

The Hide

By Liz Williams, illustration by Liz Clarke

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The birds were white as they flew over the marsh, across the reedbeds and the frosted meres, but as they drew level with the hide their shade changed, from white to black. I saw their crimson eyes, sparks in the cloudy dark, as they disappeared into the storm. Richard and I crouched in the hide and waited.

"Jude, can you see her? Can you see?" Richard whispered.

But all I could see was darkness, and the distant storm.

People lived here once. A very long time ago, when this land was called the Summer Country: named not for cowslip meadows or hazy warmth, but because it only appeared in summer, when the waters had retreated towards the Severn Estuary and the marshes were dry enough to be negotiated on foot. During all other times of year, this land—gleaming wet marshes, dense beds of dull golden reeds, and groves of alder and unpollarded willow—was the haunt only of ducks and herons, and the small people who lived along the causeways and in the lake villages.

Richard and my sister Clare and I had followed the Sweet Track the summer before, when the heat hung heavily over the water meadows, with the damselflies zooming through the kingcups that grew along the margins of the dug-out peat beds. The Track, discovered years before by an academic named Sweet, is an old road, one of the oldest in the country. I was researching it, and studying Sweet's own research, at the Moors Centre, lying right in the middle of Sedgemoor.

Hard to imagine winter, in those dreaming meadows. But I knew that come September the fog would start drifting in from the Bristol Channel, smelling of salt mud and sea, hiding first the whale-humps of islands, then the arch of Brent Knoll, then the flat lands all the way to the Tor with its tower. After that would come flood and then frost, and the long, dim, damp winter.

I'd been there for six months, but Clare was living in Manchester then, working as a fundraiser for some big arts project, and this was her first visit to the area. Her New Age soul was enchanted by it all, by the faux-Arthuriana of Glastonbury and the rather more real claims of Cadbury, by the startling caverns of the Mendips and the flat lands between, where the lake villages had once stood. She and Richard had apparently met through some university bird-watching society—though I'd never known Clare to be interested in birds before. She was more enthusiastic about it in summer, perhaps, out in the wilds with a couple of bottles of beer and a blanket, and that's how we discovered the hide.

I hadn't realised it was there, although I'd been to the bird reserve a couple of times before. I must have walked right past it, but it was Clare who spotted it, as we walked along the track with the remains of a picnic in a rucksack.

"Richie! Jude! There's a causeway, in the reeds. Can we go and look?"

Moments later, she was gone. I remember feeling an odd moment of panic, as though she'd performed some unnatural conjuring trick. Then her voice came from among the russet tassels nodding several inches above our heads. "Look at this! This is so cool!"

The causeway was built of slats placed on piles, close together and easy to walk on, with the addition of a handrail, which the original Lake Village structures would not have had. Quite contemporary and not all that old, judging from the scrubbed pallor of the wood. I'd have told her all this, but I'd grown too used to the rather glazed expression that came over Clare's face whenever I talked about my work. We'd both had our noses in books as kids, but they hadn't been the same ones. She liked the myths. She was less interested in fact.

