

into the forest. Something sharp and heavy, and rhythmic.

*Thwack. Thwack.*

It stops, but the cat keeps moving in the direction the noise came from. Sometimes she's slow. Sometimes she bounds forwards, quick, like the rabbits do. Maybe she has caught scent of one.

Every so often, the noise starts up again.

*Thwack. Thwack. Thwack.*

I've no idea what it is, but I know from Ghost to be quiet. Today everything's just clearer – the tangle of roots and branches – I can see better where I fit between them. The spaces I can pass through. The unseen paths. Ghost goes first and I follow after. I'm in her slipstream.

At some point she stops. It's misty and still only half light and when I first see it, it's not real at all – it's like a mirage.

A deer. A stag, I think, because of its size and its antlers, high above its head like some woodland crown.

Ghost steps back, wary, even though that's the wrong way round. Deer are her prey. Lynx catch deer. Yet this one's out of her league, even I can see that.

For a while everything stops and then the stag lets out this low noise – this growing moan, or bellow, or belch, from deep inside – and he's off, to some other adventure.

And it's absolute madness but I'm desperate, and I take it as a sign that we're going the right way. Maybe it was the stag that led Bear away. He couldn't have helped himself,

following something that beautiful.

The lynx and I, we carry on moving until she stops at the edge of another clearing.

There's a stone building – some old barn, or cabin, or cottage, with a loop of smoke curling out from the chimney and a pile of broken logs outside, stacked in a little shed. The woodcutter's house.

There are two figures standing in the doorway. One big, one little.

I hurl myself forward. "Bear!"

He should be running to me, but he's holding the hand of the taller person. His hand in hers. Hers because it's a woman, not a man with an axe. She's in a long dark coat and is leaning over him protectively.

"Bear!"

The woman lets go of Bear's hand, propels him to me, and I catch him as he falls into my arms, warm and solid and scared.

"Bear! I found you!"

"We've been waiting for you to show up," the woman says and I want to hug her too, because she's here. So much more miraculous than that stag. A person, a woman, out in the Wildwood where I'd started to doubt anyone else could be.

I don't mean to stare, but I can't stop myself. Her hair's silver, like Annie Rose's, except this woman's hangs down