

HEKLA'S CHILDREN
by James Brogden

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

A flash of colour appears around a bend in the path off to the left, and his group is there: Scattie's pink bandanna, Brandon's bright red walking socks, and the lime green of Liv's borrowed rucksack. Ryan is striding ahead, limping slightly because of course he's bugged his ankle already, and the rest are strung out in a line, no doubt sweaty and irritable in the sun. Nathan stands up and waves in wide, sweeping movements of both arms so that they are sure to see him. A moment later he sees Scattie wave back, and he breathes a sigh of relief. Not that there is a reason for him to have been anxious in the first place, he tells himself.

He sits back down and watches them approach, appearing and disappearing as the path dips in and out of watershed gullies. Eventually he is able to hear them: scraps of singing and adolescent banter carried to him on the capricious breeze.

'...can't have drunk it all already!'

'It's hot, man! I'm going to have to suck the stuff out of my blisters!'

'...such a fucking knob-end...'

And they are gone again. With a sigh of resignation, Nathan decides that he should probably go and meet them at least part of the way, gets up, and starts down Rowton Bank towards them.

He catches one more glimpse of them as he rises: their backpacks, half-hidden by high gorse bushes, moving away from him. He frowns. They've turned left off the main path and seem to be angling down towards the brook, something they've been specifically warned against. Not that there is any need for him to worry; the brook is shallow, and in this weather they'll dry out quickly enough if they do fall in. But if Ryan turns his ankle in a rabbit hole or a patch of bog, Nathan is screwed. He cuts right, hoping to catch them before they do so, and their voices drift to him again.

Ryan's voice is high with excitement. 'Whoa! Look at that!'

'Cool,' from Scattie.

'...you think it's clean?' That's Liv.

A brief silence and then Bran's voice coming back: '...spring, feeding... probably drinkable...'

'Hey, who's that...'

Then there is a loud splash and whoops of laughter. Nathan speeds up, wondering how a sense of mild urgency should have blossomed into actual fear. Unless the air is somehow magnifying their voices they can't have reached the stream, surely. He is moving so quickly that he almost falls into the well.

WIREHEAD
CENTRAL

It is about a four feet across, circular and stone-lined, and completely obscured from the path by the hollow of the land and the surrounding undergrowth. He checks his map – it's called Rowton's Well, and they've been told to avoid it because everyone assumed that it would be a deep, dangerous hole in the ground, but he sees now that it isn't a well in the conventional sense. It's a spring; the clear water is only about a foot deep, over a pebbly bottom. As he watches, tiny bubbles shiver up from between the stones and plip on the surface.

Propped against the side is Ryan's army-surplus rucksack, but of the children themselves, there is no sign.

'Come on you lot!' he shouts. 'Stop messing around!'

Then they are suddenly there, are strolling away quite calmly in the opposite direction, half-hidden by the trailing fronds of a few thin birch trees, none of them so much as looking back even though they must have heard him. Their movements are calm – sedate, even – with their arms hanging loosely by their sides. In single file – Ryan, Scattie, Liv and Bran – they step easily along what looks like a track of roughly-hewn timbers laid as a footbridge across the stream and up the other side. The ground there is a lot higher – more of a densely wooded slope than the open marsh it was before.

'Stop!' he yells, and runs after them.

Birch branches whip his face and he stumbles, falling to his knees in squelching black soil. When he picks himself back up the kids have disappeared again, and now he can't see the wooden track or the tree-lined slope. He splashes across the stream and up the other side, tripped by heather and scratched by gorse thorns as he fights his way up to higher ground for a better view, but once he's gained it he can do nothing but stare in shock.

Under a clear sky, and in a wide landscape empty of any hiding place, they have disappeared utterly.

In the shadowless light of Un, it is happening now.

