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

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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 scrabbled 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.