

WHISPERING  
HOLLOW





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WELBECK  
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Nan





Old Mamm Spriggan sleeps under a blanket of leaves, curled like a seed, tight as a secret. Now and then she twitches out a gnarly leg. Sometimes her long twig fingers scratch her head, dislodging a millipede burrowing in her brain. For days and nights through rain and shine she slumbers, giving herself back to the land until she's needed.

While she sleeps her mind fills with rotting things: mulch and manure, maggots and mould, putrid fluids and pungent juices reeking with the sweet-rich tang of decay. She dreams of the spinning Earth and scudding clouds, sunrise and moonbeams, cycles and seasons, longing for a time when she wasn't the last of her kind.

Best of all, is when she dreams of the girl.

She hugs herself with rough bark arms and grins when she thinks of the child's long auburn hair and eyes the colour of a mountain lake. How she'd like to

taste those eyes. Pluck them out and roll them between her fingers, feel them slide cool and juicy down her throat.

Mamm can't remember exactly when she was last called into life, for time disintegrates quickly when you're in the ground, but she recalls that long hot summer week as if it happened only yesterday. The girl's trespass had caused her to wake in the usual way - the angry dark magic filling her with fury and summoning her to protect the glade. Her heart had beaten raw and ravenous with cruelty, yet she had only watched the child.

The girl was nothing like the others who'd been foolish enough to enter her domain. She dug her hands into the crumble-soft soil and laughed when a spider crawled up her arm. She swam the river in a thunderstorm and climbed the broken oak tree at night. She skipped through dew-wet grass and spun in circles, giddy on the magic of dawn.

Few humans were able to see Old Mamm, yet the girl had. If only the child had spoken to her that night. If only there was a way to get close to her . . .

Turning over, she wheezes a raspy chuckle then buries her face into the dirt and murmurs excitedly to the earthworms, 'Next time she'll speak to me, I'll make sure of it. Next time she'll be mine.'





They'd been driving for hours and it was dark by the time they entered the forest. Pippa Newton pressed her cheek to the car window and surveyed the storm-ravaged sky. A tunnel of trees arched overhead, their long bare branches interlaced like skeletal fingers in the silvery moonlight. In one of them sat a crow, its feathers slick with rain. It turned its head as they drove by and Pippa shivered. There was something unkind in its gaze, something that reminded her of another set of hungry black eyes. It was a memory that belonged to a nightmare, yet she hadn't been dreaming when she'd seen them.

Pippa adjusted her baseball cap and slumped down in the seat. She told herself she was being silly - whatever she *thought* she'd seen that night couldn't have been real - when the car lurched. Dad ran his hand over his bald head then thumped the steering wheel. 'Look at the state of this road! That's if you can

call it a road.' His mood worsened with every pothole they encountered. Each jolt and bump shook loose a new complaint. 'Of all the places to live, it had to be Cornwall. Why anyone would want to live in the woods...'

'I think it's romantic,' said Pippa's mum, turning round to grin at Pippa and her big brother. 'I'd love to live in the middle of the forest. No noisy traffic, or alarms going off, or people making a racket outside Tesco Express.' Pushing up her thick auburn fringe so it looked as if she had no hair, she winked at the children. Sure enough, Dad took the bait. He complained for three minutes straight about how living in the woods was uncivilised before noticing his wife was pulling faces and mimicking him as he spoke.

'Yes, OK. You've made your point. I'm just an old grump.' He pretended to be offended then laughed. 'Who needs a decent Wi-Fi connection, hey, Jed?'

Pippa hoped her brother might join in the conversation, but as usual he was staring at the Switch console glued to his hands, his brow furrowed in concentration.

'Look, Jed!' she said, pointing outside. When he didn't answer, she tugged out one of his earbuds.

'What?' he snapped.

'We're in the forest. Aren't you excited?'

'Yeah, great.'

Pippa sighed. A few months ago he couldn't wait to play in the woods.

She watched a gust of wind shake the bone-thin tree trunks and thought about the last time they'd stayed. It had been summer and the trees were alive with birdsong, the long grass home to an army of frogs, and the ground teeming with insects. She and Jed had played outside every day, climbing trees, making dens and building a tree house. Now it was autumn and an eerie white mist hung in the air. It made the woods feel even more magical.

Pippa opened the window and took a deep breath. As she inhaled the enticing pine scent of the forest she felt her mood improve. Jed was bound to cheer up in a day or two; going away together could be just what they needed.

'Do you have to? It's freezing!' moaned Jed.

'But I want some air.'

'There's air in the car, otherwise we'd all be dead.'

He looked at her expectantly and the tiny muscles of his cheek twitched, making his left eye squint. He was thirteen, two years older than her, and he'd had the facial tic for as long as she could remember. Most of the time she barely noticed it, but when he was angry or embarrassed it became more pronounced.

He tugged her baseball cap down over her eyes then reached over and closed the window. 'You know I don't like the cold,' he muttered.

Pippa fought the urge to snatch his Switch from him and throw it outside. See how he liked *that*. Ever since she'd started at Manning Park High he'd been moody with her. He tolerated her at home, but in school he acted like she didn't exist. He wouldn't let her enter the main gates with him, and if he saw her in the corridor he'd walk the other way. Mum said he was growing up and was just being a teenager. If that were true, she didn't much like the person he was becoming.

They drove down the long dirt track that led to Grandpa's house for several minutes, then Dad stopped the car and twisted round in his seat. 'Right, kids, out you get.'

Jed folded his arms and Pippa felt her stomach flip the way it did when they went too fast over a bump in the road.

'Come on, love,' said Mum, reaching over and patting Jed's knee. 'It's only for a week. It will fly by and when you get back—'

'I'll have a nice new house I don't want to live in, and a nice new school I don't—' He stopped and stared out of the window as if he couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

Dad gave him a pained smile. 'You know why we're moving, Jed. The new restaurant is just round the corner, so it means I can be at home more. It'll take a while to adjust, but it will be for the best. You'll see.'

Jed rolled his eyes and said nothing.

The plan was for them to stay at Grandpa's for half-term while their parents moved into their new place. Dad thought saying goodbye to their old house might be upsetting for them and said their grandfather could use the company. Pippa knew Jed was unhappy because there was no Wi-Fi or phone signal in the forest, which meant he couldn't play Xbox with his friends, but there were other things they could do: like go on walks or visit Ollie, the boy who lived down the lane. Maybe they could use the present she got for her birthday - a pair of night-vision binoculars that recorded video. She'd already filmed foxes at home and couldn't wait to try them out in the woods.

Dad frowned. 'Jed, please get out of the car.'

Pippa braced herself for Jed to refuse, and an argument to start, when Mum began tapping her fist against her forehead, each time changing her expression - angry, shocked, sad, confused, happy - and then stuck out her tongue and crossed her eyes.

Jed sighed, but Pippa giggled. Mum had done this

since they were little and although it was silly, it always cheered her up.

They exited the car, Dad taking their bags out of the boot while Mum hugged them. 'I'm going to miss you guys. Be good for Grandpa.'

'Always,' said Pippa.

Glancing about the garden, she felt a shiver of excitement. In front of the house was an overgrown lawn with a broken oak tree that had been struck by lightning, and beyond that was a line of laurel bushes that surrounded the glade, called *Whispering Hollow*. In the centre was a large flat stone that lay on top of two smaller ones, hiding an entranceway into the earth that was just big enough to crawl through. No one knew who'd put the stones there or why, but Grandpa said it had probably been there since Neolithic times. They weren't allowed inside as the ground was unsafe, but just knowing it was there - *forbidden* - was thrilling.

Following the others, she walked towards Grandpa's house. The little cottage had always been a bit ramshackle, the roof sloping at an odd angle and ivy choking the windows. Now it looked smaller than ever, as if it had sunk in on itself.

Dad knocked on the small wooden door. 'Hello, anyone there?'

The house remained stubbornly silent.

'I can't see a light on. You did tell him we were coming?' asked Mum.

'I left a message on his answerphone.'

Mum looked incredulous. 'So you didn't actually talk to him?'

'I called back yesterday but couldn't get through. Probably a fault on the line; that's what happens when you live in the middle of nowhere.' Dad added a little too firmly, 'He'll be pleased to see them, don't worry. You get in the car. I won't be long.'

'We've driven all this way. Surely we can stop for a cup of tea?'

Dad rubbed the back of his neck. 'It's already late and we still have packing to do.'

Mum smiled sympathetically. 'I know it's hard, but you have to talk to him about the future at some point. What if he has another fall? He can't carry on living here, it's too remote.'

'Try telling *him* that! I'll have that conversation with him when we collect the kids, I promise, but not now. I'm stressed enough with the move and opening the new restaurant. Please, darling.'

Mum sighed as if there was no point arguing. 'OK. He's your father. You know best.' She cuddled the children again and covered their faces in kisses. Jed

squirmed and pretended to be annoyed, but Pippa hugged her back fiercely. As much as she loved Grandpa, a week without her parents was a long time.

Dad waited until Mum had returned to the car, then hammered on the door like he was trying to break it down.

‘Maybe he can’t hear us,’ suggested Pippa.

‘Or he doesn’t *want* to hear us,’ scoffed Jed. ‘You know what happened last time.’

Pippa walked round the side of the house. She was looking forward to staying and didn’t want to spoil it by remembering how their previous visit had ended.

As she passed the window to her left, she saw something that made her gasp. Several large dark shapes were hanging inside the room, suspended from the ceiling. They were as big as fully grown men, with looped heads, thin bodies, and long arms and legs. Looking closer, she realised they were woven from willow branches.

She scanned the windows upstairs and shuddered to see more of the strange figures. There was something disturbingly familiar about them, yet she couldn’t remember seeing them before. Who would make such creepy things? And where was Grandpa? He didn’t go out much, not since his accident.



Dad banged on the door again. 'I told you we were coming today!'

Pippa was starting to worry something bad might have happened when they heard the clang of bolts being drawn.

'Finally,' said Dad.

The door creaked open and Grandpa appeared. He'd grown a patchy white beard since she'd last seen him and was thinner and more hunched over. Worst of all were his eyes. Like the house, they were dark and empty and had a haunted look about them. He glanced nervously between Dad and the children.

'I told you when I took them home last time . . .' he croaked.

'It's only for a week. They won't be any trouble,' said Dad.

The moon peeped out from behind a cloud, casting a shaft of silvery light across the doorway, and Grandpa shrank back.

'Kids, give us a moment, would you?' asked Dad.

They reluctantly turned and moved a dozen paces back, but as soon as her father wasn't looking, Pippa crept towards them again. She knew it was wrong to eavesdrop, but she'd never been good at obeying rules. Like at school when they were warned not to climb the giant conker tree in the playground. Pippa

told her teacher she'd scaled much higher trees, but he didn't seem interested. To prove her point, she climbed it one lunchtime. When he saw her standing in its leafy branches he became *very* interested, but not in a good way.

Dad spoke in a shouted whisper. 'I know you said—'

Grandpa held up his hand, stopping him mid-sentence. 'It's not safe for the children any more. There are things—'

'Of course it's safe!' Dad let out a heavy breath. 'It's just superstitious nonsense, and you know it!'

Pippa strained to listen, but couldn't catch his reply. Grandpa had a tendency to mumble and wasn't easy to understand thanks to his Cornish accent. He'd lived in the forest for as long as she could remember and had always liked having them stay before. All she knew was that everything had changed the last time they were here, the night she'd had the nightmare.

Sensing her father would turn round soon, Pippa hurried back over to Jed. A moment later, Dad spun on his heels and stalked towards them. 'Love you, Newt,' he said, squeezing her shoulder. He held his arm out towards Jed, who swerved from his reach. Dad looked hurt but smiled weakly, seemingly resigned to the rejection. 'Behave yourselves.'

'But he said we can't stay!' exclaimed Jed. Pippa raised an eyebrow at her brother. Had he been eavesdropping too?

Dad jumped into the car and started the engine.

'Mum!' called Pippa, waving her arm.

Their mother smiled, unaware of the conversation that had just taken place, and waved at them as the car drove away. The children stared down the empty driveway then turned back to the house. Grandpa was gripping the doorframe as if his legs might buckle. It wasn't like he could take them home - he wasn't able to drive since he'd fallen over and hurt his knee. As if admitting defeat, he held out his arms for a hug, but Pippa could tell he wasn't really focused on them. His eyes were scanning the darkness as if afraid of what might be out there.