

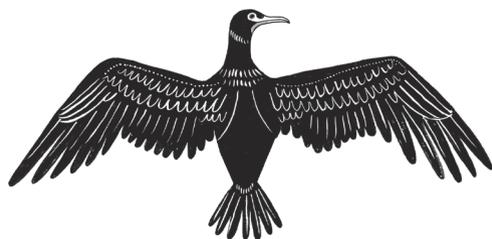
WAKING
THE
WITCH

Books by Rachel Burge

The Twisted Tree
The Crooked Mask

Waking the Witch

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Rachel Burge

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
4th Floor, Victoria House
Bloomsbury Square
London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.hotkeybooks.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1108-3

Also available as an ebook and in audio

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This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk

For my mum, Leoni



1

I love it when a butterfly emerges from its chrysalis and unfurls its tiny, shrivelled wings. It's freeing – the idea that whatever your problems, you can transcend them: wake up one day and find that you've changed into a different creature, grown wings and can fly away. Everyone gets excited about the miracle of nature, the power of transformation. At the same time, no one asks what the caterpillar had to sacrifice to achieve those wings. But then everyone loves the Disney version, don't they? We all want to see the ugly grub become a thing of beauty. We all want the fairy tale.

In the real world, orphans go unadopted and little girls who are abandoned by their mothers are raised by wolves, only to be eaten by them. But no one wants to hear that. People aren't interested in the cruel and messy truth, so I don't tell them about me – the same way I don't tell them what really happens to the caterpillar.

It's Friday morning and I'm sitting on the specimen room floor at work, wedged between two cardboard boxes (there's at least one advantage to being small), and hoping my jerk of a boss doesn't find me. Before me is a row of wooden display

cases containing various chrysalides, and in my hand is my phone. I glare at it, as if that might somehow shame it into ringing. It doesn't. Eventually the screen dims and somewhere in my heart a light goes out.

Lifting the locket from my neck, I open the tiny, hinged door and take out the slip of folded paper as I've done a thousand times before.

I'm so sorry. I tried to keep you safe, but I see now that I can't. They won't stop until they have you, but I can't let that happen. Be strong, little one, trust no one, and know that

Like me, the scribbled note was abandoned, a half-finished story containing more questions than answers. I stare at the words until they become as blurred and indecipherable as their meaning. Who was my mother keeping me safe from? What was bad enough to make her dump her baby at a motorway service station? I'm named after the cleaner who found me – Ivy. But what name did my mum give me? Where were the rest of my family? I have so many questions, but it always comes down to a single word beating inside me like a second heart. *Why?*

I fold the paper back inside and then tuck the brass locket into my shirt, my fingers briefly tracing the raised butterfly design. I guess it's fitting that I ended up working at a butterfly zoo, but then I've always loved the tiny creatures. The locket is all I have of my mum, so to me butterflies are an emblem of hope, a sign that one day I'll find her.

And now maybe I have.

I've spent years posting on missing person sites asking for

information, and last week someone actually replied. The man said he was looking for his brother when he came across my photo – he has a memory for faces and I looked like a woman he'd met on holiday once. She lived at the lighthouse on Bardsey Island, off the west coast of Wales, and he saw her go to the mainland with her baby and then come back alone. He seemed so certain and the dates checked out, and somehow I just have this feeling.

Getting to Bardsey isn't easy – a bus, two trains and a boat crossing – so I decided to send her a letter with my number. That was seven days ago. From what I've read online the island is tiny and barely populated so it's not going to have the best postal service, but even if she's moved surely *someone* would have received it. I fiddle with the silver stud in my nose and sigh. One thing's for certain, I can't stay in here. My boss will notice I'm missing and I'm the only assistant in work as Tom is late again, which means I have to give this morning's talk.

I crawl out from my hiding place then wrap my arms around a display case which is almost as big as me. There are plenty of smaller ones, but I haven't done three years of martial arts training to take the easy option. With a grunt of exertion, I lift the case and shove the door open with my foot. I love my job – I enjoy seeing the customers' excited faces when a butterfly lands on them and I like teaching them about the different species we have at the centre. I just need to pretend it's an ordinary day at work. You know, forget that my entire life could be about to change with a single phone call.

As I enter the glass butterfly house, I'm greeted by the familiar sound of wet hissing from the vents, a constant tic-tic

and fizzling hum of artificial jungle. It's always warm and humid, but the air feels stifling today. Beneath the scent of nectar is a cloying smell of overripe fruit and rotting vegetation and something I can't quite place: a stench of decay that doesn't belong here. It sits on my lungs and makes it hard to breathe.

Tightening my grip on the case, I head to the display area on the far side of the room. October half-term is one of our busiest times and the walkways are full of visitors. They wander amongst the glossy-leaved plants and tropical orange flowers, pausing every now and then to point at a flash of colour flitting about their heads. In other words, not looking where they're going.

'Excuse me, coming through!' I can't see around the case, so I have to shout and hope that people move out of the way.

'You've got your hands full there, Ivy. Can't you get young Tom to help?'

'Hey, Dot. How are you?' I recognise her voice and slow down to let her catch up.

It's mostly families that visit, but in winter we get older people who come for the free heating. Dot is one of my favourites. She wears an immaculate red wig with matching lipstick and hates wearing ugly shoes, but they help with her bunions. She usually brings a romance novel and will read it while eating pick 'n' mix. I once made the mistake of accepting a jelly baby and then had to listen as she spent ten minutes describing a sex scene in alarming detail.

She ambles alongside me and whispers, 'Shame to let a strapping lad like that go to waste. He's a handsome specimen. If I was fifty years younger, I'd rip his clothes off and –'

‘Yeah, thanks, Dot. I’ll keep it in mind.’

The truth is that Tom would be more than happy to help me, but I don’t intend to give him the satisfaction. We’re the same age and started working here around the same time, about ten months ago, and we have this rivalry thing going on. Some days I think he only comes into work to wind me up. Besides, I make it a rule never to accept anyone’s help.

Dot lays an affectionate hand on my arm. ‘You’re too proud by half. You want to snap him up before someone else does.’

She hobbles off, presumably heading to her usual bench, and a huff escapes me. Tom’s a good laugh, but that’s as far as it goes.

When I get to the display table, I set down the case and then wipe my hands on my trousers. Sensing someone behind me I spin around, but there’s nobody there. Damn my stupid boss, always loitering and making me feel uncomfortable – it’s no wonder I’m paranoid. After checking he’s not around, I peek at my phone. Mobiles are strictly forbidden at work so I’ve set it to silent. I don’t want to get fired – I’m already on my second warning – but I have to answer if she calls. Not that I need worry: the screen is blank.

Nearly ten o’clock: time to start. I stand on tiptoes and raise my voice. ‘Hello, if I could have your attention, please? The talk will begin soon if anyone would like to join me.’ A couple glance over but keep walking. Maybe it’s my appearance – pastel pink bobbed hair, blunt micro fringe and nose stud – but people often seem surprised that I work here, even in my uniform. Or maybe seventeen-year-old girls are just easy to overlook.

I make my announcement again, louder this time, and a



bearded man in a dirty anorak shuffles over, followed by a family, then two guys holding hands and a woman and her moody pre-teen daughter who come every few weeks. The woman wears her hair in a scraped-back ponytail and lives in leopard-print jumpsuits, which means I spend more time than I should wondering how she pees. We've chatted a few times, and now she waves and gives me a friendly smile. The girl sees me and rolls her eyes, seemingly convinced that Wye Valley Butterfly Zoo is lame and nothing I can say will change her mind.

I feel her pain – the border between England and Wales is blessed with amazing views (if you like hills and sheep) but isn't exactly known for its entertainment options, and the poor thing must have heard my talk a dozen times. Her mum tries to hug her, but the girl shoves her off and takes out her phone. The casual indifference of the gesture cuts a hole in my chest and jealousy reaches in and squeezes my heart, quickly followed by resentment. Between them, they have a mighty strong grip.

Get it together, Ivy. Focus on work.

I avert my eyes, uncomfortable with my own feelings, and bring my attention to the dozen people who've gathered to hear my talk. The man in the anorak stares at me, his facial muscles rigid as if they've been frozen into place. I wait for him to say something, or at least blink, but he doesn't. We get some odd characters at the centre; dealing with them is part of the job. Even so, I can't help feeling a little unnerved. He strokes his beard, repeating the movement robotically, and I wonder if he has a nervous tic or anxiety. I smile reassuringly

at him, then thank the group for their patience and scan the walkways for latecomers.

A family enters through the hanging plastic strips that cover the entrance and something occurs to me. I included both my work and home addresses in the letter, so my mum might turn up here.

No. It's so far to come; surely she'd ring me first. I don't care how hard it is to get to Bardsey. If she doesn't call by the end of the day, I'll phone in sick and go to the island tomorrow. I *have* to know if it's her.

A loud gasp brings me back to reality. People are pointing and staring at a spot above my head.

'What the hell are *they*?' asks jumpsuit woman. I glance up and fluttering over me are three huge grey moths – *acherontia atropos*, to be precise. These ones are adults of the species, each with a twelve-centimetre wingspan.

'They're death's head hawkmoths,' I tell my audience. 'They get their name from the skull-shaped pattern that adorns their thorax.'

The sight of them makes me shiver, despite the heat. Not because they're an omen of death, but because there's something unnatural about the way they circle over me. Butterflies and moths usually fly haphazardly, going one way and then another, not around and around in a neat pattern. But this is like watching a few frames of film on repeat.

A high-pitched, pulsating screech fills the air and I raise my voice. 'They make that noise to scare away predators. It's particular to the species; not many moths do that.'

A few people in the crowd nod and look relieved, and then

the creatures flit towards a fern and the sound disappears as quickly as it started. Unable to pull my gaze away, I watch their strange flight with a growing sense of unease. I've never seen *anything* here fly like that.