



Wildwood

by **Angelita Lapuz Bradney**

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It's been three years since I visited Wildwood. I press my foot to the accelerator and the forest unrolls, moss-covered trunks stretching to the left and right. A sign warns of wild boar. It's a hot August day, but the sun is hidden above the leaves that enclose the road with their thick, dark weave. We crossed the suspension bridge half an hour ago and I can't help feeling we've left more behind than its engineered white cables.

Why did I let Mama talk me into coming back?

In the passenger seat Paul scrolls through his phone. With his shirt and pressed jeans, you couldn't mistake him for anything other than a banker on a mini-break.

Now he swears. 'No bloody signal. I need to get through these emails before I take the week off.'

'Perhaps we shouldn't have come.'

'No, no.' Paul raises his hands. 'I'm keen to see your childhood home.'

'I was thirteen when we moved here. Not really a child.' Not an adult either, but entering that awkward, in-between stage where you lose yourself for several years before emerging as the person you really are. That's what happens for most, anyway. Some stay lost.

The canopy thickens and the headlights come on. Mama doesn't mind living alone in the forest. She says she's used to being surrounded by woodland spirits, having grown up seven thousand miles away in the jungles of the northern Philippines. I haven't told her about the ghosts that wait for me amongst the trees. Shadows as long and persistent as guilt.

Despite the air conditioning inside the car, my armpits are sticky. On the road ahead there's a compacted mass of fur and blood. A rabbit, maybe, caught by surprise as it lolloped across the tarmac on a dusk raid. We pass the gateposts of the old sanitorium, and a brown sign directing tourists to the Forest of Dean Pottery – a site that has been closed for years. The vehicle bumps as I turn onto the unpaved lane. Now we're close. Before we reach Wildwood there's one more house to pass: the cottage that was once our nearest neighbour.

'Woah, look at that old place,' says Paul.

My stomach twists when I see how much it's disintegrated. The windows are cracked and the roof slopes precariously, with gaps in the tiles like missing teeth. Vegetation has encroached all the way to the door as if the cottage is sinking into the forest.

'They used to say a witch lived there,' I blurt out.

Paul snorts. 'Some people will believe anything.'

For a second I'm thirteen again, following Ellie towards the cottage door. *Don't worry about my mum, she whispers. She's not used to having people round.* Her fingers interlace mine, grip hard. *You're my best friend, Nina.*

I blink and shake my head. Ellie is gone: taken by fire, taken by water. Paul doesn't know about her and he never will. The cottage recedes in the rear-view mirror, its blank eyes staring after us.

It happens in a heartbeat. A small figure looms out of nowhere, eyes wide and shocked as the car lurches towards her. There's barely time to gasp as I scramble for the brakes. The steering wheel slips through my hands. A thud and a scrape. My nose explodes in agony. The car shakes, then we've stopped.