

*The
Lost Witch*

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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.