

The Hollow Children

A Ghost Story

Chapter One: The Whisper in the Woods

Clara Mercer knew better than to linger near the forest edge after sundown. Everyone in Black Hollow knew the stories. The warnings mothers gave their children, the way old men would cross themselves when the wind carried strange sounds from the trees.

Yet there she stood, her wool shawl pulled tight against the evening chill, listening.

The first time she heard it, she told herself it was the wind. A trick of the mind, nothing more. Grief did strange things to a person. Five years without Daniel had taught her that much.

Then it came again.

"Mama?"

That voice. That exact pitch, the slight waver he used to get when calling for her in the night. Clara's breath caught in her throat. Her hands, rough from years of farm work, trembled at her sides.

Around her, the village slept. Windows glowed faintly with candlelight, smoke curled from chimneys. Normal sights. Safe sights.

From the darkness between the trees, the voice called again.

"I'm cold, Mama."

Clara took one step forward. Then another.

Chapter Two: The Keeper of Stories

Old Tomas found her at first light, standing ankle-deep in the frosted grass where the meadow met the woods. He didn't ask what she was doing there. He didn't need to.

"You heard them, then," he said, handing her a steaming mug of something bitter and herbal. His hands, gnarled as oak roots, shook slightly.

Clara wrapped her fingers around the warmth. "I heard something."

Tomas made a sound deep in his throat. He'd been the village carpenter for longer than Clara had been alive. His workshop walls were lined with carvings of saints and spirits, protection against things most people pretended not to believe in.

"They come more often these days," he said, staring at the tree line. "Especially to those who've lost someone."

Clara studied the old man's profile. "You've heard them too."

It wasn't a question.

Tomas didn't answer.

Chapter Three: The Asylum's Shadow

The ruins stood half a mile into the woods, all crumbling brick and jagged window frames. The village children dared each other to touch its walls, then ran screaming when the wind howled through its empty halls.

Clara had never been afraid of it before.

Now, as she picked her way through the undergrowth, every snapping twig sounded like a footstep. Every rustle of leaves might have been a whisper.

"Mama, where are you?"

The voice came from ahead, near what remained of the asylum's entrance. The stones there were blackened, though no one could remember what fire had done the damage.

Clara's pulse hammered in her throat. This was madness. She knew that. Yet her feet carried her forward, drawn by something deeper than reason.

A figure stood in the broken doorway. Small. Pale.

For one terrible, wonderful moment, Clara let herself believe.

Then it turned.

Chapter Four: The Hollow Truth

The child had no face.

Where eyes and mouth should have been, there was only smooth, featureless skin. Yet when it spoke, the voice was Daniel's. Exactly Daniel's.

"You left me," it said.

Clara's knees nearly buckled. The accusation in those words cut deeper than any knife. She remembered the fever. Remembered holding his small, burning hand as the doctor shook his head. Remembered the awful stillness that came after.

"I never left you, my baby" she whispered.

The thing tilted its head. Around them, the air grew colder. Other shapes moved in the periphery of her vision. Small shapes. Watching.

"Stay with us," the not-Daniel said. *"Then he won't be alone anymore."*

"Stay with us" the voices echoed.

Chapter Five: The Bargain

Clara understood now.

The Hollow Children weren't monsters. They were prisoners. Trapped in this place, wearing the voices of other people's loved ones like beggars wearing stolen clothes.

She could almost pity them.

"Let me see him," she said. "Really see him. Then I'll decide."

The faceless child went very still. For a long moment, Clara thought it might refuse.

Then the air shimmered, like heat rising from summer pavement.

And there he was.

Daniel. Her Daniel. Just as she remembered him, from the cowlick at the crown of his head to the scuffed knees of his trousers.

"*Mama*," he said, and held out his arms.

Chapter Six: The Choice

Clara's heart shattered and mended itself a dozen times in the space between breaths.

Every instinct screamed at her to run to him, to gather him up and never let go.

But something wasn't right.

The Daniel she remembered had a scar above his left eyebrow from the time he'd fallen out of the apple tree. This boy's skin was unmarked.

The real Daniel had bitten his nails to the quick. These hands were perfect.

Clara took a step back.

The boy's face changed. Not much. Just a flicker, like a candle guttering in the wind. But it was enough.

"*You don't love me,*" the thing said, and its voice was still Daniel's, but the words were all wrong. Her boy would never have said that. Never have thought of it.

The other children moved closer.

Clara turned and ran.

Behind her, the woods erupted in sound—a chorus of voices calling names that didn't belong to them, pleading in tones meant to break hearts.

She didn't look back.

Not when the first branches scraped her arms. Not when her breath came in ragged gasps. Not even when she burst into the village square, wild-eyed and shaking, to find Tomas waiting for her with a lantern in hand.

He took one look at her face and nodded.

"Now you know," he said.

And Clara did.