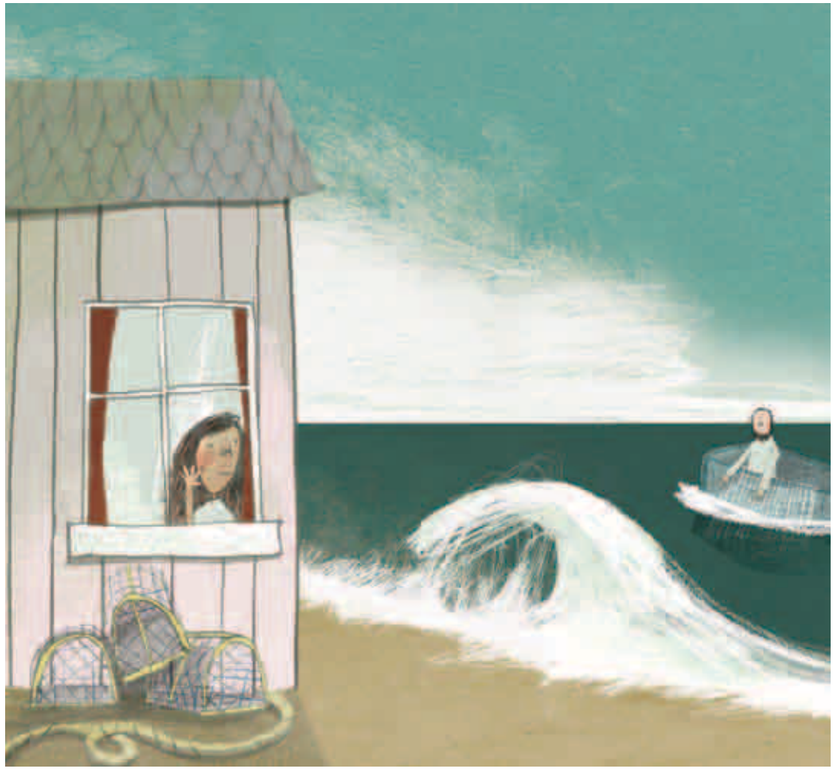
Once upon a time, a fisherman fell in love with a selkie. He hid the selkie's sealskin so she would have to stay on land with him, and over time she grew to love him, and they had a little girl. But the fisherman knew that selkie stories hardly ever have happy endings, and he knew that his selkie wife missed the sea too much to be content on land forever.

So he gave her back her sealskin, as a gift of freedom, and wept salty tears as she swam away from him and their daughter.

But he discovered he couldn't live without his selkie wife. Not even for a day. So he sat at the end of the pier, and she sang to him and he spoke to her. He left their little girl in the care of his brother while he sat, every day, on the seashore with his wife.

After weeks and months of his faithful love, the selkie wife persuaded the sea witches to grant the fisherman the power to join her in the sea, as a seal.

They were both happy together in the sea. But now their little girl was alone on land, with an uncle who hated the seals, hated that they ate his fish and ripped his nets and sang happy songs on the rocks.



And he hated that they'd taken his brother away.

He watched his niece peeling his tatties, cooking his stovies, cleaning his boots, mending his nets, weeding his garden, and as she worked, he saw her look out to sea. He knew that she had selkie blood in her, that she felt the call of the sea, and that she heard the laughter and songs of her parents.

So he told her terrible things about the seal people and the dangers of the sea. But still the girl hummed the seals' music, and gazed at the sea.



So the uncle forbade her to go past their garden gate. He boarded up the window facing the blue-green sea, and let her look only at the brown hills of the land.

Still the girl listened to the waves and the wind, and sang verses of seal song.

So the uncle asked the wise women of the village for advice. He listened to their tales, and he learnt of the one way to keep his niece on land forever.

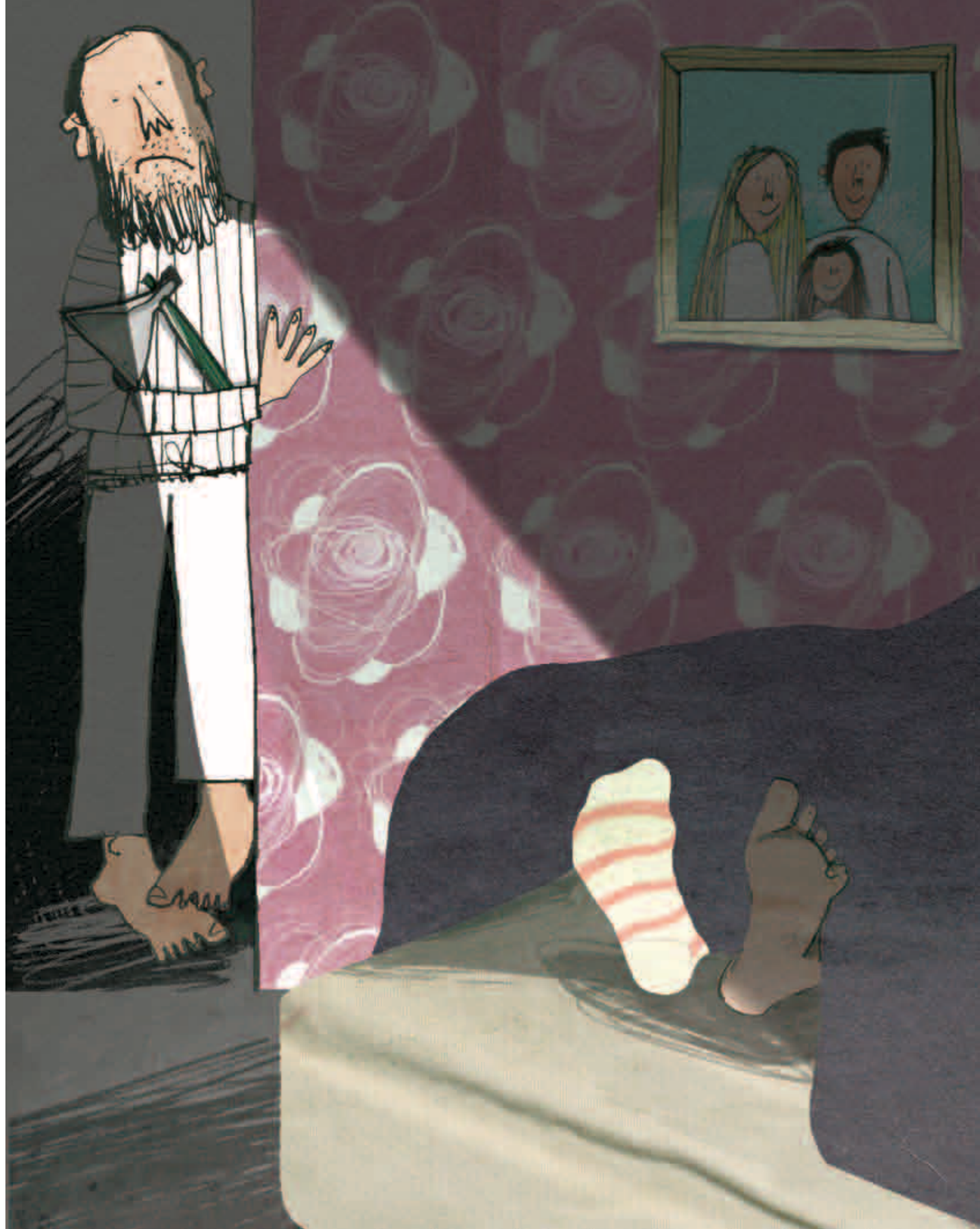
He learnt that if he cut off all her fingers and all her toes, then she would never be able to swim as a seal. Without fingers or toes, even if she did turn into a seal, her flippers would be too short and stubby for her to swim.

But, he thought, what use is a girl round the house with no fingers? So he decided to cut off only her toes, then she could still mend his nets.

But, he thought, what use is a girl round the garden who can't walk? So he decided to cut off the toes of only one foot, then she could limp around the garden digging up tatties.

But, he thought, what use is a girl in the family who hates me? So he decided to cut off only the tips of her toes, then she wouldn't mind quite so much, and she might still cook his favourite stovies.

He put strong drink and stronger herbs in her cup of tea that night. When she fell asleep, he took off her left sock, picked up his axe, and cut off the top joints of all her left toes. Then he bandaged



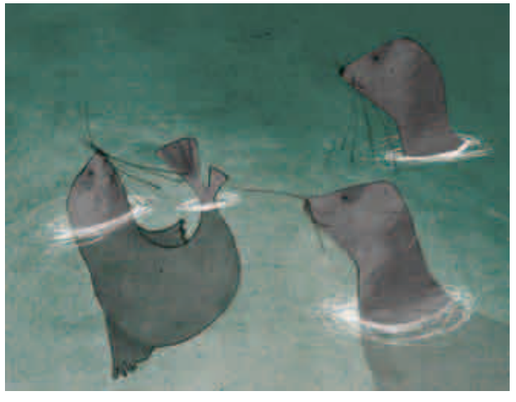
her up as she slept, drank the rest of her night-time drink and fell fast asleep himself.

When he woke, she was gone.

Her uncle ran down to the seashore. And among the seals he saw one little seal who was the slowest to scramble up on to the rocks and the last to slip into the sea when he ran towards them. One little seal who then swam and tumbled and flipped in the water just as joyfully and fast as the rest of the young seals.

The uncle wondered if he should have cut off more toes, then perhaps she wouldn't have been able to swim away from him, or if he should have cut off no toes at all, then perhaps she might have stayed with him for longer.

And he listened to one little seal, with one short flipper, singing with her mum and dad in the sea. Singing their happy ending.



Breaking the Spell:
The Story of Tam Linn

This story is about a girl called Janet, but the story starts hundreds of years before Janet was born. It starts with a boy called Tam Linn, who lived a long time ago in the borderlands where Scotland meets England.



One day Tam Linn asked his grandfather, the Earl of Roxburgh, "Am I old enough to go hunting with you and your men?"

"Yes, my boy," said his grandfather. "You can come hunting with me this spring, but only if you promise two things: you must not fall behind, and you must not fall off."

Tam Linn knew why he mustn't fall behind or fall off. It wasn't because of the dangerous animals in the forest – it was because of the fairies.

The fairies in the forest weren't little and twinkly, and they weren't interested in granting wishes. They were as tall as the Earl's soldiers, and they carried swords and spears instead of wands and glitter.

So Tam Linn tried very hard not to fall behind, and not to fall off. But his pony had shorter legs than the men's horses, so Tam Linn did fall behind; his pony was used to galloping on roads and fields,



not on the rough ground of the forest, so his pony stumbled, and he did fall off.

He might have been safe if he'd fallen on moss or mud or thorns. But he fell on a mound of bright green grass. And mounds of bright green grass are often the entrances to the fairies' world.

When Tam Linn landed on his back on the small green hill, the ground opened and hands reached up to drag him down. He was hauled along dark tunnels and thrown at the feet of the Fairy Queen.

Tam Linn looked at the Queen. She was so beautiful that she was terrifying, but he tried not to show his fear. He stood up, he looked straight at the Queen, and he didn't tremble or weep or beg.

Tam Linn was a handsome lad, and the Queen liked the look of him, so she cast a spell on him. A spell which meant that as he grew, he became one of the fairy folk, and that when he reached his full height, he stopped growing old. He became immortal, one of the Fairy Queen's knights forever.

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Years passed. And for all of those years the wise elders of the Borders told their young men and young women to avoid Carterhaugh Woods because it was guarded for the Fairy Queen by her fiercest knight.

But one girl, whose name was Janet and whose father was the Laird of Carterhaugh, didn't like being told not to go into her own woods, whoever guarded them.

So one summer day, Janet stepped into the woods, and looked around her. She saw flowers and butterflies, she heard birds singing.

She laughed. These weren't woods to be scared of! They were beautiful!

So she went deeper, until she reached the middle of the woods, where she saw a low stone well and a white horse tied to a tree. "I wonder whose horse that is," Janet said to herself, and she sat down by the well to wait and see.

After a while she noticed a sweet scent coming from a rose bush on the other side of the well. "That rose would look lovely on my dress," she said. Janet leant forward and grasped the stem of the rose, then bent it until it broke.

Suddenly a voice boomed, "Who dares steal the Fairy Queen's flowers?"

A young man stepped out from the trees on the other side of the clearing. He was tall, with long hair, fine clothes and a smooth face. He looked at Janet and said again, in a deep, threatening voice, "Who dares steal the Fairy Queen's flowers?"

Janet stood up straight. "I dare, because I am Janet of Carterhaugh. Who dares question me in my father's wood?"

"I dare, because I am Tam Linn, and I guard this wood for the Fairy Queen. So you will give back that flower."

Janet stared at him, and slowly, carefully, she pinned the rose to the collar of her dress.

Tam Linn could have picked Janet up in one hand and thrown her out of the woods. But he was impressed by the way she stood up to him and looked him in the eye, just as he had tried to do with the Fairy Queen, many years before.

So instead he took Janet by the hand, and offered to show her all the best places in the woods to find and pick flowers.

As they walked through Carterhaugh Woods, they talked.

Janet asked, "Have you always been one of the fairy folk?"

"No," said Tam Linn, "I was once as human as you." He told her how he'd fallen on the green mound, been dragged through the tunnels and flung at the feet of the Fairy Queen.

"Do you *like* being one of the fairy folk?"

Tam Linn sighed. "It's glamorous and powerful and magical, but I have no choices. I must guard this wood forever if the Fairy Queen orders me to."

"Can't you just stop being one of the fairy folk?"

Tam Linn laughed. "It's not that easy. I'd need someone to…"

"To what?"

"To break the Fairy Queen's spell."

"I could do that," said Janet.

"No, you couldn't. It's far too dangerous."

She touched the rose on her collar. "But I'm brave."

"I know you're brave." He smiled. "But I couldn't ask you to do that for me."

"You're not asking me," she said. "I'm offering."

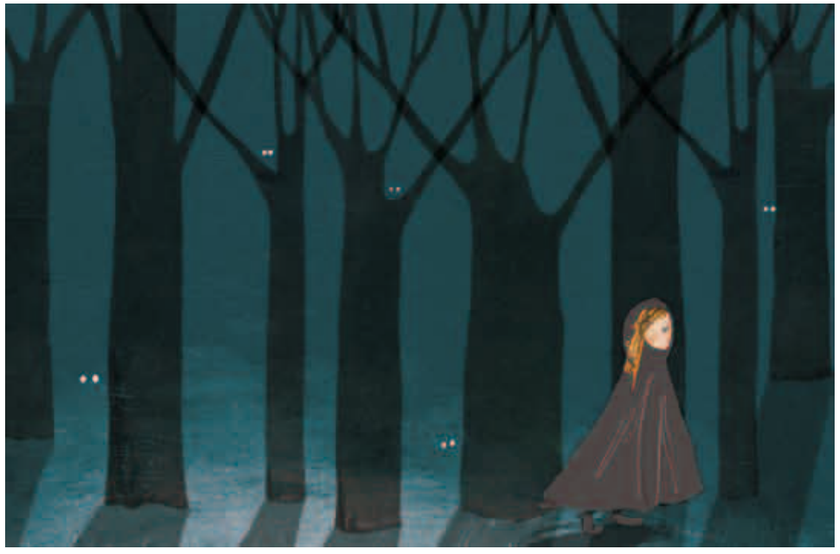
So Tam Linn told her how to break the spell. "Tonight is midsummer's night, when the Fairy Queen parades her army round her lands. At midnight, they will pass through Carterhaugh Woods. If you hide at the well and watch the army go past, you can break the spell.

"The first troop of her soldiers will be led by a knight on a brown horse. Do not let him see you. The second troop will be led by a knight on a black horse. Do not let him hear you. The third troop will be led by a knight on a white horse. That will be me. You will recognise me because I will wear only one glove.

"If you want to break the spell, pull me from my horse and hold me tight. If the Fairy Queen wants to keep me, she will turn me into many loathsome and dangerous beasts. But hold on tight to whatever is in your arms, until I am turned into a flaming torch, and throw that torch into the well. Then the spell will be broken."

Janet promised she would hold on. Then she left the woods and went home, with a big bunch of flowers in her arms.

She waited until night fell. Then she dressed in her darkest dress, put on black boots and a black cloak, and went back to the woods.



She stepped into the trees, and looked around. She heard creaks and rustles, and saw pairs of tiny bright eyes blink out. Now *this* looked like the wood she'd been warned against. But she had made a promise, so she went deeper into the woods until she reached the well. This time she didn't sit by the well, she hid behind it, under the rose bush, and waited until she heard the jingle of harness and the thud of feet.

The Fairy Queen's army paraded past her.

She saw the first troop of soldiers led by a knight on a brown horse, and she crouched down low under the bush so he wouldn't see her.

She saw the second troop of soldiers led by a knight on a black horse, and she held her breath so he wouldn't hear her.

She saw the third troop of soldiers led by a knight on a white horse and she saw that he had one hand gloved and the other bare, so she leapt out from under the bush, grabbed his bare hand, and dragged him from the horse.

His helmet fell off, and she could see Tam Linn's face, pale in the night. So she wrapped her arms round his chest, and she held on tight.

From the back of the army, the Fairy Queen screeched, "LET HIM GO! HE IS MINE!"

But Janet didn't let go.

The Fairy Queen turned Tam Linn into a snake: a great, thick, long, scaly, green serpent. Janet felt the serpent coil round her arms and heard it hiss at her face, but she held on tight.



The Fairy Queen turned Tam Linn into a lion. Janet felt the lion's claws on her shoulders and smelt its hot bloody breath on her face, but she held on tight.

The Fairy Queen turned Tam Linn into a bear. Janet felt the bear's paws squeeze the air from her lungs and felt its thick fur smother her, but she held on tight.

The Fairy Queen turned Tam Linn into a hot bar of iron. Janet smelt her sleeves singe and felt her skin blister, but she held on tight.

The Fairy Queen turned Tam Linn into a bright burning torch. Janet lifted the flaming branch high and threw it into the well. The water hissed and steamed, and Tam Linn stepped out of the well, dripping wet, but smiling.



He took Janet's hand, and the two of them walked out of Carterhaugh Woods, free forever from the Fairy Queen's spells.

Because this is a fairy story, Tam Linn and Janet got married, and they lived happily ever after.

They and their children are long gone now, but the well is still there. So you can visit Tam Linn's Well in Carterhaugh Woods. But don't pick any flowers, because I don't know who guards the woods for the Fairy Queen now…