

INSIDE A HOLLOW TREE



DALTON HOBBY WAS NO ORDINARY BOY



NOVEL BY

K. P. WHITE



2011 Readers Favorite Award Winner

*“5 stars - Inside a Hollow Tree is a sad, yet intoxicating story about a young boy who has suffered many life tragedies that most people will never have to go through... This book is **wonderful** and brings you into the mind of someone so different from anyone you have ever known.”*

--ReadersFavorite.com



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KP White

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Chapter One	page 6
Chapter Two	page 15
Chapter Three	page 25
Chapter Four	page 40
Chapter Five	page 52
Chapter Six	page 69
Chapter Seven	page 79
Chapter Eight	page 90
Chapter Nine	page 101
Chapter Ten	page 114
Chapter Eleven	page 122
Chapter Twelve	page 134
Chapter Thirteen	page 148
Chapter Fourteen	page 161
Chapter Fifteen	page 179
Chapter Sixteen	page 193
Chapter Seventeen	page 204
Chapter Eighteen	page 216
Chapter Nineteen	page 231
Chapter Twenty	page 244
Chapter Twenty-One	page 262
Epilogue	page 275

Dalton Hobby was no ordinary boy!

This is apparent the moment he steps off the bus at Capling Hall School for Boys, carrying a small suitcase, a large green garbage bag, and a thousand secrets. He never speaks. He never smiles. Whatever happened to make him like this?

Inside a Hollow Tree is the story of how an under-sized, pathetic 14-year old boy finds hope and a home.

Dedications

I dedicate this book to Lawrence Wardroper, Sandy Wright, Steven Trenholme, and John Smikahl... true friends when I needed them most.

And to my sister Karen, who was my very best friend while I was growing up.

CHAPTER ONE

Dalton Hobby was no ordinary boy. This was apparent to his most recent caseworker, Susan Ripley, virtually the moment she laid eyes on him. It wasn't anything visible that made him different. It was just that there seemed to be a sense of hollowness about him, as if he was no more than a mannequin. Small for his age, both in height and weight, with short blonde hair and large, dark-rimmed glasses, in some ways he looked more like a doll than a child. But, unlike most dolls, there was no smile on his face or gladness in his eyes.

Dalton was an orphan, made a ward of the court after his mother died and his father disappeared just before Dalton turned eleven. Bouncing from one foster home to the next, he was labeled a 'problem child' and 'deeply disturbed', and had spent much of his time in group homes. He'd had several case workers, and most had been frustrated by their lack of progress with him.

It wasn't that Dalton was a 'bad' kid. He wasn't a trouble-maker. It was just that, for some reason, he just never, ever fit in.

Never in the almost two years during which Susan Ripley had known him had Dalton ever done anything terrible. But neither had he ever done anything that might endear himself to her or anyone else.

He rarely spoke.

He never smiled.

He never, ever laughed.

And those few who had ever ventured to hug him over the past few years all had felt how his entire body immediately tensed up, as if he was preparing to ward off a blow.

And yet, there was something about him that prompted Ms. Ripley one day to ask the question:

‘What if?’

What if he wasn’t kept in the revolving door system of foster and group homes, never knowing for sure where he would be in a month or even a week? What if he was given some stability? What if he was given a chance?

And then, out of the blue, chance presented itself. Unexpectedly having access to a cache of pre-election money, Dalton’s caseworker started making phone calls, first to her superiors to obtain permission to do what she had thought of, and then to boarding schools throughout the state, where she believed Dalton might, at the very least, get some stability in his life. Even if he went to different homes each summer, at least his school would remain the same. And perhaps some foster family might find it in their hearts to take Dalton every summer, if they knew he had a place to go every school year. It could work.

And so it was that, on a drizzly afternoon in early September, 1978, a smallish blond boy of fourteen boarded the ferry in Seattle wearing a Supersonics hat and carrying one small suitcase, a large green garbage bag, and a letter of explanation.

Someone would meet him on the other side, Susan said. A school bus would drive him from Bremerton to the school. He would love it there. Capling Hall was a fine school, with almost 350 boys.

It had a long history of excellence. It had wonderful facilities. It was on a beautiful lake. Everything would be all right.

And then she hugged him, something she had been told she ought not to do, but which seemed necessary, at least with her sending him away like this.

“Everything will be okay,” she repeated, perhaps more to convince herself than him.

But Dalton was not like other boys of fourteen. His life had not been filled with many ‘okays’. He no longer expected them. He turned from his caseworker and boarded the ferry with the same grim resolve that prisoners board buses to their execution. This had happened to him before. He had been through this before.

It would not be all right.

The trick was just to survive.

And so he found a quiet spot on the deck of the ferry where, because of the rain and the sea mist, it was too cold for other boys or anyone else to want to go. He stayed there for the whole duration of the one-hour trip across Puget Sound. He then boarded the school’s chartered bus and sat directly behind the driver where there was only one seat, and he just stared out the window. Most of the other boys on the bus were returning students, and their interest was in old acquaintances and friends, not some small, odd, silent boy sitting by himself in the front.

Dalton thought he heard some derisive comment or two about him sitting all alone and not speaking to anyone, but he had learned that pretending that others did not exist was a defense that sometimes

worked. He continued just to watch the road passing by outside.

The bus trip north towards Port Angeles and then southwest again to Lake Heatherington took almost two hours. To him it seemed like two days. And it rained the entire way, a kind of drizzly rain that was somewhat atypical for the east side of the peninsula, which was normally protected from rain by the huge Olympic mountains. Several of the boys, especially the newer ones, gazed out at the mountains as the bus wound its way north... but not Dalton, who merely leaned his head against his own window, lost inside himself.

Finally the bus rounded a corner to reveal the elaborate black iron gates that adorned the entrance to Capling Hall School for Boys. Latin words etched into the gate read *Patefacio Pens Patefacio Ianua*, which means 'Open Minds Open Doors'. But Dalton saw no opening here. These gates were a sign of doom. And whether these gates remained open or slammed shut once the bus passed through was irrelevant. This would be yet another prison for him. Of that, he was certain.



Ronald Cummings had heard a rumor that his new roommate was from Southern California, which created great expectations for all the returning members of the house. Bates House had one other Southern Californian, Jim Everett, who was from San Diego and as stereotypically Californian as anyone could be... long blonde hair, blue eyes, a muscular

build and a tan... friendly, but with somewhat of a devil-may-care, rock-n-roll attitude. Girls from Wakefield School, three miles further around the lake, flocked to him. A 'Greek God', some fellow classmates called him.

Jim also was a natural athlete: an amazing swimmer, on the first fifteen in rugby, a starter in basketball, on the first eight in rowing, and a sprinter in track; and all this helped not only the school, but Bates House as well. Jim seemed to be a starter on virtually every House team in inter-house competitions. Last year, in grade eleven, he had helped Bates to win House competitions in the round-the-lake relay, swimming and rugby, and to place second in basketball, rowing and track. Even in tennis, he had helped his House place a respectable third. What Bates House needed was another Californian like Everett. And everyone believed that Dalton Hobby might be it.

In truth, Dalton had lived in and around California, but only for a relatively short time. Originally from northern Texas, after his parents separated he lived for about six months with his father and step-mother in Reno; seven months in San Francisco; and, finally, for a little less than a year, about one hour's drive east of Los Angeles. But after his mother fatally overdosed and his father divorced a second time, his father decided to move to Washington with Dalton, moving briefly to Spokane before disappearing one day when Dalton was at school. Dalton came home on the bus to find the house empty – moving vans had come during the day and taken everything. Dalton's father had not been seen since, presumably having moved

back to California with his most recent of several girlfriends who, Dalton had known from the start, had never liked children.

So, despite having spent almost two years there, Dalton could hardly be called a Californian. And he was nothing like Jim Everett. This was immediately apparent to anyone the minute they met him.

Ron had been assigned to meet Dalton when the new boy arrived on the bus from the ferry. Ron waited on the steps of the Main Building, under the large overhang to be out of the rain. He stood there with Trent Malcolm, a fellow grade ten and all-but-certain future Head Boy from rival Stanley House. Trent, too, was intrigued to meet this new Californian.

Admittedly, he would have preferred him to be entering his own house. Nonetheless, Trent had been captain of virtually every junior school team the year before. Another boy even remotely like Jim Everett would help the school in its athletic endeavors, even if only providing more intense rivalry in inter-house sports.

The two boys played the game so many people do when waiting for a stranger getting off a bus, train or plane. They tried to guess which boy was Dalton.

Besides him being in grade 10, they knew that he was blond. The school application form, besides requiring essentials like birth date and parent's names, also required some physical description.

The first unknown blond boy to get off the bus clearly was too young, almost certainly a grade eight. The next few all were returning students. And then Dalton stepped out: smaller than average; wiry; with

eyes that were suspicious and dead; wearing brown-rimmed glasses and a cap; holding one small suitcase and a garbage bag.

Ron and Trent glanced at each other. This couldn't possibly be him! But, when no other blond emerged, Ron accepted the grim possibility. He faked an enthusiastic smile as he went over to greet the new arrival, whom he hoped upon hope was NOT his new roommate. Maybe Dalton was arriving later.

"Hi. Are you Dalton?" he said, hoping that the answer would be 'No'.

But there was no answer. Dalton slowly turned his face towards the voice and then eyed Ron's face suspiciously.

"I'm Ron. Are you Dalton?" Ron asked again.

Dalton just nodded slowly.

"I'm you're roommate," Ron said, hoping for some acknowledgement.

But Dalton's eyes were elsewhere, scanning the new prison to which he had come.

"Do you have any other suitcases?" Ron asked, still trying for some answer, to anything.

Dalton slowly shook his head.

Exasperated, Ron said: "Let's go!" and started to lead Dalton into the building. This was not turning out the way he had expected.

Dalton followed quietly up fifteen broad front stairs, through the huge arched front doors into the main foyer. They turned left down a long, wide and somewhat darkened hall, then right up a long winding set of stairs to the second floor. Ron was talking, presumably giving the new boy a half-hearted mini

tour. But Dalton was not listening. His mind was elsewhere.

They passed a couple of students coming down the stairs, both presumably in the senior grades. Both of them said 'Hi!' to Ron, but merely gave Dalton strange looks. He was used to this.

On the second floor, the halls were lined with lockers. On the wall to his right, the lockers were painted dark green; on the left, they were light blue, with numbers on each side running from one through fifty, excluding the numbers thirteen and, oddly enough, twenty-seven. Dalton was puzzled by the latter omission.

The hall eventually came to a T, and they turned left. A sign above the double door they passed through said: Bates House. Dalton glanced back. Above the opposite door, the sign said: Stanley House. This was a different scheme for naming houses than the boarding school previous foster parents had sent him to near Bellingham, an experiment that only had lasted for one week when he was twelve, where the four houses were named after Washington mountains; he had been in Rainier House. He assumed that Capling named houses after people. If he stayed at this school long enough, someone probably would tell him who Bates was. If.

All of the rooms appeared to be on the right side of the hall; the left wall was scattered with windows looking out onto a paved parking lot, two floors down, each window having a black metal fire escape. As he passed the second door, Ron pointed out the bathroom. Dalton glanced in. A long row of sinks

lined one wall, opposite several stalls and everything else.

The fifth door belonged to their room, a large, square room with light blue walls and two bunk beds. Three beds already were made. Dalton was to get the bottom bunk closest to the door; sheets and blankets were folded at the end.

The far wall had two windows looking outside. Dalton again noted a fire escape. Under the windows and running from one wall to the other was a wooden surface, about 30 inches deep and having four chairs spread across its width, a surface that obviously was meant to function as a conjoined desk for the four boys. The desk areas in front of the two windows were taken, with books already set up. The area in the far left corner had a back pack on it. The far right area was clear. Dalton had his desk.

“Do you have any questions?” Ron was saying.

Dalton shook his head.

“Okay,” Ron said with a note of disgust. “Supper is at five. You’ll hear a loud bell and lots of people running. I’ll come get you. Okay?”

But Dalton already had put his suitcase onto his desk and was staring out the window. Ron shook his head and left. As he walked down the hall to find Trent again, it struck him that his new roommate hadn’t said a single word.

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