

*Hollow Snatcher*

By: Lady Jae

The old Victorian house was gloomy and grotesque. The dark grey paint was chipped and frayed. Stained curtains covered the windows. The shingles hung carelessly from the half-sunken roof. Old leaves and debris covered the house and clogged the gutters. The grass was thick and unruly, showing years of neglect. A tall, rusting, iron fence surrounded the house with a chain lock holding it shut. There were pieces of red tape streaked across the front door with the printed word: CONDEMMENED in bold black ink. Darkness lingered over the house on Dark Hollow drive.

Something happened in that house. I could feel it.

It was my first day at Sleepy Hollow High. New town, new school. Only a week and a half in and I hated it already. There was something not quite right about Sleepy Hollow. The people here were unsettling and different. They moved around as if they were in a trance or stuck under a spell. Whatever it was, it was dark, and it gave me chills since the day we moved in.

I tried to tell my dad, but he brushed me off as usual. He's always too busy with work, too busy to listen, too busy to even care. His job was always moving him. So, he dragged me around like luggage on his paper chase. City to city, state to state. I knew little about what he did, but whatever it was, I wanted no parts of it in my future. Because we moved so much, I was always in and out of public schools and homeschooling. Even though I was super smart, I could never make friends or any relationships worth holding on to. I was a loner. A bookworm. Ichabod Crane, the invisible son of a rolling stone.

I sauntered up the steps of the massive beige building. The students brushed past me, bumping my shoulders as they filed inside through the double doors. The hallways were a bright blue with grey lockers lining each side. An enormous banner hung from the ceiling that read: Halloween Bash. Oh great, a party I would not be attending.

I looked down at my program card for my locker number, then back at the numbers painted on each one. 113. I counted down the hall past a group of emo kids, another group of nerdy kids, and then past a group of cackling girls; whose laughter rang in my ears like a school bell. Just past them, 113 stood in the middle of a group of three jocks.

Just great. The last thing I wanted was a run-in with a bunch of brain-dead jerks.

As I approached, I cleared my throat, hoping they would move aside and maybe not make a scene. But that was wishful thinking.

"Ooh, it's fresh meat." The largest of the trio said as he rubbed his beefy hands together like I was a 12-foot sub he wanted to devour.

I rolled my eyes and ignored him as I fumbled with the lock, eager to getaway. His enormous fist slammed against the locker, making me practically jump out of my skin. My frail body trembled as he hovered over me. His hot breath and the smell of something rotten slapped my face, making me frown at him. His crew snickered as the other students in the hall looked on silently.

"It's rude to ignore people, you know," he grumbled.

*And it's rude to invade people's personal space, especially with breath like yours, but yet here we are.*

The words echoed in my head, but I wouldn't dare say it aloud. Being put in a locker on my first day was not my idea of a good first impression.

I took a deep breath and stepped back from his massive overgrown teenage frame. I could feel the eyes of the other students on me as they crowded around and waited for my next move.

"I just want to put my things away," I said under my breath. I looked at his friends for help, but their menacing sneers cut through my hopes.

"Oh, by all means," he snickered, as he moved his hand from the locker.

Hesitantly, I thumbed the combination until the lock popped open and the door swung ajar. Dropping my book bag to the floor, I dragged out my binder. Soon as I stood, his large arm came crashing down, knocking everything to the floor. Laughter filled the hallway as my face flushed red with embarrassment.

"Brom! Cut it out! Why must you always be a jerk?"

I looked around as the strong but angelic voice sounded off the walls. I thought it was a teacher until a young, slim figure pushed through the crowd. Her pleated skirt danced right above her stocking-covered knees. Her curly blonde hair bounced on the shoulders of her pink sweater as she knelt beside me to help. The smell of peaches and honey filled my nostrils as she handed me my binder. I stared into her blue eyes and if only for a moment, forgot where I was.

She jumped to her feet and stabbed her pink polished finger into Brom's chest.

"Don't you have better things to do instead of bullying people? Maybe you can focus that energy on winning the next game for once."

Oohs and laughter filled the hallway as I gathered myself. I appreciated her help, but I didn't know how to feel about a pretty girl coming to my rescue on my first day.

First of all, who the heck was she?

"Aw Katrina, why you gotta say that? I was just helping him fit in. Just a little Sleepy Hollow hospitality."

"Yeah right. Take your goons and find something else to do."

Brom and his goons slumped away, and the crowd dispersed. I slid my books into my locker and adjusted my jacket. My palms sweated as I gazed at her. She adjusted her hair and smiled at me. I could feel the lump forming in my throat as I tried to steady my breathing. For the first time in my 13 years, a girl made me nervous.

"My name is Katrina, but call me Kat. Sorry about Brom. He tries to play tough, but between me and you, he's a giant marshmallow."

"He didn't seem real marshmallow-y to me," I mumbled, as I closed my locker.

"Just give it some time. What's your name, anyway?"

"Ichabod."

"Ichabod? That's different. Well Ichabod, welcome to Sleepy Hollow. I'm sure you'll fit in with no problem, eventually."

"Eventually. Thank you, by the way." I rubbed my palms on my pants and gave her a weak smile.

"No biggie. Hey, I know your new, but you should come to the Halloween Bash on Friday. It's a big celebration for the town and our school. Loads of Halloween spirit, evils, and ghosts. Plus, it's the anniversary of our town's legend."

"What legend?"

The bell rang before she could answer, and she left me with a smile as she walked away. I tucked my hands in my pocket and let out a deep breath. I knew there was something strange about this town. I could feel the darkness. I could only imagine the truth of what the legend held. And it was going to be a long day until I found out.

To my relief, lunchtime came sooner than expected. I sat alone in the lunchroom's corner, picking over a dry hamburger and some soggy fries. I smelled her scent before she sat her tray in front of me and sat down.

"Enjoying your five-star cuisine?"

"I wouldn't say five-star, maybe one."

"At least give us half a chance," she chuckled, "have you considered the party yet?"

I looked at her and shook my head no. I haven't given that party a second thought. I couldn't even handle my first day in school. There was no way I was going to sign up for more embarrassment by trying to mingle at a party with strangers.

"I'm not really the party guy. Me and strangers don't get along, and I can't make a habit of you saving me." I pointed a soggy fry in her direction.

Looking over her shoulder, Brom and his crew entered the lunchroom. Immediately, I shifted my eyes down at my tray. I did not need another embarrassing moment in front of Kat.

"Some habits are worth keeping, you know."

I looked up and caught her smile as she opened her milk carton. She looked over her shoulder and groaned as Brom and his crew headed in our direction. She looked back at me and patted my hand.

"Just relax." She adjusted her shirt and brushed her hair back.

Brom slammed his tray down as his crew sat on the table around us.

"Kat, why you over here with this loser," Brom said, as he grabbed a fry off my tray.

I didn't want the food before, now I really didn't want it. Everything about his grungy hands disgusted me.

First of all, the only loser I see right now is you, Brom. Ichabod hasn't bothered you so, why do you insist on bothering him?"

"What kind of name is Ichabod? It sounds like a disease." Brom's laughter echoed in the lunchroom. He sat next to Kat and draped his arm around her shoulder.

"Ugh, get off of me! The only disease is you." Kat pushed him off and I couldn't help but smirk.

"Oh, don't ack like that now, Kat. This shrimp isn't anyone to impress."

On the physical scale, he was probably right. I was 5'11 and barely 120 lbs., soaking wet. My hair was cut low and large framed glasses swallowed my face. But what I lacked in brawns, I mastered it in brains. A guy like Brom couldn't spell impression even if I wrote it out for him.

"Nobody was trying to impress anyone. He just moved here and I'm trying to make him feel welcomed." She smiled at me again, but Brom sneered in my direction.

He stared me up and down for a second, then grabbed my unopened milk carton.

"Why did you move here, anyway? Nobody moves to Sleepy Hollow." He guzzled the milk, then crushed the carton on the table.

"Why not?" I pushed my tray away and looked at him over my glasses. There was no way I was unfolding my life story to him. Why I moved here was none of his business. Besides, I didn't have an answer for that myself.

"Mainly because of the legend. We get a lot of tourists, but nobody ever moves into the Hollow." Katrina said. She slid over, putting space between herself and Brom, and gave me a side-eye. It was obvious his presence bothered her just as much as it bothered me.

"Again, I ask what legend?" I looked at all of them, waiting for an answer.

Brom stuffed a fry in his mouth and swallowed hard. He wiped his arm on his sleeve and leaned in close, like what he was about to say was a secret.

"The Legend of Sleepy Hollow is the worse story ever told. The evil spirits control this town and it's built on sacred land that traps people in. They took over this guy's body, and he went on a brutal murder spree. He cut the heads off his wife and son. Their blood-curdling screams were heard for miles. He tried to slice his own throat, but the pain was too much. So instead, he hung himself. But they say right before he died, the spirit left his body, allowing him to see what he did with his own bare hands. The grief was so overbearing. He struggled to get out of the rope, but the chair slipped and when the rope snapped around his neck, it pulled his head right off his body! So, every year on Halloween, his spirit comes out looking for souls and heads to replace the family he murdered."

"Damn." That was all I could say.

"It's crazy, huh?" Katrina said as she sipped from her milk carton, staring at me.

"Is it true? I mean, where did it happen?" I wanted to know more. A murder like that wasn't an everyday thing. And there was no way I wanted to live in a town with a ghost snatching off people's heads or souls. But I was curious to know more.

"Of course, it's true! It's our town's legacy. That old house on Dark Hollow drive is where it happened." Brom said as he stood.

"It sounds horrible, but if something so bad happened in that house, why won't they just tear it down?"

"Because it's haunted. The spirits won't let anyone enter the property. And the ones that make it past the front door never live to tell it."

"So, you guys knowingly live in a town where a haunted house stands on the corner devouring souls, and instead of doing an exorcist or something, you throw a party to celebrate the anniversary of some of the most gruesome murders?" I frowned at all of them.

They acted too casually about something so horrible. How could a whole town live so comfortably, knowing that a murderous spirit haunted the streets?

"Well, when you say it like that, you make it sound bad," Kat said, as she frowned back at me.

"It is bad. I mean, if it's true, it's horrible and I wonder how you all can sleep so well at night. That's why I don't believe it. I mean, this town is creepy, but I think the story is overrated. And the whole haunted house is bull crap."

"Well, Ichabod, if you think it's bull crap, then go into the house and prove it." Brom challenged.

I looked around at their eager faces. I didn't believe the legend, but there was no way I was going into that creepy house.

"As long as y'all have lived here, none of y'all been inside?"

They all looked away, giving me their answer. They were afraid of their legend. They passed the house every day, but nobody dared to test the truth.

"We have always been told to stay away and leave the investigating to the tourists," Kat said, softly.

"Oh, so since I'm new, I'm the closest thing to a tourist, huh?"

"It's not like that at all. I don't want you to go in that house." Kat said, grabbing my hand.

Brom looked at the embrace and growled.

"I do!" Brom said and pulled Katrina's hand off of mine.



I could see the jealousy on his face as I moved my hands and sat them in my lap. He liked her, but unfortunately for him, I liked her too. I only knew her half a day, but I knew I deserved her more than him.

"I'll go in the house," I said, as Brom rubbed his hands together in excitement.

"But only on one condition. Brom has to come with me." I smirked at Brom.

His movement stopped abruptly as he glared at me.

"Ichabod, you don't have to prove nothing to nobody." Katrina pleaded as she reached across the table.

"It's okay. I'm more than happy to prove your legend wrong. And Brom is going to help me."

"I don't know about all that." Brom looked away.

"Don't be a chicken now. What happened to that Sleepy Hollow hospitality?"

Brom looked at Katrina, then back at me.

"Whatever, I'll go with you," Brom grumbled.

"Good. We'll meet at the house an hour before the dance." I winked at Katrina as I stood and left them at the table. I could see them whispering as I walked away, but I didn't care what they were saying. I was going to prove their legend to be a lie. I was going to walk into that house and walk right back outside unscathed.

The moon was full, and the sky was clear. I adjusted my tie and glanced at my watch as I stood on the corner of Dark Hollow drive waiting for Brom and Katrina to show up. I stared into the dark figure of the house and shivered.

"Sure you want to do this?"

Brom's voice came from behind me. I spun on my heels as he walked up with only a nervous Katrina standing behind him.

"Yeah, I'm ready. Where is your entourage?"

"They had better things to do." Brom rolled his eyes and looked at the house.

"Katrina, you okay?" I touched her arm lightly and peered into her blue eyes. The worry was clear on her face, but I paid it no mind. I was about to prove to her that there was nothing to be afraid of. The house was just that, a big stupid house.

"Are we going in or not?" Brom demanded as he stepped between me and Katrina.

I nodded and stepped towards the gate, with Brom close behind. I looked back at Katrina, who just held herself watching us intensely.

Touching the gate, an icy chill brushed through me, causing the hairs on my neck to stand up. My stomach bubbled as I forced the lump in my throat back down.

Brom grabbed the chain on the fence and pulled down hard. The rusted iron crumbled, and the chain dropped to his feet. The gate swung open with a loud creak. He looked at me and motioned for me to step inside.

I leaned in close to him and whispered, "Let's make a wager. If I come out unscathed, you let me take Katrina to the dance tonight. It's already clear she doesn't like you so, why don't you just step aside." I smirked and stepped inside the gate.

Brom sucked his teeth and grabbed my shoulder.

"If you make it out alive, you can have Katrina for as long as you can see her."

I looked at Brom questionably as he walked up the raggedy steps to the front door. I did not know what he meant, but I was suddenly uncomfortable and having second thoughts. I looked back at Katrina. Her lips moved as she mouthed something at me. I couldn't understand it. She held her hands in front of her face, like she was praying, as she watched us.

Brom stood by the front door, chewing his lip. He looked at the moon, then down at his watch, then back at me.

"Come on, man, I don't have all night."

I stood in front of the door and peeled back the red tape. Brom's foot tapped the ground as he kept looking around as if something was about to appear. My trembling hand gripped the cold iron of the doorknob. I looked at Brom and let out a breath as I turned and pushed the door open.

The smell of mold and mildew wafted through the air as I stepped inside. I covered my nose as I stepped deeper into the darkness. The floors creaked under each footstep as I walked further into the large foyer. A chill crept behind me, putting my senses on high alert. I spun around in search of Brom, only to see him step out and close the door.

"No! What are you doing?"

I ran back to the door and grabbed the knob just as he slammed it shut. His laughter sounded off as I banged my fist against the door.

"Let me out, man! This is not cool! Brom! Brom! Katrina!"

I continued to pound the door until his laughter faded. It was a trick. A prank and that blue-eyed beauty knew about it. They played me for amusement. This is why I never trusted people and I should have known better. But they were going to pay for this.

I slumped to the ground and peered into the darkness for another way out. I stood and felt the wall until the feeling of cold glass touched my palm. I reached back with all my might to break the glass, but something grabbed my arm, pulling me away. I screamed, twisted, and fought with all my might, but it was no use. The grip got tighter pulling me deeper into the darkness. Suddenly, it stopped. I scrambled to my feet to escape. Just as I reached the door again, a stiff hand grabbed my throat and squeezed. I clawed at my neck as my oxygen slowly left my

body. Then I felt it. Cold metal pressed against my skin, digging into the flesh at the base of my neck. I grabbed at my neck as the metal slid across, opening me up. I choked and gurgled on my blood as my soul left my body. Dead by the front door.

"Do you think it worked?" Katrina whispered as Brom ran out of the house. He grabbed her tightly by the arm and pulled her down the street.

"I don't know, but I hope so." Brom looked back at the house, still pulling Katrina behind him.

"This is so wrong Brom. Ichabod didn't deserve this." Katrina cried as she stumbled behind him.

Brom stopped and turned around grabbing Katrina by the shoulders.

"Look, I know he didn't, but we had no choice. That spirit demands a sacrifice every Halloween. The soul of one person protects our whole town from being consumed. Chris and his family died because we ignored the legend. He was my best friend, Kat."

Brom's voice trailed off as he shook his head. He released Katrina's shoulders and slumped away.

Katrina scurried behind him and threw herself in his path. She slammed her fist into his chest and glared at him.

"That's the story they tell us, but I know there is more. Tell me, please."

Brom turned his head and moved Katrina out of his path.

"Just stick to the script. We never seen him tonight, okay?"

Brom continued down the road, leaving Katrina standing there, disheveled. She looked back at the house and shivered as a chilly breeze rubbed against her shoulder. She walked towards Brom who stood under the streetlight, motioning her to catch up.

"What do you mean we have never seen him? I don't think I can lie—"

"You can and you will!" Brom growled. He blew out a breath and wiped his hand down his face.

Katrina gasped and stepped away from him.

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. It's just a lot of pressure on me." Brom turned to walk off, but Katrina grabbed his arm.

"What pressure? Dammit Brom, tell me the truth!" Katrina stared at him, pleading with her eyes.

Brom glared at her in silence, then let out a loud breath. He grabbed her close and spoke low.

"The legend we are told is what we tell the tourist, but it is not exactly the truth. My family's ancestors were the first people to live in the land that Sleepy Hollow sits on. My family is gifted. They used the land for sacrifices and rituals of all kinds. That house sits on the source of the power, both good and evil. But my family's power scared people, so they gathered and killed my family. They beheaded them, hoping to destroy the power along with my bloodline. But my great, great, great grandmother survived that night and so did the power."

"Brom, I don't understand. I...I..."

"Just listen, Katrina! My grams found a way to restore the spirits of my ancestors. One living sacrifice restores the soul of one of my ancestors."

Katrina's eyes bulged as she scanned Brom's blank face and stepped back.

"Like zombies?"

"No, the spirits take over the body. Destroy one life and come back as another."

Katrina paced slowly and ran her fingers through her hair.

"It's been happening for years, Kat. Don't you ever notice the faraway look in everyone's eyes?" Brom stepped closer to Katrina.

Katrina paused and gawked at Brom.

"So, everyone in the town is one of your ancestors?"

Brom nodded and reached out for Katrina. She slapped his hand away and moved back.

"Am I one?" Katrina pinched her arms and face.

"No. Listen, I know this is a lot, but I had no choice. I was chosen."

"Then say no! This is crazy!"

"I ignored my position before and Chris died." Brom looked down.

Katrina started pacing again, holding her hands on her head.

Brom watched her with a solemn expression.

"So how many more Brom? How many more must die before your entire family lives again?"

"I have already restored my family. I just needed one more so I could get back what I lost. To make things right again."

Katrina squinted her eyes at Brom and pointed at the house.

"So, Ichabod is not dead?"

"The Ichabod we met today is dead, mentally, but not physically."

"What does that mean?"

Brom grabbed Katrina's hand and pulled her down the street.

"It means we go to this dance, enjoy the night, and tomorrow the life I'm supposed to have will be restored. Now come on."

Brom stormed off as Katrina angrily stomped behind him.

The next morning, Katrina sat on her porch, staring at the dry leaves that blew down the street. Her pen tapped the blank page of her journal as she tried to organize her thoughts. She tucked her hair behind her ear just as a football landed in her yard.

She looked up and gasped as Ichabod's frame stood at her gate with a bright smile. She dropped her journal and ran to him. Grabbing his face, she peered into his eyes.

"Ichabod?"

He grabbed her hands and pulled them away with a puzzled expression. He looked back as Brom ran up with a huge smile.

"Yo, Brom, who is Ichabod? That name sounds like a disease," he said, as he laughed and nudged Brom.

"I don't know, but we're going to be late for practice. Come on, Chris." Brom slapped his shoulder and winked at Katrina. He grabbed the ball and took off down the street.

"Maybe I'll see you later, Kat."

The new Chris smiled and ran behind Brom.

Katrina turned pale and stared wide-eyed as they disappeared into the distance.

