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Dark Power Collection

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1

Rebecca's lungs burned. They screamed for more air; they begged her to slow down. But she wouldn't. She pushed herself. She ran for all she was worth. She had to.

There was no sound. She saw a few kids standing along the track, opening their mouths and shouting encouragement. She saw them clapping their hands and cheering her on. But she couldn't hear them. All she heard was her own gasps for breath ... the faint crunch of gravel under her track shoes.

Several yards ahead ran Julie Mitchell—the team's shining hope for all-State. She had a grace and style that made Rebecca feel like, well, like a deranged platypus. Whatever that was.

But that was okay; Becca wasn't running against Julie. She was running against something else.

"It's Dad ..."

For the thousandth time, she saw her mom's red nose and puffy eyes and heard her voice echoing inside her head. "They found his plane in the jungle. He made it through the crash, but ..."

Becca bore down harder; she ran faster. Her lungs were going to explode, but she kept going.

“You’ve got ... to accept it,” her mom’s voice stammered. “He’s gone, sweetheart. He was either attacked by wild animals or ... or ...”

Becka dug her cleats in deeper. She stretched her legs out farther. She knew the “or ... or ...” was a tribe of South American Indians in that region. A tribe notorious for its fierceness and for its use of black magic.

The back of Becka’s throat ached. Not because of the running. It was because of the tears. And the rage. Why?! Why had God let this happen? Why had God let him die? He was such a good man, trying to do such good things.

Angrily she swiped at her eyes. Her legs were turning into rubber. Losing feeling. Losing control. And still she pushed herself. She had closed the gap with Julie and was practically beside her now. The finish line waited a dozen meters ahead.

Trying out for the track team hadn’t been Becka’s idea. It was her mom’s. “To help you fit in,” she’d said.

Fit in. What a joke. Rebecca had spent most of her life living in the villages of Brazil with her mom, her little brother, and a father who flew his plane in and out of the jungle for humanitarian and mission groups. And now, suddenly, she was expected to fit in. Here? In Crescent Bay, California? Here, where everybody had perfect skin, perfect bodies, perfect teeth? And let’s not forget all the latest fashions, right out of *Vogue* or *InStyle* or whatever it was they read. Fashions that made Becka feel like she bought her clothes right out of *Popular Mechanics*.

That last thought pushed her over the edge. She tried too hard, stretched too far. Her legs, which had already lost feeling, suddenly had minds of their own. The left one twisted, then gave out all together.

It was like a slow-motion movie that part of Becka watched as she pitched forward. For a second, she almost caught her balance. Almost, but not quite. She stumbled and continued falling toward the track. There was nothing she could do — only put out

her hands and raise her head so the crushed red gravel would not scrape her face. Knees and elbows, yes. But not her face.

As if it really mattered.

She hit the track and skidded forward, but she didn't feel any pain. Not yet. The pain would come a second or two later. Right now, all she felt was shame. And embarrassment. Already the humiliation was sending blood racing to her cheeks and to her ears.

Yes sir, just another day in the life of Rebecca Williams, the new kid moron.



As soon as Becka's little brother, Scott, walked into the bookstore, he knew something was wrong. It wasn't like he was frightened or nervous or anything. It had nothing to do with what he felt. It had everything to do with the place.

It was wrong.

But why? It certainly was cheery enough. Bright sunlight streaming through the skylights. Aqua blue carpet. Soft white shelves with rows and rows of colorful books. Then there was the background music—flutes and wind chimes.

But still . . .

“You coming or what?” It was Darryl. Scott had met him a couple of days ago at lunch. Darryl wasn't the tallest or best-looking kid in school—actually, he was about the shortest and nerdiest. His voice was so high you were never sure if it was him talking or someone opening a squeaky cupboard. Oh, and one other thing. Darryl sniffed. About every thirty seconds. You could set your watch by it. Something about allergies or hay fever or something.

But at least he was friendly. And as the new kid, Scott couldn't be too picky who he hung with. New kids had to take what new kids could get.

For the past day or so, Darryl had been telling Scott all about the Society—a secret group that met in the back of the Ascension Bookshop after school. Only the coolest and most popular kids could join. (Scott wasn't sure he bought this "coolest and most popular" bit, since they'd let Darryl be a member. But he didn't want to hurt the little guy's feelings, so he let it go.)

"Hey, Priscilla," Darryl called as they walked past the counter toward the back of the bookshop.

"Hey, yourself," a handsome, middle-aged woman said. She didn't bother to look from her magazine until the two boys passed. When she glanced up and saw Scott, a scowl crossed her face. She seemed to dislike him immediately. He hadn't said a thing; he hadn't done a thing. But that didn't matter. There was something about him that troubled her—a lot.

Scott was oblivious to her reaction as he followed Darryl toward the hallway at the back of the store.

So far his first week at Crescent Bay had been pretty good. No fights. No broken noses. A minimal amount of death threats. But that's the way it was with Scott. Unlike his older sister, Scott always fit in. It probably had something to do with his sense of humor. Scott was a lot like his dad in that department; he had a mischievous grin and a snappy comeback for almost any situation.

Scott was like his dad in another way too. He had a deep faith in God. The whole family did. But it wasn't some sort of rules or regulations thing. And it definitely wasn't anything weird. It was just your basic God's-the-boss-so-go-to-church-and-try-to-make-the-world-a-better-place faith.

But sometimes that faith . . . well, sometimes it allowed Scott to feel things. Deep things.

Like now.

As he and Darryl entered the hallway, Scott brushed against a large hoop decorated with what looked like eagle feathers. He ducked to the side only to run smack-dab into a set of wooden

wind chimes. They clanked and clanged noisily. Lately, Scott hadn't been the most graceful of persons. It probably had something to do with growing two inches in the last three months. He was still shorter than Becka—a fact she brought up to him on a regular basis—but he was gaining on her by the week.

As they continued down the hall, Scott noticed a number of trinkets and locket hanging on the wall. He couldn't put his finger on it, but they looked strangely familiar.

Then he noticed something else. Frowning, he glanced around. Was it his imagination, or was it getting colder? There were no windows, open or otherwise, anywhere close by.

Something inside him began to whisper, "*Stop.... Turn around.... Go back....*"

But why? Nothing was wrong. It was just a hallway. Just a bookshop.

"Here we go." Darryl gave a loud sniff as he slowed in front of the last door. He smiled, pushed up his glasses, and knocked lightly.

No answer.

"Well, it doesn't look like anybody's home," Scott said, his voice cracking in gratitude. "I guess we'd better—"

"Don't be stupid," Darryl said, reaching for the knob. "They always meet on Fridays."

Cautiously, he pushed the door open.

It was pitch-black inside. Well, except for the dozen or so candles burning around a table. And the faces illuminated by the candles. Faces Scott had seen at school. They were all staring intently at something on the table. Scott squinted in the darkness, making out some kind of board game with a bunch of letters and symbols on it. Two of the kids had their hands on a little plastic pointer that was moving back and forth across the board.

"What's that?" Scott whispered.

“What do you think it is?” Darryl whispered back. “It’s a Ouija board.”

“A what?”

“You use it to spell out words. You know, it tells you about the future and stuff.”

Scott looked at him skeptically.

“No kidding,” Darryl squeaked. Scott grimaced. Even when the guy whispered his voice sounded like a rusty hinge. Darryl continued, watching the others. “The pointer moves to those letters on the board, spelling out answers to anything you ask.”

“No way,” Scott scorned. As far as he could tell, the pointer moved on the board because it was pushed by the two kids whose hands were on it: a big, meaty fellow in a tank top and a chubby girl dressed all in black. “Those two, they’re the ones moving it.”

Darryl didn’t answer. He just sniffed and stepped into the room. Scott wasn’t crazy about following, but he walked in after him.

And—just like that—the plastic pointer stopped. One minute the little pointer was scooting around the board, spelling out words. The next, it came to a complete stop.

“Hey,” a pretty girl complained, pushing her long red hair back. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” the meaty guy answered. He turned to his partner, the girl in black. “Are you stopping it?”

“Not me,” she said. And then, slowly turning her head toward the door, she nailed Scott with an icy look. “It’s him.”

Every eye in the room turned to Scott.

He raised his hand. “Hi there,” he croaked, trying to smile.

Nobody smiled back.

“Ask it,” the redhead demanded. “Ask it if he’s the reason it’s not answering.”

“Yeah,” the meaty guy agreed.

The girl in black tilted back her head and closed her eyes. Her

hair was short and jet black—an obvious dye job. “Please show us,” she said more dramatically than Scott thought necessary. “Show us the reason for your silence.”

Everyone turned to the plastic pointer. Waiting. Watching. Nothing happened.

Scott tried to swallow, but at the moment, there wasn’t much left in his mouth to swallow.

Suddenly the pointer started moving. Faster than before. In fact, both the girl and the meaty guy looked down in surprise as it darted from letter to letter, barely pausing at one before shooting to the next. In a matter of seconds it had spelled out:

D-E-A-T-H

Then it stopped. Abruptly.

Everyone waited in silence. Afraid to move. Afraid to break the spell.

The girl in black cleared her throat and spoke again. But this time, a little less confidently. “What do you mean? What death?”

There was no movement. No answer.

Scott shifted slightly. He felt the chill again, but this time it was more real. It had substance. Suddenly he knew that there was something there, in the room . . . something cold and physical had actually brushed against him. He was sure of it.

Again the girl spoke. “What death? Is someone going to die? Whose death?”

No movement. More silence.

And then, just when Scott was about to say something really clever to break the tension and show everyone how silly this was, the plastic pointer zipped across the board and shot off the table.

“Look out!” Darryl cried.

Scott jumped aside, and the pointer hit the floor, barely missing his feet. He threw a look at the girl in black, certain she had flung it across the table at him.

But the expression on her face said she was just as surprised as him.

Or was she?



“You okay?” Julie Mitchell asked as she towed off her thick blonde hair and approached Rebecca’s gym locker.

“Sure.” Rebecca winced while pulling her jeans up over her skinned knees. “Nothing a brain transplant couldn’t fix.”

It had been nearly an hour since her little crash-and-burn routine on the track. Of course, everyone had gathered around her, making a big deal of the whole thing, and, of course, she wanted to melt into the track and disappear. But that was an hour ago. Yesterday’s news. Now most of the girls had hit the showers and were heading home.

But not Julie. It was like she purposely hung back. Becca glanced at her curiously. There was something friendly about Julie, something caring. Becca had liked her immediately ... even though Julie was one of the best-looking kids in school.

“The team really needs you,” Julie offered.

“As what? Their mascot?”

Julie grinned. She tossed her hair back and reached over to slip on a top-of-the-line, money’s-no-object, designer T-shirt. “Seriously,” she said, “I’m the only long-distance runner we’ve got. Royal High has three killers that bumped me out of State last year. But if you work and learn to concentrate, the two of us might give them a run for their money. You’ve got the endurance. And I’ve never seen anyone with such a great end sprint.”

“Or such klutziness.”

Julie shrugged. “You’ve got a point there,” she teased.

Becca felt herself smiling back.

“Anybody can learn form and style,” Julie continued. “That’s what coaches are for. And if you add that to your sprint, we just

might be able to knock Royal out of State.” She rummaged in her gym basket, then bit her lip and frowned. “Shoot . . . don’t tell me I’ve lost it.”

Becka rubbed a towel through her hair, then sighed. Her hair was mousy brown and would dry three times faster than Julie’s. The reason was simple: Becka’s hair was three times thinner. Yes sir, just another one of life’s little jokes with Becka as the punch line.

Julie’s search through her basket grew more urgent.

“What are you looking for?” Becka asked.

“My pouch . . .” There was definite concern in her voice as she continued pawing through her clothes.

“Pouch?”

“My good luck charm.”

Becka wasn’t sure what Julie meant, but she gave a quick scan along the bench.

“I just hope nobody stole it,” Julie said.

Becka spotted something under the bench. It was partially covered by towels. She reached for it and picked up a small leather bag with rocks or sand or something inside. A leather string was attached at the top so it could be worn as a necklace.

“Is this it?” Becka asked.

Julie relaxed. “Yeah. Great.” She took it and slipped it around her neck.

Becka watched, fighting back a wave of uneasiness. She tried to sound casual as she asked, “So, what’s in it?”

“I don’t know.” Julie shrugged. “Some turquoise, some powders, herbs—that sort of stuff. The Ascension Lady puts them together for us—you know, for good luck.”

“‘Ascension Lady’?” Becka asked.

“Yeah,” Julie fingered the little pouch. “Course I don’t believe in any of that stuff. But with the district preliminaries coming up, it doesn’t hurt to play the odds, right?”

Becka’s mind raced. She wanted to ask lots more about the

pouch and this Ascension Lady, but Julie didn't give her the chance.

"Listen, we'll see you Monday," she said grabbing her backpack. "And don't be bummed, you did fine. Besides," she threw a mischievous grin over her shoulder, "we can always use a good mascot."

Becka forced a smile.

"See ya." Julie disappeared around the row of lockers and pushed open the big double doors. They slammed shut behind her with a loud *click, booom*.

Becka didn't move. She sat, all alone . . . just her and the dripping showers.

Her smile had already faded. Not because of the pain in her knees or even because of the memories of her fall.

It was because of the pouch. She'd seen pouches like that before. In South America. But they weren't worn by pretty, rich, athletic teenagers who wanted to go to State track championships.

They were worn by witch doctors who worshiped demons.