



THE  
BINDING  
SPELL



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Chicken  
House



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*To Elena and Sophia, the original Callies.  
You've lived with this tale a long time.  
Now you hold the book in your hands.  
This one's for you. Always.*



MIDSUMMER EVE, 1565

## POUKA HILL

**T**he local people called it Pouka Hill, the place of the evil spirits. They said it was haunted by the most dreaded demon of all – the Pouka King. But that day, under the hot June sun, the hill lay quiet.

Little Nancy crawled through a bed of bracken, nibbling at raspberries as she filled her apron pocket. Red juice smeared across her mouth like a bloodstain.

A shadow fell across her. She looked around. A tall man had come soft-footed over the grass and stood behind her. She didn't recognize him, but she could see from his fine clothes that he was no farmer.

He took off his velvet cap and bowed low, as though she were a maiden of good family and not a peasant girl.

'Good day, little one,' he said, smiling. 'What is your name?'

'Nancy Hopton, sir.'

'Hopton? That's a fine old name. My name is Mr Procter.' He rubbed his chin, eyes lingering on her child's face, her homespun clothes. 'How old are you? Eight? Nine?'

'Seven, Mr Procter. I'm big for my age.'

'Your parents live here in the village?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And you're minding the goats.'

'Yes, sir. One's gone missing, but my brother Sam went to look for her. He'll be back shortly.'

'A little brown goat? Ah yes, I believe I saw her go up to the top of the hill, kicking her heels all the way.' He paused, brow furrowed. 'Tell me, young Nancy, what do you know of magic?'

Nancy looked doubtful. 'Mother says I must not speak of such things before strangers. She will teach me when I'm older.'

'I'm not talking about village magic.' The ghost of a sneer distorted his mouth. 'Something altogether more powerful. Come with me and I'll show you . . .' He held out his hand.

'Come with you where, sir?'

He pointed towards the grove of trees at the summit of the hill.

She gazed at him. His face didn't look wicked, she thought. Nothing like an evil spirit. Nothing like she imagined the Pouka King would look. Still . . .

'The sweetest raspberries grow up there,' he offered. 'Better than these.'

'Even so, sir, I . . . I think I should wait for my brother to come back. If it's all the same to you,' she added, hoping not to offend him.

'No matter.' He clapped his cap back on his head and started away.

Then a thought appeared to strike him, and he returned.

‘Should we not seek your missing goat? We could surprise your brother with her, when he returns empty-handed.’

‘You are sure Brown Bess is up there?’

‘Nothing is more certain.’ He smiled so broadly that he bared his teeth.

The bleating of a goat came from the direction of the summit.

‘Why, she is there!’ Nancy clapped her hands in relief. ‘Oh, but Sam told me not to leave the other goats...’

‘We will not be gone long. Scarce any time at all.’

‘Well then...’ Nancy gave him her bright smile. She put her hand into his.

When Nancy’s family searched for her, they found only the goats, peacefully grazing on Pouka Hill. Nancy herself they never saw again.



## CHAPTER 1

# THE DARK LIGHT

Morgan stared out of the train window at the slab-grey streets that mirrored the thick, chalky sky, the buzz of people hurrying about their business, traffic everywhere, and the stink of car fumes. Fast, hectic, indifferent; for the past two years London had been home. Now it seemed as though the train stayed still, while the old life ebbed away, and the future was . . . hidden. Tears pricked behind her eyelids; she blinked them back. Across from her sat Wulf, her thirteen-year-old brother, head in a book – something about astronomy, his latest interest. Callie, at eight the youngest of the family, sat shoulders hunched as she drew in a puzzle book.

‘I’m bored,’ Callie announced. ‘Are we there yet?’

‘Not yet. And stop kicking my foot.’

If Morgan had been two years older, she might have refused to go when Dad broke the news about his new job. Dad had said she could decide for herself, that he wouldn’t make her leave London. But at seventeen she was still dependent. No way could she make a life for herself, let alone afford a London rent, even if she left school, found a full-time job in a shop or a cafe, and gave up the idea of

university and studying art. That dream wasn't even on the horizon, not when she had a family to help. So Dad had gone on ahead to start his contract, while his kids stayed on in the rented flat till the end of the summer term, before packing up to join him.

Morgan ran her finger down the cold damp of the window, stared unseeingly at the passing landscape, brooding on her choice that had been no choice. It wasn't just about whether she could support herself. She and Dad both knew – even though Dad didn't want to admit it – that he needed her there to help with the younger ones; knew that Johnny wouldn't be much use. Morgan was the one Dad relied on. Doctors and social workers would call Morgan a young carer. She hated the label, but that was what she was. *And it sucked.*

Morgan's phone pinged. She glanced down. Not Dad, who was meant to be getting in touch with arrangements for where to meet him. It was Marc, a boy in her class – her old class now, she reminded herself – who'd been trying to impress her with his chat. London boys were all about the jokes. Her screen showed someone dancing about in a hairy gorilla suit, before unzipping it to disclose a cartoon palpitating heart. Was that really what he thought she was about? Whatever. She wouldn't see him again now. Her thumb hovered, then pressed delete. Sorry Marc. She jammed in her earbuds and listened to a podcast she'd chosen for its optimistic, assertive title: 'How to Get the



Life You Want'. *As if.*

The movement of the train, the reassuring voice in her ears, lulled her. She drifted.

Her phone buzzed again. Girls on the group chat from school setting up a meet-up for that weekend. A couple of girls remembered Morgan was still in the chat: *Sorry u not there. Miss u girl. Come back soon*, accompanied by crying emojis. She replied, though she guessed the little group wouldn't remember her long. She'd had this experience before, trailing after Dad. Always leaving, saying goodbye.

Dad's work had taken them to different places: Birmingham, Lancaster, Dorset – that had been the worst, miles from anywhere – then London for his university job that was meant to be permanent, but things had gone wrong, and Dad had had to leave and look for something else.

At least this new location, a village near the Welsh borders, would have a family connection. Mum had originally been from there, though she'd left as a child, and never returned. Her kids had never seen the place. Morgan scrolled through her dad's messages. The blurred photos of the village, called Weir Hinny, the house he'd rented for them. He sounded excited, like he was letting himself feel again. He even mentioned Mum. He almost never said her name – Effie.

There was a tug at her sleeve. Callie said, 'I need a wee.'

Irritation at being pulled out of her thoughts twisted Morgan's gut. *This isn't fair.* The familiar taste of resentment filled her mouth, sour on her tongue. She choked it down.

*It's not Callie's fault. Not Wulf's fault either. You can't get mad at them.*

'You went before we left.'

'I *need* another one.' Callie's voice was urgent.

'You can go on your own.'

'You gotta wait outside the door. What if there's a queue? Strangers?'

Morgan looked to where Johnny slouched opposite her, leaning against the window, eyes closed, earbuds in.

'Johnny?'

No reaction.

Morgan kicked his ankle under the table. 'Callie needs a wee. Your turn.'

The eyelashes flickered; the lids closed tighter. She wanted to swear. This was the kind of attitude her dad got annoyed about. The kind of attitude that made her want to throttle her own twin brother.

With an exasperated huff, Morgan got to her feet.

Wulf emerged from his book. 'Is there anything to eat?'

'I packed all that stuff. Sandwiches, crisps, apples.'

'There's none left,' said Wulf mournfully. Empty packets were stacked around him and Johnny. 'Chase's hungry too.'

At the sound of his name, Wulf's dog lifted his head from its resting place on Wulf's feet; brown eyes fixed on Morgan, a hopeful tail thumped the floor.

'I'll take a look, but it'll be expensive. And that dog's already eaten.' She followed Callie down the swaying carriage

to the toilet; then along the length of the train looking for the buffet. It was closed.

'I'm so hungry,' announced Callie.

Morgan felt in her pocket and found the last of the chocolate-covered raisins she'd been hoarding for emergencies.

'Did you wash your hands?'

Callie nodded vigorously.

As Morgan tipped raisins into Callie's suspiciously sticky palms, she thought, *It's gonna be a long journey.*

Several hours and a change of trains later they alighted at Staplefield, a small country town. No sign of their dad on the platform to meet them. As the train pulled out, leaving them with piles of luggage, Morgan checked her phone. No message from him. She phoned. No answer.

'What the hell's he thinking?' exploded Johnny. 'Leaving us stranded in the middle of bloody nowhere.'

'I'll get us something to eat.' Morgan headed for the station cafe.

The moment Morgan walked through the cafe door, she realized something was wrong.

*This can't be happening.*

He was there, she was sure of it – the Shadow Man.

*You put all that behind you five years ago.*

But right there, in the little cafe, the heavy pungent smell cloying in her nostrils, the coppery taste in her mouth.

*Not now, she told herself, a scream rising in her throat. Not with people around to see you go crazy. Act normal, and it'll go away.* She choked down the scream. Tried to will herself back into normality.

She joined the queue at the counter, head swaying. *Think of something to distract yourself. Something. Anything.* She fixed her attention on the back of the man before her in the queue. Though it was July the day was chilly, and he wore a sandy-coloured tailored jacket with a herringbone pattern. *Herringbone. That's it. Focus.* She stared at the flecks of ochre and grey till her eyes ached. The diagonal lines. Criss-cross. The lines began to dance before her eyes. Criss-cross. Criss—

It was coming, sweeping her away. *The dark light.*

Then it hit her, like a sledgehammer in her stomach.

*He's here. The Shadow Man. Cloaked in darkness. I can't make out his face. Only the stare of his cold eyes, and his pale hand, gripped tightly around the small fist of a second person – someone I can't see at all. I want to run, but my legs won't move. I try to cover my face, but my hands dangle uselessly by my sides. The dark light burns into me. Bands of light and dark. They swirl through my head, churn up my brain. I try to scream. No sound comes out.*

*The Shadow Man whispers, softly, almost gently. 'There's no escape, Morgan.' He shakes his head. 'Not for any of you. I'm coming for you.*

*'And when I find you...'*