

A woman's profile is shown in a forest setting, looking upwards. The image is layered with a wolf silhouette and butterflies. The overall color palette is a mix of teal, green, and dark tones.

MELVIN BURGESS

WINNER OF THE CARNEGIE MEDAL

The Lost Witch



*The
Lost Witch*

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*The
Lost Witch*

MELVIN BURGESS



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*To Charlie, for her patience, her
relentlessness, her eagle eyes and of course,
for her unbounded enthusiasm for
killing off female characters.*

Part One
The Second World

1

It was tipping it down. It had been for weeks but today the weather was savage. The wind heaved at the car, shoving it across the road and flinging rain like gunshot against the windows. There was water everywhere, pouring out of the air, flooding the black fields, flowing across the windscreen. It sprang in torrents from the walls and ran in rivers down the road.

The Wilder family were all furious after spending two weeks' holiday trapped by the rain in a farmhouse on the North Yorkshire moors. Bea in particular was outraged. Her friends had been to Italy, Spain, France – even Florida in one case. She'd been to a swamp in North Yorkshire. Her mum and dad had been bickering the whole way home while baby Michael grizzled next to her in his car seat. All any of them wanted to do was get back home. They weren't far off, either, only twenty minutes away on the high moors when it all began. A set of lights appeared, bouncing across the fields in the darkness above them. Someone was driving headlong down the hill. In this weather!

'Look at that,' said Bea's mum. 'Off-road. Bloody dangerous. He's going far too fast.'

'Must be a farmer on a quad,' muttered her dad, clutching

the steering wheel like it was a life jacket. 'Must have lost a sheep or something.'

'It'd take more than sheep to get me out in this,' said her mum. Then . . . 'Look, Jamie. There's more of them. And over there.'

Bea peered out. All around them people were charging down to the road, some on quads, some on foot, some on motocross bikes. More came into sight as they watched: running, slipping and skidding over the sodden black fields. Some of them were already climbing over the stone walls and pushing open the gates to the road. There were dogs too, running fast towards them.

'What on earth is going on?' demanded Bea's mum. 'What is it? Some kind of hunt?'

Even as she spoke, Bea's eye was caught by a movement down by the side of the car. A hare. No, two. No – three! Three hares, sodden-furred, muddy-legged, wet to their bones, loping along in the road beside the car, exhausted.

'Hares!' she exclaimed.

Her dad braked. Bea pressed down the electric window and leaned out to get a better view. One of the hares, a great, gaunt beast with grey on its muzzle, had only one eye. This was when Bea's life changed, when it ceased to be just hers and her family's and became something beyond that. She regretted that moment many times, but she never forgot the shiver of excitement that ran up and down her spine and raised the hairs on her arms and neck.

The hare turned its head sideways to look up at her. Bea looked straight into its eye and she saw . . .

Worlds upon worlds within worlds. Millions of them, some like this one, some impossibly different. They fitted inside one another like Russian dolls – more worlds than there are stars in the sky or atoms in your eye.

Bea recoiled, shocked at the size and magnificence of the universe she lived in. And at that same moment the quads and bikes burst upon them. Engines roared, sudden headlamps shone in and blinded them.

But that wasn't all.

Suddenly the whole hillside was lit up. There were no shadows; the light was everywhere – in the car, under the car, above the car. The bikes and quads, the people and dogs were as brightly lit from below as they were from above. It was as if the air itself shone around them.

Two of the hares, including old one-eye, dropped down under the car, but the remaining animal spooked. It jumped sideways, twisted in mid-air, caught its powerful hind legs against the roadside wall and bounded back – right at Bea. It shot in through the car window as neat as a bolt going home and landed with a bruising, sodden thump right in her lap.

'It's come in, it's come in,' yelled her mum, twisting about in her seat in a panic. Baby Michael let out a scream, then clapped his hand over his mouth in a curiously adult gesture, and stared goggle-eyed at the hare next to him. The hare scabbled briefly and painfully against Bea's legs with its sharp claws, then crouched down into her and stilled. It was bigger than she thought a hare would be, as big as a small dog, so heavy on her bruised thighs, so muddy and cold and wet. In another moment the heat of its body warmed through to her

skin. It became utterly still. Nothing moved; but the heart inside it beat furiously.

Bea understood at once that whatever else she did she had to give sanctuary to this wild creature.

‘What’s it doing, what’s it doing?’ yelled her mum.

The hare flinched. Bea glanced sideways at Michael, who was staring spellbound. She smiled at him to reassure him and Michael smiled back. The brilliant light shining from everywhere made everything crystal clear. Every drop of water, every hair on her arm and on the hare’s back was microscopically vivid. The wind and the pelting rain blew in through the open window, but Bea didn’t dare move. She stilled herself, just as the hare had done. She knew without looking that Michael was doing the same. She pressed her elbows and her legs together, made herself small and quiet. She was terrified and delighted in one go. Who would ever imagine such a thing? And it was happening to *her*.

Unlike her mum, Bea’s dad was calm – he always was. He was staring over his shoulder at her.

‘You OK, Bea?’

Bea glanced up. She could see every detail of him in that light – every fleck and stubble on his chin, every line of colour in his grey eyes. She gave him a little nod, and he nodded back.

‘Calm down, Kelsey, it’s just a hare. Bea’s hiding it from them, aren’t you, Bea?’ Bea nodded again, gratefully.

Her mum put her hand on her chest. ‘What kind of beast does such a thing? Look at it. It must be riddled with fleas!’

The hare lay on Bea’s lap, its outside so still, its heart inside

so frantic. It was huge. Any idea you had that hares were just big rabbits was gone. This beast could kick you to the ground if it caught you right. It could break your nose. Her mum was staring at it with her eyes bulging. Baby Michael reached out a pudgy hand and laid it gently on the hare's back. The creature flinched briefly again, and wriggled deeper into Bea's lap. Michael looked up at Bea and beamed at her, his mouth open in pure delight.

'It's a hunt. We're saving the hare from those bastards, OK?' said their dad.

There was a pause while they all took this in.

'You never see hares around here,' said their mum. They were whispering now. 'And they want to hunt down and kill the ones we have!'

'Sick!' hissed Bea. And that was it; they were united. The Wilder family had their moments, at one another's throats like everyone else. But once they got an idea in their heads they were rock-solid. Nothing was going to get between them on this.

Outside, the hunt was closing in. Bea's dad wound the window up and gently put the car back into gear, but before he could pull away a Land Rover came hurtling out of the field above them. It tore into the road in a slew of mud and skidded to a halt right in front of them. The wipers smeared mud over the glass, and Bea peered through it to see if they could squeeze past. A big man in a waterproof cape was getting out, black against the headlights. But before he got to them there was a commotion outside. A dog had shoved its great wide head under their car, growling and baying, and one of

the hares sheltering there ran out – straight into the jaws of a dog on the other side.

There was a loud snap as the dog's teeth bit the air. The hare had bounded up at Bea's window just as the first had; but now the window was closed. It banged heavily against the glass and fell to the ground, but was up in an instant – a great arcing leap high into the air, right up on top of the car. They heard it landing above them with a loud bang, then the sound of its claws scrabbling for purchase.

In Bea's lap, the first hare raised its eyes, its mouth open. Above them, the hare on the roof slipped. It fell down the windscreen, its coat leaving a muddy trail behind it. It slithered briefly on the bonnet, and fell to the ground.

The dogs were on it in a second. The family stared in horror through the headlamp-spangled rain as the hare was flung into the air. The injured animal spun before them and came down with a bang on the bonnet. It tried to leap off, but it was half-stunned and dazzled by the light. It slipped and fell again to the ground.

The dogs rushed in. One of them seized it by the back legs and began to thrash it from side to side, like a heavy wet rag. Through the noise of dogs and people, the shouting, barking and yelling, they could hear the hare's voice, a thin scream of terror and pain as the dog thrashed it to and fro. Amazingly, from beneath their car, the old one-eyed hare emerged. It stood on its hind legs and started to box at the dog's face, tempting it to drop its victim and go for it instead, but the other dogs lunged at it, and it had to run back under the car or die itself.

The hare on Bea's lap stood up to look out of the window, front paws resting on the door handle. It turned its gaze on her – as if she could do anything! – and her heart broke with pity for the beast. She put her arms around its chest and wept.

The hare struggled to be free. 'Let me out,' it cried.

Yes! She would do anything to help. Bea pressed the window control, the wind and rain blew in again – but when she looked back, the hare was staring at her with astonishment, its jaw hanging open. Bea gasped, because . . . she had understood! She had understood! She saw the hare shake its head, then it turned and leaped out of the car window. It hit the wall and fell on its side on the ground with a jarring thud but gathered itself and bounded directly at the dog that held the other hare in its jaws.

It was such a hopeless thing, the hare's attack on the dog. In the car it had seemed surprisingly big, but next to the huge dogs, full of the lust for blood, it was frail and small. The two animals' desperate attempt to save their family – Bea was certain they were a family – struck right at her heart. And in her heart, something magical opened; a door which could never be closed again. She felt something rushing up towards her from deep in the earth. It was a force she could not resist.

She leaned out of the window, opened her mouth and a voice sprang into her throat:

'I SUMMON YOU, YOU CROWNED RUNNERS,' she cried. 'I SUMMON YOU FROM SLEEP. I SUMMON AND COMMAND!' This was not a voice that came from inside her. It came from deep, deep down – so deep it felt to her as if the earth beneath her had spoken those words, not her at all.

'Bea!' exclaimed her mum. You never heard such a noise from such a small throat. Her father looked at her strangely. 'Was that *words?*' he said, and Bea understood at once that no one there had any idea what she had said.

Everything changed – the light, the night, the rain. Shadows appeared all around them. Bea peered through the rain trying to make them out. So big! They were – deer? Yes, deer! But not the small roes you saw around here from time to time. Big ones – red deer, stags with huge antlers above their heads like crowns. They came pouring over the fence and out of the gates. One of them lowered its head and gored a dog, tossing it high into the air. The dog yelped, twisting as it hit the ground, and crawled off on its belly to hide under the Land Rover in front of them. People were shouting, yelling, slithering, falling in the mud as the deer barged into them, legs kicking out, great heads down among them, harrying them, chasing them away.

It lasted just a few minutes, then it was done. The deer, gone. The hares, gone. The supernatural light that had surrounded them died. The huntsmen and women floundered on their backs in the mud in the headlamps. A herd of huge deer! What a chance! Everything had been saved.

The wind gusted in on Bea through the open window, the rain fell in sheets from heaven. All around them, people picked themselves up from the ground where they had fallen or been brushed aside. The quads and bikes stood stalled or overturned on the road. It was unbelievable. There had been no red deer here for years – the last of them had been killed decades ago.

Bea's dad eased the car forward. There was just room if he took it slowly, but before he could drive off the tall man from the Land Rover in front of them came up to the car and rapped on the window. Her dad wound it down. The man bent to speak to him.

'If you'd just step outside the vehicle, sir.'

Her dad looked up in alarm. The big man had lost his hood and his brown curly hair was plastered down his forehead with the rain. He had a half-smile on his face, but his tone was commanding. There was a brief pause, and her dad moved to unbuckle his seat belt. But her mum, who always took charge of this sort of situation, put her hand on his leg and leaned across.

'We haven't done anything, have we?' she said.

'Just a routine check, madam.'

'Are you a policeman?' she asked him.

'We do have policemen here, if that's what it takes . . .' The man straightened briefly and called out – 'Ask Charles to come over. This lady needs the police to speak to them.'

He bent down to the window again, his hand gripping the window edge, and looked inside at Bea – right into her eyes. Bea stared back, but his gaze went so deep that she had to look away.

Bea's mum suddenly leaned across and slapped at his hand.

'How dare you, who do you think you are, get your hands off – off!' she yelled. The man let go and stood up in surprise. 'In this rain? You plonker. Is this Peterborough? Your giraffes are all over the car park. Go, go, go.'

Bewildered, the man looked around; Bea's dad took his

chance, revved the engine, put it into gear and shot off. He swerved, grazing the car against the stones of the wall, but just managed to squeeze through the gap between the Land Rover and the wall – and away! Behind them, the tall man lifted his arm to his face to protect himself from the spray of their wheels.

‘The Wilders do it again!’ roared her mum. Cheering loudly, they drove downhill towards home. It wasn’t the first time Bea’s mum’s famous confuse-a-cop act had got her and Dad off the hook. Bea had heard all about it before, but she’d never seen it in action.

‘That man! His face! Did you see it?’ Even her dad, who was always so calm, was grinning, his grey eyes sparkling behind his spectacles.

‘He looked like he’d just seen a ghost,’ bellowed her mum. Yes, thought Bea – or heard a hare speak.

‘Did you hear it?’ she demanded. It couldn’t be true – could it? ‘The hare? Did you?’

‘What a noise you made!’ said her mum. ‘I thought you were throwing up or something.’

‘Dreadful noise,’ agreed her dad. Bea looked up at something in his voice and saw his eyes on her in the mirror, frowning. She looked away. Hares can’t talk, she thought. But it had seemed so real! Could she have just imagined it?

She must have.

They drove on down the hill, marvelling at what had happened on the moors that evening. The deer! Where had they come from? The hunt! No one had ever talked about a hunt around here. So many of them out in such filthy weather,

as if catching those hares was all that mattered. And that man, trying to stop them and get them out of the car. Who on earth was he?

Beside Bea, baby Michael reached out to pull at her arm. 'Wabbit,' he said. 'Wabbit, Bea.'

'No. A hare, Michael. It was a hare.'

'Hare,' he said.

Bea looked over to him. Had he heard it speak too? Michael nodded and looked back over his shoulder anxiously. She reached across and held his hand, still muddy from the hare's fur.

What a night it had been! Already she had lost any sense of what exactly was real and what was imagined. Talking hares. Voices from the earth. Such crazy things . . .

And then they were in the town, winding through the wet streets. Even now, in the rain and wind, there were people out and about, in the cafés, blowing down the streets, peering out from the bright windows of the pub on the corner.

The car turned up the hill towards home. Her mum sometimes said that the best thing about holidays was getting back home, but this time, thought Bea, the best bit had happened before they got there. But what did it mean? Such thoughts, such feelings – such events!

In bed that night, Bea thought about the hare that spoke and the voice which had visited her from the underground, which had grabbed hold of the night and turned it into living things, for a brief time. What's wrong with me? she thought. She'd

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been like a child at the theatre, believing everything she saw. But her family were rebels – atheists, republicans, realists. She knew magic did not and could not exist. It was a shame, but there it was.

She turned over to go to sleep. She had already started to disbelieve.

2

The next day Bea awoke exhausted. She sat up to look out of her window, wishing that the world had changed, but it was the same old view – same rain, same trees, same old Bea. Her phone pinged – a friend asking if she was back. But she was too tired, so she flopped down onto her bed and went back to sleep. She didn't get downstairs until early afternoon, when the smell of bacon called to her.

Her parents were in the kitchen with cups of tea and bacon butties. Michael in his high chair waved a soggy rusk at her when she came in, offering her a bite, which she took – just a small piece off a dry corner.

'Crikey, it's the living dead,' said her mum. 'Are you OK?' she asked, getting up to pass her hand over Bea's forehead.

Bea leaned into her. 'Just tired,' she said. She put her arms around her mum for a moment, then pulled away, grabbed a butty from the plate in the centre of the table and went over to the window. The sun was flinging a few glistening beams of light down between the clouds onto the wet trees and the road outside.

She got out her phone and started messaging her friends.

'I wonder if you should have a day in,' said her mum.

'Mum! I've been a virtual prisoner for two weeks!'

'You look so pale. And why are you so tired? You haven't *done* anything.'

'Exactly.'

'You could help in the shop,' said her dad, glancing up. 'I've got loads to do. I could do with a hand.'

Bea's dad was a jeweller, a neat, small man who made pieces out of gold and silver and tiny polished stones that would break your heart, they were that pretty. Bea was always amazed that her quiet dad – he was pretty ugly to tell the truth – was the creator of such charming little things.

'Not today, Dad. I want to see my friends,' she begged.

He shrugged assent, despite her mum's pout of disapproval, and Bea went back to her phone. She arranged to meet some friends down the park, reassured her mum by devouring a slice of cake and a banana on top of her butty – no sick person could stomach that lot – before putting on her wellies and raincoat and setting off down the hill.

The river was high, rubbing its back on the underside of the bridges as she walked down into town. She paused by the weir to watch it hurtling past, enjoying the thunderous rush of brown water and foam. For a moment, she imagined not water rushing past but a stampede of horses storming into town, glistening and shiny with wet, rushing and shoving their way past, full gallop . . .

Ridiculous! She was annoying herself now. Stop it, Bea, she thought, and hurried on to meet her friends and salvage what was left of the summer.

* * *

There wasn't much going on. Everything was wet and muddy. There was a puddle as big as a small lake on the football pitch. A few kids were out on the skateboard park showing off their tricks while Bea and her friends stood about swapping holiday stories and watching the skaters go through their paces.

There was a new boy on the ramps a few years older than them. Lars, he was called. He'd fixed some fiery red and orange lights to the underside of his battered old board, which was a cheap trick – but that boy knew how to skate. The board spun and glittered beneath him like an advertisement. He wore shorts and a T-shirt, arms and legs bare despite his daredevil moves, with his red hair up in an Alice band. A total poser, thought Bea. Even so, you couldn't take your eyes off him. He flew. He made Bea want to fly too.

The girls were all over him. When he started to offer rides to her friends, they were queuing up. He stood with his feet straddling the board and had them stand between his legs. Then he pushed off, weaving in and out and around the slopes, the chosen girl leaning back into him, squealing and laughing while the older girls stood wryly watching. Bea stood with them, arms folded tightly across her chest. Ridiculous. Pathetic! But when he offered her a go, there she was, grinning like an idiot, running up for her turn.

Lars got her to step backwards onto the board, then put his arms around her. 'Use me,' he whispered. 'Lean back. I'll guide you.'

Bea giggled.

'Ready?'

'Yes, yes!'

He pushed off. Bea swayed for a moment in surprise, then relaxed back and pressed into him as he rocked behind her, swerving smoothly around the slopes. And – it was easy! The other girls had been falling all over the place, but Bea was with him on every curve. She was a natural. When it was done she stepped lightly off – the only one who had stayed on till the end.

The boy grinned. ‘Good girl!’ he said, and turned to the next.

‘Like it?’ asked one of the older girls dryly.

Embarrassed, Bea tossed her head and stalked off. ‘It wasn’t him, it was the board,’ she told her friends. But it had been such fun! Suddenly she was hatching an urge to make a skateboard fly under her feet just as this one did for him.

Back at home, Bea nagged her parents to get her a skateboard of her own and a couple of days later she was setting out self-consciously with her new toy under her arm and, knee and elbow protectors in place, off to practise in the park. She was as proud as a prince – but when she put it on the ground and jumped up on it, that glimpse of magic she’d had with Lars had vanished. She wobbled, shook and fell to the ground like a leg of lamb.

She got straight back on, but it was no good. As soon as the board moved, she fell. To make it worse the red-headed boy turned up to watch her. After ten minutes, bruised and humiliated, she was ready to give up. But Lars the poser didn’t sneer or tease.

'You're actually doing really well,' he said. 'It's the board that's bad. This thing' – he flicked his fingers against her shiny new skateboard – 'it's sketchy. It talks the talk but it don't walk the walk. My old thing might look as if it's seen better days, but it's got balance. Maybe I've got something at home you could try out. Here, look – practise on mine. I'll pop back home and see what I can find.'

He was as good as his word. Bea balanced and fell, balanced and flew, balanced and fell for an hour on the borrowed board, and then he was back with his easy smile and his pretty face, and a really ancient old board, even more battered and scratched than his.

'I learned on this,' he said. 'Maybe you can too.'

Every morning for the next few days Bea woke up covered with scrapes and bruises, aching from head to foot. She didn't care. Lars had taken her under his wing. The rest of the world seemed to fade away. Her mum and dad, her home, her friends all began to feel like events from someone else's life. And the hares on the moor, that glimpse of another world? Even though she'd thought at the time she would remember it for ever, that faded too. All she wanted to do was skate. She swooped up and down the ramps, spun and jumped and fell again and again, until she knew every tilt and groove in the park.

Her friends teased her. How she adored Lars! How much time she spent with him! They made her blush red from top to toe. Look at Bea! She's in love with him already!

'It's the skating,' she insisted. That was all. But in bed at

night she squeezed her pillow with delight and grinned into the darkness. Life was sweet, she told herself. Oh yes, life is sweet, life is *so* sweet! But not because of Lars. Of course not!

Her mum saw what was going on and worried about her spending so much time with an older boy.

‘You’re not his girlfriend, are you?’ she asked, which drove Bea crazy. As if you can’t have a friendship between a boy and a girl that isn’t like that! As if she didn’t know he was far too old for her.

As if she cared.

3

It was mid-week, just ten days before school started. The sun shone in between fluffy white clouds – summer had begun just in time for autumn and Bea was making the most of it. She was practising a move – down one ramp, up the other – twist at the top. Down that side and up the other – twist at the top. Her record so far was five.

For the tenth time that day she took a fall and ended up rolling on her back in the gully between the ramps. She looked up to the sky and saw something that could not be.

A man was riding horseback among the clouds.

She lay still for a second or two, trying to make sense of it. Her eyes spun in her head, her stomach clenched. It was impossible! But when her breath returned, the vision was still there. ‘What’s that?’ she cried, and everyone turned to look.

‘What?’ someone asked, and Bea knew in that moment that this was in her eyes only. For the first time in days came a memory . . . a hare with a single eye through which she had seen the universe. Another that had begged her – ‘Let me out!’

She got up and went to sit on the grass away from the others, as if she were just taking a break. When she was sure

no one was watching she tipped her head back and sneaked another look up towards the sky.

It was still there. The man was wearing old-time clothes, she wasn't sure from what period. The horse was a great heavy beast with feathery hair around his feet, and although his hooves were treading down on thin air the weight of him seemed to thump around her. It was unmissable – but everyone else was missing it. Bea ran her gaze across the park to see if anyone else had caught her looking, and at once her eye fell on a girl, about ten or eleven, standing over by the tennis courts. She too was gazing up at the rider. As Bea stared, the girl dropped her gaze to look directly at Bea, and pointed up.

Bea turned away at once, terrified. How could a thing be seen by some people and not by others? Either it was there or it wasn't. She waited a bit, then glanced back. The girl was staring at her intently. Bea got up abruptly and walked away. If she was going mad, she wanted to do it where no one else could see.

Out of sight of the skaters she broke into a trot. Past the café on the old bowling green, over the canal into the memorial gardens, where she found a bench. She went the whole way without looking up once, but all the time she was fearfully aware of the events unfolding high over her head. She sat down, cast a wary look each way to make sure no one was watching, then again raised her eyes to the skies.

The rider had turned his horse round and was trotting towards her now. Closer he came, down from the sky as if he was riding a stairway from heaven. But it wasn't Bea he was after. Suddenly he stooped low, put an arm out and plucked

someone from the air. It was a girl, about four or five years old. She shrieked with excitement as he swung her up and plonked her on the horse in front of him, where she clutched hold of the coarse hair of its mane. Then she turned and looked up into his face, and she beamed, just beamed with pleasure.

'She's losing them one by one. It's getting faster, I think,' said a voice. Bea looked down with a jerk. It was the girl she had just seen in the park – the one who had looked up to the sky and pointed.

At once Bea got up and began to move off. She didn't want this. But the girl grabbed her arm.

'I know who you are,' she said urgently. 'I saw you looking.' She pointed up at the sky. Bea's neck muscles twitched, but she kept her gaze low. She wasn't going to admit to anything. She tried to push her way past again but the girl stood her ground. 'Wear this,' she demanded. She thrust something into Bea's hand. 'The Hunt knows you're here. It'll protect you. *Please!*' she begged, seeing the doubt in Bea's face. 'It *was* you on the moors that day, wasn't it?' she added.

Bea hid her shock by looking into her hand at the object the girl had given her. It fitted her palm nicely, but it was a dreadful thing, ugly as mud. It had a long, twisted face, with little blue stones for eyes, a row of tiny wee brownly orange stones for teeth, and a sliver of bone for a nose. There was a piece of mirror in the forehead. The whole thing was made out of some kind of dirt. There were feathers and tiny bones rolled up in it. And yet . . .

. . . and yet the blue eyes stared up at her from the palm

of her hand, and the crooked orange teeth glinted in the light. It was dreadful, but Bea felt at once that it was on her side.

She was so surprised that she wanted such an ugly thing that she raised her head and took a good look at the girl for the first time. She was poor and skinny – poor clothes, poor face, bony from head to foot. She wore tatty old trainers, worn old trackie bottoms and a cheap pink cardigan. Everything about her said *poor*.

‘My grandfather made it for you,’ said the girl. She paused, as if unsure she had the right person. ‘The dogs, the quads. The Hunt. You’re a witch, right? You called the deer – you saved our lives! My grandfather wants to talk to you. We’re past the station, on the waste ground, in the old caravan.’ She nodded across to the wasteland on the other side of the park, eager to get Bea to agree.

Bea nodded, as much to stop the conversation as in agreement, and as she did, the face wriggled slightly in her hand. She squealed and dropped it, and before she had time to think she’d crouched to pick it up. She looked at it again and it winked at her. Bea jumped, but managed not to drop it again.

The girl grinned. ‘It’s a beauty, innit?’ she said. ‘That’ll scare ’em off!’

‘Thank you,’ said Bea. She thrust the strange little idol into her pocket, slapped her board down on the ground at her feet, jumped on and skated off fast, down the sloping path towards the exit before anything else happened. When she reached the street she got off her board and turned back to look.

The girl stood watching her. ‘Don’t show it to anyone!’ she

shouted urgently. She lifted a hand and waved. Bea turned without waving back and scooted off.

'You're a witch!' the girl had said. She had seen the visions in the sky too. But that was impossible. Everyone knew that such things simply didn't exist. Everyone knew that people who saw things were crazies . . .

Bea let out a sudden cry of bewilderment. What was happening to her? A woman going past with her two kids looked at her curiously and she turned and ran away from the woman, away from the man on the horse, away from going mad, away from the girl, away from everything impossible. She got out of the park and was halfway home, before her breath gave out on the narrow road that sided the river. There she paused to look up again.

There was nothing there. Just clouds and sky and jackdaws flying overhead. It had all been an illusion after all. She had been hallucinating. Because if it wasn't a hallucination – what on earth was it?

4

Bea came crashing in the back door and ran upstairs to her room, practically knocking her mum over as she came out of the kitchen.

‘Careful!’ her mum called, but Bea ran up without replying, slamming the door behind her. In her room she flung herself on her bed, hid her head and wished it all away.

Later, when she came down to dinner, she mumbled an apology to her mum for barging her out the way earlier.

‘That’s OK,’ her mum said. ‘Let’s face it, you’re at that age. It’s probably just your hormones.’

Bea rolled her eyes.

‘I was hoping it wouldn’t include a bad temper, though.’

Bea was outraged. ‘Why do you think everything I say has to do with *hormones*?’ she demanded. ‘Don’t you ever think I might just be annoyed about something?’

Her mum wagged her head and smirked at her dad. Bea jumped to her feet. ‘You never take me seriously!’ she yelled.

Fearing tears, she rushed out of the room, but paused behind the door. All she was doing was proving her mum right. She was about to go back in, but then she heard her father say . . .

‘That wasn’t very clever, Kels.’

‘It feels like she’s going to have a difficult adolescence,’ her

mum sighed. 'I wonder if it's got anything to do with that boy she's hanging out with at the park. He's too old, and Bea is so naïve . . .'

'Bloody know-all!' screamed Bea from behind the door.

'That's enough of that!' yelled her mum. But Bea was off – out the door and down the steps before another word could be said.

When she was little, Bea's mum and dad used to take her for walks in the woods, but although she lived only a few hundred metres away, she never went there any more. Even so, for some reason, when she ran out of her house that day into the gloomy late afternoon she turned up the hill towards the woods rather than taking her usual route down into town. There was a rock by the river among the beech trees she wanted to see. When she was little she used to love to hang over the edge, watching the water stream by. Perhaps she wanted to recapture those still moments when she was small and life was simpler?

She was confused, upset and exhilarated all at once. What if she was going mad? Surely she was! Didn't mad people see things that no one else did? They listened to the voices and did as they were told . . .

'*Let me out!*' the hare had said. And she had.

The rock was wet, but she sat on it anyway. The water ran by, just the same; it was Bea who had changed. Nervously she peeped up at the sky breaking blue above the leaves and at the water running below her. All she saw was sky and clouds and trees and water, yet she felt a presence. Eyes in the shadows

out of sight, faces hiding in the rocks, green arms and twiggy fingers shifting in the foliage just beyond her gaze. Watching her. Waiting for her . . .

It was her imagination of course, but it spooked her, and as twilight began to fall, Bea jumped suddenly up and ran home. She tore through the woods, paused outside on the street so that she wouldn't go in out of breath and then crept in as quietly as she could. But her mum was listening for her, and came up ten minutes later to make peace and lure her down to eat.

She sat on the bed and gave Bea a big hug. 'I'm sorry, I know I can be insensitive,' she said. 'Trouble is, I only realise it after I've opened my big mouth.'

Bea smiled and hugged her back.

'Your dad gave me a right telling-off. He said you should be allowed to get cross without me assuming it's something to do with hormones. But it's only cos I care. You know that, don't you?'

Bea allowed herself to be led downstairs where a great pile of cottage pie had been put aside for her. She was ravenous.

'I'm a silly sod sometimes,' her mum said. 'But you know I love you, don't you?'

Bea nodded and gave her mum another hug. They were forever squabbling, but they always made it up in the end.

'And the boy thing,' her mum added.

'Mum!' groaned Bea.

'I know, I know. But it's my *job*. I'm your mum. This lad, Lars. If he was fourteen or fifteen that would be different. But he's not, is he? How old is he, do you know?'

Bea thought about it. 'Too old for me,' she said. And that made her shed a tear or two as well. Her mum was right; she did fancy him after all. She blew her nose and her mum pulled her to her.

'Heartbreak hotel, isn't it?' she said. 'You know, Bea, it takes a while to get it right, but when you do . . . oh boy, Bea! Oh boy!'

Bea hugged her hard, laughed and shook the tears out of her eyes.

'So is that what was upsetting you earlier?' her mum asked.

Bea shrugged and got back to the pie. She ate for a little bit, then . . . 'When you got your hormones,' she asked, keeping busy shovelling cottage pie in her mouth, 'did you ever see things?'

'See what?' asked her mum.

'Stuff. In the sky. People, maybe. You know.'

Her mum thought for a moment. 'I never did, personally,' she said. 'Why, Bea, have you?'

'No,' said Bea quickly. 'The girls were talking about it.'

Her mum nodded. 'I expect they were teasing you,' she suggested.

'I expect that's it,' said Bea. She finished her plate and began to pick at the crusty bits on the edge of the dish.

Her mum leaned across suddenly and gripped her arm. 'Don't pay them any attention,' she murmured. But Bea knew her mum well enough to know that she had alerted her, which made her even more unwilling to admit what was really going on.