

# DARK SUMMER

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Ali Sparkes

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For Simon



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# Chapter 1

*I've-no-han-ky-in-my-hand-so-I'm-a-bo-gey-wonderland . . .*

*Wo! Bogey wonderland—wo—oh—*

*Wo! No hanky in my hand . . . Oh no!*

*I split my pants when I start to dance in bogey wonderland . . .*

It was only when Kayleigh and Chanelle stopped boogieing and put their hands on their hips that Eddie realized he'd been singing out loud. He stopped. He shuffled uneasily, and pushed his hands deep into his fleece pockets as they all stared at him. Auntie Kath pursed her lips and raised one eyebrow. Damon, though, paid no attention. He was listening to his iPod and ignoring all of them as they stood in the queue to the caves.

'Sorry,' muttered Eddie, feeling his ears get hot. 'I didn't realize that was out loud.'

‘Don’t worry, girls—go on.’ Auntie Kath turned her back on Eddie and smiled at her daughters. ‘Some people just don’t appreciate talent. And look . . . other people think you’re wonderful!’

The twins smirked and then went on with their dance routine and yes, people *were* watching, and smiling indulgently. Kayleigh and Chanelle were nine-year-old disco dance champions, after all. Three times a week they put on shiny dance outfits and scraped their brown hair up into very tight knots on their heads and went to what they called Modern Jazz classes. Then Disco classes followed on afterwards. Sometimes Tap classes followed Disco. But Disco was their best. And they had loads of silver cups in the sitting room cabinet to prove it. The house was forever pulsing with ‘Boogie Wonderland’ or ‘D.I.S.C.O’ or ‘I Will Survive’, and if you walked into the dining room without checking first you were likely to get a smack in the face from a twirling spangly stick, which was part of some of their routines.

They *were* good dancers, Eddie had to admit, but their singing was dreadful and nobody in their family seemed to have noticed. Auntie Kath was convinced that her twins were going to be hugely famous.

The other problem was that none of them seemed to have an embarrassment chip. For Eddie, practising

a song-and-dance routine in a queue outside a tourist attraction was as appealing as doing naked handstands in the middle of school assembly. But the self-consciousness component in this family was missing. They just didn't think that constantly showing off to complete strangers, without ever being asked, was in any way odd. Being twelve, Eddie was an expert in embarrassment, which was why he was so surprised to find he'd been quietly singing his 'Bogey Wonderland' lyrics out loud. Oh no . . . it must be catching. He'd only been with them a week and already he was performing in public.

'Queue's moving!' said Auntie Kath and Kayleigh and Chanelle broke off from their gyrating and shimmed along the path instead. Eddie was hugely relieved that the queue was quite short. It had been a bad summer for tourism so far, with foot and mouth disease striking the country once more. Although the Wookey Hole caves, unlike attractions with animals, were open to the public, not many people were travelling far from home. Most of the people in this queue were likely to be locals, from Bristol or Bath maybe. Somerset wasn't an afflicted area, so people in the county could still travel through the countryside. Auntie Kath, Damon, Kayleigh, and Chanelle had been here at least twice before and were really more excited by the indoor play

area, slot machines, and gift shop at the end of the tour than the caves themselves.

Eddie, though, was excited about the caves. He'd never been into real caves before. He lived in East Sussex, where the land was green and pretty and flat. No caves in East Sussex. This outing was the best thing that had happened since he had arrived this summer in the Mendip Hills to stay with his aunt and cousins. His mother had been very ill and now needed time alone with just his dad, so she could recover. Dad had asked his sister if she would take Eddie and she had said he could stay for the whole summer if need be. She hadn't wanted him to come, Eddie had since decided. He could tell this by the number of times she said the words 'Christian duty' to her various friends when they dropped by the house. It was her Christian duty to look after her nephew while poor Ellen was getting better. Her Christian duty to put up a camp bed for him in Damon's room. Her Christian duty to feed him and take him out with her own children. Auntie Kath was not unkind to him, but she made sure he was well aware of the cost of all the kindness he did get. All he had to do in return was be constantly grateful. It was exhausting.

'Thanks ever so much for taking me here today,' he said, as they walked into the opening of the caves

where the guide was waiting for them in the cool underground air.

‘That’s quite all right, Edward,’ said Auntie Kath. ‘What kind of an aunt would I be if I didn’t bring you along too?’ Eddie smiled gratefully.

‘Are we all in?’ said the guide, a young man in a Wookey Hole fleece, carrying a torch. There was a murmur from the small group of about a dozen people standing in the wide cave opening. There was nobody else in the queue behind them.

‘Good,’ said the guide. ‘Now—welcome to Wookey Hole, where a river flows from the underworld and pagan and Christian legends abound! Follow me into a world of witches and saints, of cave people and explorers, of divers and danger!’

Eddie looked around him and grinned. The air smelled of earth and metal and water and the roof of the cave seemed to reach down to him with its stubby stone stalactite fingers. *Or was that stalagmite?* he wondered, as they trooped down a dimly lit passageway after the guide. *How did you remember? Ummm . . . Stalactite . . . the c was for ceiling. And stalagmite, the g was for ground.* He thought . . . Anyway, they were stone icicles going up and down and it was really properly spooky.

After a bit more talk about the history of the

caves, the guide led them down some steps, hewn into the rock, and they arrived in the ‘Witch’s Kitchen’: a larger chamber opening out around a subterranean river, its clear, glassy water lit from beneath the surface and glowing gold and green. The guide showed them a huge stalagmite which seemed to rear up out of the rock floor. Then he shone his torch onto a large misshapen rock, close to the water, said to be the petrified witch. Eddie wasn’t convinced. It looked more like a deformed potato to him.

‘She was cooking a child in her cauldron when she was sprinkled with holy water by a monk,’ whispered the guide, who was obviously an out of work actor, thought Eddie. Chanelle and Kayleigh were fascinated by him and stood, gaping, hanging on his every dramatic word. Damon hadn’t taken his earphones out and simply bopped along to a song only he could hear, his eyes idly roving the walls and ceiling and his mouth working tirelessly on a lump of bubblegum. He’d seen it before and wasn’t impressed. He shoved Eddie back behind him, though, as they made their way on through another narrow passage.

‘Oi!’ complained Eddie, rubbing his chest where Damon’s hard elbow had struck. Damon made an ‘aww, poor baby’ kind of face and then went on ahead.

‘Nice chap, your cousin.’ Eddie looked round,

surprised. He had thought he was the last person in the queue of visitors, but there was a man behind him. An old man. His hair was silvery white and his eyes, behind his spectacles, were grey and rather pink in the corners.

‘Well . . . he’s always like that,’ said Eddie, as if it was an excuse. Which, of course, it wasn’t. Damon was a thug. He was top in sports at school and liked to use his cousin’s head as target practice for rugby, basketball, or football. Eddie had been woken up three times already this week with some kind of sports equipment bashing into his face. He was hoping his cousin would stop short of the ice hockey stick which stood in the corner of his bedroom. He *would* complain about the bruises to his aunt, but feared this would be seen as less than grateful. She was doing her Christian duty, after all. He complained to Damon, at the time, of course, and obviously badly wanted to get up and smack his cousin’s face in, but this wasn’t really a sensible option. Damon was a year older and several times harder than Eddie. He’d already broken the nose of a boy at school. Auntie Kath insisted it was only ‘playing around’, but you only had to look at Damon’s block-like face to realize that ‘playing around’ with him was a very bad idea. Mostly, Eddie just stayed out of his way.

‘You’re not anything like him, are you?’ said the strange man. ‘Or the rest of them.’

‘I hope not,’ muttered Eddie, moving away after the tour party.

‘You go your own way, don’t you?’ said the man, standing still as Eddie looked back at him. He realized the man was wearing a Wookey Hole staff fleece.

‘Um . . . yeah,’ said Eddie. He glanced back to the tour party which had nearly disappeared now around a bend in the cave passage. Without them the Witch’s Kitchen looked better. More serious. Real.

‘Well,’ said the man. Eddie squinted at him, confused.

‘Well what?’ he asked.

The man smiled and pointed to his left. ‘Your own way,’ he said, smiling broadly and somehow *expectantly* at Eddie. Eddie followed the line of the man’s finger and saw what looked like a small dark seam in the rock face of the cave. ‘Move left a little and see,’ said the man.

Eddie looked around him uneasily. Was this guy the staff weirdo? The one they had to employ on some government Employ This Weirdo initiative. The one who was never allowed a tour party of his own, for safety reasons. But still, he moved slightly to his left and then gasped as he saw that the line in the rock was not just a darker streak of limestone, but actually a gap. A gap that led somewhere.



‘It’s fine, you know. You will be safe,’ smiled the man. ‘They don’t take people down here because some are too fat to get through. You’re small and thin. You’ll be fine. There are better chambers beyond. Here—you’ll need this.’ He handed Eddie a torch. Eddie took it and stepped towards the narrow, slanting gap. He was nervous. Unsure.

‘I will wait for you here,’ said the man. His smile was very calm, very steady. He looked at Eddie as if he had known him for a very long time. ‘Mind your head and keep turning to your right. You should come back to the passageway of your own accord. Then we can catch up with the others.’

Eddie opened his mouth to ask why he was being given this special treatment. Then he closed it again. He should be very, very suspicious. An old guy offers you a secret passageway outing in a cave and you just shrug and go? Yeah, right! And yet . . . it was that smile. A smile that seemed to hold ages and ages of knowledge. Further up the passageway the voices of the main party were echoing back. He heard Kayleigh and Chanelle singing. They were obviously amused by the echo and going back into their act for the assembled party. Eddie shuddered, switched on the torch, and stepped into the gap in the rock.

## Chapter 2

At first he thought the Wookey Weirdo might follow him, but the man did not. He just stood still, back in the Witch's Kitchen, and briskly flapped his hands at Eddie, encouraging him to go on.

With his heart thumping rather hard in his chest, Eddie swung the torch around and peered along the passageway. It slanted off to one side and a taller boy would have had to lean sideways with it as he walked on, but Eddie was quite small and could stand up straight. The limestone rock looked the same as in the previous cave—smooth and undulating, with more pale stalactites hanging above him. He couldn't see where the top of the cave roof was, because it just folded away from him on an angle, into the dark, but the slanted walls dripped with petrified minerals, like the fingers of a thousand aliens reaching down to him. He shivered and shone the torch ahead of him. The passageway

went straight for a few metres and then veered to the left. Under his feet the floor was smooth and softly ribbed. He guessed this had once been the bed of another underground river. There were all kinds of waterways that threaded through this network of caves, apparently.

Eddie took a deep breath and stepped forward. His footsteps made little noise, as he was in soft-soled trainers, but his breathing seemed very loud to his own ears, slapping against the slant of the wall which was so close to his left temple. He could hear trickling and at one point his foot made a splashing noise as it fell. He shone his torch down and saw a small rivulet of water winding across the passageway and disappearing into a gap, low in the rock.

He went on. Around to the right the passageway widened a little and the headroom was higher. Still he could not see the roof of this sliver of cave, but more impressive stalactites were twisting down from above like melted wax candles. How far along was he now? How far from the others? He had better go round fast and get back to the Wookey Weir, or he'd be missed and would get into trouble. He quickened his step, aware of a low hissing noise. He reached a fork in the passageway. One path led off to the left and seemed to descend, while the other stayed flat and

went right. Stay to the left, the man had said. He shrugged and followed the downward path, although it was narrower and less inviting than the right-hand path.

The path twisted abruptly further to the right and then pitched down at quite a steep angle. He caught hold of some outcrops of stalagmites to his sides as his trainers slid a little on the smooth floor. The hissing sound was louder and deeper now—it sounded muffled and echoey. In fact it was almost a roar. He moved on, feeling quite nervous. It was time he wound back to the main cave and found the man again. He'd been going for five minutes by now, surely? He examined his watch with the torch. Well—four minutes at any rate. Ah—there was a second switch on the torch, he noticed. As he stepped around another large outcrop of limestone sculpture, he pushed the button and extra light, pale blue, suddenly flooded out of the torch from further down its barrel. Ah! He realized it was a kind of lantern too, with a hanging strap at the holding end. He picked it up from the strap and held it high and then gasped at what it picked out. The ceiling was vaulted with beautifully dripping stone, curving up away from him in a concave dome. It felt like a cathedral. Off to one corner were some low smooth lumps of rock and just beyond them

he could see movement—sparkling, glistening movement. Now he realized what the muffled hissing and roaring had been. He moved across and leaned over the rocks to see, in one corner of this immense chamber, a twisting, turning, tumbling, blue-black waterfall. Fine spray rose from it, scented with ancient minerals, settling across his nose and brow.

‘Wow!’ said Eddie, out loud. He held the lantern out, swinging, further across the waterfall which cascaded into view from a hole in the cave wall about two metres above his head and plunged into a shallow pool of smoothly worked limestone, maybe the size of a kid’s garden paddling pool, before rushing away and disappearing into a convoluted chute of stone to some underworld he would never see. The anguished, frantic liquid sent up bubbles and gurgles which warbled just above the hiss and the roar. The roar seemed to be rising up from some way down in the rocky tunnel of water. Eddie shone the lantern as close to the pool’s exit as he could reach and caught sight of a tangle of watery ribbons, wriggling endlessly, far below him.

‘Wow!’ he said again. ‘Oh!’ he gasped, as he dropped the light. There was a three second moment when he *might* have retrieved it as it spun across the surface of the shallow cauldron, sending light in a

wild, dancing arc through the water. But after two shocked blinks of an eye it had upended, sending a beam of blue-white up through the waterfall above it, before vanishing down the chute of water. There were two more glimpses of man-made light and then a cracking noise and a second later Eddie was surrounded by the blackest dark he had ever known.

He gulped and whimpered, ‘Oh no!’ as he sank down against the low rock. His eyes opened wider. He could *feel* his pupils *straining* for light. Some light. *Any* light. Just one tiny pinprick of light. There was none. He turned his head in the direction he *thought* he had come into the cave from. Surely some light from the Witch’s Kitchen could reach here . . . eventually. As soon as his eyes had adjusted, the slightest lightening of black to grey would show him where to go.

He sat and waited, his heart now hammering with fright and his breath coming out hard and ragged. After what must have been more than a minute, his eyes still felt as if they were sheathed in thick black velvet. Whether they were open or closed, the view of total blackness was unchanged.

‘OK, OK, Eddie . . . *think!*’ he murmured, loud enough to hear himself above the water noise. ‘*Think*. The man knows where you’ve gone. In a few minutes, when you don’t come back, he’ll come for you. Just

wait. There will be a torch flashing in here, any time. Any time now.'

After another minute or more—he couldn't see his watch so he didn't know—he repeated, 'Any time now.'

He stood up, shakily, and began to move away from the sound of the waterfall. He was fairly sure that the entrance into the bigger cave had been opposite the waterfall. So he should reach it soon. His hands out in front of him, he shuffled forward, feeling through the air for the wall of the cave. Once he had the wall, he would work along it, moving away from the waterfall noise. And this would take him to the passage out of here. Wouldn't it?

'Think,' he said again, out loud, and his voice sounded high and scared. 'Was there any other way leading out of this cave? Or j-just the way you came in?' If there was another way leading on from the cave—or maybe even *another*—then he could wander off down a passageway he hadn't been through yet—and get even more lost. But no—he had to keep going right, the man had said. Or was it left? Left or right? Which? He couldn't remember. Eddie felt real panic unwind its tentacles in the pit of his stomach. Like a cold squid inside him, it began to wake up and stretch towards his chest and throat. No! He stopped and

breathed as evenly as he could. Cool. Calm. No panic. The man would come . . . would find him as he was making his way back probably.

He shuffled forward again, arms still outstretched, and then something struck him hard, right in the middle of the forehead. Blue and red stars suddenly bloomed across his vision, like a small firework display—the only light he could filter into his brain in this pitilessly dark place. But he knew it was just inside his own head. He felt dizzy as he lifted his hand to his brow. It was sticky. He was bleeding. A low hanging stalactite had found him. More dizziness assailed him. He knew he should get his head down or he might faint. He crouched down, feeling the smooth ripples of the limestone beneath his palms, and leaned his head down between his knees. Very soon, in maybe a minute or so, when his head had cleared, he was going to have to start shouting for help. He didn't want to. Actually hearing himself cry out for aid would make this whole thing very, very real. Until then, it was manageable. But once it was real, he didn't know how he would cope.

They must have missed him by now. Auntie Kath and the twins and Damon must have retraced their steps. And surely they would ask the Wookey Weirdo if he'd seen him and he would admit what had happened



and come in after him. Or (now the panic tentacles writhed harder against the inside of his throat) maybe he wouldn't. Maybe this was what he did. He liked to send kids off alone to get lost and die in caves. And nobody would ever know what he'd done . . . Not until it was far, far too late.

Eddie hitched in a breath which sounded like a sob and lifted his head. He was going to shout for help now. He was going to do it. He opened his mouth to yell—but instead he gasped out in shock.

Someone had just taken hold of his hand.

## Chapter 3

‘Who’s that?’ he shrieked, a second later. The fingers were cool and smooth and dry, grasping his right hand and encouraging him to sit up.

‘Shhh,’ said a voice. ‘Be still. Be calm. You’re injured.’

‘Wha-what?’ He was wagglng his head from side to side, desperate to see the source of this voice. It was a young, sweet voice. Most definitely not the Wookey Weirdo. It sounded like a girl.

‘Who are you? What’s going on? How come you can *see* me?’

‘Oh!’ exclaimed the voice. ‘Of course. I forgot. Here.’ There was a scratching sound and suddenly a small pale glow effused into his vision. His starved eyes seemed to drink it greedily in, so that at first the light was all he could see.

‘Is that better?’ said the girl. For a girl it was. After a few seconds he could see her features picked

out in the gloom. She was smiling. He thought she was about his age—maybe slightly younger. Her eyes were large and almost luminous in a rather elf-like face. Her smile was wide and curious and her pale hair hung far below her shoulders. He saw that she was wearing what looked like a thin vest top and some trousers. She raised her light to his face and he blinked. She touched his brow gently.

‘It’s all right. Only a little cut. It’s already stopped bleeding.’

‘Who are you?’ breathed Eddie. ‘Did—did the weirdo guy send you in to get me?’

‘Weirdo guy?’ she repeated, squinting at him across the glow of light, which seemed to waver and gently pulse. ‘Oh!’ Laughter suddenly lit up her features and danced around the chamber, chasing all the dank, dark fear right out of it. ‘Oh—you must mean Stan! I will have to tell him that one!’ She laughed some more.

‘Look—do you, I dunno, work here or something? Or are you someone’s kid? Some staff member’s daughter?’

‘Come on,’ she said, getting to her feet and pulling him up. ‘You’re going to be late back and you’ll get into trouble. You took the wrong turning, silly. I’ll take you back now. Follow me. Mind your head.’

Ducking down under another low stalactite, Eddie stumbled along after his strange guide, who was still holding tight to his hand. He did not want to let go, even if she was a girl. In any other circumstances it would have been highly embarrassing, but there was no way he wanted to be left alone in the blackness again. They seemed to turn several times, left *and* right. And then he saw the odd, slanted passageway ahead of them and a few diamonds of light hitting a distant wall of rock. The light from the Witch's Kitchen! He puffed out a loud sigh of relief.

'You can go on from here,' said the girl. In the better light he saw that she was slight and smaller than him by two or three inches. Her hair looked almost white and her eyes were a pale silvery-lilac colour.

'Aren't you coming too?' he asked. 'Shouldn't we both be getting back?'

She smiled and shook her head, before tilting it to one side and, oddly, holding out her hand. 'My name is Gwerren,' she said. 'It's nice to meet you, Eddie.' He shook her hand, unable to think of what to say. Then she said, 'See you again one day, maybe,' and blinked away into the dark.

Eddie almost panicked again. She had switched off her light thing and just . . . gone. And then he saw the dim glow reaching along the passage from the Witch's

Kitchen and began to make his way to it. How did that girl move around in the dark? What was *that* about? And where had she run off to?

A minute later he emerged, blinking, into the golden light of the Witch's Kitchen. The Wookey Weirdo—or Stan, as the girl had called him—was still waiting and still smiling.

'Have they been searching for me?' he demanded, looking around for panicky relatives, but Stan shook his head. He inclined it towards the path that Auntie Kath and Damon and the twins had gone along some time before and Eddie gaped in amazement as he heard the last few bars of 'Boogie Wonderland' being murdered by his cousins. 'They didn't even notice I was gone?' He gave an astonished chuckle.

'Time moves strangely in here,' said Stan. 'Better catch them up now. Here—take this with you.' He handed Eddie a leaflet—some kind of special offer thing for this and other attractions in the area.

'Er . . . thanks, Stan.' Eddie pushed it into his pocket and moved along the passage. 'And thanks for letting me see the waterfall . . . Sorry—I lost your torch. I'd better move on now.'

'Any time, Eddie, any time,' smiled Stan. 'Don't forget to look at your leaflet. Goodbye.'

Eddie ran up the passageway just in time to hear

a ripple of applause for ‘Boogie Wonderland’. What a freaky, freaky day. The secret passage, the cave, the waterfall, that *girl!* And how could she see him when he couldn’t see her? Freaky!

And one more thing, he thought, as he reached the party and joined in with making impressed noises about the twins’ performance, just behind his aunt—how did Stan and that girl know his name?