Hannah and the Hollow Tree

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Inkberry Press

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First Published 2018

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InkBerry Press

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-739306014

eBook ISBN: 978-1-9999016-7-7

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J A Browne asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

This Third Edition published by InkBerry Press 2023

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For Mum and Dad
Love Stays

Prologue

I can't reason with her. My mother. The *great* Eleanor Walsingham.

But I'm a mother now, too and decisions about my daughter's future lie with me. At least until she's old enough to make her own mind up.

I stare at Hannah tucked tightly into the pram which I push and pull lulling her to sleep. She loves the motion, the movement. With those strong legs of hers, I'm certain she'll be a runner. Sometimes, the phantom feeling of her still inside my stomach kicking away with such eagerness leaves me breathless.

Sitting on the hard mahogany bench, my hand naturally returns to continue picking dates from Joyce's fruit bowl. Spitting my seventh stone out into a napkin, I toss it into the brass bin in the corner of the room. *Always been a good shot.*

I stare at a gilt framed painting of Windsor House hung part-way up the staircase squinting at the brass plaque. 1764. Little has changed which I find comforting. Nestled into the vast woodland, its bright stone walls stand proud as sheep and cattle graze across the rolling hills. It looks so peaceful. And it is. There's a calmness here that I rarely feel living in a city, even one as beautiful as York.

A light wind rattles the windowpane and from down the corridor I hear their footsteps and muffled voices approach. As they draw closer, I detect the frustration in Mum's voice. Joyce's naturally serene tone might soothe Mum enough to lessen any intended verbal blow that may come my way. If anyone can talk my mother down, it's Joyce. They stop just under the large stone archway. I hold Joyce's pitiful gaze and sense my mother's eyes boring into me. All hope I clung to of Joyce's prevention skills dwindle. I can't ignore my mother any longer. Her visage is fixed with such a sharp degree of hostility, so I fire first.

"I have the right to choose, Mother," I remind her, as she fidgets with the string of aquamarine beads around her neck. *She's nervous. Really?*

Her eyebrow arches, "That you do," she begins stepping forward. "But I..."

"No buts. I will not change my mind," I say glancing into the pram. Hannah huffs a little and gurgles.

"But what if something happens to the Earth or Gaian, Caroline? It will fall on your daughter's shoulders and what is *your* destiny will become *hers*. It cannot be undone," she says firmly as Joyce moves to open the door, letting a September chill permeate the house.

"I just don't believe something *will* happen. It's ridiculous to think it could!"

Refusing to accept defeat my mother continues to badger, to hound, to push, to persuade, but my mind is set.

I *will* abdicate.

After wrapping Joyce's tartan shawl around my shoulders, I push the pram's brake with my foot carefully so not to disturb my little bundle of blonde. As I lift her from the pram, Joyce coos and strokes the apple of Hannah's cheek. Sensing Mum's gaze which makes me wonder if she's trying to read my mind, anger builds brick by brick, but I bite the rotten words between my teeth denying their release.

I don't want to feel this way towards her.

I glance across but she turns away like I've slapped her across the face. My heart stings. For a split-second I question myself.

"If we're going to do this, then it must be now," says Joyce passing a flashlight to Eleanor, who wafts it away. Instead, she conjures a sort of ball of light in her hand, which I'm certain is entirely for my benefit, then proceeds to tap it making it multiply until there are half a dozen sprites of light. Dusk gives way to night, allowing the dance of the sprites to begin. With a gentleness to every move, they loop and bound and leap and twirl. One fawn coloured sprite with a coffee-coloured mane flits furiously around my head then hovers in front of me. I offer my hand as a perch. As it lands, I feel the scratch of its claws. It sniffs me then smiles, which I take as a positive sign, as if my level of goodness is detectable by scent. The sprite hums a little, a melody I've never heard before, and begins to sway from side to side.

Or is it me swaying from side to side?

A sudden dizziness pumps through my increasingly numb limbs and across my chest. I fill with fear of falling.

"What have you done to me?" I cry.

The sprite's waspish tone takes me by surprise, "Humph!"

A watery hissing sound follows as I realise the sprite is pumping a glistening white liquid from its body to mine.

"Stop it! Get off me!"

Flicking my wrist, the sprite tears my skin as it extracts its claws from the back of my hand.

"What's it done to me? What was that?" I rub the scratch. The dizziness fades.

"What it must," says Joyce, calmly.

Extending its wings, a river of the same white liquid it pumped into me rushes through the sprite's translucent veins, enlarging its wingspan. Unbelievably, the sprite sticks its tongue out before it flits back to its flock, which emanates a rosy glow above our heads. I appreciate their beauty, but balk at the symbolism my mother seems intent on making me swallow.

"Is this not enough in itself to believe, Caroline?"

I knew it.

"You've shown me things like this before, Mum, but it still doesn't mean the world is doomed."

"Then lead the way, Joyce, for hope and sense have clearly abandoned this place," she retorts bitterly.

The cool night is filled with the soft scent of wisteria as we leave the grounds. Joyce, pointing the beams of the two torches out like headlights, guides our way. Scents evolve the further we head into the woodland; daphne and jasmine fill the air.

Accompanied by moonlight with guiding sprites, like the three kings, we journey to a sacred place. Only, I have no intention of worshipping something I can't bring myself to believe in.

The ill-mannered sprite which administered something wholly unprescribed keeps looking over its shoulder at me, expectant-

ly as if waiting for something to happen. I can't bring myself to imagine what...

"Not much farther now. It's just ahead on the left-hand-side, but do be quiet. No sudden movements," whispers Joyce, as if we're on a wildlife expedition looking for badgers or red squirrels.

Mum has stayed silent for the entire journey across the grounds. I didn't expect that. *Maybe she's accepted my decision, finally.*

Joyce holds up her hand and we halt. She raises the torches directing both beams of light upon the Hollow Tree, casting a grey glow upon it. It stands dormant, like a stone pillar, cold. It is not what I expected at all.

"It knows," she says coldly, like my mother has read my mind.

"Oh really?"

I make no attempt to hide the sarcasm.

"It won't throw its arms open for you and welcome you in, Caroline. There'll be no fanfare. What did you expect? Bells and whistles?"

"No, of course not. What a stupid thing to say."

"And what a stupid thing to do!" she retaliates.

"Ladies, enough! This isn't helping."

"But this is wrong, never mind utterly unprecedented."

"It is my life and I have the right-"

"Yes, yes, yes, Caroline. You have the right. Of course you do. It's your life. Your right. Your everything. How on Gaia's earth did I raise such a selfish young woman!"

"What did you say?"

"Does it really need repeating?"

"Oh for pity's sake. Both of you, shut up!" bellows Joyce, directing the torches beams of light at us, creating anything but a halo-effect.

I turn away from the interrogating lights, "Joyce, do you mind?"

"Oh, sorry," she replies directing them elsewhere.

Mum, dramatic as always, flicks her velvet coat behind her like a Matador. The sprites, wings pulsating with luminous lights, begin weaving between the Hollow Tree's branches and making tiny sighing noises, as if they know what's about to happen.

"Caroline, I want you to listen to me," she begins. "You were born into Gaia's bloodline. It is a privilege. An absolute blessing. To be chosen to inherit the world, should something happen to her. To be responsible for all life-"

"But that's just it. I don't want to be responsible for *all* life. I just want to be responsible for my life, my daughter's."

"But humans are defined by their collective existence and we all have a responsibility to one another and every creature upon Gaia's earth. And, like I keep saying, life isn't that simple, Caroline. If you go through with this ... if you abdicate your birth right as Gaia's heiress, then because you have progeny, the right passes on. It doesn't just stop. It never stops."

"You've said all this again and again, Mum. I get it. I get that. But I just don't believe anything will happen to Gaia. Why can't you accept that or don't you have faith in her."

"Er, now that's enough, Caroline. Even from you. Don't ever question your mother's faith to Gaia again," barks Joyce, stepping forward between the two of us.

"Nothing is ever certain," begins Mum. "And call me old fashioned, but I believe in being prepared."

"Well *you* can be a good little girl guide then, but it is not what I choose for my life."

"What if-"

"No, mother. Stop." I clutch Hannah's blanket forming a fist of frustration. "I cannot and will not live my life on the premise of 'what if' and neither should you, nor anyone for that matter."

"Eleanor, as much as it wearies me to admit, Caroline has made her choice and even if you don't respect it you have no choice but to accept it."

"What if I refuse to perform the ritual?" Mum retorts.

"Then Joyce can. Can't you?"

Ignoring my plea, Joyce turns to her friend, "Eleanor, do not put me in that position. Caroline is *your* daughter. You must accept her decision and any consequence arising from it."

Exasperated, Mum snatches something from Joyce's hand before huffing, "Very well. But Gaia will never forgive you, Caroline."

"She doesn't have to ... but I hope ... I hope one day, that you will."

Light drains from my mother's eyes, replaced by a stone-cold stare. She asks the sprites to envelope the Hollow Tree within a

'sacred circle' of light whilst Joyce moves to my side, holding her arms out. I place Hannah into them and cradling her head, she pulls my daughter into her chest. Nerves writhe deep within my gut. For a moment, I hesitate. Joyce's expression pleads with me but I shake off the cloak of doubt.

Joyce's gaze falls back upon Hannah. "Shh, there, there," she coos, beginning a rocking motion. I kiss Hannah's head then turn and cross the light entering the Sacred Circle.

My mother walks the line of it, but doesn't cross as I have. "Hollow Tree, I come to you with a burden to bear."

So, she admits it's a burden.

"This daughter of Gaia offers you a gift. A gift so great that you and only you can hold until such time as it returns to its rightful place. Will you, most blessed one, receive this gift and act as guardian of it?"

She really is talking to a tree.

It's then I realise everything has fallen silent. No wind to rustle leaves. No nightingale song or cricket's call. For a moment, only stillness. But then ... as if awakening from its slumber, a thin branch from one of the Hollow Tree's limbs flexes and bends, offering its hand, stretching its twigs, as if fingers to touch. *Oh my god. It heard her.*

Hesitating, I look at my mother, who flicks her head towards the offering. Pain etches itself across her face. "Take it," she whispers.

I stifle a cry, running my fingers through my hair to let a blonde veil shield my face from her gaze. *I can't bear it.*

Placing my hand into the Hollow Tree's, its fingers of twigs clasp mine, guiding me forwards to its trunk. I tremble The

nodes on the branch press against my skin. I wonder how long it has stood on Earth for. Releasing my hand, it presses down on my shoulder. I realise it wants me to kneel. Its branches groan as they begin to unfurl and stretch; its slumber must have been deep. Suddenly, little puffs of air expel released from the dewy ground as dozens and dozens of roots rise up, swaying like charmed grass snakes. *Oh please, no!* My stomach flips as it dawns on me exactly how my gifts will be extracted.

Argh!

The first root pierces my calf. I clutch at it trying to pull it out, but then others strike like vipers stinging my legs. I smack them away, but it's no good. I'll be damned if I am giving in, but my limbs tense and twitch as panic sets in like I've been dropped into well of nettles.

"Make it stop, please!" I cry.

The roots, despite being thin and spindly, strike my arms and spiral up across my chest and my stomach before piercing through my clothes and going deep into my skin. *Argh!*

"I'm sorry, Caroline! It's why I brought the sprites. Kaoko pumped a clove and glycerine compound into your blood stream to numb the pain."

"It's not helping. Make it stop!"

"I can't. It cannot be undone. It is filtering out Gaia's gifts. Cleansing your blood. Like a transfusion."

I collapse onto my side, suddenly short of breath. *This is meant to be the novocaine version?*

"Mum! Please! Help me!"

"I cannot enter the Sacred Circle!" she cries as my blood chills and wave upon wave of nausea crash over me. "Can you crawl to me, Caroline?"

I look across to Mum who is on her knees at the very edge of the illuminated circle. Her cheeks glisten from tears.

"I'm c-c-cold. Am I dying?"

"No! I would never let that happen! But it is draining a life source from you. Caroline, I'm sorry. I should have stopped you."

"Guess who-who's the m-more stubborn one now," I say grabbing clumps of grass and soil clawing my way to the edge of the Sacred Circle where my mother awaits. The roots feed, drinking Gaia's nutrients from my body. *Someone make it stop.*

Joyce kneels at my mother's side, clutching Hannah tightly, swaddled in blankets.

"Oh my goodness!" she cries all of a sudden and I become aware of a fluorescent emerald glow encompassing the woodland. I glance back to see the Hollow Tree's illuminated veins pulling Gaia's gifts from every inch of my body.

Nearing the edge of the circle, I reach out to Mum. She clasps my hand tightly as I fall back staring at a haze of stars.

"I'm so sorry, Caroline. I shouldn't have let you do this."

"How l-l-long? I'm so cold."

"Caroline, I need you to trust me. Take deep breaths. *Really* deep breaths. I promise everything will be okay." I turn to her as she lifts a clutch of stems to my face allowing the scent to escape. *That's what she snatched from Joyce.*

With every scrap of energy I have left, I force my lungs to inhale her apothecary; sweet lavender clouds my brain as I begin to float away staring into my mother's face.

"Hannah," I mouth as she squeezes my hand.

Joyce shuffles closer peeling back the blanket revealing my daughter's button nose and tuft of blonde hair.

Forgive me, Hannah...

3am

30th October: Hannah

What is it about phone calls in the middle of the night that always makes people nervous? I press my stomach, hoping it stops curdling like week-old milk. I am covered in cold, clammy sweat. Drenched, in fact. A weightless feeling overwhelms me. Was I drowning?

Is that what my dream was about?

Sometimes dreams feel so real, don't they?

I shove the weight of the winter duvet - Mum insisted I have - down to my shins, before pressing my fingertips into the cool pools of sweat that sit in the well of my collarbone. Upstairs, I can hear Mum's muffled voice.

I've got to change that foghorn ringtone of hers.

I wince against the brightness of my mobile as my eyes adjust. *Who soddin' well rings at 3am?I mean, it's not going to be anyone with good news, is it?*

I close the case and stick it back in the dock, before lying back and pulling the matted hair from the back of my neck up onto my pillow. Sometimes rain is soothing to listen to. But not tonight. It reminds me of the dream, I can't quite remember. Like a lion tamer's whip, the wind and rain lash the windowpanes as if trying to scar the glass.

Huh!

Flashes fill my room.

One-one-thousand. Two-one-thousand. Three ...

The starving thunder rumbles ever closer. *How on earth did I sleep through that?* Normally, I'm such a light sleeper. *Weird. Not like me.* It's closing in. We never used to get many thunderstorms in Yorkshire, but now ... and rain, well, that we get that by the bucket load. I've never liked thunder since I was little. Mum used to say it was the gods arguing with each other. I never actually asked her which gods she meant, though. Her meant-to-comfort story doesn't work now, of course. I'm not a little kid anymore, but still, I curl into a ball and roll onto my side. Between each rumble I listen for Mum's footsteps from above because they'll tell me if it's bad news or no news.

There it is ... a slight creak, like an unhinged gate.

I track her footsteps across my ceiling; ancient floorboards in an ancient house. She crosses her room back and forth, dresser drawers being pulled open then slid shut. Eventually, her footsteps descend the narrow attic staircase and my heart sinks like a badly skimmed stone across a pond. Bad news, then. My door edges open and I wait for Mum to speak.

"Hannah?"

I bolt up onto my knees, balancing on the edge of the bed. There's an urgency in her voice causing a sudden flush of goose-bumps across my arms. I watch her flick on the lamp; her face a mixture of tiredness and ... shock, maybe?

"What's happened? I heard the phone."

My stomach somersaults.

"Always been a light sleeper, Han." *Apparently not tonight, though.*

"What's happened?" I repeat.

But she just says, "Get dressed, Han, okay?" as she pulls a jumper, jeans and underwear from my dresser. "Here."

Clothes fly from drawer to bed. My purple roll neck clings to the duvet like a mountaineer, before eventually dropping to the floor. Brow wrinkled, I stare at her busying herself. If she's thinking about other things, then she isn't thinking about ... *What the hell's happened?*

She balls up a pair of slipper socks and glances back at me, "Sweetheart, seriously. I need you to get dressed. Now. We have to go."

"But why?"

In the haze of the lamp's light, her ocean-filled eyes narrow. She turns away and is still for a moment. Eventually she unhooks her hair from behind her ears, creating a blonde veil between us, which usually means the urge to cry is rising.

She swallows hard, "We have to go."

"What do you mean, 'We have to go.' Where?"

"Norwich."

Norwich? But that's...

"Oh my God, Gran! Is she okay? What's happened?"

Mum doesn't reply. She's in her head, not in my room. I climb off the bed and stand by her side.

"Mum! Is Gran okay?"

She's wearing her 'calculation face', like she's still mathematically weighing up what the caller said. Something then equalises

because she replies, "I don't know, love," before pressing the balled up pair of socks into my hand. "Just get ready, okay?"

As Mum leaves the room, questions march in and form an orderly line. I'm not the most patient of people, so that line won't stay orderly for long. Mum didn't answer my questions. That means she won't. Not yet, anyway. Not until she has all the facts.

What's happened to Gran?

Mum's flicked her switch to autopilot, which usually means something needs fixing, sorting, defending, paying; that's what she does. Sometimes, I think that's all she does since ... well, the less said about 'since' the better. Maybe it's because Mum's a solicitor. Or maybe it's just Mum.

The news *was* bad ... *and it was about Gran.*

Tears well.

"Hannah," she calls from the bottom of the stairs, meaning, 'get a move on'.

I guess I need to flick my switch.

Right.

Tipping the entire contents of my school bag onto my bed – won't be needing any of that – I grab my phone. 3.07am. I tuck it into the side pocket. What else?

Jumper

Socks

Underwear

Kindle

Chargers – most important

3:09am

Brush

Hat. *Favourite.*

Finally, I stuff deodorant and my lip balm into my bag, then thunder down the stairs. I stand at the door, pull my boots on, then flick the latch whilst Mum does a final sweep, double-checking everything's locked and pulling plugs from their sockets. Better to be safe than sorry, she always says. *Is this really happening? Is Gran* ... but I daren't finish that thought.

I open the door ajar, feeling sprays of rain against my face. A flashback from the dream I couldn't remember startles me. *Mum plunging into the black water.* I shudder as rows of fir trees lining the garden groan and creak against the might of the brutal wind but remain defiant. Years of clustering shore up their leafy ramparts. But tonight's storm is something else. *Never seen it like this. At least that I can remember.* Winter approaching is autumn's warning.

Argh!

A low, thick branch of a silver birch tree – one that Gran planted for me – cracks and falls; bark peeling. It hangs like a flesh wound.

Mum presses her hand onto my shoulder.

"Look at what the storm's doing?"

She doesn't even acknowledge what I said, just rummages through her handbag filled with cra- *Huh!* Lightning fills the house, then vanishes, but leaves behind a racing heart. *Hate storms.*

"Mum, are you sure you want to drive to Norfolk in *this*?"

She stops rummaging and stares out into the darkness beyond our security light, which gives the sheets of rain a silvery glow.

"No. But we have no choice, love." She pulls one of the huge brollies from the wicker stand and offers it to me. Pulling at the

press-stud, unravelling the tightly wrapped canopy, Mum gives me a nudge. Finger on trigger, I step out into the storm.