

The Halloween House (completed November 6, 2020)

Part 1 - Larry

Larry's house looked foreboding despite its termite-ridden timbers and dilapidated, warped patio. As I stood there, staring at the place as if it were radioactive, the stifling midsummer heat encircled me like a shroud.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and climbed a set of creaky wooden steps to the front door. The branches of Larry's elm tree seemed longer than I remembered. They waved accusatory fingers at me as I rang the doorbell. I waited, noticing for the first time the fussy woman who had emerged from the house next door. She pretended to water some dead-looking plants while sizing me up with quick, sidelong glances. She obviously wanted to see what kind of fool would visit her reclusive neighbor on a hot Saturday afternoon. When I flashed her a big, shit-eating grin, she fled back inside.

I reached for the bell again but stopped when I heard shuffling coming from inside, like something dragging itself across the floor. Within moments the knob turned and the big door swung inward. The chill of the grave washed over me when I saw what stood there.

A skeleton, complete with bits of rotten flesh, just like the ones from last Halloween.

Larry was at it again.

Memories of that terrible night came flooding back as the skeleton faced me across the threshold. Its bones were gray, clattering things, its eye sockets black voids. It opened and closed its mouth, its teeth clacking together in a horrifying way.

Larry stepped into view, wearing a dirty robe and slippers.

About thirty, with a wiry physique and a gaze as unnerving as that of the skeleton, Larry sported thinning brown hair and eyes of an intense blue. Though not handsome in any ordinary sense, he radiated an aura of confidence that had its own particular appeal.

"Nicky!" he greeted. "Come on in, buddy."

I nodded, but continued staring at the skeleton, which had begun chattering its jawbone in a disturbing, inhuman way. It sounded like one of those plastic wind-up sets of teeth, the ones sold at novelty shops.

"Oh, hey," Larry said. "Don't mind him." He made a bizarre sound, like a strangled cough, and waved two fingers in the air. The skeleton shuffled away from the door and into a corner of the room, where it sank into an unmoving pile of bones.

"You caught me at a busy time," Larry said, gesturing to the macabre heap. "I use him mostly for security, not opening doors."

"Security?"

"Sure, I still have to sleep you know. And my enemies wouldn't really be impressed by an alarm system or guard dog."

I composed myself and smiled shakily. "You said you were busy. Did you mean busy...*downstairs*?" The thought of Larry's basement made me shiver once more.

He laughed. "Oh, no, nothing like that. At least, not yet." He turned and walked toward the living room. I followed and we both sank into ratty-looking chairs.

"What 'enemies' are you talking about, Larry?"

"The Golden Scroll, mainly. They've been sniffing around town again," he said. "But I'll be ready for them this time."

I shook my head. Sounded like another very odd summer for the innocent citizens of Newport. Perhaps a fatal one, for some. I had to try to get through to him, try to stop him somehow.

"Look, Larry, I'm not going to waste time bullshitting. You have to end this—all of it. I came here this weekend because I thought I could nip it in the bud. Remember what happened last year?"

His eyes blazed. "Yeah, I remember. They almost got me. Thankfully, you came home from your fancy grad school when I called, like a true friend." He opened his robe, exposing the awful, twisted scar across his stomach. "I sure remember when I got this—the night when you, me, and Carla beat them. I also remember when you took off. Some of us don't have another perfect life to switch to when things get dicey around ol' Newport."

I stood up, shaking with anger. The self-righteous bastard wasn't going to get away with that.

"Carla *died*, Larry!" I shouted. "She's dead because of us, so don't make yourself out to be some kind of martyr. Trust me, pal, you got off easy."

My fury raged, but Larry's faded. "Have a seat, Nick," he said.

"Why? So you can try talking away your responsibility? The Golden Scroll would have been hundreds of miles from here if it wasn't for your damn machine—"

"Nick," he cut me off. "I suggest you have a seat. Look up."

I glanced toward the ceiling and saw a two-foot wide spider dangling on a thick strand of web a foot from my face. I jumped back, an involuntary groan sneaking its way out of my throat as I shook in revulsion. Now that my eyes had adjusted to the gloom of Larry's house I could make out the creature's gigantic web, spanning most of the room between the living room and kitchen. The huge arachnid waved its legs for a moment, mandibles probing the air, then ascended its web line with surprising speed and nestled in the darkness somewhere near the ceiling.

"What the hell is that?"

"Something I cooked up last week. Look at its web! Fucking awesome, isn't it? As strong as nylon, and *sticky*!"

I tried to regain my composure. "Larry, this has got to stop. You have to stop it."

"Can't do that, buddy." He was all smiles once more. "I've got to keep on keeping on. Summer's here, and the power's ripe for the taking. It's all solar energy, Nicky. Not gods or demons or anything else. Just the sun. And once summer ends, well, things really start to heat up. All that dying at the end, you see—that's what does it. Everything drying up, going to seed, liberating energy. If you know what you're doing you can feed on that shit like a fat man at a buffet."

"Sure you can," I agreed. "But if you do, you attract nuts like the Golden Scroll."

He laughed. "I'm not the only one messing with magic in Maryland, Nick, trust me. There are others who know the score, scattered all over the state."

Andersburg's got its witches, and there's a bunch of vampires over in Essex. Here in Newport, though, it's mostly just me and Ed McElwain on Grove Street."

"Ed McElwain? What are you talking about?" Old Ed used to work as janitor at Roosevelt Middle School. He'd been retired since forever. Kids at school liked him—he used to keep quiet if he caught us sneaking smokes in the boys' room. In fact, sometimes he'd even give us one or two out of his own pack.

"You think that old codger is *human*?" Larry's eyes danced with glee now, like they had in the old days, before he'd gotten Carla killed. "I'm not positive *what* Ed is, but he damn sure isn't human. Come to think of it, I have to remember to go over there someday soon. Poke around his place a bit, see what sticks its head out."

Larry sounded the same way he had last year. If anything, he seemed even crazier.

"I came here to find out what you were planning, Larry." I spoke with as much authority as I could muster. "And to convince you to give it up."

He went to the window, covered by a filthy sheer curtain that had perhaps once been white, and peeked out.

"You want to know my plans?" A horrible memory forced its way into my mind just then: Larry turning the old woman inside-out last Halloween. My stomach churned and I swallowed hard to keep from vomiting. "Fine, I'll tell you. I plan on being well-prepared this year. I plan on taking my time, using the next few months to get stronger—to get ready. I plan on watching the goings-on in this town extremely closely." His eyes shimmered. "This Halloween, I plan on making the trash who killed Carla pay. Every last one of those motherfuckers has to die."

I had one more year left at school. Then I could move into the job my uncle had waiting for me at Dow Chemical. Or maybe I'd stay in the department and get my doctorate. Or maybe I'd be dead. I thought of Carla Martinez, of the horrible way they'd gotten her in the end.

"What I need to know, Nicky," Larry continued. "Is whether or not you're with me on this."

I'd known Larry for five years—five of the strangest, most amazing, and most terrible years I could possibly have imagined. In the end, I guess I had no

choice as to how to answer him. I guess the choice had been made for me a long time ago.

"I'm with you," I said.

I'd thought I could find a way to avoid it. When you're far from Newport, sitting in a dorm room in Baltimore, sometimes the awful truth seems less real. Then you come back to your home town, the truth hits you hard, and you find out it's as real as summertime heat.

Larry nodded once, then offered his hand. I shook it like we were sealing a pact. Maybe we were. Then he turned and went to a small table. He opened a drawer, removed a long, thin stick, and held it out.

"You should carry protection while you're here. You remember how to use it?"

I took the wand, handling it gingerly. "I'll manage. You really think I'm in danger?"

"You never know, Nicky," he said. "You just never know."

I wanted to ask him more questions, but he ushered me quickly to the door. The unseen spider above made chattering noises as we passed below its lair.

"I have some work to do," Larry explained. "Come back tomorrow, and we'll talk more. I've got something to show you."

Larry opened the front door for me. Bright sunlight streamed in, the daytime illumination making him look even paler than usual. I stepped out onto the porch, slipping the wand into the pocket of my shorts. The woman next door was watering her plants again. They looked deader than ever.

"Larry," I said. "Be careful, okay?"

"You too, good buddy," came the reply. "You too. We'll talk more tomorrow." He shut the door.

I descended the stairs and walked down the gravel path. I passed Larry's thorn bushes and stepped onto the sidewalk next to Ridgemont Street. My thoughts were a gray, confusing mess. I slowly walked toward George Street and my aunt Greta's place.

At the corner, I glanced back at Larry's house. The late afternoon sun glinted off its second-storey windows, making them look like two orange eyes,

staring at me. I shuddered and moved on, obsessively fingering the long, thin piece of wood in my pocket.

The July air had acquired a distinct chill.

Part 2 - Grove Street

Aunt Greta's spaghetti tasted as delicious as ever. A few years ago I would have enjoyed every morsel as I told her about my studies, reminisced with her about my childhood exploits, and asked about her gardening. Once, Newport itself had been an oasis of calm for me, one I could return to whenever life gave me an excuse to make the trip from noisy Baltimore. Those days were long gone. Since I'd met Larry Pike, things had changed in strange, unthinkable ways.

For instance, instead of paying attention as Greta discussed the latest additions to her flowerbed, I thought about last fall's horrors, and about how it would be October again soon.

It's my fault.

Everything reduced itself to that simple statement, like one of my chemical equations at school. Getting mixed up in Larry's crazy world was my fault. Last Halloween's destruction and terror were my fault. Carla's death was my fault.

It had been so seductive, at first. Secure in my world of reactants and reagents, solvents and solutions, I'd been confident in the sheer predictability of chemistry, science, and life itself. Confident, and ultimately disappointed.

That's why Larry appealed to me so intensely. Some essential component of the universe around me had apparently escaped my notice. He represented the idea that the world could still surprise—that pure wonder could still be felt.

Wonder's only the first stage when dealing with magic, though. That's what I'd come to learn. Wonder soon gave way to fear, and finally to cold regret. I had no idea what came next, but I supposed I'd soon find out.

"Nicholas?" Aunt Greta's voice startled me out of my thoughts—to be honest, I almost leapt out of my chair. "What's wrong?" She gestured to the window, beyond which lay her beautifully-landscaped property. "Your mind is off flying with the sparrows."

Greta was my mother's sister, the only family member remaining in Newport. Her husband, Johann, had passed away some years ago, leaving her a substantial fortune. She enjoyed the trifecta: bird-watching, gardening, and cooking.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, dabbing at the corner of my mouth with a napkin. "I have a lot on my mind. School stuff, y'know? Would you mind if I went for a little walk?"

She smiled. "Of course not, but if there's something you want to talk about, Nicholas, you know I'm here."

I rose and kissed her cheek. "I know, Aunt Greta. Thanks for the offer...and for the delicious dinner."

Once outside I hesitated, then turned left on George Street. The evening sun slowly sunk into the haze, a bloated orange ball. It seemed more distant than usual, as if recoiling in shame from the Earth. I stuffed my hands into my pockets and walked through the neighborhood, not really caring where I ended up.

After a while I found myself on Grove Street, which shocked me like a splash of ice water to the face.

It made sense, though. Ever since Larry had mentioned old Ed, I had gone over it again and again. It wasn't that I didn't *believe* Larry. It was that I didn't *trust* him. Not after Carla. The distinction was abstract—and probably nonsensical—but still there: Larry Pike could still command my belief, but he had forever lost my trust.

Besides, Ed McElwain couldn't be involved in any of Newport's strange goings-on. Like Aunt Greta, old Ed had to be immune to the insanity of Larry Pike's world. Ed belonged to my school days, my childhood. Sacrosanct.

The setting sun turned Grove Street into a fiery red furnace, every house reflecting and magnifying the glow like a congregation answering their minister's call. A few people wandered in the humid air, periodically mopping sweat from their faces. Somewhere a dog barked half-heartedly, but for the most part Grove lay deserted.

I could see the McElwain house a few blocks away, its familiar peak jutting above its neighbors. Old Ed had lived alone forever—on lazy summer days we used to cut through his yard on the way to the mall. He never ran out to chase us away, yet another point in his favor on our mental tally sheets.

As I approached the gated driveway leading to the house, my hand slipped into my pocket and massaged the strange wood of Larry's wand.

Ed's beige, shingled home crouched at the end of his drive like a wooden predator. Its small front yard contained a rustic picnic table and bench, both sitting next to a dilapidated flower bed. Ed's windows were closed and curtained, and the house didn't seem to have an air conditioner. I paused, wiping at my forehead. *Ed has to be eighty at least, and he hasn't even cracked a window in this heat?*

I circled around behind the house and stared into the weed-choked backyard. It looked like the lawn hadn't been cut in weeks. Bees and wasps buzzed over the neglected garden, almost totally hidden by an overgrowth of ragweed. The grimy window next to the back door beckoned with an almost irresistible pull.

I'll just take a quick look inside to make sure Ed's okay.

I pushed open the gate, wincing at the squeak its rusty hinge produced. The footpath to the back steps was barely identifiable amid the unruly tangle. I waved at a few fat houseflies that came too close to my face as I climbed the steps and stood on Ed McElwain's porch.

I approached the door, wiping aside strands of cobweb. The hair on my neck stood on end as the memory of Larry's horrible spider returned with a vengeance. I pushed the image into the back of my mind and cleared away some of the grease and dirt coating the window. With hands cupped around my eyes, I peered inside.

You know how people always quote that phrase, the one about it being impossible to take back words once they're spoken? Well there's another related idea, one that I came to understand as I stood on the rotten boards of Ed's doorstep. Once you see something, it's impossible to unsee it—and what I saw when I looked into that window still haunts me.

Inside, a small entry-room contained a few dust-covered knick knacks on a cheap plastic stand. A part of the kitchen area was also visible; I could see half of a white formica table and some grimy cupboards.

Ed McElwain sat slumped at the table, his sunken and unmoving form sprawled onto a chair. One arm hung down, fingertips brushing the floor. His eyes were fixed, their glassy gaze turned toward the ceiling. Ed's mouth hung open, displaying yellowed teeth and slack, taffy-like skin. The overall effect was ghastly, but I hadn't yet seen the worst—not by a long shot.

I felt a combination of pity and revulsion. *My God. Old Ed died in there, all alone.* I reached for the doorknob, but before my hand touched it I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

Something else lurked in the room with Ed's body.

A dark shape, like a shadow but somehow *more* than a shadow, trailed across the floor and into my view. It slithered across the tiles as I watched with growing horror. The shadow-thing reached Ed's hanging fingertip and began to encircle it, flowing upward like gravity-defying molasses. It reached the corpse's wrist in moments, then began to creep up its arm like a living bruise. It flowed under Ed's shirt, reappearing at his neck and quickly encircling it.

I saw the shade coat Ed's face, swirling around his nostrils and open mouth and then disappearing into them. Suddenly the old man's whole body jerked and his dead eyes rolled obscenely in their sockets and locked onto mine.

I jumped back from the door with an involuntary cry, falling over my own feet and landing in a tangle on the broken boards of the porch. Several long splinters of wood pierced the flesh of my hands and arm as I fell, but I barely noticed.

I did notice the unmistakable sound of a chair being pushed back from a table.

I scrambled backwards, lurching to my feet and almost tumbling down the steps and braining myself on the propane tank. I turned and fled through the tangled yard and back to Grove Street, whirling when I heard Ed's door creak open.

The corpse stood there, looking for all the world like the man I remembered from grade school. Its lips—lifeless a few moments earlier—now parted in a friendly grin. It raised one arm and waved at me from the porch where I had stood less than a minute ago. "Nick Delacourt? That you, Nick?"

The raspy, barely-human voice brought back the image of black fluid flowing up the old man's limp arm. I shuddered and did not reply.

"Want a drink? It's a hot day." Drool bubbled out of the thing's mouth as it spoke, staining the front of its shirt. "Come on in, Nick. I'll fix you right up."

I shook my head and retreated up Grove, walking backward until I could be sure the creature wasn't going to lurch down the stairs and come for me. It

didn't, and when I had gone partway up the street it turned and went into the house.

I walked back to Aunt Greta's as fast as my legs would carry me.

Part 3 - The Basement

"Nick, you look awful," Larry told me when he opened his front door. "Did you sleep at all?" The fact that he looked as if he'd last gotten a decent night's rest sometime during the Bush administration obviously hadn't occurred to him.

I waved a hand. "You wanted to show me something today?" Might as well get it over with.

"First things first. Where did you go last night?"

A shudder ran through me. "I took a walk around town, that's all."

After getting back from Ed McElwain's place I'd sat at Greta's, listening as she told me where my childhood friends now lived, and what they were up to. Talking with her helped me push the awful sight of old Ed's dead, staring eyes out of my mind for a few hours—at least until I looked down and saw the marks from where I'd removed the splinters from his deck.

"Well, I hope you're ready," Larry said. "Because we're going downstairs."

Meaning the laboratory.

"What are you up to, Larry?"

He just smiled and gestured for me to follow him. I gingerly picked my way through the dilapidated living room and musty hallway to the basement stairs. A naked bulb threw a dull illumination over the cobwebby staircase, and together we descended into the depths.

The cellar was mired in darkness, since Larry had painted over the windows. He scrambled along the wall until he reached a switch and turned on a bank of harsh fluorescent tubes.

A dead body lay on Larry's examination table—female, blonde, and barely out of her teens. The naked corpse had suffered an ugly wound to her rib cage, its edges ragged and torn. I felt my gorge rise.

"Larry, what the fuck?"

"Relax, Nick."

"Fuck that. Where did you get her?"

"Relax," Larry repeated, moving to the side of the steel table. "She's some kind of runaway, a Jane Doe from the city. Maybe her dealer stabbed her when she tried begging for free junk, I don't know. She died about two weeks ago."

"No one claimed her body?"

"Nope. The cops made a token effort to find the killer, then quickly put everything into the cold case file. You know how it is."

"Then how did you—?"

Larry's face broke into a sly smile. "I told you I had contacts, didn't I? Friends in high places?"

I moved to stand at the other side of the body. I wondered how someone's daughter could end up anonymous, dead, and splayed out on a table in Larry Pike's lab.

"You have a contact in the Baltimore PD?"

He nodded. "Remember Reggie Finlay?"

There's a blast from the past. "Carla's ex. He's an asshole."

"Yeah." Larry grabbed a grease pencil from a tray and began to scrawl indecipherable doodles onto the table around the girl's body. "A gaping asshole for sure. But still in love with Carla, apparently."

"That coward bailed on us two weeks before Halloween, Larry. He's a fucking douchebag." *He left the three of us to face them, alone. He didn't give a shit about Carla.*

"Nicky, Nicky," Larry said, pausing his scribbling. "Calm down. Reggie still feels guilty about all that. Which is why he risked his career when I called him in January. Did you know he transferred to Baltimore last Christmas? It's Detective Finlay now, by the way. Can you believe that shit?" He chuckled. "From rookie cop in Newport to Baltimore homicide in the space of three years. The guy's a superstar. Once I told him what I needed—and why—he promised to keep an eye out for me. Last week he actually came through." He gestured toward the body on the table, then continued writing.

I struggled to keep up with Larry's manic exposition. "Why did you tell Reggie you wanted a dead body?"

Larry, still carrying the grease pencil, walked around the table and placed his hands on my shoulders.

"What the fuck? Get off me!"

"Listen, Nick. You're going to call me crazy, but I swear I can do it."

I wriggled free of his grasp. "Do what?"

"I'm going to bring Carla back to life."

His words stunned me. I felt like decking the delusional motherfucker, but at the same time fierce hope leapt within me. If Larry could animate a skeleton, and enlarge a spider into some sort of monster...if Ed McElwain could walk around, an empty shell filled with molten darkness—

"You heard me, Nicky. I'm going to bring her back."

I tried to figure out if Larry had gone totally apeshit, or if there was a chance he could do what he claimed—raise the dead.

"Larry, she's been buried for a year. There's nothing left but bones." I had visited her grave. I had left flowers for her, prayed, and cried.

He pointed toward the dead woman on the slab. "So? I'm going to use that fresh body there. It's not the vessel that's important, it's what's inside."

"You're talking about what? Her soul?"

"Sure. Soul, spirit, whatever you want to call it. Carla's essence."

"She's at peace, Larry. She's in Heaven. You can't bring her back." I stared into his eyes, trying to convince myself of his insanity. "It wouldn't be right to try."

"Oh, I'll do more than try." He went back to the examination table, and pointed at the cadaver atop it. "Tuesday night, when the full moon rises, so will she."

I stood next to him and looked down at the dead girl. "Hasn't this body been embalmed? I mean come on Larry, she's got no blood, they might have removed her organs to donate—"

"That doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? What's Carla going to *be* if this works?"

His eyes flashed with anger, and I flinched despite myself. "She's going to be *back*, that's what." His rage dissipated quickly. "Look, I'm not exactly firing blind here, okay? I've sensed her presence. Carla hasn't moved on—not yet. She's still hanging around Newport."

"Why?"

"Who knows? I'm betting she doesn't *want* to move on. I think she wants to return."

My mind raced. Could it be true? Carla, waiting for us to help her? Waiting for us to bring her back to life? Or was Larry rationalizing his appalling behavior, as usual?

“Only two more days, Nick. These runes will keep the body in perfect condition. I want you to be here Tuesday, to help me perform the ritual.”

I swallowed and nodded. When it came to Larry’s schemes, I couldn’t seem to help myself. He drew a white sheet over the dead girl and guided me back upstairs. Before I knew it I was in a dirty recliner with a glass of cheap whisky in my hand.

I drank it down in two swallows and asked him for another.

*

On Monday morning a thick fog blew in from the ocean, drowning the yellow sun and bringing with it a chill unseemly for July. I sat at Greta’s, in the guest bedroom she prepared for me whenever I visited, and tried to read a newspaper. My laptop sat unused on the desk, the work I had intended to do while in Newport now abandoned.

Could Larry really bring Carla back? The idea tore through my thoughts like a runaway train. *It’s impossible, right?*

Carla had nicknamed Larry’s place “the Halloween house” because of its special location. The Pikes had always been dabblers in the occult, and Larry’s father Theodore had bought the property back in the 50s. Apparently it sat on a nexus of two ley lines. This enabled him—and later, his son—to channel mystic energies and use them in bizarre rituals and rites. The power grew stronger and more accessible on certain days, such as solstices, equinoxes, and especially on Halloween. Larry, Carla, Reggie, and I had done amazing things in the house. We’d seen wonders and touched other planes of existence.

We’d also gotten very careless, and paid the price. In Carla’s case, the ultimate price.

I tossed the paper onto the bed and got to my feet. I stretched, then sniffed the damp breeze blowing into the room’s open window. The scent of the foggy

sea air nauseated me, or maybe the sickness came from the awful thing Larry and I planned to do.

After a few moments, I shook my head and went downstairs to find Greta watching television. Her morning gardening done, she'd cleaned up then put on her favorite soap opera. She sat in one of the living room's two leather-backed recliners. I dropped my ass into the other, which had been, in the days of my childhood, Uncle Johann's.

"Finished your research already, Nicholas?"

"I think I'll leave it for another day."

She nodded and we sat in silence for a time, while the clichéd melodrama played out on the screen. When the next commercial break came, I spoke again.

"Aunt Greta, do you know Ed McElwain?"

She frowned. "I don't like him."

That surprised me. Aunt Greta liked just about everyone.

"Really? Can I ask why?"

She paused the television. "I always felt bad vibes from him, Nicholas. Even back before he got hurt on the job hanging telephone wires. After he fell off that pole out on Route 2, janitorial work was all he could manage." Her eyes got a far-away look as she continued. "And I never believed his story about the party and that missing boy."

My ears perked up. "What missing boy?"

"A bunch of teens used to hang out at Ed's house. He let them drink there and sometimes gave them cigarettes. Apparently, checking if they were of age wasn't high on his list of priorities."

My mind struggled to process this information. "Ed McElwain hosted parties for teenagers?"

Greta smiled. "This was after you graduated, dear. You'd already started college. Ed's health deteriorated, and he drank more often. A lot of the young people remembered him from school. The friendly janitor, and all that."

The friendly janitor who shared his booze. Yeah, that would probably attract teens.

"One day, the party got out of hand and Marnie Speerman called the police."

That didn't surprise me, my memories of Mrs. Speerman were unpleasant—a stern woman who used to yell at the neighborhood kids and wave her cane at us like a bludgeon.

“When they raided Ed's place, the cops found underage drinkers and even some drugs. Ed knew Al Dunlop, the sheriff back then, pretty well—they'd graduated together. Apparently Ed claimed he'd been passed out upstairs and hadn't realized what the young people were up to in his house. Many of us knew Ed was lying, though. I'm sure Sheriff Dunlop knew it too, but he smoothed things over just the same.”

“One of the boys at the party, Chris Vickman, didn't return home afterward. They searched for days, combed through most of the woods behind Grove Street all the way out to the Interstate, but they never found a trace of him. Personally, I think he wandered into the forest drunk and fell into an old mineshaft. You can find them all over the backwoods, most still unmarked.” She paused, staring into space, then blinked. “After that, Ed's parties stopped for good.”

I shuddered. After my trip to Grove Street the day before, I had absolutely no problem imagining exactly what had happened to the poor Vickman kid in Ed McElwain's house. It didn't involve Chris falling into a hole, though—at least not while he was still alive.

“Enough of that topic, Nicholas,” Greta said, and pressed 'play' on her remote. I nodded and watched the soap opera with her, trying in vain to stop the horrible images running through my brain.

Part 4 - Carla

I found Larry drinking beer and watching television when I arrived on Tuesday evening.

"Nicky? You all set?" He switched off the tv, tossed his empty can toward the overflowing trash, and laughed. "You look nervous."

"Of course I'm nervous, asshole."

"Okay," he said. "Stay calm."

"Are you kidding? Do you realize what we're about to do?" Violate the memory of a friend. Maybe the *soul* of a friend. An act that could never be forgiven.

"I know. It's exciting."

I stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. "Exciting? How about fucking horrifying?"

"Do you want Carla back? This is the only way."

"Jesus Christ."

Larry grinned. "Leave him out of it." He grabbed a filthy lab coat and pulled it on. "Now, can we cut the hysterics and get going? Everything's ready downstairs, and the moon's about to rise. It's now or never."

I hesitated, perhaps trying to hold on to the last vestiges of my human decency.

"Come on." He turned and headed for the basement and God help me, I followed.

Larry paused at the bottom of the staircase and found the light switch. The harsh fluorescents revealed a woman's shape under the thin sheet. My stomach churned; I thought for a second I might actually vomit. Larry ran to the table and threw back the cover. The dead girl lay amid scribbled symbols—just as she had on Sunday. Without the ugly wound in her side, she could have been asleep.

Larry positioned himself near the corpse, then placed his hands on either side of her head. He nodded toward the other end of the slab. "Stand there and grab her feet. The sigils will help guide Carla's essence toward us, then I'll direct her into the empty vessel."

Her ankles chilled my hands—every instinct told me to let go and bolt for the stairs—but I forced myself to grip tightly. Larry chanted, his voice rising and falling in a disturbing ululation as the runes covering the table flared to life. They gave off a fierce orange glow, gaining substance by the second until they bulged into the air like a cinematic 3D effect.

As Larry's incantation continued, I could feel energy gathering in the room. A presence.

Carla.

I can't describe the sensation—not really. You know when a person leaves the room, but you can still smell their perfume? That's not quite it. Ever get punched in the arm, and hours later it still ached? No, damn it, that's not right either. I can't get any closer with words. Somehow, Carla was there with us—less real than if she were physically present, but more than a mere memory. Some weird in-between state that Larry's spell allowed and magnified.

Tears streamed from my eyes, either because of the energy crackling through the room or at the possibility that this absurd ritual might actually work.

Sweat poured down Larry's face as he continued to chant—he looked like a man nearing the end of a marathon. He slowly increased the cadence of his words, causing the runes to flash and flare. Memories of Carla flooded my mind—her mocha skin, her raven hair. Papers atop Larry's ratty desk rustled, and a dull vibration filled the air like the hum of an electrical substation. Larry's voice rose to a crazed yell, the tension in the air palpable.

All at once he stiffened and threw back his head. I felt something grab me like a gigantic hand, like a ten thousand volt current. On instinct alone I held on to the dead girl's legs, knowing that the pent-up energy had to be released soon or it would kill us.

A titanic circuit closed as power coursed through me and into the body. Larry's runes glowed like miniature suns as he barked out three words in rapid succession. His sigils flashed when he uttered the final syllable. A wave of force shoved me away from the table, and I fell back onto a pile of specimen jars and old suitcases. The overhead lights popped, sparks raining down, then everything went dark.

My skin crawled as a choked grunt came from the body on the table.

The sound scared me worse than the spider had, worse even than the thing hiding inside Ed McElwain. I hadn't felt such intense fear since last Halloween.

I jumped to my feet. "Larry?"

He didn't reply, but the corpse made another sound—a long, raspy moan.

"Larry!"

A flashlight probed the darkness. "Relax, Nicky." The light found me, scanned up and down. "You okay?"

I nodded, but my eyes remained glued to the body. I raised my arm and pointed. "Larry, look."

His beam shifted to the table.

She moved.

The girl's eyes were still closed, and she wasn't breathing, but her hands repeatedly clenched into fists, then relaxed. Her legs bent at the knees, her body shook all over. The ragged, bloodless hole in her side still gaped, yet she now possessed some awful mockery of life.

"Yes!" Larry cried. He raised his arms and grinned like a demon. "Fuck, yes!"

The girl shuddered once, twice, then opened her eyes. She stared at us, then unexpectedly sat up, causing both Larry and myself to stagger back.

"Carla?" I said.

She swung her legs over the side of the table, put her feet onto the cold concrete floor, and stood. Her legs shook as she took a step before pausing again. She inspected herself, lingering on the ugly wound between her ribs. She touched it with her fingertips, then her gaze flashed back to us. I looked for some trace of recognition in her face, but saw none. Carla's cold eyes reflected the glow of the flashlight like those of a cat, her features as bland and expressionless as they'd been while she laid inert on the table.

"My god, what have we done?" I asked. I neither expected nor received an answer.

We dressed Carla in clothes Larry produced from a dusty trunk: underwear, jeans, and a white t-shirt. Then we led her upstairs. She offered no resistance as I took her cold hand and guided her into a seat at the filthy kitchen table. Larry and I stood by the sink, drinking beers and watching her.

"She's not breathing," I told him.

He downed half his can, then shook his head. "Doesn't need to."

I felt as though the foundations of my worldview—which had begun to crack and crumble the day I met Larry—were now close to total collapse. I couldn't shake the idea I was dreaming and would soon wake in my dorm room in Baltimore.

"Should we get her some food?"

Larry drained his beer and popped the tab on another. "I don't know."

I grabbed him by the arm. "What do you mean you don't know? She's a fucking walking corpse—you've got no idea how that works? I thought you said you knew what you were doing."

"Relax, Nicky."

"Stop telling me to relax, you lunatic. What if she eats brains now, or something? Can she even understand what's going on?" He tried to shake free, but I latched on and forced him to look at me. I'd helped him do a terrible thing, and now I needed to have one question answered. "Larry, is that Carla or not?"

He sighed and put down the beer. I let go of him and he went to the table and sat. "You always had your book smarts, Nick. That and your family's money. Everyone knew you'd be a success, even after your parents got killed. I only had this old house and my dad's magical shit. He taught himself, you know? Then tried to teach me a little before he died. The rest I figured out on my own. I might not know all the secret handshakes fuckers like the Golden Scroll use, but this is *my* talent. Get what I'm saying?" He swept his arm toward Carla—or whatever it was—sitting across from him "This is what I can do. It's all I have."

I took a huge swallow of beer, then sat and looked the madman in the eye.

"Larry, answer the question. Is this Carla or not?"

"Yes," he said immediately. "I'm sure of it."

The only thing I felt sure of was that I'd crossed a line, some kind of Rubicon into the lands of unpardonable sin.

We fell silent for a time as the moon rose like the eye of God.

Part 5 - A Day In Newport

Bright sunshine and a thunderous headache greeted me in the morning. I rubbed my temple and tried to recall how I ended up crashing on the threadbare living room sofa. I remembered Larry taking Carla upstairs at around two o'clock—after that things got hazy. Apparently, I'd continued drinking alone until I passed out.

I brushed beer cans off and crawled to my feet. Once the room stopped spinning I made my way to the kitchen, stepping carefully to avoid the massive web Larry's spider had constructed during the night. I tested my stomach with a banana and a cup of coffee, then left the house and headed downtown on foot. After the events of the previous night I figured some fresh air couldn't hurt. That turned out to be a good move, as my hangover quickly faded.

During the night I'd dreamt about the missing Chris Vickers, although I couldn't remember details. I still wanted to find out exactly what went on the night the teen vanished.

And if it had happened to anyone else.

The Wash Point Road branch of the Newport Public Library held digital archives of the town's daily paper, the cheekily-named Newport News. Since I'd been away at college—first doing my undergrad work at St. John's in Annapolis, then in the Master's program at U of M in Baltimore—I hadn't really spent a lot of time back home. Why would I, especially after my parents became two more statistics in the war on drunk driving? Events in town had passed me by; time to put Larry's schemes on the back burner and catch up.

I arrived at the library just past ten, reserved a computer, and settled in to read. I went over the details of the Vickers case (including the slap-on-the-wrist treatment Ed McElwain received for hosting the infamous party), then scanned through the next few years' worth of papers. Search functions made the archive a breeze to navigate, and I zeroed in on what interested me most—missing persons cases.

A slew of possibilities appeared, which I whittled down using nothing more than gut instinct. I focused on young men in their late teens or early twenties, especially those who had little connection to Newport. Visitors, drifters, migrant

workers, that sort of thing. I figured old Ed's preferences probably wouldn't change, but he'd proceed more carefully after his first brush with the law.

I found four matching cases in the past five years—and I found them quickly. So much for the investigative skills of Al Dunlop and the men who followed him as Newport Sheriff.

Four missing persons, all within five miles of Grove Street. Two berry pickers, a few years apart, who didn't show up for scheduled shifts in the orchards and left unpaid bills at local fleabag motels. A known addict who vanished from his apartment and presumably left town. Finally, a former psychiatric inpatient who had been putting his life back together but failed to return to his rooming house one day, never to be seen again.

I logged off the library computer and took a deep breath. The clock on the wall told me it was only eleven, but it felt like hours had passed. I tried to figure out my next move. I needed some sort of evidence—my suspicions alone meant less than nothing.

Before I could come up with any ideas, my phone buzzed. Caller ID told me the police wanted to speak with me. I tapped the green icon and put the phone to my ear. "Hello?" For a moment I half expected to hear Al Dunlop on the other end, calling from beyond the grave.

"Is this Nicholas Delacourt?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Delacourt, this is Deputy Brian Cobb of the Charles County Sheriff's Department. There's been a break-in at your aunt's place." My blood ran cold. *What?* "She's conscious, but we think she may have a concussion. She gave us your number. Can you come over here, sir?" My mind went blank—I could barely remember how to form words. I finally managed to croak out two of them. "What happened?"

"Apparently an intruder entered her house last night, and got into the room where you're staying. Your aunt slept through the home invasion—she discovered the...damage this morning when she checked your room." I noticed the slight hesitation. *What kind of damage?* My skin suddenly broke out in gooseflesh. "She fainted and struck her head on a table. They're going to take her to Grace General

to get checked out.” He paused. “May I ask where you spent the night, Mr. Delacourt?”

“At my friend’s place on Ridgemont Drive.” I had to stop myself from continuing: *We raised the dead last night, deputy. A man needs a few drinks after something like that.*

“Can you get here quickly? She’s asking for you.”

“I don’t have a vehicle.” My heart pounded in my chest. Someone had broken into Aunt Greta’s place and damaged it. She’d been hurt. I couldn’t process these pieces of information. They seemed alien, wrong.

“What’s the address on Ridgemont? I’ll send a car for you.”

“I’m at the Wash Point Road library right now.”

“We’ll be there in five minutes.”

*

As I watched the ambulance leave Aunt Greta’s driveway, my body had already switched to autopilot. I’d reassured Greta that I’d take care of her flowers and refresh the water in the birdbaths. I promised I’d meet her at the hospital as soon as I could, and took the keys to her beloved blue 1982 Mercury Marquis. I kissed her cheek, told her everything was going to be okay, and waved goodbye.

Once the ambulance left, I listened as Deputy Cobb told me how the intruder had climbed the south fence and scaled one of the gutter pipes up to the ledge under my second-floor window. Apparently he’d forced the lock—breaking it clean off the frame—then crawled inside. Another deputy showed me the ruin the invader had made of my bed and belongings. The sticky black fluid covering the walls and floors puzzled Newport’s finest, but I understood perfectly.

I also understood the handprint, dark as tar, smeared on Greta’s bedroom door—his little message to me.

He had taken my laptop, ignoring everything else, even the gold chain my mother had given me for my eighteenth birthday. I’d left it on the desk, not wanting to risk it during the ritual at Larry’s place, and there it remained.

I said all the right things to the police and answered all their questions. Finally, the deputies left me alone in the house.

The old bastard had gone straight to my room. He knew exactly where to find me. If I'd been in there, asleep...

My computer had no password protection. He now knew intimate details of my life: my address on campus, contact info for my friends, class schedules, everything. My personal safety didn't mean much to me—the crimes I'd been complicit in with Larry meant I'd forfeited any right to a peaceful life. Greta's safety, on the other hand, meant a great deal. The black handprint on her bedroom door swept away all caution, leaving only red rage behind.

I went out to the garage and got a mop, a bucket, and some cleaning supplies. Then I set to work scrubbing Ed McElwain's filth from my aunt's walls and floor. The black stuff revolted me—it had the consistency of pitch and smelled like sour motor oil. It took a long time for me to clear it from the carpet and wood, but eventually its stain faded. I tidied the bedroom and changed the torn sheets and pillows. I also grabbed uncle Johann's old toolkit and repaired the window lock. I even wiped down Greta's gutter pipe and fence, removing the faint coating of dark residue I found there.

When I finished I called the hospital. The doctors wanted to keep my aunt overnight as a precaution. I left a message with the nurse to tell Greta I'd be there first thing in the morning, then hung up and popped a frozen dinner into the microwave. The food tasted awful, but as I sat at the kitchen table in the empty house, I barely noticed.

My mind was off flying with the sparrows.

*

At dusk I drove Greta's big Mercury to Church Street, parked it, and walked the two short blocks to Grove. The peak of old Ed's house beckoned me, rising higher than any of its neighbors, and my lips thinned to a straight line.

Here I come, shitbird.

I passed the open gate to the driveway and strolled up like I owned the place. The lightless windows of the house stared blankly down at me as I approached. I moved through the gathering twilight with purposeful strides—a

man on a mission. The thing that called this place home thought it could murder and destroy without repercussion. It was wrong.

I reached the backyard and walked past the weedy garden, barely giving it a second glance. I knocked over the picnic table as I passed, out of petty spite. I slipped the wand Larry had given me from my pocket and came to a stop near the back step, where I had fallen in shock after peeking into the window a few days earlier.

This time I'd be the one delivering the shock.

Larry Pike made his wands out of elm branches from the tree in his front yard. It took about a week to carve one and boil it in the magical concoction that allowed the wood to store mystic energy. Once prepared, the rods then needed to be charged, another lengthy process. Afterwards, the power inside could be stored until released by a certain word-and-gesture combination known only to Larry and those he considered friends.

I pointed my wand at Ed McElwain's huge propane tank. With a twist of my arm, I pronounced the trigger phrase.

White brilliance bloomed in the darkness as my arm jerked like a live wire. A shimmering finger of light flew from the tip of the wand and struck the metal tank, cracking it open like a rotten egg. Time seemed to stand still—the tank fragments expanded in slow motion, surrounded by a cloud of white gas. An instant later the gas flashed to flame, and a great wave of hot air struck me like an invisible hand. The force of it shoved me backwards onto the lawn. Intense heat sucked the breath from my lungs and the sound of the explosion made my ears ring. I crawled to my feet and saw a sizzling fireball engulfing the side of old Ed's house, burning furiously. Through a smashed window I witnessed movement within, a solitary figure peering out at me from behind a curtain of fire.

I raised my arm and held up Larry's now-exhausted wand. As the creature watched through the flames, I opened my hand and let the elm rod fall to the grass.

You know where I'm going, asshole. Now follow me.

As I turned and ran out of the yard and back to Church Street, a thick column of smoke rose to the sky. Slowly, it blotted out the moon and stars.

The car rumbled to life and I peeled away from the curb, my knuckles white on the wheel.

Part 6 - The Battle

I burst into Larry's place, my heart pounding and sweat running down my back. He'd set up a projector in the living room, showing an old video of himself with Carla and me—Roanoke, the time we met a shady magic dealer named Archimedes. Larry took us down there in hopes of buying a piece of lightning glass. We had a fun weekend, despite the fact that Archimedes repeatedly hit on Carla and then tried to rip us off.

Speaking of Carla, version 2.0 sat staring at the video with a blank expression. Larry looked over as I ran into the room, one eyebrow raised.

"We're about to have company," I told him.

"Who?"

I went to the window and peeked out, but the street was deserted except for my aunt's Mercury parked half-askew near the curb. "Ed McElwain. I just burned down his house then led him here."

Larry's mouth fell open. "What? Why?"

"He tried to kill me in my sleep and threatened my aunt Greta. Come on, Larry, we don't have much time."

He shook his head. "Nicky, you're really not a people person, are you?" He turned and uttered an incomprehensible word. Mystic symbols shimmered into visibility on the living room windows, purple and radiant. "Those should keep him out for a bit, give me time to think." He switched off the projector and grabbed Carla by the hand. She rose from the couch and allowed herself to be dragged toward the center of the room. Larry went to the window and peeked around its glowing sigil into the darkness. "What *is* McElwain, anyway?"

I tried to describe the horrifying creature as quickly as possible. "Some kind of dark spirit that can crawl into and out of his body—I saw him do it."

Larry snapped his fingers. "A *daeiva*. I should have known."

"What the hell is that?"

"A shadow demon."

"Do you know how to kill it?"

"Tricky."

The sound of breaking glass came from above us. “Larry, you’ve got those runes up there too, right?”

He blinked. “Whoops. Better get your wand out.”

“It’s all used up, got any more?”

He opened a drawer and pulled out another of the elm rods. He flipped it to me, and I grabbed it out of midair just as the ceiling above our heads came apart.

“Look out!” I screamed, as an avalanche of wood and plaster descended toward us. Larry dove to the side as I scrambled madly backward.

Carla stood, unmoving, as debris—including a massive bookcase—fell on top of her, burying her in a pile of mangled wood. A moment later Ed McElwain leapt from the floor above, his agility all the more terrifying due to his wizened appearance. Old Ed noticed Larry’s mutant spider squirming amid the wreckage and nonchalantly squashed it with one boot. He watched as it died twitching in a pool of its own guts, then smiled at me through the dusty air.

“Evening, Nick.”

Larry regained his feet. He shouted the trigger word, and his wand shot a bolt of light at the demon, blowing a hole straight through its midsection. Gobs of foul-smelling brownish goo splattered me, causing me to gag. When I cleared the offal from my eyes the thing still stood, the gaping wound in its belly leaking rotten fluid.

Ed stared at Larry. “As I’m sure your daddy used to tell you, junior, that’s not nearly good enough.” The creature moved with astonishing speed—it closed the distance between them and drove its fist into Larry’s stomach before he could even react. He collapsed to the floor, coughing wetly.

Old Ed turned back to me. “I invited you in the other day, Nick. You should have accepted. We could’ve sat down and talked things over. Maybe had a drink together.”

I backed away. “Like the drink you had with Chris Vickers?”

I’d hoped to surprise the *daeiva* with the accusation, but it only grinned. “Are you angry when you see an owl take a squirrel? Nature is red in tooth and claw, boy.”

“There’s nothing natural about you.” I tried to disguise the waver in my voice. “Now stay back, or—”

“Or what?” The creature took a step forward. “You trespassed on my property and spied on me. After I gave you a gentle warning at your aunt’s house, you returned and destroyed my home. Now your flesh will settle the debt.” Ed tensed to lunge, and in desperation I raised my wand.

Before I could trigger it, the pile of wood and debris behind the *daeiva* flew into the air. Carla stood there, as expressionless as ever. The monster whirled in surprise and she seized it by the throat. Ed thrashed frantically, but couldn’t get free. Carla took her other hand and grasped its forehead, one finger sinking into Ed’s eyeball with a wet pop. Ed released an inhuman screech as Carla pulled, separating its head from its shoulders. The headless torso spasmed, then collapsed.

Black, oily smoke poured out of Ed’s severed head instead of blood. It pooled on the floor and piled higher, slowly forming itself back into the shape of a man. The *daeiva* hissed at Carla, then turned and flowed toward me like rancid fog. I bolted, Larry’s voice trailing after me. “That’s it, Nicky! Keep it busy.”

I fled, the smoke-like creature nipping at my heels. The thought of its black mist touching me filled me with utter revulsion. I ran from the wreckage in the living room and toward the stairs. Getting cornered down in Larry’s basement terrified me, so I chose to go up to the second floor instead. The landing branched into two hallways at the top, and I took the one leading to the guest rooms. The other way led to the master bath and Larry’s bedroom, which had formerly been his father’s. An abusive alcoholic of the worst kind, Ted Pike’s parenting at least partially explained how Larry had turned out.

I ran past one spare bedroom and into the second. It smelled of mildew, the paint hanging off the walls in long, damp strips. I threw open the musty curtains, thinking to climb out onto the ledge then double back across the roof.

When I saw the bars on the window, I froze. *Larry, you asshole.*

The shadow demon filled the doorway, shutting off all avenues of escape.

As it closed in on me, I raised my wand—but if Larry’s shot hadn’t stopped it, I doubted mine would have any effect.

Apparently the *daeiva* couldn’t speak in its shadow form, because it stared at me silently with hate-filled yellow eyes as it approached. A low hiss emanated from the thing, like steam escaping a boiler. Backed against the dirty window

pane, I had nowhere to run. Your life is supposed to flash before your eyes at the end, but I saw only a long string of bitter regrets.

At the last moment I decided to try to fight, but before I could fire the wand the black smoke encircled my wrist. Despite its wispy appearance, it had a grip like steel. It twisted and my arm snapped like a twig. A supernova of pain engulfed me. I screamed as the wand fell from my hand and clattered to the floor. The thing that had once been Ed McElwain drew closer; its eyes staring with unholy lust at my open mouth. I recoiled uselessly against the window frame, realizing what it meant to do. The oily darkness changed shape, elongating into bifurcated ebon tendrils. I couldn't stop them from entering my nostrils and forcing their way past my clenched teeth and down my throat.

"Hey, old-timer." Larry's voice came from the doorway, and the *daieva* paused. It withdrew its substance from my face and turned toward him.

I doubled over, coughing and choking. My stomach heaved and I vomited, the puke almost pleasant after the revolting taste of the creature. I raised my head to see Larry step forward, holding a small square shape in his hand.

"I got something to show you," he said. The object in his hand flipped open, and the room instantly filled with cold light.

I saw strange geometries inside the container—intricate nested figures, receding down into infinity. The pain of my broken arm forgotten, I wiped vomit from my mouth, eyes wide. I felt as though I might glimpse the secret behind the entire universe, if only I stared into the glow just a little longer...

The frantic hissing of the *daieva* shocked me from my fugue state. I blinked, and both the light and the monster disappeared.

Larry closed the lid of the wooden cube and placed it on the table next to a lamp. "You okay, Nick?"

I nodded, then tried to croak words. "What happened?"

"I got the fucker with the Reimann box. Dad's prized possession."

I slowly approached the table and stared at the device.

"It was in the safe," Larry said. "Sorry it took so long for me to grab it and get up here." His eyes narrowed. "Your arm's fucked up, by the way."

The box looked flimsy, like balsa wood. "It can't get out of there?"

Larry laughed. "Not unless someone opens the lid. Let's head downstairs, I'll fix you up."

"Where's Carla?"

He shrugged. "Still in the living room, last I saw. Chewing on Ed's skull, maybe. Let's go."

I shuffled toward the stairs, still in a state of shock. I saw Larry grab the Reimann box and stuff it into his pocket.

I made it halfway across the room before I collapsed into blissful unconsciousness.

Part 7 - July 31

After a week my arm healed enough for me to stop using the sling. Larry's poultice, which he claimed he'd learned how to make from a witch, had done its job. With Greta back home, gradually recovering from the shock of Ed McElwain's invasion, and Ed himself locked away in the Reimann box, I should have felt relief and some sort of peace.

I didn't.

Larry made no secret of the fact he was sleeping with Carla. He now referred to her as his girlfriend and had tattooed magical markings onto her skin. He claimed the runes simply preserved her lifeless flesh, but I had my doubts. As for Carla herself, she did nothing unless directed by one of us. I still struggled to believe the undead blonde was really my murdered friend, but as the days passed it became easier and easier to give in and accept Larry's claims.

I spent less time at Greta's and more at the Halloween House. I wanted to keep an eye on Larry, but that wasn't the main reason. I'd put my aunt in danger once, but never again. Larry offered me a guest bedroom—the one without bars across the window—and I accepted. I wouldn't be in town much longer, anyway. My Advanced Alkylation course at U of M started on the third of August. I'd just begun packing when a knock came at my door.

"It's open."

Larry sauntered in, hands in his pockets. "Hey, Nicky, how's it hanging?"

"Fine." The sight of him worsened my already sour mood.

He eyed my half-filled suitcase. "Tomorrow is midsummer's eve. You're helping me with the ritual, right?"

I sighed. "I know what tomorrow is." The last thing I wanted was to set him off on another rant about 'traditional witches' and their differences with Wiccans—including calendar differences. "What ritual?" If it involved dead bodies, he'd have to work alone.

"Collecting energy for the big show."

That meant Halloween. He still intended to go through with it, then. I stood and faced him. "Larry, your 'show' is what attracted those maniacs last year."

"Yup, and it'll attract them again. I'm counting on it."

A mutant spider ran around his legs and into my room, leaving a thick trail of sticky webbing behind it.

"Can you please keep those things out of here? One of them nearly ruined my biochem textbook."

"Sorry." He made a grunting noise, and the two-foot monster scampered back out into the hall. "They keep the place free of mice, though. Haven't seen any of those little shits around since I've been growing the spiders."

I had to get through to him somehow. "We lost Carla last year, Larry. Reggie abandoned us. They almost got you, too." He would have bled to death if I hadn't been there. "Are you sure you want to—"

"The Golden Scroll have to die, Nick; I already told you that. But in order for me to kill them, they have to be *here*." He raised an eyebrow. "By the way, you're coming back at Halloween, right?"

I stared at him, then nodded. *In for a penny, in for a pound*, that's what Aunt Greta always said. I'd be there, God help me.

He smiled. "Good, good. Tomorrow night we start at ten, harvesting energy until midnight. After that, you're free."

I didn't think I'd ever really be free again.

*

The thirty-first dawned hazy and hot. At noon we moved to the backyard, enclosed by high fences on all sides. Larry had his skeleton—which he'd christened 'Mr. Bones'—haul up box after box of metal discs from the basement. The thing brought its cargo out of the house and we took over, laying the discs in intricate patterns across the lawn. That done, Larry drew symbols on each plate with his grease pencil, then connected the discs with lines of Himalayan salt from a rusty bucket.

Carla stood in the shade and watched us work. She didn't like being in direct sunlight, and would move out of it at the first opportunity. Aside from that, she stared straight ahead and remained motionless.

Larry mopped sweat from his forehead with a filthy rag, then held up a disc. "These babies are five percent erbium, that's the secret ingredient. Erbium

interacts with the ley lines and really pulls in the juice. You're the chemistry star, Nicky, you got any idea why it works so well?" I shook my head—I doubted the laws of science applied in this particular situation. Maybe I was wrong, though. I'd been wrong about a lot of things.

Larry dipped a finger into his salt bucket then licked it clean. "Want some? Got to keep replenishing the electrolytes in this heat."

"No, thanks."

I knew I'd be stuck in the backyard for hours once the moon rose, so I let Larry work while I edged closer to Carla. I needed some answers.

She failed to acknowledge my presence at her side, as usual. I tapped her on the shoulder, but she still didn't react.

"Carla?" I whispered. "Is it really you?"

My heart leapt in my chest when her eyes flicked to me for a moment, but she looked away again without responding. We stood together in silence, watching Larry draw incomprehensible scribbles on erbium pancakes as the sun slid toward the horizon and the world turned gold.

After dark, the real work began. Larry stood in the center of the candle-lit yard chanting while I moved the metal platters around into various configurations he'd scrawled on pieces of paper. Each pattern could be held for only a few minutes before the next had to be assembled. If I misplaced a single plate they wouldn't charge properly and we'd have to start over. I'd done this before, and made sure I committed no errors.

By midnight, when the moon and stars moved out of the necessary alignment, my body ached all over. I dragged myself upstairs to my bedroom, checked it for spiders, then locked the door and collapsed onto the bed. Within moments I fell asleep, still wearing clothes stained with grass and mud.

*

I woke to strange scratching sounds. It took me a few moments to get my bearings in the pitch black room, but eventually I realized they were coming from the heating vent in the floor. I grabbed my phone and turned on the flashlight, then got out of bed and onto my knees. Shining the light into the vent revealed

only cobwebs and dust, but I could clearly hear scrabbling noises coming from somewhere below.

Outside my room the hallway lay shrouded in darkness. I made my way to the stairs, ducking low to avoid one of the huge spiders hanging in its web. I tiptoed down the steps and paused at the bottom to listen for the noise again. In the gloom of the living room I made out the silhouette of Mr. Bones near the window. The skeleton's head rotated, empty eye sockets following me as I crossed the floor.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" I asked it. Not for the first time I wondered if I might be going insane, infected by Larry's madness like a plague victim.

I opened the door to the basement and cocked an ear.

The scratching sounds were coming from the laboratory.

I didn't have a weapon, so I grabbed a broom handle I found leaning against the wall. If something lurked in the darkness down there, I'd at least have the satisfaction of breaking the wooden stick over its head before it got me.

Larry hadn't replaced the blown bulbs, so my phone provided the only illumination. The stairs creaked as I descended, but I could still hear the noises that had awoken me, louder now. Close.

I passed the large metal table and approached the shape I saw near the far wall. I raised the broomstick over my head and prepared to strike. My other hand held the phone, its light revealing the outline of a person—

Carla turned her head and stared at me. Blood surrounded her mouth and ran down her chin in crimson rivulets.

She'd buried her right arm up to the shoulder in the wall's air vent. Her nails scraped against the metal inside, reaching for something. As I watched, she gave up, pulled her arm out of the duct, and turned toward me. Finally, I noticed what she held in her other hand.

A live mouse, one of many that infested the walls of Larry's home. I stood transfixed as Carla slowly raised the squealing rodent to her lips and bit into it. The mouse screeched and blood spurted from between Carla's teeth as a horrid crunching sound seared itself into my brain. I watched her devour the animal's mangled carcass in the sterile white light of the phone, my eyes wide.

“Carla, no,” I whispered. “Jesus Christ, no.”

My heart nearly stopped when Larry’s voice came from behind me.

“Didn’t I tell you to leave him out of it?”

I whirled, fear and disgust fuelling my anger. I pointed at Carla, still calmly enjoying her midnight snack. “Larry, what the fuck?”

He stepped past me and put his arm around Carla’s waist. “She wanders, Nick, that’s all.” The bastard actually sounded apologetic. “She wanders after I fall asleep. Sorry she woke you. I’ll take her back to bed now.” Carla continued chewing the mouse as Larry spoke. After a moment, she swallowed.

I didn’t know what to do, but I couldn’t watch any more. I turned without a word and left. I went back upstairs, locked and bolted my door, then placed a chair against the knob. I crawled into bed, assuming I’d be up for the rest of the night revisiting the horrible scene I’d just witnessed.

Instead I fell into a dreamless sleep almost immediately.

*

I didn’t see Larry or Carla in the morning, which was fine with me. I finished packing, then called a cab to Greta’s. When it arrived I got in and left without a backward glance.

I planned to spend some time with my aunt, say my goodbyes, then head to the train station and from there back to Baltimore. I had things to do—like buy a new computer before my classes began.

As for Larry, I’d promised to return to Newport at Halloween. I’d keep my word, but until then he could go to hell.

Him and his whole fucking house.

Epilogue - August 25

Tuesday started out fine. In the lab, my Friedel-Crafts demonstration went well—Professor Edberg even complimented me on my “thorough experimental technique”. After a successful morning of alkylation, I supervised the undergrads from four to six that afternoon. Helping the newbies wrangle apparatus and perform basic titrations felt good, and I whistled on the short walk from the ivy-encrusted Patterson Hall to my residence, a brick building nestled amid the sprawling College Park neighborhood a few blocks north.

I rode the elevator to the tenth floor and made my way to 1011, my flat for the past year and a half. I tapped my keycard, opened the door, and dropped my bag on the sofa. Something moved at the edge of my vision, and my day took a sudden turn for the worse. I turned to see a spider run across the top of my desk. The sight of the creature brought back unwanted memories from my time at Larry Pike’s house in Newport: walking skeletons, mutant arachnids in sticky webs, dark shadows with glowing eyes, a body on a cold metal table, strange scratching noises echoing through a pitch-black room.

I shuddered and tried to shake off the feelings of dread rising from deep inside me. Grabbing a container of leftover butter chicken from the fridge, I went to my desk and flipped open the laptop. I sat and ate while distracting myself with news stories about politics, terrorism, and natural disasters. When the food ran out I got up to get a Snickers from the care package Aunt Greta had sent me for my birthday.

A knock came at the door before I made it halfway to the cupboard.

I put my eye to the peephole and saw Reggie Finlay staring back at me. My heart sank into my stomach, the last bit of the day’s positive energy gone in a flash. I stepped back and considered my options. I could open the door and deck the bastard. That idea definitely had potential. Or, I could get my Snickers and continue browsing the web—let Reggie rot out there until he crawled back under his rock. Another good choice. This was going to take a while.

“Come on, Nicky,” Reggie called from the hallway. “Lemme in, man.”

I sighed and twisted the knob. When I opened the door, the scumbag had the nerve to smile at me.

“Hey, Nick. Been a long time—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I told him. “I don’t know why you’re here, and I don’t care. I’ve got nothing to say to you.” *You took off when we needed you most, asshole. You left Carla to die.*

“Look, I have to tell you—”

“You don’t have to tell me anything. I know all about the little blonde gift you brought Larry.” He opened his mouth again, but I wasn’t finished. “I wonder what your bosses on the force would think if they heard all the details about their grave-robbing star detective? Why don’t you get the fuck out of here, Reggie, before I pick up the phone and find out?”

Anger flashed on his face for a moment, then quickly vanished. “Nick, you have to listen to me. We’ve got to go back to Newport.”

That stunned me. “Are you fucking insane? Why?”

“Because,” Reggie said. “Larry phoned me this morning.” He paused as if expecting some reply, but I just stared at him. Finally, he sighed and spoke again.

“He asked me to get him another one.”

To be continued in...

The Halloween House: Bitter September