

The Halloween House: Bitter September (completed November 2, 2021)

Part 1 - The Embers of August

I sat across from Reggie Finlay and watched the Baltimore homicide detective shovel spoonfuls of canned spaghetti into his mouth.

"This is good, Nick," he declared between swallows. "Thanks."

"Are you kidding me? I can't believe you're keeping that stuff down."

Reggie had loosened his tie but still looked ready to step into active duty at a moment's notice.

"Food is food. That's my motto."

The urge to punch him in the face grew strong. "Really, Reg? I thought your motto was more like 'every man for himself'."

His eyes flicked upwards. "Look, I told you the magic shit was a bad idea right from the start. I told Larry the same thing. I tried to convince him to come to his senses—"

"Yeah, and when he didn't, you bugged out. Left us to face the music while you took care of number one."

He sighed. "I know you're still pissed, Nick. Not saying you don't have a right to be, but put it aside for now. We have to work together."

Fuck you. "Is that the kind of speech you give at the precinct to rally the troops? I bet they love it down there. Too bad they can't see the real you, hidden behind the layers of bullshit."

Anger crept into his face. "You still blame me for Carla's death."

"You really are an ace detective, aren't you? Of course I fucking blame you."

Reggie pushed his chair back from the table and stood. He went to the small window and stared out, his back to me. The setting sun had turned the western horizon a marigold hue. It's light framed Reggie's head like a halo—or maybe a warning. Like one of those brightly-colored frogs whose skin contains a deadly poison.

"I think about her every day, Nick. Every single day. Why do you think I got that dead junkie for Larry? He said he was going to bring Carla back." He turned to

me, his face hidden by the sun. "I hear you spent July in Newport, by the way. What went down?"

There's a question. How could I even put the summer's events into coherent sentences? Not that I wanted to try hard for this scumbag.

I got up from the table. "The dead girl is up and about. In fact, Larry's sharing his bed with her."

Reggie's eyes widened.

"Oh yeah, they're a hot item. Totally inseparable, in fact—unless she happens to get hungry in the middle of the night. Then she slips away to find a nice juicy rat."

"Is she...Carla?"

I'd felt the touch of my friend's spirit during the resurrection ritual. I'd also seen the soulless glare in the zombie's eyes as she crushed the rat's body between her teeth.

"I don't know."

Reggie took a step toward me, then paused. I guess my body language made him think twice. He clenched his fists at his sides like a man contemplating violence.

"We have to put the past aside, Nick. Larry's looking to collect more corpses. Whatever you think of me, we've got to work together to stop him."

Who does Reggie think he's fooling with this shit? "Before people learn you've been helping him for years, right? Before your precious career is threatened."

"That's part of it, sure. If you had a real job you might understand."

I went to the door before I did something that would get me arrested and worked over by Reggie's buddies on the force. Grabbing the knob felt like a poor substitute for wrapping my hands around his neck. "You've said your piece. Now get the fuck out."

I held the door open, but he stopped before stepping through. "I already booked my vacation time—I'm going to Newport. Are you coming or not?"

His eyes told me he knew what my answer would be. Police training, I guess—or maybe he understood my fatal flaws, the ones that got me into this

mess in the first place. Either way, the smug bastard stared at me as if the future had been preordained.

“Yeah, I’ll go. But not with you.” I’d kill the cowardly bastard. “I need a few days to sort things out here. I’ll meet you in town on Monday.”

He pulled out his phone. “What’s that, September 2nd?”

“Yeah.” *The day I’m supposed to start the new semester. Instead I’d probably lose my placement and research grant.* “Hit the road, Reg.”

He looked about to say something, but decided against it and walked out. After he left I slammed the door behind him, locked it, then sat at the table. My emotions roiled like a summer thunderstorm, so intense I could almost smell ozone.

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Saturday I drove my rental car from Baltimore down Route 301 under darkening skies. My mind drifted back to the terrible events of last Halloween—memories imbued with the irresistible pull of a black hole.

Carla had been the first to sense danger that night, some hidden potential energy tickling her awareness, making her jumpy and tense. She’d always been sharp that way—maybe because of the magic steeped into her blood, a genetic imprint of power wielded on Caribbean Islands by long-dead ancestors. Voodoo birthmarks on her soul.

Larry, drunk with power from his damned machine, laughed as he handed us enchanted elm twigs. *Let Reggie run*, he told us. *Anyone who trespasses on my property tonight will regret it.* Had I recognized the insanity in his eyes back then? The lunacy in his voice? Could I have done anything to shift the awful inertia of that night, even if I had?

Wands in hand, we’d waited on the grass in front of the huge energy collector as the wind whistled and the Halloween House loomed, dark and ominous as ever. October thirty-first, the night of power. Larry’s apotheosis.

The streets lay empty—trick-or-treaters and adult party-goers gone as if forewarned to hide themselves away, like birds before a storm.

And the storm had come.

They walked up Ridgemont Drive slowly, four figures appearing and disappearing as they stepped past each pool of streetlight illumination.

My hands clammy with fear, I felt blood pounding in my ears, mixing with the sound of Carla's nervous breathing. Time slowed to a crawl as the Golden Scroll stopped on the sidewalk, inches from the edge of Larry's driveway.

The old woman, Gabriela, took the first fateful step. The others followed, and moments later pandemonium reigned.

When it ended, Carla's eyes stared sightlessly up at the pitiless stars, her heart frozen to stone. Gabriela had been turned inside out by Larry's ultimate spell, a twisted mass left steaming on the lawn. Larry himself lay not far away, bleeding to death from a knife wound to the gut. The sorcerer Dharpaan had been torn apart by two of Larry's skeletons—his mangled body lay near the hedge for almost two days afterward, untouched. At the side of the house the broken, burned-out shell of the energy collector smoldered, fragments of its enchanted metal scattered across the yard.

I'd gotten off easy: a concussion, three broken ribs, and a shattered clavicle, all suffered when something hit me from behind, probably a limb from the dead tree Dharpaan had animated early in the battle. I woke in time to limp to Larry and stanch the madman's bleeding. My reward for saving his life? Another year filled with anxiety and terror.

I held Carla's body in my arms as the cold wind blew that night. I cursed the Scroll, Larry, Reggie, and above all myself.

Now, things had come full circle. I signaled and exited onto Highway 5, rapidly approaching Newport. The same warning twinge came again, running down my spine like liquid fear.

The intervening months had left me no wiser: God help me, I kept driving.

Part 2 - The Boys Are Back In Town

Larry picked up after the first ring.

"Nicky! How's it hanging, man?"

The sound of his voice brought back all the terrors of the past year, and my hands tightened on the steering wheel. "Fine, Larry. Listen, I'm back in Newport. So is Reggie. We need to talk to—"

"Yeah, I know. Reggie's here already."

What the fuck? "He said he was meeting me at your place at three."

"He showed up an hour ago. You coming over?"

"I have to check in at the Super 8, then I'll be there."

"Great. See you in a bit."

I hung up, then pounded my hand against the dashboard. Reggie was up to his old tricks again. The asshole had made sure he'd gotten to Larry's place first to put his own spin on things—who knew what kind of bullshit he'd spouted.

Since I was already an hour behind, I figured I might as well stop at the Circle K and grab some snacks to stock my hotel room. Turns out that was another mistake, because while carrying the bags of chips and pretzels back to the car I nearly collided with my aunt Greta.

"Nicholas?" she said. "What are you doing here?"

The gears in my head whirled like a clock with a missing counterweight. Even so, my mind retained enough residual function to remember my vow to never put my aunt in danger again.

"Hi, Aunt Greta," I stammered, dropping the bag of snacks on the hood of my rental. "I'll be in town for a few days. I was planning to come by later and surprise you." Her face broke into a smile, and she held out her arms. We embraced, the scent of her perfume bringing back sweet childhood days when Mom and Dad would take me to Greta's on Sundays after church. Childhood was a lie, though, and I'd long since discovered the sugary coating of the world hid vast amounts of evil and horror—enough to drown us all many times over.

Greta released me, her expression stern. "Why are you buying all this junk food? I won't have it in my home."

"I'm not staying at your place this time, Aunt Greta. I have a room at the Super 8."

"But why?"

I tried to ignore the hurt in her voice. "I'm here with Reggie Finlay; you remember him? I didn't want to impose on your hospitality, so we just got a hotel room instead." Telling my aunt a little white lie didn't seem that serious when compared to the shit I'd already done—including almost getting her killed by a shadow demon in July.

"Yes, I remember the Finlay boy. I never cared for him much, but the two of you would have been more than welcome to stay with me." Her look of disapproval slowly softened. "You can bring him with you to dinner tonight. Seven O'Clock sharp." She turned and walked toward her big blue Mercury. "Don't be late, Nicholas."

I had no idea what to say, so I blurted "I won't," piled the crap I'd bought into the Cruze, and raced to the hotel.

Things were going downhill fast, and I hadn't even seen Larry yet.

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The Halloween House looked as foreboding as ever, a hulking edifice fiercely guarding Ridgemont Drive. The two-storey monstrosity crouched on its corner, sucking light from the late summer afternoon like a vampire. A black Chrysler sat at the curb out front—Reggie's ride, I assumed.

A woman peered at me from a dirty window in the bungalow next door as I parked and walked up the path. I cracked a shit-eating grin and waved at the old busybody, and she retreated as if scalded.

I passed the big elm tree on the front lawn and climbed Larry's creaky front steps. Hoping to get things over quickly, like pulling a scab from a wound, I rapped on the front door.

Carla opened it. Her blonde hair had been washed and styled, and someone had applied lipstick and makeup to her face. She wore a yellow sundress and wedges, revealing eldritch tattoos on her forearms and legs. Carla looked more lifelike than ever, but her eyes still held a cold, inhuman emptiness. Her red

lipstick reminded me of the rat blood that had trickled from her mouth down in the cellar, and I shuddered.

She stared at me. I felt the tenuous presence of my friend, hovering nearby as it had in July. Then the sensation faded and there was only the zombie—not Carla at all but an abomination created by Larry from a dead runaway in his lab.

“Let him in, honey,” a voice called from behind her. “And close the door.”

Carla obeyed, and I entered the gloom of the house and into the presence of its master.

Larry looked even more disheveled than he had in midsummer. He wore a dirty bathrobe and slippers, and smelled like he hadn’t showered since the last full moon. His unkempt hair and stubble-encrusted face lent him a comical appearance, but I knew better. Larry was a dangerous motherfucker—and I shared culpability for all of his crimes.

“Larry.” An acknowledgement, not a greeting. “Where’s Reggie?”

“In the kitchen.”

“What’s he been saying?”

Larry laughed, then turned and walked away. I followed, and Carla fell into step behind me. “He sounded like you, actually. All ‘you can’t do this’ and ‘stop and reconsider that’.”

Being compared to Reggie in any way turned my stomach. I opened my mouth to protest, but when we entered the kitchen and I saw what Larry had done to him the words died in my throat.

Reggie sat at the table, ramrod-straight and rigid. His eyes had rolled back into his head, transformed into ghastly white orbs. From his neck jutted some sort of glass ampule, filled with a bluish liquid. A few loops of duct tape held it in place just beneath his right ear, creating a gray collar that resembled the world’s ugliest choker.

“What the fuck?” I whispered.

Larry smiled and stood at Reggie’s side. He put one elbow on the detective’s head and leaned against him. Reggie remained unresponsive.

“I like him much better this way, Nicky,” Larry told me. “Our old pal here will no longer follow his natural inclination to run off the moment things get dicey.” He

drummed his fingertips on Reggie's scalp. "No, Mr. Finlay is going to be sticking around this time—right to the bitter end."

Part of me recoiled in horror at what Larry had done, but another part felt no pity at all for Reggie. That part of me thought he was finally receiving a small measure of what he deserved for abandoning us.

"Larry, I don't give two shits about this asshole. But he's on vacation. People probably know where he is. You can't just—"

"Relax. He'll come around in a bit. He's experiencing a little system shock. Once his body adapts to the *veve* juice, he'll be more like his old self—except he'll do exactly what we tell him at all times."

I looked past Larry and noticed several of his dog-sized spiders scurrying across the living room floor, leaving trails of thick silk behind them. I turned and glanced at Carla, who stood impassive as always just behind me.

"What are you up to anyway, Larry?" I asked. "Reggie said something about you wanting dead bodies."

He waved a hand. "Forget that. There's no longer any need to raid the morgues of Baltimore. I've found all the corpses I need, right here in town."

My skin crawled. "You have? Where?"

"The old mine shafts just a few miles north. A lot of cave-ins happened during the past century—dozens of miners died down there and were well-preserved by the standing water in the pits." He left Reggie's side and gestured for me to follow him. "Grab a beer and sit down. I'll tell you all about my plans."

I went to the fridge and snagged a Bud, then pushed webbing aside and entered the living room as Carla's ice-blue eyes followed me.

"I can't stay long," I said. "My aunt's expecting me for dinner."

Part 3 - Two Visits

"A pity your friend Reggie couldn't come."

I shrugged. "He's not really a friend, Aunt Greta. More like an acquaintance. Anyway, he's busy." Busy being Larry Pike's slave.

She stared at me over the top of her rimless lenses. "You don't look well."

I paused, a forkful of spaghetti a few inches from my mouth. "I feel fine."

She sighed. "It's not that I don't appreciate the time you spend here, Nicholas—I enjoy it immensely. But this town can be unhealthy."

You don't know the half of it. "What do you mean?"

She wiped at the corner of her mouth with her napkin, then folded it fastidiously and placed it next to her plate. "Do you remember Mr. Barnes, the man whose daughter drowned in the river when you were a boy?"

I swallowed, racking my brain for memories of Barnes. All that bubbled up was the image of a sad man in a rumpled suit, sitting on a bench and feeding breadcrumbs to pigeons. "Bald guy, right? Hung out in the park?"

"Yes, Tom Barnes. After the tragic accident, he withdrew from his friends and family. I tried to speak with him several times—once I even brought over a tray of cookies—but he made me feel like I was intruding on his private grief. Tom became a recluse, living in his dilapidated house, not taking calls or accepting visitors. His wife had died a few years prior, and his other children had grown and gone. In my opinion he should have left town and started some sort of new life—but of course no one asked me." Her expression made it clear she thought someone should have.

"Newport is in an odd town, Nicholas. Things have happened here you'd scarcely believe."

In fact, I knew just about anything could go down in Newport—and the more horrific, the better.

I realized Aunt Greta was waiting for a response, so I nodded stupidly. After a moment spent staring at me over her glasses, she continued.

"Tom developed an obsession with the spot where his daughter drowned. He'd wade into the river where they found her body, go down on all fours and feel

around in the shallows, bringing up fistfulls of muck from the bottom, over and over.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“One day, he went missing. They checked the river first.”

“Let me guess, he’d drowned himself.”

Aunt Greta shook her head. “That might have been better. They did find him floating in the water, but he’d choked to death. His stomach and throat were full of mud.”

I grimaced. What a horrible way to go. “That’s awful, but you can’t blame what happened to him on anything but his own mental illness.”

“He should have left Newport. It’s toxic, especially to those who’ve experienced tragedy. Sometimes I think this place feeds on tragedy.” She fixed me with her patented stare, then rose and began to clear the table. After a few moments, I joined her.

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When I first woke I thought I was still at Aunt Greta’s, in the bed she’d always prepared for me. Then I blinked and the Super 8’s hideous wallpaper hit my eyes like radiation.

I sat up and took a swallow of the beer on the bedside table, trying to ease my crashing headache. Dinner with Greta had been nice—spaghetti was one of her specialties—but the story of Tom Barnes had left a sour taste in my mouth, one I’d tried to rinse away with whiskey.

I dragged myself to the bathroom and took a shower. Afterward I felt more like a human being. I dressed and jumped into the car. A quick visit to a McDonald’s drive-thru took care of breakfast. As I gobbled my McMuffin I narrowed the day’s tasks to two: number one, convince Larry to abandon his plan to confront the Golden Scroll. Number two, find out once and for all if Carla’s spirit still clung to the undead thing sharing Larry’s bed.

A small part of my brain also wanted to have him release Reggie from his servitude. A *very* small part of my brain.

On the way to the house I thought over what Greta had said. She'd been right when it came to Newport's toxicity—but I didn't think my dead parents made me any more vulnerable to the town's weirdness. In fact, in many ways I was part of the problem. I had helped Larry do some terrible things, things that made Newport more dangerous than ever.

And he's still at it.

Larry's new plan involved harvesting the bodies of men who'd died in accidents deep in the mines just north of town. Apparently, they had had no way to retrieve many of the victims, so their corpses had been abandoned in the flooded tunnels. Larry wanted to reanimate them and put together his own personal undead battalion for some sort of apocalyptic war with the Golden Scroll. It sounded insane, but I'd already seen him create a walking skeleton and bring a dead junkie back to life as a surrogate for Carla. The fact that the blame for Carla's death rested squarely on his own shoulders didn't seem to bother Larry much.

I pulled up on Ridgemont and parked behind Reggie's Chrysler again. I walked up the steps and opened the door, not bothering to knock. I'd built up a head of steam and wanted to launch into a righteous diatribe right off the bat. When I entered the living room and saw Reggie standing there, however, the words died in my throat.

The glass ampule and its blue fluid were gone from his neck, the puncture wound now covered by a comically large Band-aid. In a white button-up Reggie looked almost normal, except for the odd cerulean tint of his once-brown eyes. Behind him a polo-shirted Larry lounged in an easy chair. Carla stood nearby, dressed in jean shorts and Chuck Taylors. Above hung several giant spiders, each as big as a pitbull. They crawled around in their huge webs, which covered most of the ceiling.

"Hey, Nick," Reggie said.

I frowned, then glanced at Larry. "He's talking again?"

"Reggie's feeling much better," Larry replied. "He just needs a dose of his medicine every few hours. You know what they say, it does a body good."

I stepped around Reggie and took the other chair. "I think that's milk, not whatever the fuck that blue shit is."

Reggie turned. "What, not even a 'hello'?"

I ignored him. "Is he even alive, Larry?"

"Yup. I told you, he's better than ever....so long as he gets his regular injections."

Reggie stood, ramrod straight, and fell silent.

I tried to get back on track, struggling to disregard both the rigid Reggie and the spiders crawling around above. "Larry, we have to talk about this mineshaft idea of yours—"

"Great, isn't it?" He turned to Carla. "Hon, pass me those land surveys."

Carla took a sheaf of papers from the coffee table and handed them over.

"They're right here," Larry said. His finger stabbed at several locations on the map. "We can visit all of them in one night. We'll drop an erbium disc down each hole and—"

I raised a hand. "Wait. I came here to talk you out of this. We can't steal those men's bodies. It's not right."

Larry looked at me like I'd grown a second head. "You helped me bring Carla back to life. You didn't bat an eyelash when you saw the changes I made to ol' Reg over there. But the idea of messing with some nameless miners from a hundred years ago makes you squeamish? Nicky my friend, you are one odd fellow."

He had me there. Whatever moral compass I'd once possessed had been twisted and warped beyond all recognition. After a few moments of silence, I turned my head. "Reggie!" I barked. "Get me a beer." Drinking it would give me time to think.

He moved obediently to the fridge. Larry grinned like a demon, but I ignored him. My eyes were glued on Carla. She stared back, and for the first time I saw a faint smile on her lips.

As Reggie returned with a Bud, I addressed Larry. "Fuck it, I'm in."

I had to stick around now. I had to know if a trace of my friend still existed inside the walking blonde corpse. If that meant some graves had to be desecrated, so be it.

"Good," Larry said. "Let's get to work."

Part 4 - The Backwoods

The moon hung in the night sky like a pale mirage as Larry brought Reggie's car to a stop where the asphalt ended and a rough trail into the woods began.

The few houses along this end of Wickwire Lane crouched in the dark like predators, their windows unlit and barren. Larry stepped out of the car and peered into the blackness of the forest. Carla emerged from the passenger side, her face expressionless as usual.

I couldn't wait to escape the claustrophobic back seat. Larry had injected Reggie with a hypodermic filled with blue *veve* juice at the house. The concoction made him docile and compliant, but sitting next to his motionless, mannequin-like presence made my skin crawl.

Unnatural heat had shrouded Newport all month; beads of sweat broke out across my forehead as soon as I stepped out of the air-conditioned car.

What the fuck am I doing here?

But I already knew the answer to that question—I had to find out if part of Carla's soul had been trapped inside the blonde zombie. Nothing else mattered to me anymore.

"Get my stuff from the trunk, Reg," Larry ordered.

Reggie went to the back of the car and dragged out a large wooden box containing two dozen eight-inch erbium plates Larry and I had charged up on midsummer's night. Reggie put the box on the pavement then leaned back in and grabbed the burlap sack containing Mr. Bones. He dumped the pieces of the skeleton next to the crate then stood like a robot awaiting further instructions.

I followed Larry to the rear bumper. He waved a hand over the pile of human remains and made a noise deep in his throat—a sound halfway between a sneeze and someone choking to death.

The bones rapidly assembled themselves into a complete skeleton and stood, its jaw clattering in a disturbing manner as it rose.

Larry handed me an elm rod. "Just in case, Nicky. The woods around here don't always appreciate visitors." I took the wand and nodded.

He turned to Carla. "Anyone spying on us, sweetheart?"

Preternatural eyes scanned the neighborhood and the fringes of the forest. She shook her head.

“Good. Bones will bring the *ouanga* disks. Reggie, you stay back here with him and keep an eye out. Nicky, you’re up front with Carla and me.” He gestured toward the overgrown cut in the deep grass. “This path takes us directly to the first abandoned mineshaft, less than a mile north. Once we seed that one we’ll move on to the next few, which are a bit trickier to find.”

Our flashlight beams glinted off spiderwebs criss-crossing the path as we trudged through the high grass. I brushed aside their numerous, bulbous owners—after the monstrosities infesting Larry’s place, no normal arachnid fazed me. Carla plucked a particularly large specimen from its web and popped its plump body between her fingers like a grape. She brought the twitching remains of the spider to her mouth and slurped its juices hungrily.

Larry grinned. “Tasty, honey?”

Jesus Christ.

Behind me, Mr. Bones carried the heavy wooden crate with mechanical precision. Reggie followed the skeleton, his unnatural blue eyes staring straight ahead. A spider crawled up his neck and into his hair, but he didn’t seem to mind.

I edged closer to Carla and she turned her head toward me. Larry was busy perusing Google Maps on his phone, so I decided to take a chance.

“Carla,” I whispered. “Is it really you?”

Our eyes locked. I thought I saw her shrug in the darkness, but I couldn’t be sure.

We walked for another ten minutes, then Larry stopped. “Here we are,” he said. Across a clearing a rotten wooden structure loomed over a rebar-covered chasm. We surrounded the pit, a black abyss that reminded me of Lovecraftian portals in the cheap horror novels I read by the boxful as an undergrad. Larry grabbed Carla’s arm and guided her to the edge of the hole. “Any bodies down there?” he asked.

Carla looked in, then nodded.

“Perfect.” He took one of the enchanted metal platters from the box and dropped it into the hole, slipping it between the rebar covering the shaft. Far

below, I heard a splash. Larry chanted a few words and smiled. "That ought to do it. Let's go."

He led us over brackish bogland and through overgrown bushes, deep into the Maryland backwoods. The path had long since been reclaimed by the undergrowth, but he seemed to know exactly which way to go. Finally, after a twenty-five-minute trek, we found another derelict structure—this one with an uncovered opening half-concealed by sedge grass and weeds. Nearby we located two more boreholes, these even more well-hidden.

Larry chanted over three of the disks, then handed two to me and one to Reggie. "Put them in," he said. "Just like I showed you back there."

I went to the first hidden pit, being careful not to step anywhere near the hanging sods marking its edge. I tossed the smooth metal plate down into the shaft, then moved to the second gaping void and dropped in the other disk. As it left my hand I heard a scream and whirled.

A dark shape, a thing of shadow halfway between a bear and a gorilla, had emerged from one of the pits and gotten hold of Reggie. Caught in my flashlight beam, I watched as it brought its hairy, fanged muzzle close to his neck and bit deep.

My heart pounded at the sight of the thing, a revolting monstrosity of matted black fur and malevolent eyes. "Larry!" I shouted. "What the fuck is it?"

Larry took a step forward and raised his wand. "A lougarou. Dad told me the witches exterminated these bastards." A bolt of brightness seared my eyes as Larry released the power contained in the sliver of wood. The black monster roared in pain when the bolt struck it—an inhuman sound that made the marrow of my bones vibrate.

The thing released its victim and retreated back down into the mineshaft, moving with liquid swiftness despite its bulk.

Shaken, I ran to Reggie, his upper body painted red with blood. His neck was a ragged mess, with four deep puncture wounds and torn flesh around them. Reggie's breathing came in gulps, but besides that he showed no sign of panic or even concern at his injuries. He sat up and stared at me.

"We need to get him to a hospital," I said.

Larry walked past. “No. I’ll fix him up back at the house.” He and Carla went to the edge of the lougarou’s den and peered in. “I’m more worried about that beast. It’s going to mess up my plan.”

Fear turned to rage inside me. Reggie was an utter prick, but even he didn’t deserve to bleed to death. “You selfish asshole! His neck’s been ripped open, and you couldn’t care less.” I wondered if Larry actually valued anyone but himself.

He smiled in the stifling moonlight. “Relax, Nicky. Reggie will be fine. The veve juice makes him tougher than normal. He’s really hard to kill so long as he gets his injections. Like I said, it does a body good.”

I grabbed Reggie’s hand and helped him to his feet. He stood, bleeding, in silence. “Let’s get back to the car,” Larry said. He turned his back and walked away; Mr. Bones’ macabre figure followed obediently behind, still carrying the splintery crate.

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Larry washed out Reggie’s wounds and sewed up his flesh, muttering to himself as Carla stood nearby, her face devoid of interest.

“Fucking monster thinks it owns those old mines? Like hell.” He paused and shot me a glance. “Nicky, how about passing me that roll of gauze.” I tossed it to him, and he went back to his ranting. “I’ll show it who’s the fucking boss in Newport.”

Great, another Larry Pike pissing contest. I wonder who’ll pay the price this time?

“What was that thing, anyway?” I asked him.

“I told you, it’s a lougarou—a shape-shifting blood drinker. It’s probably had its lair out there since the mines were abandoned, maybe for a hundred years. We’ll have to kill it.”

“How are we supposed to do that? You emptied an entire wand, and it didn’t come close to putting that thing down.”

He looked up from his suturing. “Next time, I’ll have home field advantage.”
Huh? “What do you mean?”

Larry gestured toward Reggie. “The lougarou marked ol’ Reg for death, Nicky. It’ll follow him here. It would follow him to the ends of the Earth—once they fixate on prey, they never give up.”

Great. I went to the window, but all I could see outside was the streetlight on the corner and the front end of my rented Cruze.

“Don’t worry,” Larry continued. “We’ll have a special surprise waiting for that ugly motherfucker. Won’t we, honey?” He patted Carla’s rear and laughed, a maniac’s cackle.

Not for the first time, I considered where I’d ended up in life. I wondered how much higher I’d allow my mistakes to pile up.

In the chair, Reggie sat in silence as Larry closed his wounds with rough stitches.

Part 5 - Strangers In The Night

I lay in the darkness of Larry's guestroom, staring up at the ceiling and ruminating on the debacle my life had become. Outside my locked and bolted door dog-sized spiders scampered and chittered, their clawed feet scratching against the hardwood. I assumed the creatures were searching for prey, some kind of vermin—at least, I hoped it was just vermin. Larry himself had retired an hour previous, taking Carla with him into the master bedroom. I tried to ignore as best I could the squeaking mattress sounds that soon reached my ears.

I'd moved into the House—no need for the hotel room now. The charade of my own independence had ended with Carla's shrug in the woods. I wasn't in Newport to talk Larry out of his plans or to try to minimize the damage he caused. Who did I think I was fooling with that shit? Carla captivated my full attention. Did the blonde zombie contain a portion of my friend's soul? I had to find out, and to hell with anyone who tried to get in my way.

Until I had the answers to my questions, I'd sleep in Larry's house. I'd help the crazy bastard wrangle corpses and battle monsters. I'd ignore the terrible squeaking of his mattress.

Whatever it took.

A crescent moon sent silver rays through the dirty window, and for a moment I thought I could feel the eldritch energies surging through the ley lines that converged on the property. I fingered the elm wand laying atop the blanket next to me, within easy reach. An idea struck me: what would happen if I used it on Larry—if I perhaps released the energy stored in its carved wood directly into the back of his skull?

Maybe Newport would be a bit safer. Maybe I'd worry less about Aunt Greta, living alone in a town infested with horrors.

Maybe Carla would be mine.

I blinked in the moonlit gloom. Where had that thought come from? Even when she'd been herself, Carla had been with Reggie, not me. I'd never been more than a friend to her. The fact that I'd loved her from the moment I'd first set eyes on her only made the reality of our platonic existence even more stark.

After a long groan from Larry, the mattress's squeals finally came to an end. I unclenched my fists in the dark, muscles aching from unconscious strain.

Some minutes later, I heard a door creak open and soft footfalls in the hallway. I remembered a basement room and a twitching, headless mouse held to lips moist with blood. *She must be hungry again.*

But the footsteps halted outside my room.

I held my breath and listened, but no further sounds reached my ears. Even the spiders had apparently ceased their nightly prowl. Slowly I took the wand, got out of bed, and approached the door. With my ear to the wood, I strained to hear something—anything—but the house had fallen silent. With shaking fingers I twisted the bolt and unlocked the handle. I took hold of the doorknob and gingerly turned it.

Behind the door stood Carla, naked. The stitched wound that had killed her bulged beneath Larry's mystic tattoos. Moonlight reflected from blue eyes locked unerringly onto my own. The breath caught in my throat as we stared at one another—I felt as if I'd been rendered immobile, as statue-like as Reggie after an injection of *veve* juice.

Without conscious thought, I raised one hand toward her pale skin. I might have actually touched her, but the glint of Larry's saliva on her nipples caused me to shrink back, my brain boiling with emotions as volatile as napalm. I struggled to master myself and come up with some sort of plan.

Before I could figure out what to do, the sound of breaking glass shattered our frozen tableau.

It came from the bedroom next to mine.

I ran past Carla and twisted the knob on Reggie's door.

Something far darker than nighttime gloom sat perched on the ledge outside the smashed window, reaching through the iron bars Larry had installed. The thing's arm had shifted and stretched, now resembling a tentacle more than a limb. The macabre appendage had clamped onto Reggie and slowly dragged his limp form closer and closer to the window. Fangs glimmered there, yellow and vicious. As I watched they lunged forward and seized Reggie's arm.

On instinct alone I yelled for Larry and grabbed Reggie's feet, desperately trying to keep him away from the monster. Carla lunged forward and seized its

tentacle. The loulgarou released Reggie and wrapped itself around her arm instead. She hissed and struggled to free herself, the thing making horrible growls as it fought her. I raised Larry's wand and gestured. The enchanted wood spat a gout of bright fire, striking the loulgarou in the chest. The energy staggered the creature but it held on, pulling Carla almost within range of its jaws.

Larry burst into the room wearing heart-covered boxers and a dirty bathrobe.

He closed the distance to the window, raised Reggie's nine-millimeter pistol, and fired several shots into the loulgarou's face.

Disgusting fluid sprayed from the creature, coating us in warm gore. The thing howled in pain and rage, released Carla, and slipped down out of sight toward the lawn below.

"Fuck," Larry said. He wiped at his eyes, then smiled. "I got the bastard, Nicky!"

My ears still rang from the gunshots, and my adrenaline-infused muscles felt like coiled springs. Carla stood next to me, peering out the window with casual indifference. I pointed at Reggie, bleeding on the bed. "Is he all right? Why isn't he moving?"

Larry grinned. "I gave him a triple dose of his medicine. That much veve makes ol' Reg a bit passive, but it'll also poison the loulgarou, slow it down." He looked at the window. "Grab the plastic tarp from the lab, Nicky, and cover that hole. I'll get dressed and we'll follow the beast and finish it off." He left the room, then stuck his head back into the doorway. "Come get dressed, baby," he told the naked Carla. She glanced at me for a moment, then followed Larry back to their bedroom.

With effort, I managed to get my emotions back under control. When I felt I'd regained as much of my composure as possible under the circumstances, I ran through the hall and down the staircase, dodging spiderwebs by instinct as I headed for the basement.

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As we trudged through the woods under a starlit sky, I edged closer to Larry. "Will Reggie be okay alone in the house?"

"Relax, Nicky," Larry said. "Bones makes an excellent security guard. Not to mention my little pets. Nobody's going to break in, trust me."

I shook my head. "I mean, is he going to bleed to death? That thing did a number on his arm."

Larry waved a hand. "I'll stitch it up later. He'll be fine." He turned to Carla, who led the way through the trees. "That's it, honey. Don't lose the scent."

"Wait, isn't that thing going back to its lair in the mineshaft?"

"The shafts are over there." Larry pointed toward the east. "You never got your Boy Scout navigation badge, did you?" He laughed. "The loup-garou is heading somewhere else."

Another thought popped into my head. "What about those gunshots? What if a neighbor calls the police?"

"That old busybody next door has never filed a noise complaint—and I've had a few explosions down in the lab. I doubt anyone else heard anything. Now can you please concentrate on the task at hand?"

Before I could reply, we passed through a gap between two trees and into a wide clearing. A figure stood there, a hooded woman wearing a shawl. In the darkness her features were inscrutable, but her voice carried the distinctive lilt of Jamaican patois.

"Who are you people?" she said. "And what are you doing out here?"

Larry quickly handed me a wand as he replied. "Trust me, lady—we're performing a public service. Besides, I could ask you the same question."

The figure stepped forward and dropped her hood, revealing long, dark hair. "My name is Toni Williams," she said. "And these woods belong to the covens."

Part 6 - The Well In The Woods

"This isn't Andersburg," Larry said. "You people have no authority here."

Toni raised her lantern. Her eyes swept over me, lingered on Carla, then moved to Larry. "It's you and your apprentice who have no authority. Not to animate corpses and stir up evils like the monster you're chasing."

I blinked. *His apprentice?* "Listen, I'm not—"

"Who do you think you are, witch?" Larry cut in. "Since when does your little knitting circle do anything useful? Where were you last year when the Golden Scroll attacked me?"

This was getting us nowhere. I stepped in front of Larry and faced the robed woman. "Let's cool things down a bit," I suggested. "I think we're on the same side."

Neither spoke, so I pressed on. "I'm Nick Delacourt. You said your name's Toni? Let's work together here."

The witch stabbed a finger at Carla. "Did you help him create that thing?"

"Carla's my girlfriend," Larry snapped. "You got something to say about her?"

Toni's eyes flashed. "Lawrence Pike. The so-called Necromancer of Newport, and his little entourage. Always causing trouble, making messes that someone else has to clean up. What happened this time?"

I spoke before Larry could answer. "The creature attacked us at the old mineshafts."

"We call them shapeshifters," Toni said. "The French say lougharou. What were you doing out in the middle of nowhere, hanging around those abandoned mines?"

"None of your business," Larry told her. "By the way, I thought the covens cleared lougharous out of Maryland back in the eighteen-hundreds. Sloppy work—you missed one."

"I'll take care of it," she replied. "Go back to town."

Larry bristled. "You think I take orders from you?"

"The last thing I need is clumsy amateurs getting in my way."

"Oh, and you witches are the professionals?"

“Yes.”

“That’s funny, because my father told me all about your organization. He said that your leader back then—the big warlock—was batshit crazy.”

Toni frowned. “That was ages ago. Ronald Loach is long dead, just like your father.”

Larry’s face reddened and his knuckles went white gripping his wand. If I didn’t want a fight on my hands, I had to do something fast.

“Knock it off. This monster attacked us tonight at Larry’s place and mauled someone. We need to make sure it doesn’t do it again. Will you help us track it down or not?”

“There’s no need. I know exactly where it went.”

Larry looked slightly calmer, but his voice held a note of petulance. “Were you planning on telling us or what?”

“The shapeshifter is wounded and poisoned. I can feel its rage and desperation. It’s going to the place its ancestors came from—we call it the Sealed Well.”

Eagerness crept into Larry’s voice. “That thing really exists?”

Toni nodded. “A portal to a dark place. It was already here when the first Europeans crossed the ocean. Witches closed it, doing a great favor for the people of this state. It didn’t matter, though, they hung us anyway.” Anger flashed across her face. “Now my wife and I watch over the Well. Which is why I felt the disturbance out here tonight.”

“How far is it?”

“Less than a mile.”

Larry rubbed his chin. “Then let’s go.”

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Toni had called it a well, but it didn’t look like it brought fresh water up from the deep. Its dark stones had a different purpose. Arranged in a rough pyramid and covered with runes, they radiated an aura of menace and immense age. At its top a metal slab had been placed, its substance welded to the rocks below. The

iron of the slab had melted and twisted until it flowed between the stones and became entwined with them in an unbreakable bond—an eternal seal.

Larry began taking pictures, his phone's flash filling the darkness with stark white light. "Why doesn't this place show up on Google Maps?" he asked.

"We cast a glamor on it a hundred years ago," Toni replied. "No one can see it or find it without our permission. Even you two won't be able to get back here after you leave."

Larry grinned. "I bet Carla will."

Toni glanced at Carla's tattoos but said nothing.

The closer we came to the rock pile, the stronger the feeling of malevolence grew. Hatred seeped out of every crack in the stones, making me feel like turning and scrambling back into the surrounding trees. Instead I clutched my wand and continued forward, following Larry and Toni. Carla walked at my side, occasionally casting enigmatic glances my way.

When we'd closed to within fifty feet of the Sealed Well, a dark figure stepped out from behind the mound. Its flat face still bore the bullet wounds Larry had given it, and it staggered as if drunk. Its eyes, now tinged blue from Reggie's *veve*-filled blood, burned with anger. I tensed and raised my wand as I saw its bulk approach, as black and malleable as molasses. With a roar, the shapeshifter charged.

Toni gestured, and a ghostly creature materialized next to her, quickly solidifying. I'd never seen a familiar spirit before, but I'd read about them in one of Larry's books. This one looked like a wolverine with huge, six-inch talons and a fang-filled snout.

"Kuyo," she commanded. "Kill." The feral familiar surged forward, snarling, and the two adversaries collided in a storm of teeth and claws. I moved in quickly with my wand, trying to target the *lougrou*'s head, but I couldn't get a clear shot. I hesitated, and with terrifying speed the shapeshifter tossed away Kuyo's torn body and came for me.

The apish monster loomed up, its arms extending into grasping tentacles and its mouth opening into a horrifying, sharklike maw. I shrank back and braced for the end.

Carla tackled the *lougrou* like a linebacker, saving my life.

The creature, strong as a bear, shrugged her off, then seized her with both tentacles. It squeezed, grinding her bones together hard enough to cause cracking sounds.

I crawled desperately back to my feet. *Carla!*

Toni shouted a word and argent power flew from her fingertips, staggering the beast and forcing it to drop Carla and lurch backward. I triggered my wand a moment later, it's brief brilliance pushing the monster back further, sizzling and pockmarking its ebon hide. Toni, weakened by her spell, watched helplessly as the shapeshifter surged toward me again, its jaws snapping.

Before I could react, Larry leapt from behind the Sealed Well and fired one shot to the back of the creature's head, blowing it open. Inside lay black, rotten brain matter. Ichor leaked from the gaping wound as the monster froze in its tracks. A fetid odor filled the air, causing my stomach to churn. I crouched and vomited as the creature collapsed to the ground. Larry stepped forward holding Reggie's gun, a huge grin on his face.

"Silver bullets, blessed by an angel. I got them off the dark web." He watched the lougarou shrivel and deflate like a balloon. "Surprise, motherfucker."

When I reached Carla and offered her my hand, she took it. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and limped out of the bushes. Things scraped and rasped inside her body as she staggered back into the clearing. Larry saw my expression and smiled. "Don't worry, she'll be right as rain in no time."

My emotions roiled like a summer thunderhead, bitter and dangerous. Before I wrapped my hands around the bastard's throat I turned and went to where Toni knelt over Kuyo's motionless form, chanting. Slowly, a golden aura blossomed around her, then enveloped the wounded familiar. Kuyo's injuries grew less ragged as the shining power suffused him. When Toni finished her intonation her nimbus faded and I edged closer.

"Will he be alright?"

She looked up. "Kuyo is a warrior. He will heal."

I placed a hand on her shoulder. "Thanks for your help."

Toni stared at me. "Be careful, Nick," she said. "Larry Pike is a selfish man, like his father before him. Don't let him drag you down with him."

It was good advice, but it couldn't change the situation. As a scientist I considered fate a crock, but when it came to me and Larry the concept held merit. A blind man could see where our relationship was headed.

I nodded at Toni, but before I could utter a word Larry called out from behind me.

"Let's go, Nicky, we have work to do." He walked back toward the forest, away from the Sealed Well and its clearing, dragging Carla along.

I followed, as usual.

Epilogue - Decisions Made

Professor Edberg assured me that my leave of absence would be approved by the dean, and by the time I hung up, I was reasonably certain I wouldn't be kicked out of the department and lose a whole semester of work. I promised him I'd return to the university no later than Monday, November sixth, and that I would work double shifts assisting undergrads in his lab for the rest of the year to make up the time.

One loose end down, another to go. I needed to talk with Aunt Greta and own up to everything. I had no idea how that conversation would go, but I could no longer maintain the house of lies I'd constructed. Greta took me in as a teen after my parents had been killed by that drunken asshole—I owed her more than deception and falsehood. I planned to join her for dinner and come clean.

I looked around the bedroom from my perch on the rickety desk chair. A person could almost pretend they were in a normal house. I mean, if you paid attention you might be able to hear the scrabbling of doberman-sized spiders out in the hall, but only if you knew what to listen for.

When I opened the door, one of them had wrapped a mouse or rat into a silken ball the size of a turnip. The thing hissed at me, and without thinking I kicked it hard. The feel of its tough but yielding carapace against my shoe disgusted me, and as it scampered off with its prize I gagged.

When I arrived at the kitchen, Larry was playing gin rummy with Reggie. I wondered what kind of enjoyment Larry got out of the farce, since under the influence of veve juice Reggie would show him his cards without complaint if asked. I ignored them and passed through the living room, headed for the library. I pushed thick webs aside and entered the bookshelf-filled room, my eyes slowly acclimatizing to the gloom created by the painted-over windows.

Carla reclined on one of the sofas, as motionless as a waxen statue. She watched as I approached and sat next to her.

"You feeling okay?" I asked. "Did he fix your hip?"

She nodded.

I took a deep breath. Everything hung on this—the course of my life and the course of Larry's.

“Are you Carla Martinez?” Once I started, I couldn’t stop the questions from pouring out. “Do you want to be here? Do you want to be with *him*?”

She stared at me without responding. Finally she shrugged. “I don’t know.”

My mouth fell open. She could speak? From the moment Larry brought her corpse to life she’d never uttered a word. It seemed doing so took effort—her voice sounded strained, like a mechanism close to seizure. I also couldn’t parse her meaning: did her answer refer to one of my questions? All of them?

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached out and took her cold hand. She didn’t react, but her ice-blue eyes flicked to mine. Carla had long, elegant fingers; Larry had painted her nails a pale pink. “I’ll stay and help,” I told her. “I owe it to you. Once Halloween’s over, though, he has to pay for his crimes. I’m going to make sure he does.”

The dead girl didn’t reply, but neither did she snatch her hand away. We sat for a time, Larry’s braying laughter coming intermittently from the kitchen.

Finally, she spoke again.

“I’m hungry.”

To be concluded in...

The Halloween House: October Surprise