

## The Halloween House: October Surprise

### Part 1 - Aunt Greta

I sat in my aunt's sunroom, watching the glow on the horizon fade from red to deep, fever-dream purple. A sip of lemonade fortified me for the conversation to come, as welcome as a stroll through thornbushes.

"You remember my friend Larry Pike? I never told you this, but he's obsessed with the supernatural."

Greta's brow creased. She set her own drink aside and leaned forward in her wicker chair. "I knew his father. A mean drunk who beat his son. He also got mixed up in that sort of thing—I'm not surprised Larry followed in his footsteps. I trust you've cut ties."

"No, Aunt Greta. In fact I've been helping him with some of his experiments whenever I'm in town. I've avoided telling you the truth; that's why I haven't been staying with you."

I expected her to be hurt by this admission. Instead I saw alarm on her face.

"Nicholas!" she hissed. "Don't get dragged into that world. It will wreck your life—I've seen it happen before."

I shifted in my seat. "It's too late for that kind of warning. I'm already in it up to here." I paused, then shook my head. It was time I faced the cold, hard truth.

"No, scratch that. I'm in over my head."

Greta sat back, staring at me in silence for a few moments. When she spoke again, her voice had a different tone—wistful and filled with remorse.

"Long ago, before you were even born, I dated a man with a dark reputation. As a young woman I thought I should give all suitors a fair chance. Your mother advised me to refuse his advances, but I ignored her and to her credit she later refrained from any 'I told you so's.'" Greta paused, shaking her head slowly. "How I miss you, Barbara." I felt a surge of sadness and loss at the mention of my mom's name. Not a day went by when I didn't think about her and Dad, and curse the drunken asshole who took their lives out on Highway 3. Maybe all this shit with Larry was just my way of keeping busy so I didn't go insane with grief or

smuggle one of those plastic pistols into Jessup state prison, find the driver, and do what came naturally, so to speak.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Greta's eyes flicked up. "I went on the date, Nicholas. Stubbornness is a family trait, after all." Her smile lacked humor. "His name was Ronald Loach. Very charming, and he dressed well. Not the sort of man anyone would call overly handsome, but with a certain rugged appeal. He took me to dinner at Mumford's, next to the old train station—both buildings have been gone for years now. He got steak and I ordered a salad, not that I paid much attention to my food. He told me about his family tree, the history of Newport—obviously he had made a diligent study of the past. Then the conversation veered into the unusual. I didn't feel it appropriate for him to talk about his relatives who practiced black magic."

I tried to imagine Greta on a date, but couldn't quite do it. Let alone with some nutter who brought up sorcery.

"I suppose he sensed my discomfort, because he let the topic go. Later, as we strolled along the George Street canal at sunset, it came up again, in a way." She shuddered, and I felt guilty for causing her to revisit disturbing memories. "A homeless man sat on the edge of the canal, one of the hobos who frequented the trainyards in those days. He had a mangy dog with him, its leash wrapped around his wrist. As we passed, the animal fixed its eyes on Ronald and growled. Its owner—either asleep or too soused to notice—didn't react to its hostility. Just as the dog lunged, Ronald said an ugly word I didn't quite catch." Greta reached over and touched my hand. "I swear to you, Nicholas, this is the truth. When he spoke that word the dog instantly turned on its master. It locked its jaws onto the sleeping man's face and began shaking his head back and forth, spraying blood across the boardwalk. The awful screams drew passersby who desperately tried to help, but by the time they managed to haul the beast off him the hobo had lost one eye and most of his nose and lips. The bloody mask of his face and exposed skull haunts my dreams even today."

"Jesus Christ."

Greta nodded. "Ronald's reaction chilled me most. He simply took my hand and continued on. He kept talking as if a man hadn't been horribly mutilated in front of us thirty seconds before. I must have been in shock because I didn't

mention it either. We strolled back to his car and he drove me home not long afterward. Needless to say, no second date occurred.”

“Thank fuck.”

“Don’t swear, Nicholas. I avoided Ronald after that, and luckily he didn’t seek me out. He continued his dalliance with the black arts, however—I heard he joined some kind of coven and ended up dying in a mysterious fire years later.” She fixed me with a stern gaze. “That sort of end comes to most who dabble in the occult. Your friend Larry isn’t immune...and neither are you.”

I drained my lemonade and sighed. “I know.”

“Then quit it. Tell Larry and whoever else is involved—the Finlay boy, I presume?—that you’re done taking part. Quit before it’s too late.”

I stood and she did likewise. I embraced her, feeling another rush of sadness and longing deep inside. I pushed it back down and released my only living relative.

“I think it’s already too late, Aunt Greta. There are only three weeks until Halloween. I promise you, though: after the thirty-first I’m finished with all this shit, one way or the other.”

Greta looked at me, her expression troubled.

“I hope you are, Nicholas. And I hope it’s finished with *you*.”

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Late evening on Ridgemont Street. The Halloween House looms over its corner like a crouching giant, welcoming me back to hell. As I open the rusty gate and start up the pathway I see Larry and Carla waiting on the front lawn. The master of the house sits in a cheap plastic chair, wearing his customary filthy bathrobe. Carla stands behind him, in jeans and a tank top, motionless. Still no way to determine if the reanimated corpse contains some vestige of my friend.

As I approach, Larry reaches into a dented cooler and hands me a beer.

“Nicky! Just in time, have a seat.”

I take the Bud and slump into the second chair. There’s no resistance inside me now. Events will play out as they will—I don’t much care either way. All that

matters is getting to the bottom of the mystery surrounding Carla. I glance at her and see cold blue eyes staring back. “Where’s Reggie?” I ask.

Carla points at the house, croaks a single word. “Inside.”

“That's right, baby,” Larry says. He reaches up to caress her cheek in a way that makes my blood boil. “Detective Finlay will join us in a bit. He’s taking his medicine.” The blue veve juice keeps Reggie docile and compliant. It also makes the asshole super-strong and nearly immune to pain—a useful little bonus.

The stars shine down with their customary lack of compassion as I crack my beer and take a long swallow. The night air is warm for October; the breeze carries with it the brine scent of the nearby ocean. Somewhere, a dog howls—a lost, forlorn sound. It fits Newport to a tee.

“This time, I’m ready for them,” Larry says, addressing both myself and the universe as a whole. “This will be *my* Halloween.”

I take another gulp of beer under the uncaring stars. The fact that Larry might be proven correct is the thing that scares me most.

***To be continued in part 2***