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written by

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THE LAST OF THE HIGH KINGS



Kate Thompson

RED FOX

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On top of the mountain stood a hill of stones. It measured one hundred paces around the base and twenty paces from the bottom to the top. Of all the people of the seven tribes there was no one who could remember when it had been built, but of all the people of the seven tribes there was no one who could not remember why.

On top of the hill of stones stood a boy. He was barely twelve years old but he considered himself a man, already a proven warrior and hunter. If the talks going on in his father's fort went well he would soon be married. If they went badly he would, even sooner, be dead.

The young man who stood beside him on the hill of stones was a cousin. He was short; barely taller than the boy, and some people said it was his small size that had made him so angry. He was the right man to go hunting with and the wrong man to have an argument

with. He had killed stags and bears and men in close combat, and when he saw blood he always wanted to see more of it. But even he had not wanted to see this blood; the blood of his young cousin. It was with great reluctance that he had allowed himself to be persuaded to take on this watch.

Throughout the whole of the night the two of them had waited on the beacon, taking it in turns to rest, but never to sleep. A constant hard wind had been blowing against them but it hadn't been that which kept them awake. They were watching for a messenger to tell them that the boy would live or a sign to tell them he would die.

Time after time, throughout that longest of nights, the boy wondered what had compelled him to speak. His father, as everyone had known he would, had asked for a hero, and the words were barely out of his mouth before the boy had called out with his own name. He hadn't thought about it. Something in him that was quicker and deeper than thought had spoken. The meeting had exploded into uproar. A dozen men and women demanded to be chosen instead of the boy and the voice that shouted loudest and longest was that of the man who stood beside him now. But it was no use. Battling against his own powerful feelings, the boy's father had quelled the storm. It was he who would be leading the forthcoming negotiations. It was

right that his own flesh and blood should pay the price if they failed.

The fort on the edge of the plain could not be seen from the beacon, which was why two signalmen had been stationed at the edge of the mountain top. Both the fort and the mountain's edge had brush pyres waiting to be lit if the talks broke down. The one at the fort would signal to the watchers on the mountain and theirs, in turn, would signal to the boy. All through the night he had stared in its direction, sometimes imagining he saw the red glow of fire or smelled the smoke from burning kindling. Now, as the day dawned, he could see the two men, more cousins, their backs turned towards him as they kept their careful watch upon the fort. In the daylight the fires would not be lit. There were other signals instead. Arms stretched up and held still for success and reprieve. Arms to the sides and then up, waving, for failure and death.

The boy wondered why it was all taking so long. Could they still be talking down there? Perhaps the meeting had finished hours ago and no one had thought of coming up to tell them. He sighed and stamped his sandalled feet in an effort to warm them.

'Hungry?' said his cousin.

'No.'

There was bread and cold meat in a hide bag but

neither of them had touched it all night. The boy rewrapped his cloak around him and fastened it with the gold pin that his mother had given him shortly before her death.

'You keep this,' he said. 'If—'

But the young man shook his head. 'If you die I will not be long coming after you. There are those who say I'm an angry man, but if I am made to spill your blood there isn't a beast in the forest nor a man among the seven tribes that will not know what my anger looks like.'

The boy shook his head. 'Don't take it out on them,' he said. 'They aren't to blame for this.'

But he saw, already, the glint of derangement in those dark brown eyes, and he realized that an early death had always been written on his cousin's brow. And at that same moment he saw that the same thing was written on his own. His death was waving at him from the horizon. He saw the signallers turn back and look towards the plain, then wave again, more urgently.

'Do it,' he told his cousin.

'Then say it.' The boy looked and saw tears streaming down his cousin's wind-burned face. He turned away from him and saw the signalmen running hard, in opposite directions, away from their unlit pyre.

Something was coming. Already. How could it all

have happened so fast? The boy found that his knees were shaking so hard that they would scarcely support his weight.

'I swear,' he began, but his voice was constricted by fear and it squeaked like a child's. The words would be worthless if he did not mean them.

The mountain was shaking. Huge, heavy feet were thundering up the hillside from the plain.

'Say it,' said his cousin.

Two enormous, monstrous heads appeared over the rim of the mountain top, then a third, then a fourth. The creatures had reached the top and were advancing on the beacon with massive strides, and they were far, far more terrible than he had ever imagined.

There was no more time. The boy took a deep breath and, as he did so, all doubt left him.

'I swear that I will guard this place,' he said, and his voice was clear and strong. 'I will stay here and guard it whether I am alive or dead.'

The beasts were almost upon them. Behind him, the boy heard the whistling swish of a sword being swung through the air with ferocious strength.

And for a short while afterwards, everything was very, very still.

NEW YEAR'S EVE



1

JJ Liddy stood in the hall and yelled at the top of his voice.

'Where's Jenny?'

The old house, which had been full of noise and activity, fell silent and still. JJ groaned, then shouted again.

'Has anybody seen Jenny?'

His wife, Aisling, came out of the sitting room. 'I thought you were watching her,' she said.

'Well, I was, a minute ago,' said JJ. 'Then I couldn't because she wasn't there.'

Aisling gave a martyred sigh. Their eldest, Hazel, appeared at the top of the stairs. 'She's not up here,' she said.

JJ went out into the yard. 'Jenny!' he yelled, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. If she knew that he was angry she would never come. 'Jenny!'

She probably wouldn't come anyway. She rarely did.

JJ went back into the house and began searching for his walking boots. He found them underneath a pile of cased instruments which were waiting beside the door to be packed into the car, and as he was putting them on Donal came down the stairs with a half-filled backpack.

'Does that mean we aren't going, then?' he said. Donal was nine, and was by far the easiest of all Aisling and JJ's children. He seldom had much to say, and he never made a fuss about anything.

'Well, we can hardly go without her, can we?' said JJ, tugging at a bootlace.

'I don't see why not,' said Hazel, who was still at the top of the stairs, leaning on the banisters. 'I don't see why we have to let her ruin everything all the time.'

'Bold Jenny,' said Aidan, arriving on the scene with a hammer. He was nearly three, and going through an aggressive phase. Aisling and JJ spent a lot of their time trying to disarm him.

'She wouldn't care anyway,' Hazel went on. 'She doesn't want to hang around with the rest of us; that's why she's always swanning off on her own. She probably wouldn't even notice if we weren't here when she got back. She'd probably be delighted.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter,' said Aisling gloomily. 'We can always go in the morning.'

'It does matter,' said Hazel irritably. 'If we go in the

morning we'll miss the party, and that's the whole point.'

'I'll find her,' said JJ, lacing his second boot.

'Yeah, right you will,' said Hazel, stomping back to her bedroom.

JJ went out and shut the door behind him.

'Bold Daddy!' said Aidan, raising the hammer with both hands and aiming it at one of the glass panels in the door. Aisling snatched it out of his hand the instant before it hit the target and held it up high, out of his reach. He lunged at her and screamed, but she sidestepped and escaped into the kitchen. Silently, Donal retreated, leaving Aidan to finish his tantrum alone on the hallway floor.

As JJ crossed the field called Molly's Place he felt his annoyance subsiding. More than that, he found he could almost sympathize with Jenny. Although it was midwinter the weather was mild. A gentle breeze blew a soft, misty drizzle in from the sea, and the grey hills which rose ahead of him were inviting. Why would anyone want to squeeze into a crowded car and be stuck there for three hours when they could stride off into the fresh, earth-scented wilds beyond the farm?

He spotted something in the grass and changed his course. One of Jenny's shoes. It meant he was on the right track, at least. He looked up and caught a

glimpse of something white on the mountainside far ahead. That big old goat again. It had been hanging around a lot lately, and it made JJ uneasy. He suspected that it might not be quite what it appeared to be. He suspected, as well, that Jenny was already a long, long way ahead. She hadn't got that much of a head start, he was fairly sure, but she was capable of moving incredibly quickly once she had, as she always did, jettisoned her shoes.

JJ looked at his watch. It was two o'clock, which meant that there were still about three hours of daylight left in which to find her. They wouldn't make it for dinner, but provided they were on the road by six they would still arrive in plenty of time for the party. His sister Marian had married an accordion player from Cork and their new year parties were famous in traditional music circles. They were one of the highlights of JJ's year, and the annual trip to Cork was just about the only time the whole family went away together. Everyone loved it and looked forward to it. Everyone, that was, except Jenny.

JJ found the other shoe just inside the boundary wall of the farm. That was good luck. More often than not only one would turn up, and Jenny's room was littered with shoes that had lost their partners.

'Jenny!'

Beyond the farm the land became much wilder. This

was the winterage that belonged to the Liddy farm, but unlike Mikey's land at the top of the mountain it had hardly any grazing at any time of year, and to a farmer it was useless. The rocky slopes rose steeply, and in hollows and gullies there were belts of woodland, mostly ash and hazel, guarded by blackthorn and brambles. There were plenty of places where Jenny could be hidden from view. She could be almost anywhere.

'Jenny!'

There was no answer. Even the white goat had disappeared. JJ sighed and, with a last glance back at the house, climbed over the dry-stone wall.



2

'Can I go to Ennis with the girls, then,' said Hazel, 'if Jenny's not back by six?'

'I suppose so,' said Aisling. It was nearly five already, and a few minutes earlier she had got up to turn on the outside light. This was not for JJ's benefit, or for Jenny's, but for Aidan, who had found three large pieces of polystyrene packaging in the shed and was out in the back yard, pulverizing them with a brick. It was making a terrible mess, which someone would have to clear up at some stage, but it was rare for anything to keep Aidan occupied for more than a couple of minutes at a time, and Aisling was reluctant to bring an end to the relative peace.

Hazel went off to phone her friends and book a seat on the bus. Aisling looked at the clock again. She would soon have to think about making a meal. There was hardly anything in the house, because they hadn't planned on being there that night. She could probably

scrape something together with tins and frozen food, but the trouble was she didn't want to. She had been looking forward to getting away; to being fed for a change, and to mucking in with Marian and Danny in the big friendly kitchen down in Cork. She had been looking forward to sitting at the piano and having a few tunes tonight. But then Jenny . . .

A wave of anxiety washed over her thoughts and changed their direction. What were they going to do about her? The child had been a disaster right from the word go. She wasn't stupid or devious or nasty, she was just completely intractable. She spent most of her time roaming around the countryside and seemed to be incapable of doing as she was told. And recently it had got worse. Much worse.

At least, in the past, she had gone to school. She was now eleven, and although she still went occasionally, it was becoming the exception rather than the rule. Most mornings when Aisling and JJ got up, Jenny was already gone. And when she was gone, she was gone all day. The girl didn't seem to need the things that normal children did. She never took anything to eat, and she never came home for lunch. She wore light clothes, often forgetting to take a jacket, even in the foulest of weather. And although Aisling's notes to the teachers were full of them, the truth was that Jenny never ever got a cough or a cold or a sore throat. But

it couldn't go on. The school principal was beginning to get suspicious and had starting asking questions that Aisling found difficult to answer. It should have been JJ's responsibility to deal with that kind of thing, but the trouble was that JJ was hardly ever there.

Because JJ Liddy, over the last few years, had become a household name. He had made four CDs and he spent a large part of every year touring at home and abroad, playing to packed houses wherever he went. That hadn't been the plan when they married. The deal had been that JJ would stay at home and make violins, and Aisling would go back to working as a homoeopath. They were supposed to be sharing the housework and the child-rearing, but as the years went by those things had become, almost exclusively, Aisling's department.

Anger simmered under her breastbone. She had put up with it for years, partly for the sake of JJ's career and partly because he was better paid for playing music than she would be for working as a homoeopath. But money wasn't everything. Aisling's life was passing her by, and Jenny's behaviour was the last straw. It was high time things began to change.