



ORLA ^{AND} THE WILD HUNT

ANNA HOUGHTON

Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Anna Hoghton 2022
Illustration © David Dean 2022

First published in Great Britain in 2022

Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

Anna Hoghton has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying
or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-912626-11-3
eISBN 978-1-913696-83-2

*For my Granny Ireland, who still inspires me every day
And for Bo, who we will love and miss for ever*

*'Tis better to have loved and lost
than never to have loved at all.*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson



Also by Anna Houghton

The Mask of Aribella

From the Author

This story has been inspired, in part, by my own Granny Ireland's tales. I've brazenly plucked and blended creatures from Irish mythology with other favourite myths and legends from my childhood, as well as taken liberties with my own artistic interpretations.

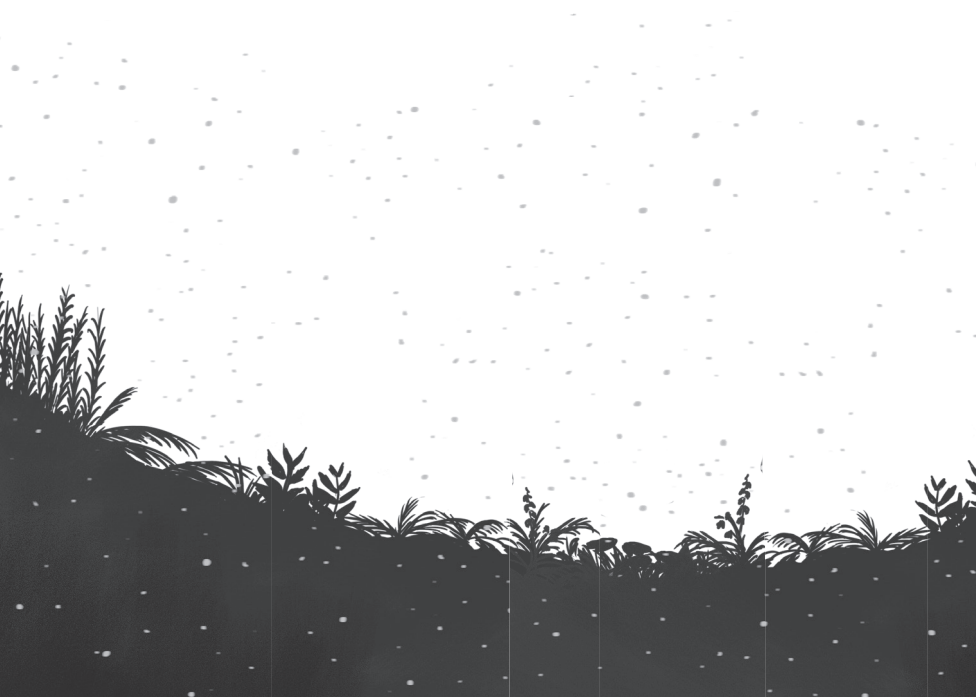
I hope readers enjoy and forgive these embellishments and modifications. After all, myths have long been living, breathing things, shared and shaped from person to person, evolving with each iteration. In the end, what matters isn't the accuracy of the details, but how these stories connect us; to our grandparents and theirs, and theirs before them.

The Wild Hunt rides in the dead of night,
Spreading terror, misery and fright,

They'll feast on your despair and pain,
Whatever you do, don't say their name.

For speak it three times and you will call,
Clouds black as coal, a hideous squall —

Birds, horses, beasts — who'll break your soul apart,
Sorrow hunters who once had mortal hearts.





CHAPTER 1

Too Good to be True

Orla had already lost Apollo. When they'd landed at Belfast International Airport, Orla had nipped to the loo, and by the time she'd returned Apollo was nowhere to be seen. She eventually spotted her ten-year-old brother's blue hair in the confectionery section of WHSmith.

'Why do you have to run off like that?' she growled, shoving him towards the exit doors of the arrivals terminal.

'I didn't *run off*! I was only gonna get a Mars bar. I'm starving,' retorted Apollo, pulling away so hard that several people wheeling suitcases had to dramatically change course to avoid colliding with him. They eyed Apollo and Orla disapprovingly, clearly wondering where their parent or guardian was. Orla bristled and felt even more cross with Dad for not coming.

Instead of being here with his children, Dad was on his way to France to drink cocktails in the sunshine

with his new fiancée, Penelope Toogood, and her *too good* sons, Charles and William. He'd barely even entertained the idea of coming to Ireland instead. They'd all only been to visit Gran once since Mum died. *Once*. In two whole years. Dad always made some excuse about work or school or flight prices, but Orla knew it was really because he'd found the last visit to Gran's too hard. Gran's house was inextricably tied to Mum, and Dad seemed to be doing his best to erase Mum's entire existence from his life. He was such a coward.

Orla had always enjoyed going to Gran's. Gran was a champion of life – warm and kind and exactly how a grandma should be. Orla had loved their last visit for exactly the same reason Dad seemed to have found it difficult. Everything had felt so strange and different since Mum had died, except for Gran's house, which had felt the same as always: a time warp, with photos of Mum everywhere. Dad might be content sailing off into the sunset with the Toogoods as if everything was hunky-dory, but Orla wasn't going to play along. It was bad enough that they all had to live together in a new house – she couldn't bear to go on holiday with them too.

Orla had nagged and nagged until Dad had finally been forced to give in and say she could go to Ireland.

It had been a surprise to everyone when Apollo had insisted that he wanted to go with her. Orla knew Apollo adored Gran and missed her a lot, but she'd thought he would have liked to go on the expensive beach holiday. While Orla could barely stand to be in the same room as the Toogoods, Apollo annoyingly got on with them all fairly well. He got on with everyone.

As they bustled out the exit of the terminal building, the strong Irish wind sent Orla's blonde hair dancing around her face. She shivered. It was always colder and wetter here in Ireland than in Bristol, even in summer. With all that rain, it was no wonder everywhere was so lush. She could see the low-lying hills around the airport, green as gumdrops.

The Emerald Isle.

That's what Mum had always called it.

Orla felt the same warm fizz of anticipation in her belly that she always had when she arrived here, though she knew the week ahead would contain nothing but gardening, games of Scrabble and reading books. There was just something comforting about being back in Ireland. She'd never have admitted it to anyone, but deep down she hoped that this trip and seeing Gran would help fill the big empty space she'd been carrying around inside her since Mum had died.

Orla's stomach twisted as she remembered Gran's first response to her suggestion of coming. She'd expected Gran to be delighted, but instead it had felt almost as if Gran was trying to put them off. Maybe Gran just wanted Orla and Apollo to get on with their new stepbrothers and not to offend Penelope, but it had still felt like a snub. In the end, though, Gran had said she couldn't wait to see them . . .

Where was she? When they'd done this flight with Mum in the past, Gran had always been there waiting for them by the doors. Orla fiddled with her crescent moon earrings nervously, making sure they were still firmly in place. They were Mum's and she never took them off. She jumped as a car horn beeped twice, jolting her from her thoughts.

Gran!

Her heart lifted. Without checking if Apollo was following, Orla shrugged her backpack further up her shoulders and hurried past the taxi bay, heading towards the short-stay car park.

'Orla, wait!' Apollo called.

Orla ignored him, searching the cars for a battered red Fiat. For a moment, she couldn't spot it but then – there it was! And there was Gran! Waving wildly through the windscreen, looking as tiny and birdlike as ever hunched behind the steering wheel.

When she smiled, Orla felt the knot inside her chest loosen.

She and Apollo raced up to the car and pulled open the doors. ‘Hi, Gran!’ they called in unison.

Gran was dressed in her trademark tartan trousers and a baggy red jumper. *Just like old times*, Orla thought happily.

‘Why, hello, my darlings,’ Gran replied, as they slid into the seats. ‘Ach, I love the blue hair you’ve got on yer, Apollo. Very fierce!’

Apollo’s hair had, up until recently, been brown like Dad’s. However, on his tenth birthday, he’d dyed it a luminous shade of neon blue.

Apollo grinned. ‘Thanks, Gran! It’s great to see you.’

‘Grand to see youse too, so it is. My two favourite grandchildren!’

Apollo laughed. ‘We’re your *only* grandchildren, Gran!’

‘And what difference does that make, now? You’re still my favourites.’ Gran beamed. ‘Was the flight all right? Big journey for youse both on yer own. Sure you’ll be needing a wee lie down later, won’t ye? Ach, it’s just grand to see youse, so it is, just grand!’

Gran handed around the packet of Polos she always had in her car. They both took one and crunched on them. The minty taste, Gran’s soft accent, and the

lavender scent of the air freshener were all so familiar to Orla that she found herself relaxing for the first time in months. For once, the world didn't feel like it had been flipped upside down and inside out.

Everything was going to be all right.