

HOLLOW

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Hollow

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Near Tarrytown, New York, October 1790

"You are far too old—way beyond marriageable age."

Katrina shuddered as her father's harsh words echoed through her head. She really shouldn't pay them any heed. It was not like he could force her to marry. If her father tried that she would just flee to the woods of the hollow, the only place in all of Tarrytown where she felt at peace—despite warnings of a Hessian who haunted the hollow's roads.

The trees above her rustled, their brightly colored leaves starting to dry out and, as they rubbed together, sounded like moans, or spirits.

Spirits did not frighten her. She did not tell her Puritan father, she was wise to the ancient arts of magic, though she did not practice black magic. Her mother had taught her everything she knew before she was executed for the black arts.

A snap of a branch caused Katrina's spine to stiffen.

Damn that Brom.

Brom prided himself on being a witch finder, and since Katrina could remember Brom had been shadowing her, as if trying to catch her in the act of witchcraft. Brom was out for money, and Katrina knew he would use extortion against her father Baltus, the richest farmer in the county. As his sole heir, he couldn't afford to lose her to the accusation of witchcraft. It would ruin his reputation.

Brom had made it quite clear he was either going to blackmail her father, or get her hand in marriage. The thought of Brom even touching her made her shudder.

Leaves being crushed under a heavy foot gave her pause. Pulling down the hood of her cloak she craned her neck to see. The flicker of a lavender waistcoat moved through the branches and heavy fog which was rolling through the forest.

"Brom, I know it is you." Yet, there was no answer forthcoming.

Perhaps it is the Hessian.

A shiver passed down her spine as she thought of the headless horseman who haunted the Hollow road in search of a replacement head. She would rather deal with the horseman than Brom, or any other human lurking in these woods.

Spirits she could handle. Men she could not.

"Brom, come out or so help me I will cry foul. Perhaps I'll even awaken the Hessian." It was one thing Brom was terrified of, the horseman. She had often heard him boast that the horseman would want his head because he had the finest brow in all of Tarrytown.

"As you wish, I am going to bloody well scream—"

"I did not mean to frighten you miss." A tall, lanky man stepped out from the bushes. He was garishly dressed, his face lean and angular. His eyes were beady, dark, causing a shiver to run down her spine. He doffed his tri-corner hat and bowed. "I did not expect such a raven-haired beauty to be wandering the Hollow woods alone."

Katrina bowed her head in acknowledgement. "Tis nothing, sir."

He returned his hat to the top of his perfectly powdered wig, and advanced a step further.

Run, every instinct in her body screamed at her, but she could not move. It was if her limbs were frozen.

The man chuckled. "My apologies, I am Ichabod Crane, the new schoolmaster."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir."

He cocked his head to the side. "You have not told me your name."

"No," she stepped back, finally finding her footing. "You will have to forgive me, but I must return to Tarrytown." She turned around, but in a flash he was standing in front of her. He moved like lightning. She let out a gasp.

Ichabod chuckled, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. "I am sorry, miss. I just cannot allow you continue on your way."

"Why?" her voice stuttered as she tried to contain her fear.

It was then Ichabod's eyes lit red with an unholy fire. "Because I think you are the key to what I'm looking for." He reached out, his long fingers digging into flesh of her upper arm through her gown. She winced as he pulled her closer. His teeth were jagged, his eyes glowing in the waning sunlight. "If I spill your virginal blood, then I will release what is rightfully mine."

The thundering of her heart pounded between her ears, becoming louder and louder. But it wasn't her heart, it was the sound of hoof beats coming closer and closer—pounding against the hard tract of dirt road which ran through the hollow.

Ichabod turned his head, but did not release his grasp on her. Through the thick mist in the lane of slumbering trees she saw a black form breaking through.

The Hessian? He is real?

Ichabod hissed as the metallic scrape of a blade being unsheathed echoed through the forest. Releasing his grip, he tossed Katrina to the ground. Her head hit an upturned root. A brilliant starburst flashed before her. Ichabod leapt into the air and clambered up a tree like a squirrel as the headless Hessian's blade swung close to her, before it all went black.

* * * * *

"I have you now, Miss van Tassel."

Katrina moaned. Her head was pounding. Prying open her eyes, she squinted through the brilliant lantern-light and was able to make out the shape of Brom standing over her, looking inordinately pleased with himself.

"Brom...what are you talking about?"

"Your father sent me out to find you when you did not return. He will be most displeased that I caught you red handed in the act of witch craft. "It looks to me like you are surrounded by a seeing eye, drawn by the hands of the very devil himself."

Katrina sat up slowly, holding her head. "Have you become mad? I was doing no such thing, I was..." she was going to tell him about the strange creature Ichabod Crane and the Hessian, but Brom would further condemn her. "I tripped and fell."

Brom yanked her to her feet—a jab of pain reverberating through her skull.

"Oh yes? Tripped and fell eh? Then what do you call that?" He held his lantern over the ground and Katrina's eyes widened at the sight of the all-knowing eye inscribed in the middle of a pentagram, but it was not wicked. It was inscribed for protection against evil. "You are a fool, Brom Bones. I did not cast that. I fell, and if you do not believe me you can feel the goose egg which is throbbing on the back of my head."

Brom's eyes narrowed, but he did reach out and probe just above the nape of her neck roughly. He snorted, grudgingly accepting he did indeed find it.

"Now, if you will excuse me I am sure my father is expecting my return." Smoothing out the wrinkles in her skirt she pulled her hood over her head and began to walk back through the darkness towards home, the moon lighting her way. She could hear Brom lumbering after her, his lantern light bouncing off the road and his breathing heavy as he tried to keep up with her quick pace.

Katrina had nothing further to say to him. All she wanted to do was get off the hollow road, back to the safety of her bedchamber. It was not the horseman who frightened her, but the creature who called himself Ichabod. Next time she ventured into the woods she would carry a stake of wood and some holy water, for she was certain the creature was a demon straight from the bowels of hell.

What did he want with me, and what was he doing in the Hollow woods?

Whatever it was, Katrina was going to find out. Especially why the demon Ichabod was so frightened of the horseman. She was still reeling over the fact the horseman did exist and wasn't just a tale meant to frighten misbehaving children.

The Hessian did not take her head. He was after Ichabod, which meant the horseman wasn't just out hunting for heads. So what was the horseman after and who drew the protective circle around her?

Katrina stopped at the crest of the hill, looking down at the quiet village of Tarrytown. Her father's home was the largest on the outskirts, the lights were all lit and she knew he would be waiting to chastise her when she returned. But the lights of the church were also burning brightly, the doors wide open, and she could hear the murmur of the townsfolk inside.

Brom came up beside her, heaving and panting. He bent over, taking in deep gulps of air.

"What's going on at the church?"

"Town meeting...new schoolmaster," Brom sputtered.

Dread coursed down her spine. *The demon.*

"Come on, Brom." Picking up her skirts she ran as fast as she could toward the village church.

"Miss van Tassel...Katrina!" Brom called out, but Katrina did not wait for him. The whole town was crammed in the church, so much so she didn't even get a chance to get far in the door. Ichabod, the demon, was speaking. He seemed to hold some kind strange spell over the town. Everyone was enthralled with his speech, taken in by his genteel words and his educated speech.

The simple town folk were falling for Ichabod Crane. Even as he looked at everyone in the room, Crane's glittery black eyes alighted on her and he grinned.

Katrina's stomach knotted and she hurried out of the church, pushing past those who had filed in behind her, including Brom who was just as transfixed as the others in the town.

Snorting, she wrapped her cloak around her and headed back home. Using the shortcut across the cemetery, she made it there in no time. No doubt her father would be waiting for her, for she had not seen him at the town meeting.

"There you are. I was nigh worried sick about you," her father exclaimed, opening the door before she even had a chance to lift the latch.

"Sorry, father."

He stepped to the side and Katrina entered, removing her cloak and handing it to a servant who whisked it away.

"Look at the state of you." Her father sighed in resignation. "Your hair is full of leaves and brambles, and your dress is covered in dirt. Where have you been?"

"I was walking in the woods, west of town."

"The Hollow?" her father gasped. "Alone?"

"Aye, I stumbled on a felled tree and hit my head. Brom found me unconscious and escorted me back to town."

Baltus sighed, visibly relieved. "Nothing else happened?"

Katrina blinked in astonishment. "What do you mean by 'else', father?"

Baltus shook his head. "I am being foolish. I thought you were meeting someone in secret. I assumed that was your hesitation on getting married."

Trying not to roll her eyes, Katrina kissed her father's cheek. "No father. Nothing like that. Now, if you'll excuse me I need to rest."

"Yes, yes...of course. By all means." Her father remained frozen at the bottom of the steps and Katrina slowly began to climb the wide, winding staircase. "Oh, tomorrow we are to have a party."

Katrina froze. "A party? What for?"

"To celebrate All Hallows Eve of course, and the arrival of our new schoolmaster." Baltus beamed. "I met him this afternoon. A most agreeable fellow."

Katrina gritted her teeth. "Is that so?"

"Aye and you will do well to be polite to him. He would make an excellent match."

Suppressing the urge to shudder, Katrina grinned at her father. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, dear."

* * * * *

After breakfast Katrina hurried and packed a satchel with wooden stakes and some holy water she had pilfered from the church a month ago. She tucked the satchel under her cloak and crept down the stairs. Her father was so busy instructing servants to make the main hall perfect for the elite of Tarrytown, he did not notice her sneaking out. Not that there was any danger to her in the woods during the middle of the day, and she was prepared to deal with Ichabod should she run into him again.

Taking a well-worn path, she entered the woods leading from Tarrytown into the hollow. It didn't take her long to pick her way through the brush and find the old, abandoned dirt tract the Hessian had traversed through the mist.

The sounds of geese flying south overhead echoed through the seemingly quiet woods. Katrina paused and looked up at them, watching their shaky vee formation as they fled the north before winter. Reaching down into her satchel she pulled out a wooden stake and gripped it tight as she headed west through the woods.

Then, as sure as anything, she heard the distant patter of hooves coming up behind her. They grew louder and louder. Katrina took a deep breath and turned around.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end as she spied the black horse and caped rider trotting towards her. Squinting, she could make out what looked like a head on his shoulders. But two glowing eyes, like amber, burned from the shadows of the hood. Almost like a hollowed-out pumpkin or lantern which was used around this time of year to ward off evil spirits.

Biting her lip, she backed up against a tree and held the wooden stake, though what good would it do if horseman drew his sword and intended to strike, she could not say.

The Hessian's horse drew abreast of her. It pawed the ground uneasily the glowing eyes of the rider seemed to pierce her very soul as he stared down at her.

"Katrina van Tassel." The horseman said.

"Hessian." She acknowledged.

The horseman laughed and pulled back the hood of his cloak. Katrina gasped as she saw the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on. His amber eyes were still glowing, and a smile was tugging at the corner of his lips.

"You are a spirited little witch, but full of goodness."

"Thank you." She said, stunned, not knowing what to say. "Are you the...are you the headless horseman of legend?"

He laughed again. "Aye, that I am. The headless part is to scare away those who would disturb the hollow portal."

"Portal?"

"Aye," he held out his hand. "Come, and I will show you, for you have been marked by a demon. To protect you I must divulge the secret I protect in these woods."

Katrina stared at his gloved hand, not sure if she should take it.

Do it. Find out the answers for yourself.

Nodding, she grasped his hand and, with inhuman strength, the horseman pulled her across his lap. She was wedged between his chest and the pommel of his saddle.

"Away Nightshade."

His stallion nickered and took off at lightning speed down the hard packed dirt road. The low overhanging branches reached down, seemingly trying to grasp her, pulling at her hair in little nips as her raven hair came undone, blowing around her face.

"Whoa, boy." The horseman commanded, as he came to the very center of the woods. A place she had never been to. A clearing formed a perfect circle, and in the middle of the clearing was a circle of stones.

"What is this place?"

"The portal, to hell." He dismounted his horse and then helped her down. "I guard it. I keep demons from getting to it, because if they do they can unleash legions of minions to bring about

the end of the world.”

“Ichabod,” she whispered. “He’s a demon.”

“You are correct. When I felt his presence in my woods I came for him, but I had no idea you would be there. I am sorry if I frightened you.” He took his horse’s reins. “Come, my home is just through this rock cut.”

Katrina nodded and followed the horseman through a wide crevice in a rock wall. It was a pathway which wound its way until they came to a cozy cottage nestled under a hill with a large oak tree making up the roof. She watched in amazement as the horseman settled his horse in his little stable, and he lovingly fed the stallion oats and hay.

He then turned those warm eyes on her and smiled. “This way Miss van Tassel.” Opening the door he bowed as she entered his small cottage. Taking a seat at the rough-hewn table, she folded her arms neatly on the table, as the Hessian removed his cloak and sat down opposite to her.

“You are full of questions, aren’t you?” He laughed. “Go ahead, there is nothing I shall hide from you. You are wise to my world, for I know you carry holy water and wooden stakes to protect yourself.”

“You’re the one who drew the protective circle around me.”

The horseman nodded. “Aye. ’Twas me.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Samuel, and I am an angel.” Katrina averted her eyes and Samuel laughed.

“What are you doing Miss van Tassel?”

“To look upon an angel is instant death is it not?”

“No, Miss van Tassel. You may look upon me. I am currently as mortal as you. Well, I am quite a bit older than you.”

Katrina gazed at him again. “How much older?”

“Centuries at least.” He smiled again. “I need your help.”

“My help?”

“I need you to lure the demon to the woods.”

“He plans to kill me.”

“I assure you Miss van Tassel, I will not allow that to happen.”

Katrina raised an eyebrow. “Why are you telling me all this? I mean, how can I help you?”

Samuel looked at her very seriously. “You are a special woman, Miss van Tassel. May I call you Katrina?”

Katrina nodded. Samuel grinned, pleased.

“You are something of a guardian yourself. Two souls, in one body. One new, one old, though you are not aware of your older soul. You can see demons, and me, you can see my head and know that I am very real.”

“A guardian?” Katrina balked.

“Aye, your mother was one. Guardians, especially women are mistaken for witches mostly and are executed. I have been watching you for some time. The demon Ichabod has taken a liking to you, and I know you can lure him to the woods, to this very place and together we will dispatch him back to hell.”

Katrina bit her lip. Samuel reached out and touched her hand. His eyes pleading with her, and as if something in her mind unlocked images of her old soul fluttered past her eyes. Stone pyramids rising from the dunes, and dark skin with dark eyes and the sting of an asp bite. Samuel was there was well, mourning over her body.

Gasping she stood to her feet. “It’s true.”

“Aye, I’ve been waiting a long time for you to return, my lost love. You are an Incarnate, a guardian. Together we can stop Ichabod before he brings about the end of the world.”

Though she still had a hard time believing it, she assented. She had come to the woods to find the horseman and find a way to dispatch Ichabod, now here was her chance.

“What do I have to do?”

* * * * *

Katrina paced along the edge of the dance floor. All around her merry making celebrating All Hallows Eve was being played out—children bobbing for apples, ghost stories being told in the other room. Brom stalked her slowly, but she did not care, her eyes were on Ichabod.

He had just finished dancing with another young maid from town. He bowed to her politely, but then his glittery beetle eyes turned on her and she saw the flash of red, of hellfire simmering just beneath the surface.

Ichabod bowed, and she curtsied. “Miss van Tassel.”

“Master Crane.”

“I hope our little misunderstanding in the woods did not frighten you.”

“Oh no, not at all. I was not in my right mind yesterday.” She moved closer and traced her hand over his crimson waistcoat. “In fact, I was hoping we could return to the woods to finish what we started.”

Ichabod’s eyes flashed. “Oh yes?”

Leaning in she whispered in his ear. “I know what you seek and where it is.”

“You do? Perhaps you can take me there now?”

Katrina nodded.

“Good,” Ichabod cooed, very good. “By all means, my carriage is waiting. Lead on.”

Katrina took his hand as Ichabod escorted her outside. He helped her up in his carriage and told his driver, who she suspected was one of his minions, to take him into the woods.

Ichabod said nothing. He tented his fingers, watching her, as Katrina gave him directions to the very center of the hollow. It made her uneasy being alone with him for this long.

When the carriage lurched to a stop, Ichabod opened the door and helped her down. The harvest moon was full and orange in the sky. The moonlight lit the clearing perfectly.

Ichabod began to chuckle with glee. “You have done well my dear, I am glad my little speech worked on you so well.”

Katrina smiled, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the glint of metal—Samuel’s sword, drawn and ready to strike at the demon.

The demon entered the stone ring, and the wind began to whip around. Katrina watched in amazement as blue fire rose from the ground, and a doorway was being torn out of nothing. She could hear the howls of misery becoming louder as the portal stabilized.

Ichabod rounded on her, his eyes blood red, his skin like coal, his voice hollow and metallic. “Now, all I need is virgin’s blood to open my portal and release the minions of Hell upon the world.”

It was then Samuel leaped from his hiding spot. Ichabod’s eyes bugged out, he stared, frozen in the spot, as Samuel’s sword of heaven’s fire slashed through the space between them, severing Ichabod’s head from his body.

Samuel kicked the body and head through the portal, then jammed his sword in the blue fire. The moaning turned to agonizing howls. The wind whipped around the clearing, like invisible fingers turning up the dead leaves on the forest floor into miniature cyclones. A clap of thunder sounded across the sky and the blue fire was extinguished, bringing silence to the clearing.

Katrina struggled to catch her breath as Samuel raced to her side, holding her steady.

“You did wonderful the portal is sealed for good.” He tipped her chin and kissed her. Liquid fire spread through her body as their lips touched, and she felt like she was kissing an old lover.

“Witch, whore! I knew you were in league with the devil.”

Katrina spun around to see Brom Bones Brunt staring at them, behind him members of the town, including her poor father.

“Father?”

“I saw everything Katrina. I saw the Hessian kill the schoolmaster, and you...you getting ready to fornicate with the very devil himself.” Her father said sadly.

Samuel's eyes narrowed. "You have two choices here I'm afraid." He whistled and his stallion came running out of the forest. Samuel mounted him, sheathing his sword. "You can stay in Tarrytown and be persecuted for witchcraft, or you can ride with me to another portal and fulfill your destiny as a Guardian."

Katrina looked back at the folks of Tarrytown, and didn't hesitate to grasp the horseman's hand. Samuel helped her up, and smiled as he chirruped to his horse riding away from the Sleepy Hollow.

The Hessian and her.

About the Author

A.C Ruttan started writing at a very young age. Life and responsibility got in the way and writing was put on hold. It wasn't until the birth of her second child and spending countless hours in a NICU she realized that life is precious and it shouldn't be wasted.

Now years later --and a healthy preschooler later--A.C. has realized her dreams. She was first published in 2007 under her alter ego [Amy Ruttan](#), and she hasn't looked back.

You can find more about A.C. at her website www.acruttan.com or her alter ego Amy at www.amyruttan.com

A.C. Ruttan's Samhain Page: <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/ac-ruttan>

COMING SUMMER 2011 FROM SAMHAIN PUBLISHING

INCARNATE: *At the top of the world the fate of mankind rests in one trucker's hands ... When those who protect us from the Apocalypse are being murdered there is only one Incarnate left with the balls to keep us from being sucked into hell—too bad she doesn't really have balls.*

Cia doesn't mind banishment in the Canadian Arctic, what does bother her is someone is bumping off fellow Incarnates, and she's the next target. She's already died once before and she's not about to let that happen again. Especially, since the killer is apparently her estranged husband, Arthur, who hasn't spoken to her in a decade since she killed his brother.

To prove Arthur's innocence and earn back his love she needs to find the real murderer before the Wrath consumes him. Although that's going to be tricky given the entire world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket and her past life continues to haunt her on every turn of the ice road.

She has thirty days to find the killer before Hell breaks loose—literally