



Legacy
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By Richard Stuart

Where the hell am I?

Abigail eased the rented Dodge Stratus to a stop at the next intersection and snatched up her map of Boston from the passenger seat. She compared the abstract coloured lines to physical turns she had already made, revising her mental atlas. If she was right, the street she wanted should only be a couple more turns away.

So far, Hyde Park was Hollywood back-lot perfect. Substantial conifers enveloped Queen Anne houses, their shingle porches glowing with the warm orange light that poured from their windows. Abigail was almost tempted to check the shrubbery for butcher-knife wielding maniacs in carnival masks. Instead, she dropped the map beside her again, on top of a dog-eared manila folder, and then eased the car around the corner.

Up ahead, she noticed a group of figures making their way from house to house. Drawing level with them, she saw that they were a horde of ghosts, ghouls, goblins and demons. Not far behind, a couple of parents kept an eye on them.

Americans made such a big deal of Halloween. It wasn't like back in England, where a couple of rubber creepy-crawlies and a plastic pitchfork constituted a party. These people went hell-for-leather in celebration of the denizens of the night. Abigail wondered how long that might continue, if they knew that the monster under the bed crawled out and watched them while they slept, stroking their hair and breathing in their nightmares; or that the next time they reached for their coat, the creature in the closet might drag them into its own twisted Narnia, before drinking their souls.

The night really did have a thousand eyes, which meant there were at least five hundred gaping, salivating maws out there, too. And *that* only held true if you counted the things with *two* eyes and *one* mouth. Abigail had learned, from childhood, to be vigilant against such things, to look for their footprints in the seemingly ordinary. Just such a set of tracks had brought her across the Atlantic almost two weeks ago.

She had discovered some old research papers, in one of the many boxes stored in her mother's attic. Papers her father had compiled. Her sudden interest in her family's past was the reason that she and her mother were no longer on speaking terms. They hadn't really had a civil

relationship since Abigail began her doctorate in Parapsychology. Her mother feared that she was following in her father's footsteps. To be honest, her mother was probably right.

After several minutes of raised voices and harsh words, followed by the slamming of the front door, her mother's footsteps faded into the street. Then Abigail climbed the stairs to the attic.

What remained of her father's old papers and books were stored there. She felt like an archaeologist, excavating artefacts and dusting off relics, attempting to understand the past – her past. The deeper she dug, the more things started to make sense, the more her past came into focus.

She made a right turn and noticed the sign: Rymer Street.

Finally! Driving slowly, like some lethargic curb-crawler, Abigail checked the house numbers.

Sixty Four was a pretty Victorian home with a steeply pitched, irregularly shaped roof. A child's red bicycle was propped against the side wall.

Fifty Two had a one-story high porch which extended along the front and side. A metal wind chime hung from one corner, sparkling in the light from the streetlamps.

Forty Seven looked dead inside.

Abigail brought the Dodge to a halt on the opposite side of the road, turned off the engine, and stared at the house. It skulked between two seemingly identical homes, but the signs were there if you knew where to look. The front yard was deliberately nondescript. Nothing made it stand out: no unusual plants, no garden furniture, and no ornamentation; great pains had been taken to ensure that no-one looked twice in its direction. The same went for the façade of the house: it was a generic, faded grey-white. There were no embellishments of any kind, not even a porch light. Absolutely nothing drew the eye a second time.

In Abigail's opinion, it was exactly the kind of place that needed to be watched. Anyone who made that much effort to make their home invisible *had* to be up to no good.

Unlike the other houses in the street, *Forty Seven* lay in complete darkness. No soft glow crept out around the curtains and no porch light issued a warm welcome to visitors. Most of the neighbours had at least made some concession to the season, but not even a lone, illuminated plastic pumpkin interrupted the subtle shroud that lay over the building.

It was almost as if the inhabitant's nature had infected the place. The corrupt soul of the creature within seemed to have overflowed with each new crime, staining its surroundings and tainting the house forever.

How could the locals not see the spiritual pollution spewing out, creeping towards their own homes, threatening to infect them, too?

Abigail's father had warned her that one of her greatest foes would not be the sharp teeth or razor talons of her prey, but the effortless apathy of those she ultimately sought to protect. The normal people, who simply refused to see for themselves exactly what went on around them. It was the reason her family had come to call the general public *The Blind*.

'Tell The Blind as little as you can get away with. Lie to them if you have to. Do whatever it takes to get the job done. They won't believe the whole truth.'

Her father's advice, passed on down the line from his own great-great-grandfather, was why she had ended up outside the house on Rymer Street: she lied to the police.

She told them she was writing a paper for her professorship. Dropping the words *Oxford* and *Cambridge* into the conversation helped. A startling number of the people she spoke to seemed to think they were the same place. Still more of them thought she meant Cambridge Massachusetts.

Eventually, she was put in touch with a very helpful gentleman named Bob, within the State Records Office. Abigail's shameless flirting helped to unlock a surprising amount of information, not all of which should have been released to a member of the public. She suspected her accent may have helped, as Bob turned out to be something of an anglophile. All she had to do, in the end, was agree to show him around London when he finally managed to get over to England.

She slid the manila folder out from under the discarded map and fished a small torch from the inside pocket of her coat.

Stapled inside the cover was the yellowed notepaper that she had pulled from the bottom of one of the boxes in her mother's attic. Her father's faded handwriting listed a number of events, in date order. His notes were the reason she was here. She wanted to complete the investigation he hadn't had the chance to begin.

Photocopied reports and newspaper clippings, courtesy of Bob, filled the file. They revealed a haphazard history of murders that spanned the entire state. Abigail flipped through information that she had read so often she knew most of it by heart. Even so, she felt she had to go over it again. This close to her quarry's lair, she wanted to be absolutely certain she was right.

The first death took place in 1911. A young woman was found in a copse of trees on the outskirts of Salem, her body burned beyond all recognition. Two more followed, over the next few months. Briefly, there

was what the newspapers of the time described as a *Witch Hunt Panic*, as authorities feared someone with an unhealthy regard for the area's history had begun their own unholy crusade. When no more immolated bodies materialised, the alarm died away and, after a while, no-one seemed to worry that the culprit had never been found.

In the late 1930s, four more bodies were discovered during the construction of the Quabbin reservoir. No-one was sure how long they had been there, in part because they had also been burned. Due to the existing furore involved with relocating over two thousand people to accommodate the reservoir, officials chose to keep the discovery quiet. A discrete investigation was conducted, but turned up no clues as to the victims' identities. Again, the killer was never found.

It was a pattern that repeated throughout the next five decades. Bodies were discarded and burned, and no-one was ever charged with the murders; no-one credible, at least. There seemed a disturbing trend to blame the nearest Black Male, and Abigail wondered just how much *local justice* hadn't made it into the official records.

By 1992, however, Forensic Science had advanced somewhat. It became much more difficult to burn a body and get away with it. A man named Wallace was charged with five murders, in and around the city of Lowell. His defence lawyers submitted a plea of Insanity. Reports said he used to mutter a lot about a dark presence that whispered to him in his dreams. He swallowed his own tongue, whilst undergoing treatment at a secure psychiatric hospital, at the age of twenty-seven. Obviously, it didn't occur to The Blind to connect his supposed crimes with those of earlier eras. Why would they?

For seventy years, similar crimes had been perpetrated across the state. Death and fire seemed to go hand in hand, and Abigail could see the flickering shadows they cast; shadows that coalesced into a *dark presence*, an unseen hand, conducting the proceedings. She didn't doubt that other bodies lay out in the night somewhere, still to be discovered. Wallace had been nothing more than a puppet, a weak-minded thrall for the authorities to blame.

Abigail knew who the real culprit was. Bob had told her, though he was unaware of the fact. He copied a number of documents for her to use in her supposed thesis on the *Psychology of Body Disposal*. Amongst them were interviews, conducted by police officers, with Wallace's known associates. Most of them were of little interest, but Ed Larsen was different. He and Wallace lived in the same tenement block in

Charlestown for several months. Of itself, that didn't seem too odd until Abigail went back over the reports from earlier eras.

Every once in a while, the name Larsen appeared, and the more she looked, the more she saw him lurking in the background. In 1911, Mr. Larsen was a clerk in a Salem hardware store. In 1930, E. Larsen was a small time reporter covering the Quabbin reservoir's construction. In 1960, Edward Larsen was a cost assessor for a Cape Cod boat building concern. In 1985, a bank teller in Lenox. By 1992, he worked in a pharmacy. Mere coincidence played no part in proceedings. It was obvious, to Abigail at least, that this monster had murdered his way across the state for at least a century.

Now, the man who lived at number Forty-Seven worked in a funeral home. Which meant he'd found the perfect way to dispose of the bodies. He no longer needed to burn the remains, in an effort to conceal the cause of death, he just had to send out a sealed coffin with an extra passenger, and let nature do its work.

She switched off the torch, dropped the folder and stared at the house. The thought of him getting away with it any longer made her stomach churn with anger. Something stirred at the back of her mind. It wanted justice for all those poor, charred victims. It wanted retribution for all the families left behind. It wanted him dead.

Rage propelled her from the car. She slammed the door shut and strode across the street. It was a chilly night and a slight breeze stroked her face with cold fingers. The moment she stepped across the mouth of the path leading up to the doorway, however, the cold sank its nails into her cheeks.

She was right about this place, it was tainted, evil. She thrust her hand into the pocket of her overcoat, feeling the comforting weight of the weapon she had placed in there earlier. It renewed her courage, gave strength to her legs and drove her on.

Abigail climbed the porch steps and knocked on the door. In the cool quiet of late October, the staccato impacts of her knuckles sounded harsh and alien. She waited for a few moments. Up close, the building seemed almost decayed. The paint was flaking, and the wood itself had begun to rot away. Thick curtains hung in the front windows, dark and dusty material concealing the interior. She knocked again. Nothing. Either the house was empty, or its owner wasn't disposed to visitors.

Maybe he's busy.

The thought chilled her more than the Bay State climate. If he really was responsible for so many deaths, he may not be alone in there. She may already be too late to stop him claiming one last victim.

She launched herself from the porch and ran round to the back of the house. If the place had seemed to lack warmth from the front, then the back yard was positively arctic. A phalanx of large trees blotted out the stars, swaying, as if alive, in the sudden wind. She understood why Larsen had picked this place. None of the neighbours could see into the property. Hopefully, they wouldn't be able to see her, either.

Abigail slipped her fingers inside her coat and brought out the slim torch again. She turned it on and looked around. Like the front, the yard was devoid of any character. But for a couple of garden tools leaning against the fence, it was plain and empty. She switched her attention back to the house, sweeping the torch beam over the rear wall.

Here, too, the paint was peeling away to reveal the rotting wood beneath. Larsen clearly wasn't interested in home maintenance. His hobbies were far more specialised. She stepped up to one of the windows and tried to look through it. More curtains prevented her from seeing inside.

She walked over to the back door, climbed the steps and took hold of the handle. It wouldn't turn. She thought for a moment, and then headed towards the collection of sorry-looking garden implements. Selecting a flat-headed shovel, she stalked purposefully back to the door. She pocketed the torch and then slid the head of the shovel between the door and the frame.

She put her weight against the handle, straining for a few seconds, before the lock gave. She almost lost her footing as the doorjamb splintered and the door swung violently inward. It smacked against something, and a crash followed. She held her breath for a moment. Nothing stirred within the house, but the neighbours might have heard her less than subtle attempt at housebreaking.

She stepped quickly inside and slid the door to. Just as she did so, the yard light went on next door. Abigail waited. After a while, the light went out again. She rested the shovel against the broken door, so it wouldn't swing open, and then retrieved the torch from her pocket.

The beam illuminated a small kitchen. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary about it, just a stove, a few cupboards and a refrigerator. It was like anyone else's kitchen. She wasn't certain what to expect of a killer, but this all seemed too normal.

She eyed the fridge with suspicion. If he was going to keep trophies, then that seemed a likely place. With that thought, its gentle electric hum took on a much more sinister tone, as if daring her to look inside. She moved towards it, slowly, cautiously, as if the door might burst open at any moment, spewing something obscene.

Her fingers closed around the cool aluminium handle and she prepared herself for whatever horrific tableau waited within. Larsen was a monster, and monsters were capable of anything. With a final deep breath, she yanked open the door.

The fridge was empty. Completely empty. Which was almost as odd as the sick little keepsakes she had half expected to find. For the sake of completeness, she checked the cupboards too. They were equally empty, save for a jar of coffee and some sugar – but she doubted he needed the caffeine. Maybe he entertained, once in a while, or maybe it had been left by the previous tenant.

Abigail swept her torch beam around to the door, edging towards it as quietly as possible. She pulled it open slowly and moved into the sparse hallway. A harbour watercolour hung on the wall. She couldn't be sure, but she suspected it might have come with the frame.

The door to her immediate right led into a dining room. A circular table with just two chairs occupied the centre of the room. Another painting hung on the wall, the room's only attempt at character. Larsen certainly didn't like clutter.

She left the room and moved on to the next door in the hallway. This opened into the living room. A threadbare couch faced the area where, in any other home, the TV would have been. Instead, an old-style radio sat there, a relic from an earlier time. An antique sideboard rested against the wall and a number of silver photo frames sat on its dark wood surface.

Abigail picked up one of the photographs. It was very old; a sepia image, hand tinted in faded colours. It showed a handsome woman in a fox fur and a feathered hat. This wasn't a generic image, like the paintings, this had some value to its owner. Abigail could feel the patina of sadness left behind, over the years, each time it had been lovingly handled. She replaced it and picked up another. The same deep longing emanated from this one too. It was a wedding photo.

She put it down quickly. If she allowed herself to empathise with him, to humanise him in any way, no matter how slight, she wouldn't be able to do what she came here to do. She wouldn't be able to kill him.

More of her father's words came back to her.

Don't let the monster fool you for one minute. He may pretend that he's human, but he isn't. He's a cancer and you must cut him out before he can spread.

At the age of nine, Abigail had encountered her father's world, beyond mere words and stories, for the first time. For as long as she could remember, she had been warned to stay away from his study. But, on this particular afternoon, he left the door unlocked and she crept nervously inside.

A large mahogany desk occupied the space in front of the window, and shelf upon shelf of books lined the walls. For a girl who had been reading since the age of two, it was a wonderland of possible stories and potential dreams. She crept to the desk, reached out a tremulous hand, and touched the cool, dark timber. It seemed to thrum with her father's energy.

He was always a powerful, animated man, who threw himself into anything that interested him – including his daughter's imagination. He encouraged her to develop her own ideas, listening to every silly little thought she had with enthusiasm. He told her to grasp every opportunity with both fists, never letting go until she had achieved what she set out to do. He filled her head with tales of his travels, and brought her souvenirs from every corner of the world.

When she grew up, she wanted to be just like him.

Until she found *the book*.

It lay in the centre of his desk, amongst note pads and folders of research, a big, leather-bound tome with peculiar symbols branded into the cover. She couldn't pronounce its name, as she'd yet to learn more than a handful of Latin phrases, but the illustrations were enough to make her heart hammer against her ribs so fiercely that she found it hard to breath. The images were horrible, creatures washed ashore from chaotic seas, abominations so foul that to utter their names would rip a hole in the fabric of the world and allow them to gush forth, engulfing everything in their path – a fetid tsunami that would leave nothing in its hellish wake unchanged.

Her father found her with her eyes rolled back in her head, and her limbs shuddering uncontrollably. He placed a warm hand against her clammy forehead and whispered into her ear, words that she couldn't make out. Her arms and legs flailed against him, he would be covered in bruises the following day, but he knelt with her until the seizure came to an end.

Afterwards, he carried her up to bed. She tried to apologise, but he hushed her into silence, pulling the covers over her and telling her that

everything was all right. She was exhausted, and slipped easily into sleep.

Then the nightmares began.

Chasing away the horrible visions that had haunted her childhood slumbers, Abigail walked out of the living room and back into the hallway. She made her way to the bottom of the stairs and played the torch beam up the wall to the landing at the top. She paused, with one foot on the bottom step.

After the episode in her father's study, Abigail had learned to fear the night time trek up the stairs. It was a dreaded precursor to bed and slumber, and the arrival of the things that crawled around behind her eyelids when she finally fell asleep. Even now, fifteen years later, she sometimes felt a slight twinge of apprehension when confronted with her own staircase at night. Creeping around the home of a monster, and then climbing his darkened stairs, brought the old fears skulking back.

She gathered her thoughts, squared her shoulders against the dark, and started up the steps. A few of them creaked, making her heart race slightly, but she soon found herself on the landing.

Don't fear the monster, Abigail, her father's voice advised her, *make the monster fear you!* She smiled at him across the years, pushing the dread deep down and burying it under a decade of self-control, until it was nothing more than a faint echo.

She forged on, pushing open the doors to the bathroom, a bedroom, a small box room. The last door she came to opened into another bedroom, but this one actually contained a bed. One look at it told her that it had been made up for some time. Larsen didn't sleep in here. No-one did.

Apart from the living room, the whole house might as well have been unoccupied, a show home for prospective property buyers. Many old legends had the monster living in a sparse, dank cave. This house was the modern equivalent. It was cold and stark, and served only as the entrance to the creature's lair. She had yet to find his sanctum.

Abigail went back down the stairs, through the hall, and into the kitchen once again. She was about to head back outside and take another look around when she stopped. Something scratched at the back of her mind, trying to draw her attention. She looked around, desperate to see with her eyes, what her hindbrain had already registered.

There was something wrong with the kitchen. The dimensions were *off*, somehow. She swept the torch around, taking in the stove, the cupboards, and the refrigerator.

That was it.

The wall that the fridge rested against was *wrong*. Now that she knew what she was looking for, she couldn't believe she hadn't noticed it earlier. It was a small kitchen, but it was *too* small compared to the exterior. There had to be a false wall.

She moved over to the fridge. She had been so intent on what it might contain, earlier, that she completely failed to consider what it might conceal. It was a huge, brushed metal affair, ample enough to store several weeks' worth of food, yet it was empty. Why pay for such an extravagant appliance, if you weren't going to use it?

Abigail placed a hand on either side of it and pulled, but it wouldn't budge. Despite its size, it should have given a little – it had to be secured to the wall somehow. She looked it over again, wondering if she should grab the spade that held the back door shut and use it to prise the fridge away from its moorings. She pushed it, to see if it would give in the other direction.

There was a soft click, and then the whole appliance swung towards her. She stepped back, allowing the hidden door to fall open. Beyond it was another staircase, leading down into the darkness of a hidden basement. A slight earthy smell crept up the steps.

She smiled to herself. There was something terribly clichéd about it. Every monster wanted a dark, dusty cellar to call its own. She could have saved herself a lot of time if she'd just looked for a basement in the first place. Maybe she should put a lot more store in the wisdom of old horror movies, in future.

If she were a character in some Halloween horror tale, the audience would be screaming at her now, telling her not to go down into the bowels of the sinister house, and calling her stupid for doing so. Of course, she had an advantage over all of the young women in those stories. She knew that the monster was real. She knew what she was doing.

She wasn't scared.

But if she wasn't scared, why was her heart thumping so loudly? Why could she hear her own blood rushing through her veins? Why did she linger on the top step, her mouth dry and her torch trembling slightly in her fingers? Why couldn't she be more like her father, no matter how hard she tried?

Your father was a brave man, the French woman had said.

Abigail didn't remember much about her father's funeral, but she did remember the striking redhead who dropped a single rose onto his coffin. Her mother wouldn't talk to the woman, didn't even acknowledge her existence, but Abigail was fascinated by her. While close

friends and relatives wept at the graveside, she snuck away to find the visitor, who had disappeared as surreptitiously as she had arrived.

How old are you, now, Abigail?

She spun around. The woman was standing under a tree that Abigail had only just passed. The woman was quick and quiet, like a cat.

I'm twelve. Who are you? How did you know my father?

The woman smiled. *So many questions, ma chère! My name is Roxanne D'Angerville. Your father and I were friends, many years ago.*

Abigail pondered this for a moment. The woman seemed familiar, but she didn't recall ever meeting her. She would certainly have remembered. Roxanne's skin was ivory pale and her hair was blood red. She wore a long black dress that emphasised her perfect figure, and a hat with a small veil. She was elegant and beautiful.

Do you hunt monsters, too? Abigail asked.

I've met a few, in my time, Roxanne replied. *But not all monsters deserve to be hunted.* She smiled again, more broadly this time. *Some of us just want to be left alone.*

Abigail's stomach began to churn when she noticed the French woman's teeth. She looked around, to see how far away the rest of the funeral party were. If she screamed, would they hear her in time? She turned back again, but Roxanne had disappeared.

Abigail ran back to her mother, and didn't leave her side for the rest of the day. The monsters weren't just in her nightmares anymore. She could see them with her eyes open, now.

And they could see her.

The stairs down into the basement were made of old, bare timber and creaked terribly. Abigail played her torch over them, stepping carefully for fear that they were rotten, like the wood on the outside of the house. Reaching the bottom, she tried to prepare herself for whatever horrors might greet her. Larsen had taken great pains to conceal the entrance to this place, it stood to reason that he didn't want its secrets revealed.

So far, those secrets amounted to several wooden crates and a lot of loose soil. She walked over to the largest crate, her boots sinking slightly into the soft earth, and looked it over.

It measured about four square feet. Getting it down here couldn't have been easy. Unless he had another accomplice, like Wallace, Larsen had to be one strong fellow. Abigail kept herself physically fit but, unless she could catch him off guard, she wasn't sure she could take him.

She noticed scuff marks around the centre of the crate. Maybe he'd used some rope to help him wrestle it down the steps. She felt a little better about that. He might not be supernaturally strong, after all.

Abigail took hold of the crate's lid. It was loose. Apprehensively, she slid it to one side. The box didn't contain the unfortunate remains of another victim, as she had half expected. Except for a bit of dirt in the bottom, it was empty. She checked the rest. They were all empty, but for what looked like stray clumps of soil.

She stepped back, her boots sinking into the floor again. Abigail looked down and realised what had been in the crates. She felt stupid for not considering it earlier. Wooden crates of loose soil – Larsen was a traditionalist.

She walked into the centre of the cellar. The ground was at its loosest here. She sank up to her ankles in the dark earth. A wooden box must have seemed too cramped. He wanted to spread out a little, to stretch. Wherever he was from originally, he'd had some of his native soil shipped over.

It was no wonder that the bed upstairs hadn't been used. He didn't need it. Ed Larsen slept in the cellar, in the cold, damp earth.

Until now, there had always been a few seeds of doubt in her mind. Perhaps it was simply a coincidence. Maybe the Larsens were just a family that moved around a lot, and couldn't be bothered to register their births and deaths. Perhaps she was wrong.

But none of that worried her anymore.

'You blood sucking bastard,' she muttered triumphantly.

And then her torch went out.

A wave of darkness washed over her, taking her breath away and threatening to drown her in its murky depths. She tried flipping the torch switch a few times, but the battery was dead.

She struggled to remain calm, to get her bearings and remember the basement layout. She took a few steps in what she hoped was the direction of the stairs. The ground was soft and pulled at her feet.

She tripped over something, landing on her hands and knees. The earth was damp and cold between her fingers, sending a chill up her arms and into her chest. The moisture soaked through her jeans, freezing her legs.

What had she stumbled over? She couldn't remember seeing anything on the ground. Maybe it was a stray stone in the soil. Or maybe something had clutched at her feet.

Her stomach clenched and she felt nauseous.

Was Larsen down here right now, his pale skin swaddled in the dark soil? Had he been waiting for her to find him; waiting to drag her down into the earth and grasp her to his cold, dead flesh? Would anyone ever find her body?

Abigail clambered to her feet and launched herself towards the part of the basement that she thought contained the stairs. She had been stupid to come here. She wasn't like her father, and never could be. Her family's legacy had died with him.

Her right shoulder smacked against the stair lintel and she fell heavily onto the bottom steps. She glanced backwards, but the darkness was absolute. She wouldn't see anything coming for her, even if cold fingers closed about her throat. She would die in the dark without seeing her killer's face, if she didn't drag herself up the stairs and out of the house. The thought gave strength to her legs, guided her hands from one step to the next, and drove her upwards to the kitchen.

Abigail crawled out onto the kitchen floor and clambered to her feet. Grasping the refrigerator with filthy hands, she slammed the hidden entrance closed, before sweeping the spade away from the back door. She burst out into the garden, and the crisp night air chased the stench of dank earth from her nostrils.

The damp soil caked to the bottom of her boots made her slip on the grass. She landed heavily on her left knee and let out a yelp, before forcing herself to her feet once more. Despite the warm ache radiating from her knee, she ran along the side of the house, down the path, and out into the street.

She grasped at the car door, yanking it open and diving inside. Locking it behind her, she stared across at the house again.

The building seemed even more sinister now. Her mind rearranged the windows into a leering face that mocked her. It told her how pathetic she was. It told her to go back home to England and stop pretending that she was anything more than a silly little girl, out of her environment and out of her depth. She should drive to the airport, get on the next plane and run home to hide under the duvet.

Her lungs hurt from the cold autumn air she'd gulped into them as she fled. Dank earth still clung to her legs and hands. She felt nauseous and panicked. She concentrated very hard on not throwing up.

Abigail had been very sick before her father's death. She was overcome by a heavy fever, punctuated by nightmare visions, which confined her to bed for over a week. Through the pyretic haze, she could remember only disjointed images and brief snatches of conversation.

James – her father’s name, spoken in a French accent – *we’re losing her!*

She remembered pale skin and red hair.

She saw her father’s exhausted face.

I won’t let you take her! His voice, ragged and weak.

There was something in her head. An alien presence, making her say and do things she would never even have thought of. A nightmare made real, trying to use her as a doorway into the waking world.

It was there inside her. It was there because of the book.

Her father uttered words she couldn’t identify. They began in a whisper and grew steadily in volume, an insistent chant that whirled around inside her head.

She began to scream.

No, it wasn’t her. It was the thing inside her, trying to claw its way out. It was in agony. The words *hurt* it.

It was losing its grip on her, being sucked back into the abyss it was trying to escape.

As a final act of defiance, it lashed out.

Her father flew across the room and hit the wall with a sickening thud. He fell to the floor, leaving behind a glistening red stain.

The French woman rushed over to him.

Abigail felt the fever recede. The thing inside her fell away, its voice a faint echo in the back of her mind.

She looked across the room and saw Roxanne cradling her father’s still form, sobbing quietly.

Not all monsters deserve to be hunted.

The sharp-toothed woman from her father’s funeral had been there during her illness, helping him combat whatever evil entity had slipped into her mind.

The fear of losing herself in the dark had kick-started her memory, bringing back images she’d long suppressed: her father’s limp body; Roxanne’s tears; her mother, standing in the doorway, screaming.

Or was she just inventing it all? Was she retrofitting thoughts and images into her childhood, to accommodate a growing psychosis? Had any of it *really* happened?

What was worse, the thought that the monsters were real, or the idea that she was slipping deeper and deeper into madness? The latter scenario was certainly the most logical. Perhaps Larsen was a relatively normal guy who grew mushrooms as a hobby. Maybe it was *her* family who were the monsters, taking innocent lives in the mistaken belief that they were purging the world of the supernatural.

She had to get away from this place. She needed to go back home and pull at the ragged threads of memory, to see if she could untangle the twisted knots that made up her mind.

Abigail fished the car key out of her pocket and fumbled it into the ignition. Out of habit, she looked into the rear view mirror before turning on the engine.

There was a man walking up the street. He was tall and thin, dressed in black, and carried an old Gladstone bag. He could almost have stepped out of a century-old photograph. As he drew closer he stepped under a streetlight and she was able to make out his features. His receding grey hair was slicked back against his gaunt skull; thin lips were set into a down-turned grimace; coal-black eyes glistened from deep sockets.

She couldn't take her eyes from his reflection – the mere fact that he *had* a reflection would have been enough to convince most people that he was just a frail old man, rather than a blood sucking fiend. But Abigail had been taught that not all of the myths were true.

Ed Larsen – who else could it be? – walked slowly up the path to *Number forty-seven*, climbed the porch steps and unlocked the front door. Then he disappeared into the darkness within the house.

With the closing of the door, something stirred at the back of her mind. Not quite a memory or a feeling, but the faint echo of a voice from her childhood. She could feel the panic disperse, sucked away by a shadow at the edge of her mind.

Her fears were replaced by a desire to resolve any uncertainty once and for all. She needed to *know* what was real and what was fantasy. If her illness had not been a natural one, then it had left something behind. Something dark and dangerous. And if it turned out that she *was* insane, then at least she would have an answer.

Besides, no supernatural creature could be more terrifying than the certain knowledge that she was losing her mind.

In the distance she saw the coterie of trick or treaters that she'd noticed earlier, as they turned the corner and started down the street. It would only be a matter of minutes before they were knocking on the door of *Number forty-seven*. And then what? Would Larsen even answer the door? Would he invite them inside?

She knew she had only a few seconds before he discovered the damage to his property and the footprints in his basement. If she was going to do anything, she had to act quickly.

Abigail removed the key from the ignition and got out of the car. Striding towards the house, she willed away the ache in her shoulder and the throbbing in her knee. She wiped her dirty hands on her jeans before putting them in her overcoat pockets. The fingers of her right hand closed around the weapon.

She climbed the steps and knocked on the door, surprised at how calm she now felt. Knowing that she would soon have answers, one way or another, brought a wonderful sense of serenity.

She could hear his footsteps approaching the door. There was a moment's pause – he must have been looking at her through the peephole. Then the lock clicked and the door creaked inward.

'Yes?' asked Ed Larsen.

Up close, he seemed even frailer. His parchment skin was stretched so thinly across his skull that she feared it might tear at any moment. His silver hair was lank and sparse. His dark eyes were sad and rheumy. He just looked like a tired old man approaching the end of his life.

She took a breath, ready to apologise for disturbing him, when the stench caught in her throat. His breath reeked of blood.

When she looked at the hand holding open the door, she saw red stains under his fingernails. When she looked at the collar of his shirt, she saw tiny blotches of crimson. And when she looked at the corners of his mouth, she saw scarlet caked into his jowls.

Edward Larsen was an old man. Too old. He had murdered in order to extend his own life beyond its natural span. How many innocent lives had he taken to do so? How many more might he take? Whose blood stained him tonight?

She tightened her grip on the weapon in her pocket and took a step towards him. Startled, he stepped backwards. She followed him across the threshold.

When this was over, Abigail would seek out the French woman with the sharp smile. No doubt she would still be as beautiful as she was fifteen years ago. Perhaps Roxanne would tell her more about her father's work, and maybe something about the rest of her family. Her mother had refused to discuss any of those things, since the night her father died.

'Who are you?' Larsen demanded. 'What do you want?'

She smiled at him for a moment.

'My name is Abigail Van Helsing,' she said, 'and I'm here to stop you from hurting anyone else.'

She kicked the door closed behind her and pulled the stake out of her pocket.

Don't fear the monster, Abigail.

Make the monster fear you!

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The Crooked House

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