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Beswitched

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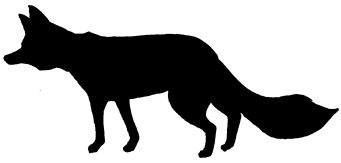
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Bewitched



KATE SAUNDERS

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1

Rock Bands and Ponies

"At least look at the picture!" Flora's dad begged. "Don't you want to know what to expect?"

He pushed the glossy brochure across the table. It had a photo on the cover of a large white house on a very green lawn, and the words "Penrice Hall – Individual Fulfilment in a Home-like Atmosphere".

Flora scowled and pushed it back. "It doesn't matter what I expect, does it? Not unless I have a choice about going there."

Her father opened his mouth to say something, but her mother gently touched his arm to stop him.

"All he means," she told Flora, "is that you might like it."

"Well, I won't," Flora said. "Nothing on earth could make me like it."

Dad let out a long sigh that was half a groan. He looked anxious and exhausted, and even more ancient than usual – he had not had time to shave that morning, and the bristles on his chin were grey. The fact that he was a million years older than everyone else's dad had always been an embarrassment to Flora. Her mother, though not such a relic, also looked annoyingly old.

Flora was angry with them. Why couldn't they fix this disaster? Why were they being such wimps? They kept saying sorry – but what good was that when they refused to change anything?

"I need another coffee," Dad said, standing up. "Flora, do you want anything else? Another croissant?"

"No!" Flora snapped. "Stop trying to stuff me with food – do you want me to be fat as well as miserable?"

"We're fine," Mum assured him. "Don't rush, darling. There's plenty of time."

They were in a coffee shop at the station. Flora's gleaming new backpack and laptop case lay at her feet. Dad went to join the long queue at the counter.

"Plenty of time," Mum muttered again, looking at her watch. "I really think we'll be fine – though we're going to have to dash for our plane after we've seen you off." She leaned across the table. "Flora, please don't be so hard on Dad – he's having such a horrible time at the moment."

"*He's* having a horrible time! What about *me*?"

Flora's voice was tight with fury. "My entire life has just been destroyed!"

"Don't exaggerate."

"I've been separated from all my friends – my house is being torn apart—"

"Flora!" For the first time, her mother's voice had a hint of snap. "We're both desperately sorry about this whole situation – but there isn't a thing we can do about it – so don't you think you should start trying to accept it?"

"No!" Flora said. "Why do I have to go to a boarding school?"

"I've told you a million times," Mum said, obviously straining to be patient. "We don't know how long we're going to have to stay in Italy – or how long the builders are going to be at home – this is the only way we can cope. And it's only for two terms at the most."

"Why d'you have to go to Italy?"

"Stop it, Flora. You know perfectly well why – because Granny broke her hip and can't take care of herself. And because we've got to sell her house and about a hundred years' worth of furniture. And Lord knows when the new flat will be ready at our own house. Why must you make it more difficult? Are you really so selfish that you're making all this fuss about two terms at a boarding school? A very luxurious and expensive boarding school, I might add."

The unfairness of this was so enormous that it took Flora's breath away. "You and Dad are the selfish ones. You just decided everything without asking me."

Her mother suddenly looked very tired. "OK – what would you have done differently?"

This was even more unfair. Knowing what to do was their job. "I don't see why Granny has to come and live with us."

"She's your dad's mother and she's alone," Mum said. "All her husbands are either dead or married to other people. She's old and frail, and she can't look after herself. Where else is she supposed to go?"

"How should I know?" Flora snapped. "Can't he put her in a home?"

"*Flora!*"

Flora knew how nasty she sounded, but the misery of the past few days weighed on her chest like a stone. If she hadn't kept up being angry, she might have cried. "Dad doesn't even like Granny," she said bitterly.

"Don't be silly."

"She deserted him when he was little. She just ran away with her lover." Flora was scornful.

Mum sighed. "Well, yes, she did. Her lover was a very famous artist – and she got rather famous for inspiring him."

"For sleeping with him, you mean."

"Don't let Dad hear you talking like that."

"Why not?" Flora muttered. "Why can't I tell the truth all of a sudden?"

Mum sighed again, and frowned with the effort of choosing her words. "Look. Granny's not the maternal type – some women are like that. And Dad says he's glad he did all his growing up with his father and stepmother – you remember Nana, and how he adored her. He didn't get to know his real mother until he was in his twenties."

Flora had heard this story many times. "I know, I know – when he hitchhiked to Italy and turned up on her doorstep."

"He's very proud of her," Mum said firmly. "And you should be too – you're named after her, and she's a fascinating woman. The headmaster at Penrice Hall was really impressed when he heard that your granny was Flora Arditti. Lots of the kids at the school have famous parents, but I doubt you can go and see paintings of them in the National Portrait Gallery."

"Nude paintings," Flora pointed out. Famous pictures of your granny in the nude – how embarrassing was that?

"She's met everyone from Winston Churchill to Mick Jagger – Picasso painted her portrait. In her day she was one of the most beautiful women in Europe. She's practically a legend, and you should be glad you're getting this chance to know her properly."

"Well, I'm not." Flora was sick of hearing how "fascinating" and "wonderful" Granny was. "I've seen enough of her to know I don't like her. She's spooky and mean and always telling me off. That's what my life's going to be like from now on, isn't it? Nag, nag, nag. Brush your hair. Sit up straight. Stop texting at the table."

"Hmmm, yes," Mum said, "you've had it pretty easy up to now, I suppose." And she looked at Flora in a distant, thoughtful way, as if seeing her for the first time. "We've run the house around you."

"Are you saying I'm spoiled?"

"Well, no," Mum said doubtfully. "But you are rather used to getting your own way – and so is Granny. This isn't going to be easy for her, don't forget. She's used to having her own big house all to herself. A granny flat in a Wimbledon semi might seem like a bit of a comedown."

Flora said, "I can't do it, that's all. Italy was bad enough."

She suddenly had a vivid memory of Casa Boffi, her grandmother's big house in Italy, where she had spent two dreary weeks last summer. It was a dark and dusty place, in the middle of baking countryside, with no swimming pool for miles. The furniture was weird, and there were paintings everywhere. It had been like staying in a really hot, uncomfortable art gallery. There

had been long, long meals, where Granny told endless stories about her four husbands and countless lovers.

A single tear slid down Flora's nose. It had been horrible. Flora had been allowed to bring her best friend, Ella, as company. Granny had barely noticed they were there – Mum had to cough loudly to remind her, when her stories got too rude. When she did notice, she forgot their ages and tried to give them gin and tonic.

"Which one is my grandchild again?" she had asked Dad one evening. "Is it the lumpy one or the little weasel?"

Ella was now her ex-best friend, and hadn't really spoken to her since. Flora had been furious about the "little weasel", and she didn't blame Ella for being angry with Granny for calling her "lumpy" – but why was Ella angry with *her*? She had tried and tried to put it right, but Ella carried on avoiding her. It had spoiled the first term at APS (short for Alderman Popham Secondary), which should have been so much fun.

And now her grandmother had to slip on a squashed grape and break her hip. The Italian mansion was too much for her to manage now, so Dad had decided to convert their garage in south London into a small flat. The scary old woman hung over them like a shadow.

Flora said, "I feel as if I've lost my home."

Mum reached across the table to squeeze her hand.

"My precious, try not to worry too much. Even if she wanted to, Granny couldn't turn a semi in Wimbledon into a copy of the Casa Boffi. We'll all have some adjusting to do."

Flora said, "But now I've got to face the boarding school. It's going to be a nightmare."

"Honestly, darling, Penrice Hall is incredibly relaxed and easy-going – you'll have your own little room – I think you're allowed to do your own cooking and phone out for takeaways – there's an Olympic-sized pool – five rock bands—"

"Blah-blah-blah-blah," Flora said rudely.

"Ponies—"

"It's no use, Mum. I know I'm going to hate it."

"Well then, you'll just have to hate it," Mum said.

There was a throb of anger in her voice that Flora recognized. When she was three she had screamed and screamed until she was finally allowed to wear a leotard to nursery in January. In exactly the same voice, Mum had said, "Well then, you'll just have to catch pneumonia."

Flora had learned then that no amount of screaming could make a January morning less cold. Her parents obeyed most of her wishes, but they couldn't change the weather or prevent old ladies from breaking their hips. They were going to Italy for three months, and she was going to the terrible school, and that was that.

"Oh bum," said Flora. "Fart and bum."

"Stop being so negative."

"I really will, you know. I really will totally hate it. For one thing, I'll be literally miles from everyone I know in the world."

Dad came back to the table and caught the end of this. "But you'll have your phone, darling. You'll be able to talk to us any time you like, day or night. And send us emails."

"It's not the same," said Flora. "And anyway, it won't do me much good. If I hate it you won't take me away."

"Yes, but you might not hate it. Penrice Hall is a famous school. We're lucky they had a place."

"Dad, please. I've just had this conversation with Mum. Spare me the rock bands and ponies."

The three of them spent the next few minutes in miserable silence. Flora looked at her reflection in the mirror on the opposite wall. She definitely did not look like a little weasel. But if only she didn't look so short and *young* – Yasmin, who was (sort of) her new best friend, looked at least fourteen. Still, the blonde streaks in her light brown hair added a bit of sophistication, and her new clothes were amazing. Her parents felt so guilty about sending her away that Mum had finally stopped trying to dress her in little skirts and flowery cardigans like a six-year-old, and let her choose exactly

what she wanted – today, black jeans, red Converses, red T-shirt, silver belt and a seriously cool leather jacket.

Dad gulped his tiny cup of black coffee. He really did look crumbly this morning, Flora thought crossly. It was his own fault, for waiting so long to get married and have a baby. People sometimes thought he was Flora's grandad. He was so old that he had been born in 1950. If he wasn't so old, his mother wouldn't be such a dinosaur.

A large pigeon pecked at the crumbs on the floor. Station announcements boomed foggily overhead.

"That's us," Dad said. "Platform Seven." He leapt up and grabbed Flora's suitcase – almost as if he were relieved to be getting rid of her.

Two huge cases had already been sent ahead by Red Star – cases crammed with wonderful new clothes, make-up and books. Flora only had her snazzy new backpack containing her iPod and the small case for her laptop. Flora had to admit that there were some good things about going away to boarding school. Yasmin had even confessed that she was jealous – "I'd go to army boot camp if it meant I got a new laptop."

But Yasmin didn't understand how it felt to be let down by your parents. Flora's selfish parents thought they were angels because they wouldn't put Granny in a home – even though she was a notoriously tough old lady who might even have liked it. Yet they saw nothing

wrong with banishing their sensitive daughter. She was determined not to let them think they had been forgiven.

"There's no need to get on the train with me," she told her dad haughtily.

As usual, her parents ignored her and climbed on to the train with her like two clucking old hens.

Dad put her laptop case on the small table. "Now, darling, the train manager knows you're an unaccompanied minor, and he'll—"

"Dad, stop telling me. That's the billionth time this morning."

Mum handed her a posh tuna baguette. "He'll make sure you get off at the right station—"

"I'm not a baby," Flora said crossly. "I know where to get off."

"—and you'll be met by Fiona, who's one of the teachers at Penrice Hall."

"Any problems, just call us," Dad said. "Call us whenever you like."

"Oh, my darling –" Mum hugged her hard – "I'm going to miss you so much!"

Dad said, "Bye-bye, bunny rabbit," and gave her another big hug.

And then the whistle shrieked, and they had to leave her.

Flora did not like this moment at all. Suddenly, seeing her parents on the other side of the glass made

her feel very young and very lonely. They waved as the train pulled out of the station and bravely tried to smile – though they obviously felt more like crying.

Suddenly, all she remembered was how much she loved the foolish old things, and she blew kisses at them for as long as she could see them – and then there was a massive lump in her throat. But there were other people in the carriage, and Flora did not want them to think she was pathetic – the "bunny rabbit" Dad had let slip was embarrassing enough. She sniffed a couple of times and stared out of the window, until there was no more danger of breaking down.

After this, she found that she felt fine. A woman came round with a trolley, and Flora bought herself a bottle of apple juice. There was something rather elegant and mature about travelling alone, she decided. The train was going so fast that the nearest houses and gardens slipped by in a silent blur. Now that her parents were no longer watching her, Flora could take a proper look at the brochure for Penrice Hall.

The big white house, she had to admit, didn't look at all bad. Inside the brochure, there was a photo of a man with a beard. "Hi, I'm Jeff, the headmaster," said the text underneath. "Here at Penrice, we believe education should be tailored to the individual. Young people know instinctively what they need to learn, and our students are encouraged to draw up their own

timetables. A Penrice teacher is a good mate – not an authority figure!" There were pictures of a swimming pool, a pottery shed and a music studio, all thronged with grinning kids in cool clothes. If it really looked like this, the place might be all right.

She had meant to send a text to Yasmin – something like "This sux!" – but Yasmin wasn't such a good best friend as Ella had been. Suddenly, Flora felt desperately tired. She barely had time to wonder why before a great wave of sleep crashed over her.

A voice was speaking very close to her ear – so close that Flora heard it deep inside her head. It was the voice of a girl, solemn and clear.

"We summon you! Come to us! We summon you!
From the far north of the years to come!
With hare's whisker,
With hog's bristle,
With two sprigs of milk thistle,
A stone from the stream's rush,
A hair from the fox's brush!"

She knew it was not a real voice. She was in the middle of a dream.

It was pitch dark. Flora tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids felt as heavy as two metal shutters.

Then, while her eyes were still tightly shut, she saw it all.

She was in a dark room lit by two misty smears of candlelight. She did not know why she was there, except that she had somehow obeyed the mysterious summons.

There were three figures draped in white – like ghosts in a cartoon. Did they want to scare her? Flora tried to concentrate harder on this dream, so that she could see them more clearly. If the white shapes had arms, they seemed to be waving them. There was an odd noise – like loud screams heard from very far away.

Flora was not scared. She felt quite calm. She could see a large window, with long, blue-patterned curtains on either side. One of the spirits began to move towards her, and Flora felt herself being pulled away – not painfully, but very firmly. The dark room with the white figures suddenly vanished, like a candle being blown out.

She was flying now, or perhaps falling. It was like being sucked back into a gigantic vacuum cleaner. She could see nothing but darkness. A great whirlpool of sounds was babbling inside her head – voices and engines, explosions, crowds cheering. She was flying faster than the wind.

It did not last long. Flora felt herself gasping as she was suddenly thrown out of the dream and poured back into her sleeping body on the train.

But something was wrong. Her arms and legs seemed to be wrapped in thick, soft layers of cloth. Her feet had landed in shoes that were hard and heavy.

"Flora," a woman's voice said. "Wake up, dear. We're nearly there."