
DO YOU
BELIEVE IN
MAGIC?

Dark Circles / Book 1

Jim Melvin

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Author's note

As a novelist, Jim Melvin is best known for *The Death Wizard Chronicles*, a six-book epic fantasy for mature audiences. *The DW Chronicles* is appropriate for ages 18 and older.

His latest work, *Do You Believe in Magic?*, is book one of *Dark Circles*, a middle-grade epic fantasy that is appropriate for ages 13 and older.

Other than having the same author, the two series bear no relation to each other.





Prologue

Lord Gar was exhausted.

This latest battle was worse than any other, and he knew that those who fought at his side also had little strength left. Hoped-for reinforcements had failed to arrive, and the enemy massed for yet another frenetic assault.

His small company's only hope was the fortress it held against an army of monsters. The stronghold's sturdy bulwark, crowned with a chiseled parapet, formed a half-circle that was anchored against the base of an escarpment. The stone wall was virtually impregnable. One hundred warriors could hold against one thousand. But Gar's force numbered less than thirty, and the army that gathered in the bony fields outside the fortress easily surpassed *ten* thousand. The monsters were sufficient in strength and number to clamber upon each other and scale the 50-foot bulwark like a swarm of

ants.

A deep voice broke Gar's reverie.

"My lord."

Gar turned and faced a grizzled warrior. He had not heard the husky man approach, so intense was his concentration on the evil that loomed beyond.

"My lord," the warrior repeated.

Despite their long acquaintance, Gar still didn't feel comfortable being addressed as "lord," especially by a grownup.

"What have you to say, Nobuo?" Gar asked.

Nobuo placed a gauntleted hand on his lord's shoulder. "This is a fight we cannot win."

Gar knew he was right. Without reinforcements, the next assault would be the last.

"You state the obvious. What else have you to say?"

"The monks have found us and have opened a portal."

Gar's eyes brightened. "This is excellent! How many of us will it contain?"

Nobuo hesitated before saying, "One."

"What? Why?"

Nobuo motioned beyond the walls. "A great evil has joined the fray. A Kuutar has revealed its presence, and its dark magic appears to be countering the efforts of the monks."

A wave of dizziness caused Gar to stagger. He was only a boy, after all. How could he stand against a Kuutar, a creature of legendary might that

struck terror into the stoutest of warriors? *This is how it will end*, he thought. But the prophecies foretold otherwise.

“Save the most novice one among you,” Gar ordered. “*Hurry ...* before the Kuutar reaches us and closes the portal.”

“My lord, we will not prevail here,” Nobuo said. “But this is one battle of many. We can afford to lose one battle, but we cannot afford to lose the war. Without you to lead us, all will crumble.”

Gar took a step back. “No.”

“Lord Gar.”

“I will *not!*”

Gar’s own people placed many hands upon him. They intended to send him—and only him—through the portal.

Gar was smaller and younger than those who now opposed him, but he was stronger than any of them, including Nobuo. It didn’t matter this time. He was not a god who could flatten hundreds with a sweep of his hand. And apparently, he couldn’t even overcome a dozen of his own determined warriors. After a brief struggle, they shackled him and dragged him into a small room tucked into the rear of the courtyard. A warrior slammed and braced a thick wooden door. Gar could hear violent clashes outside. The bulwark was breached. The enemy was upon them.

The room’s cold and dank interior chilled Gar’s heart. The only furnishings were crude wooden chairs and a few candles dying slow deaths on metal posts. Gar saw the portal looming ahead, a circle of glistening light magically punched into the far wall.

“I command you,” he shouted, struggling without success against his

comrades-turned-captors. “*Do not do this!*”

The door burst asunder, and a creature that dwarfed even Nobuo squeezed through the shattered opening. In the flickering light, Gar could see the Kuutar’s hideous face. Two horns erupted from its skull like spears of obsidian. It wielded a club half as large as Gar himself and probably several times his weight.

“Aye!” a warrior wailed. “The Kuutar has come.”

The beast leaped forward faster than would have seemed possible for a creature of such bulk. But Nobuo fearlessly greeted it, slipping beneath the wicked club and stabbing the Kuutar in the abdomen with a curved sword. The wound was not severe enough to slay a monster of this magnitude, but it slowed the Kuutar enough to buy a little time.

Four men carried Gar the final few steps and thrust him like a battering ram into the portal seconds before it dimmed and winked out. Even as he entered the light, Gar heard screaming behind him. His warriors were sacrificing themselves in order to save him.

Gar’s body tumbled into a room of similar size, and he ended up face-down on a bed of straw. He raised his head and dizzily recognized a dozen Yati monks, their white robes filthy and stained with blood. The portal that had saved his life must have been brutally difficult to conjure.

Gar was still shackled and could barely move.

“Free me,” he ordered.

But maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.

The way he was feeling, he might kill all of them out of spite.



1

GOODBYE FLORIDA, HELLO SOUTH CAROLINA

The road was endless.

Or at least it felt that way to Charlie Magus as he dozed fitfully in the front seat of his mom's rickety Toyota pickup, lulled by the bumpy rumbling of rubber on cement.

A tuft of pampas grass—still his mother's favorite living-room

decoration despite being filthy and tattered—dangled over his seat and tickled his nose no matter how many times he brushed it away. Even worse, a tiny spider clung stubbornly to one of its strands, adding to Charlie's misery. He heard his mom giggle, which yanked him back to a world where people were awake.

"It's not funny, mom," Charlie said, sounding appropriately grumpy for a 13-year-old having to share the claustrophobic cab of a small truck with boxes, lamps, books, and yes, pampas grass teeming with deadly spiders. "Can't we just hurl the stupid thing out the window?"

"Charlie, this was a gift to me from Poppy and Mawmaw before you were even born. When we move in with your grandparents, they'll appreciate that I've kept it all these years. They're doing us a big favor, young man. They have earned our gratitude and respect."

"But it's all dusty," Charlie said, and then—predictably—sneezed. At least it was a for-real sneeze.

"We can't shake out the dust because every time we so much as touch it, more of the hairs fall out," his mother lectured.

This was not a new argument. Charlie decided to "get while the getting was good"—as his dad used to say, back when his dad was still around—and wisely changed the subject. "I'm hungry."

"Already?"

"And thirsty."

"It's not even noon yet."

"Not even noon? Mom, we left St. Pete at 8 this morning."

"Have an apple."

“*Mom!*”

“Okay, we’ll reach Lake City in a few minutes. There’s a Steak ‘n Shake. Your favorite.”

The thought of a double hamburger with extra ketchup and a chocolate milkshake with extra whipped cream cheered up Charlie instantly. They were less than 200 miles into a 600-mile journey, but right now all that mattered to him was food.



After lunch they crossed the Florida border, and a couple of hours later they pulled into a rest stop on the Macon bypass—pretty much in the dead center of Georgia. Charlie knew this because he loved to study maps. He didn’t have any problems making A’s in geography. Or any other courses. Yes, he was a nerd, which got him picked on more than he would have preferred. But what could he do? When you’re smart, you’re smart. For better or worse.

As for being in the dead center of Georgia, it sure felt lifeless to Charlie. The rest stop was dusty and uninviting.

When he got out of the truck, the late-summer heat struck him like a fiery fist. Several hours of daylight remained before dusk, so it wasn’t impending darkness that made Charlie feel jittery. More likely, it was plain old depression. Leaving Florida wasn’t his idea, but his father’s abandonment wasn’t either. And his mother losing her job was yet another no-no. Bailing to Poppy and Mawmaw’s made a certain desperate sense,

even to a boy. That didn't mean it made Charlie happy. He loved St. Petersburg. Loved the beaches. Loved the palm trees. Even loved the people, except for the bullies at school. Georgia was foreign to him, like a stranger who seemed dangerous simply because he looked different. And yet, Georgia wasn't even their final destination. Today's epic journey would end in South Carolina, where they would settle in an area popularly called The Upstate. Their new city ... er, town? Lowery. Population? Three thousand.

In other words, Hicksville.

Charlie's mom got mad when he used that word, but as his famous vanishing dad liked to say, "It is what it is."

His mom startled Charlie back to the land of the living.

"Once we leave here, we'll be driving for at least three hours before we stop again, so make sure you do what you need to do."

A little blond girl stood near her parents' fancy car in the parking area and overheard Charlie's mom, causing the girl to cackle.

This horrified Charlie's sense of coolness. "*Mom!*"

The girl cackled louder. It was the most obnoxious laugh Charlie had ever heard.

Even more humiliating, his mom grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the restrooms. "Let's just get this over with, okay? I'm already tired, and there's such a long way to go."

Charlie knew when he could mess with his mom and when he couldn't. This was one time when it was better to do what he was told. Besides, he knew in his heart how deeply his father's "disappearing act" had hurt his mom. And despite how annoying his mom could be, Charlie loved

her more than anyone else on Earth. Came with being an only child with a derelict dad, he supposed.

The men's restroom was empty except for one tall man wearing a black T-shirt and blue jeans, both of which seemed to fit as tight as a suit of armor. The man stood with his back to Charlie at a urinal. There were open ones on each side of the stranger, but Charlie wanted nothing to do with them. Something about the man made him nervous. And the last thing he needed was to suffer from what his friends in Florida called *stage-fright*, where you froze at a urinal and couldn't go. His mom had warned him to "do what he needed to do," so he used this as an excuse to slip into the nearest stall and latch the door.

And man, did he have to go then. It seemed to last forever. Near the end, Charlie heard a tapping sound behind him. He twisted his head around and looked at the floor outside the stall door. He could see a pair of black boots.

Charlie heard a deep, scary voice.

"A boy shouldn't venture in places he don't belong."

Charlie didn't say a word. For the first time in his life, *stage-fright* struck while he was still going.

The boots clomped off, leaving behind a deathly silence.

Charlie somehow finished, then turned and peered out the crack of the door. The bathroom appeared empty, but he was afraid to come out. Thankfully, the main door of the bathroom swung open and a friendly-looking dad with three noisy sons trundled in to do their business. Charlie seized the opportunity and rushed out of the restroom, not even stopping to

wash his hands. Outside, his mom was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the man with the boots.

The little blond girl was there, though, and she cackled yet again. Charlie stuck his tongue out at her. She smiled and then slowly wagged her finger. “A boy shouldn’t venture in places he don’t belong,” she said in a voice so squeaky it gave him a chill.

“Huh?” Charlie whispered.

“*Charlie!*” came a jolting voice from the side that was far from a whisper. His mother magically appeared next to him. “I’ve called you *twice* now. Let’s get going.”

“Huh?” Charlie said. “Twice?” Until then, he hadn’t heard her say anything.

His mom made some adjustments to the ragged tarp that covered the portion of their belongings stuffed in the truck’s bed. Then they were back on the road, heading north on Interstate 75.

At least they were leaving behind the dead center of Georgia—not to mention the scary man and the spooky girl.



The next stretch of interstate had five lanes, and sometimes six where there were merges. They churned toward Atlanta, always in the lane next to the far-right lane. Charlie’s mom was no speed demon, and her truck no race car. The venerable Toyota struggled to maintain 65 miles per hour, which was slower than a turtle on a manic interstate like this. Charlie watched a

slew of newer, more powerful vehicles blow past them one after another, each going 80-plus. Some of these drivers gave his mom dirty looks, and there was even a bird or two “mixed in for good measure.” Charlie cringed. He was at his mom’s mercy.

As they approached Atlanta, the traffic grew even heavier. The lanes to their left were full of cars as swift and bloodthirsty as sharks.

“There was a weird guy in the bathroom,” Charlie said, without even intending to bring it up. It was like a sorcerer had forced the words out of his mouth.

“What?” his mom said. She gripped the steering wheel hard, causing her small knuckles to look red and swollen.

“A weird guy in the bathroom at the rest stop. He said something to me.”

His mom looked at him nervously. “Did he touch you?”

“No, mom! Nothing like that. When I was in the stall, he stood outside and said something about me not going where I didn’t belong. Then he left. It kind of scared me. It was as if he knew me.”

Now his mom was fully engaged.

“Tell—me—exactly—what—he—said.”

“Mom!”

“*TELL ME*, Charlie.”

“I can’t remember *exactly* what he said. It was something like, I shouldn’t ‘venture where I don’t belong.’ I remember he used the word ‘venture’ and said ‘don’t’ instead of ‘doesn’t.’”

Charlie saw a tear trickle down his mom’s cheek. “You should have

told me about this when we were still at the rest stop. It's obvious the guy was a creep. I would have called 911."

"Mom, I looked around, and he was gone. But do you remember that little girl?"

"Little girl? There were lots of kids there."

"A little blond girl. And here's the weirdest part. The girl said the same thing to me that the man did."

His mom studied Charlie's face. He didn't like the look in her eyes. Nor did he like how close the eighteen-wheeler was to the front of their pickup.

"Mom, there's a lot of traffic."

She continued to stare.

"Mom, there's a *lot* of traffic."

She finally looked forward, but her hands continued to hold the steering wheel in a death grip. Charlie noticed she had begun to cry, making him want to cry too.

"Mom, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

This made her cry harder.

After a while, she calmed down. "Charlie, your father hurt me. But not only me. He hurt us both. Sometimes I forget that. Sometimes I get caught up feeling sorry for myself, and I don't think enough about how much you're hurting. It's no wonder your imagination might run a little wild."

Charlie's sadness turned to agitation. "You think I made this up?"

"I think we're both in a lot of pain, which can affect how we experience things."

“Jeez, mom. You sound like a psychiatrist.”

“Charlie! All I know is we both need a fresh start. Here’s hoping that we’ll find it with Poppy and Mawmaw.”

Poppy and Mawmaw’s real names, Bill and Betty Watchman, were rarely spoken in the Magus household. Charlie’s dad called them “Sloppy” and “Cole Slaw,” which made Charlie giggle. But it infuriated his mom, who couldn’t understand why her husband would want to demean the very people who had given them the down payment for houses “not once but twice.” Charlie’s dad was not the type who held onto a job for any length of time.

Poppy and Mawmaw were born and raised in Lowery and had lived in their current home for forty years. They purchased it several years before their only child Mary came into the world. Mary hadn’t managed to “escape” from Lowery, as Charlie’s dad put it, until she was 20 years old when a 30-year-old restaurant manager convinced the star server to marry him and move to Florida. “We’ll start our own restaurant and get rich,” Charlie’s dad proclaimed.

The rest was history. They never started a restaurant. Or even approached getting rich.

Charlie knew all this because he and his mom spent a lot of time talking about it. When Charlie’s dad disappeared for good a few months back with their life savings stuffed in a duffel bag, it left the two of them to pick up the pieces. Now, Charlie sat inside the cab of the pickup and mused about the past. It was 5 o’clock, and they were trapped in an epic traffic jam.

“Dang it! I should have taken the Atlanta bypass like Poppy told me to do. Now we’re going to be stuck here forever. And I have to pee.”

“So do I.”

“Charlie!”

“What???” How come you get to pee, and I don’t?”

His mom chuckled and then laughed out loud. Charlie joined her, and soon they laughed hysterically. It was a good thing they were stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. She might have wrecked the truck otherwise.

“Gosh, Charlie. You’re going to make me pee my pants.”

They laughed even louder.

They both almost peed their pants because it took until 6:30 before they got moving at a decent speed. When his mom finally veered onto an exit, it took twenty more minutes to drive three blocks to the McDonald’s parking lot. Then they had to wait another five minutes to get into the crowded bathrooms.

Soon after battling back onto the interstate, they hit another traffic jam caused by a five-car pileup. They were stuck again. But it didn’t seem as bad this time because they had empty bladders and full stomachs. Charlie closed his eyes and fell asleep. Soon after, a honking horn startled him awake.

Charlie reflexively turned toward the abusive sound. In the lane to their right, he saw a fancy black sedan. Though it still had to be 90 degrees outside, the sedan’s windows were down, and Charlie could see inside the car without difficulty. Leering at him from the driver’s seat was the man he encountered in the bathroom. Charlie wasn’t sure how he knew this; he hadn’t seen the man’s face. But he just did. And by herself in the sedan’s backseat was the little girl. She also leered, only her expression was even

scarier because jagged fangs protruded from her mouth. When she met Charlie's eyes, she smacked her jaws together loud enough for him to hear it above the traffic noise.

Charlie wrenched his neck against the seatbelt and turned to his mom for help. But she was disinterested in his plight. In fact, she wasn't moving at all, frozen like a mannequin. This spooked Charlie as much as anything else. He reached for her, but a scratching sound to his right distracted him—and when he turned back, he saw the little girl's face pressed against the window. She clung to the side of their pickup with fingers that resembled suction cups. Charlie screamed, his voice high-pitched and pathetic. In response, the girl sprang backward and flew erratically away.

Charlie felt a tug on his shoulder.

“Wake up!” It was his mom's voice. “For god's sake, you scared me half to death. What in the world were you dreaming about?”

Charlie said, “Huh?” Then he looked out of the window and was shocked that the girl and the black sedan were gone.

“Where are we? What time is it?”

His mom chuckled. “We're almost to the South Carolina State Line. You've been asleep for close to three hours.”

“Wow! Sorry, mom.”

“It's okay. The drive's almost over. Less than an hour to go. We certainly have set no world records getting here. But at least we're safe and sound, right?”

Charlie managed a trembling smile. “Right.”

After her reaction to his story about the man at the rest stop, Charlie

didn't dare tell her about his dream girl.



They crossed the Georgia State Line and entered South Carolina, taking Exit 1 and then merging onto Highway 11. They passed a building with a glowing sign in the front parking lot that was shaped like a question mark and had to be 15 feet tall. Charlie puzzled over this. In this area of the country, a cross that large wouldn't have surprised him. But a question mark? The more Charlie thought about it, the more amused he became. It was an appropriate symbol of his life as a young teenager.

“What’s so funny?” his mom said.

“Oh, just that sign we passed. What is it, do you know? I don’t remember seeing it any of the other times we’ve visited.”

“Don’t have a clue. I thought it was odd myself. Anyway, we’re almost there. My gosh, I can’t remember ever being so tired. I think I’m going to go inside, kiss Poppy and Mawmaw on the cheek, and go right to bed. Are you tired?”

“Probably not as tired as you. I’ve slept half the drive, seems like. And believe it or not, I’m hungry again.”

This time, being hungry didn’t annoy his mom.

“Mawmaw will make you something to eat. In fact, going without food will be the least of your problems. I’m sure you remember how much Mawmaw loves to cook. Fried chicken, sausage gravy and biscuits, crispy bacon, homemade apple pie. And that’s just the appetizer.”

“Now you’re *really* making me hungry.”

“Don’t worry, we’re almost there.”

Despite his mom’s calming words, the last few minutes of the drive turned out to be hectic. They ended up on a two-lane road lined with thick trees, and if not for the weak beams from the Toyota’s headlights, it would have been so dark Charlie wouldn’t have been able to see his hands in front of his face. His mom cursed under her breath, then came to a stop in the middle of the road. They hadn’t seen another car for what seemed like forever.

“Darn it! I don’t know if we’ve already passed their driveway. Why can’t I remember where it is?”

“Didn’t you grow up here?”

“Charlie! Now’s not the time.”

“Sorry! Can’t you call them on your phone?”

His mom grimaced. “If I do, Poppy will lecture me about not being better prepared about getting here before dark. Besides, what am I going to tell him? That we’re parked by a big tree with a bunch of other trees next to it?”

“I don’t know, mom. But we’ve got to do something.”

“Let’s go a little more. Remember, look for 314 Poplar. There’s a small sign that glows in the dark. I remember that much, at least.”

“Me too.” Even as he said those words, several fat drops of rain struck the windshield.

“Crap,” she said, then added, “Sorry, I shouldn’t use such lang—”

She didn’t complete the last word because the rain suddenly came

down furiously, startling them both.

“All our stuff is going to get soaked,” she moaned.

“The tarp won’t keep it dry?”

“You heard it flapping. It’s probably only half on by now. I’m surprised the whole thing didn’t blow off a hundred miles back. This is when we could have used your *father’s* help.”

His mom got teary-eyed. Charlie sat in the stormy dark, too worn out to comfort her. She sensed this and regained control. “We’ll go another mile or two, and if we don’t find it, we’ll turn around, okay?”

As she was about to step on the gas, a vehicle came up behind them, and then the swirling lights of a police car illuminated the darkness like colorful laser beams.

“Mom, are we in trouble?”

“Shhhh!”

A powerful flashlight lit up the front seat and almost blinded them. His mom rolled the window down only halfway, yet even that was enough to allow splats of water to sluice in.

An officer, wearing a raincoat and wide-brimmed hat, looked at them and said, “Is your truck operational, ma’am?”

This caused his mom to burst into tears. Charlie didn’t know how a man was supposed to behave in these situations, so all he could think to do was lean over and say, “We’re lost. And we’re scared.”

The officer mused over this, then said to his mom, “Are you okay, ma’am?”

She looked up, her hands trembling.

“I’m so sorry, officer. We’ve been driving since morning, all the way from Florida. We’re tired. And my son’s right. We’re lost.” Then she composed herself and managed to chuckle. “And I used to live here.”

“It’s not a good idea to stop in the middle of the road,” the officer said. “There’s not much traffic this time of night on a road like this, but the few who are on it rarely obey the speed limit.” Then he said, in a manner that Charlie found kind: “Tell me the address you’re looking for and I’ll be happy to lead you there.”

“Three-one-four Poplar Road. It’s my mom and dad’s house. I grew up there, but I’ve been living in Florida for a long while now. My son and I are moving in with them.”

“In that case, you’re going the wrong way. You need to turn around. Can you manage it in this rain?”

“Yes sir,” she said.

This lifted a tremendous weight off Charlie’s shoulders. There was hope after all.

The officer led them to the driveway and then drove away without putting them in jail or even giving them a ticket. In Charlie’s young mind, the man was a hero. He wished he had a dad like him.



Poppy and Mawmaw’s long driveway wound deep into a hundred acres of Carolina hardwood forest, eventually leading to an aging but well-kept two-story house nestled in a hollow surrounded by oaks. Charlie

remembered the house well and had enjoyed his previous visits. The little town of Lowery was boring, but his grandparents were kind of cool, and there was a lot of land to explore outside the front door. Still, Charlie figured that living here was going to be a whole different “ball of wax” than visiting for a week or two.

They drove slowly through the rain. Charlie felt like a sullen warrior returning from a lost battle, and his mom’s sallow expression echoed this sentiment. The house was lit up, as was the detached five-car garage. One of the wooden garage doors was open.

“Should I reverse in?” his mom whispered.

“Mom, *gosh*.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

She pulled in front-first and turned the truck off. The contrasting silence—no more rain beating on the cab’s roof like a hyperactive drummer—further rattled Charlie’s overwrought senses. They sat without moving for a long time. Then a rapping sound on his mom’s window made them jump.

Charlie half-expected to see the police officer again, but instead it was Poppy standing there wearing a yellow raincoat and a yellow hat.

His mom rolled down the manual window. “Hi, dad.”

“You’re late, Mary.” His voice didn’t sound angry. Just matter of fact.

“Yes. We hit a lot of traffic.”

“You didn’t take the bypass.”

“I took the Macon one.” Then she sighed. “Not the Atlanta one.”

Poppy nodded, as if he had expected this. Then he leaned down and looked at Charlie. “Hello, boy.”

“Hi, Poppy.”

Poppy smiled genuinely. “Welcome home.”