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# UNDER THE STAIRS

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October 2025 Halloween Story



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## Chapter 1

Winter had come early. It was only mid-October when the cold winds of the north had swept through and torn the remaining leaves from now barren limbs. Thunder roared from the skies as rain as cold as ice pelted the roof of the small farmhouse at the end of the dirt road. Inside, Mary shivered under the basement stairs. She covered her thin nightgown with the old blanket she had found on the floor.

The frame of the old farmhouse groaned and creaked under the assault of nature and aging timbers. Mary curled harder against the wall seeking the shelter of darkness from her pursuers. She didn't know who they were. They just came in the middle of the night pounding on her front door. Demanding to be let in. She had flung open a second-floor bedroom window and climbed down the old oak to escape. Then she ran wearing nothing but her nightgown. She ended up in this old decrepit farmhouse far on the outskirts of her family's land.

Strange events had been happening ever since her return to the old homestead four days earlier. Her mother had passed a year earlier on Halloween of all nights. Mary was out of the country when it happened. She had been working deep in the forests of central Africa and hadn't received the news until well after the funeral. Mary was estranged from her mother and her family. The estrangement was Mary's choice.

Her father's affection was non-existent in her life. He was all business all the time. It wasn't only the detachment that alienated Mary, it was also who he did business with. The business associates were creepy. The men openly leered at Mary. The women looked at her with lust coupled with disdain. When they were around she felt small and intimidated in her own home.

Her mother dominated the household and the women that came by whether for social events or business. Even her father's friends deferred to her mother in her home. She reigned as queen in the household. But Mary's station was less than a scullery maid in her mother's eye. Mary learned early on to stay out of sight and out of mind. She lived alone in the large rambling home. Her only companions the odd stray cat and a few friends she met at school.

Even though Mary lived as less than a servant in the household, in an odd juxtaposition she also lived with luxury. She had the latest clothing and attended the finest girls' schools. Her mother and father insisted. They would be mortified to have had their daughter appear in public without anything but the best material objects. In that sense Mary had found herself an extension of her father's business and her mother's social standing.

At home she lived in an isolated tower far away from the daily life of the household. It was a mostly barren room with a simple four poster bed, vanity, two drawer dresser, and chair. It was small, but round. She had a clear view of the entire estate from all the windows encircling the tower walls. She managed her privacy with black drapes but frequently pulled them aside to look upon the nature before her.

Mary came of age the day she graduated. On that day she shook her father's hand. Gave her mother the obligatory peck on the cheek and hopped the next train out of town. She never looked back. She had taken small advantage of her father's station while she was in her final year of school. Mary had secured a position in a minor company doing business in Africa. She wanted to as far away from both her mother and father as she could achieve. Joining this company had achieved that goal.

Mary worked happily and hard within the company. To all but the owner she was just another hire, someone needed to do the job. Mary found her first true friend in Africa, Junla. She had learned to laugh. She had learned to care. She had even learned to love. She found herself fascinated with ancient rites and rituals of the local tribes. She studied at the feet of shamans and witch doctors. In little time at all Mary walked freely among almost all the tribes. She had become invaluable to her company and a great friend to the villagers. She had also not seen her home and family for over a decade. She missed neither.

Then a letter was delivered to her in the outback of the forest. The letter was in an embossed black envelope with dark red lettering. It was simply addressed, Mary. Just her first name. The courier who brought

it had no other duty but to bring her that letter. He left as soon as she received it as if in a run from the devil himself.

Mary opened the letter. It was from her father's lawyer. They had been apparently trying to reach her for two years. Her father was dead. He had died nine years after her departure. Her mother had died the next year. She was the only heir. She was needed back at the homestead to settle all the affairs. A simple business letter with uncaring sympathies expressed.

Mary's teachings in rites and rituals demanded she return. The souls could not rest until their earthly duties were done. If they did not rest they could take their revenge on her soul. Mary sighed as she read the letter. She was neither sad at their death's nor happy. It was a duty that had to be performed in a place she never wished to return.

Mary stood from where she was reading the letter and just as she had come she left. She immediately made her way to the company headquarters. Mary secured funeral leave. She hugged Junla, grabbed her few belongings, and secured a plane ticket back home. She didn't know how long it would take to resolve the estate. Apparently her father and mother were quite wealthy. Not only did they create their own wealth they came from old money, very old money that stretched back on both sides of the family. Mary never knew, nor did she care to know.

Mary stepped off the train onto the boarding platform. Her backpack carried everything of significance to her. The law offices were just one street over and two blocks west. She began walking the same streets she had tread as a child. She tread them alone and insignificant just as he had before. But for the first time Mary noticed nothing had changed.

It wasn't a trick of the mind bringing back old memories. Nothing physical had changed. The buildings were as they had been since her earliest years walking the sidewalks. The street lights were exactly in the same place they had been before. Trees lined the streets as if they had not grown or evolved in years. Mary had become used to change in Africa. Life happened all around. Nature changed daily. But here nothing had changed. Mary was certain in her mind that if she went to the corner restaurant the tables would be as they always had been and the menu the same. It was eerie.

Mary made her way to the law offices. They were set in a rather large building with a black granite façade adorning the outside. The law offices took up almost the entire building. She pushed through the glass doors and made her way to the receptionist's desk. Mary took the letter from her backpack and set it upon the desk. She said nothing and waited. The receptionist looked up, saw the letter, and immediately gestured for Mary to follow her to a conference room. Not a word was spoken in the entire exchange.

Mary sat down in one of the chairs crowded around a large board room table. The receptionist left then returned with a tray of cups and water supposedly for Mary's use. It wasn't too long to wait before a side door silently opened and a tall gentleman dressed in the uniform of lawyers entered. With him was what Mary assumed was his administrative assistant. He carried a legal document adorned with the latest court signatures and declarations. She carried a steno pad. Mary recognized him as one of the many men that had leered at her when she was at that homestead.

"Ah. The heir has returned." The lawyer expressed himself as he sat down just across from her. The assistant sat to his right side. Mary nodded an acknowledgement.

"It has been quite difficult finding you Miss Scoville. We have been searching for more than a few years. Still, here we are. The wills are simple enough, your parents left everything to you. You are their only heir and there are no claims on the estate. Your parents apparently paid as they bought. No loans, debts, or outstanding requirements. They did specifically leave two items for you and you alone. They requested you wear them as soon as you accept the inheritance."

With the last statement the lawyer passed over two packages. Each package contained small jewelry boxes. Each box was simple wood and adorned with what appeared to the uninitiated as Celtic drawings or ancient scribblings one might find on many a souvenir website. Mary opened the first box. Inside was her

father's black ring. It has always been on his right hand third finger. There was no adornment on the ring. It was smooth, dark black, and cool to the touch. Much like her father.

Mary was always entranced with the ring. It was, in its own way, beautiful. Light seemed to dance in its darkness instead of being reflected. Mary had no desire to wear a token of her father. She was not obliged to keep his memory alive, nor did she care to do so. He was dead and buried. She intended to give him no further thought. Still, the ring was unique and called to her. She placed it on her third finger right hand.

Mary took a gasp as the ring settled on her finger. It was warm. It also seemed to bond to her hand. The feeling was subtle, but there. The lawyer and the assistant took great interest as Mary placed the ring on her finger. Her reaction and the rings comfort on her hand was duly noted. Each gave a simple but pleased smile.

Mary reached for the next box. Inside was her mother's broach. It too was entirely black in color. It depicted a belladonna plant, or what was commonly known as nightshade. Mary ran her fingers over the leaves embossed on the broach and the berries settled in the center. Even being entirely dark in color one could make out the details of the plant when it was worn. Mary had been drawn to this broach like she had been drawn to her father's ring. It was the broach itself that captured her attention, not any attachment to her mother.

Mary placed the broach on her left shoulder just as her mother had worn it. Like the ring, the broach became warm when it was placed on her body. It too settled on her shirt as the ring settled in on her finger. Once more the lawyer and his assistant watched with intense curiosity. The reaction of the broach to her acceptance produced another soft smile from both.

"What's next?" Mary thought all this a bit strange. The lawyer, nor his assistant, asked for proof or identification when presenting the will, ring, and broach.

The lawyer pushed both wills to her and indicated where she was to sign. She did so with a pen that produced a red ink similar to the color of blood.

When she finished signing another assistant came in with a set of ledgers, a couple of computer thumb drives, and of all things a large checkbook. Mary stared at the pile.

"You'll probably want to review the financial information before you make any decisions on what you want to do with your inheritance. Oh, by the way." The lawyer pulled a key from his coat pocket. It was the old large front door key to the homestead. "Here is the key to the homestead. Please contact us if you need any assistance with anything. Here is my card."

The assistants and the lawyer stood up and exited the room. There Mary sat a ring on her finger, a broach on her dress, a business card in her hand, stacks of ledgers, and a large checkbook. Mary was a bit on her back foot, but at the same time quite pleased the whole unpleasant business took no more than 15 minutes of her day. She grabbed everything and made her way out the conference room, to the lobby, and out into the daylight.

Mary looked as she exited the building and saw her mother's dark blue Jaguar setting at the curb. A man she assumed was from the law offices helped her load the papers in the side passenger seat. Then he gave her a key fob turned and left. Apparently her inheritance included the cars. Mary got in the driver's seat and made her way to the homestead.

It was as she remembered it. Nothing, like the town itself, had changed in the decade since she had crossed its threshold. The landscaping was immaculate. Lawns mowed. Driveway cleared of any leaves or branches. The large wraparound porch was sturdy and uncompromising. Hedge rows set before the porch and hard pressed against the large staircase to the porch itself were perfectly manicured. She looked towards the back and could see the small grounds crew at work. They had been with the family and property for as long as she could remember. She didn't really know their names. Mother and father prohibited staff from becoming familiar with family.

## Chapter 2

Mary parked the car at the porch entrance. Within moments Sharon emerged from the front door with Henry quickly behind. Henry opened the car door then headed over to get the stack of papers given to Mary at the law offices.

“Welcome home, Miss Mary. Or should I say, Lady Scoville?” Sharon inquired.

“Mary is fine, Sharon. How have you been?” Mary was pleased to see Sharon. She had been the only one besides Henry that Mary ever had contact with while she grew up in the old mansion. Sharon wasn’t the nanny. But she may as well have been. She took sincere interest, albeit at an approved distance, in Mary’s life.

Sharon gathered Mary’s backpack and followed her up the steps to the porch. When Mary stepped on the porch itself the house shook. The whole house from the foundation to the very tip of the highest lightning rod shook. It wasn’t violent. But it was obvious. Sharon smiled. Mary looked confused.

“The house is accepting you. The mantle has been passed.” Sharon stated as a simple fact. Sharon moved on into the front lobby. Mary followed a bit confused.

“What do you mean the mantle has been passed?”

Sharon just looked at Mary and grinned. It was if she knew something that anyone would or should know. But Mary didn’t know and was confused. Before she could ask again Henry came up behind her.

“Shall I put the ledgers in the study, Miss Mary?” Henry asked.

The study. Her dad’s office in the mansion. Where he conducted his business. Inside was a huge desk made of ancient woods and inscribed with runes. It was large, beautiful, and his. But it was the best place to do business. Mary nodded an assent and Henry moved to put the papers in the study. Her study now.

“We’ll have a bit of a snack ready in a few minutes, Miss Mary. I’ll place it in the dining room if you wish.” Sharon called out.

“Could I have it in the kitchen?” Mary asked.

“Of course, dear.” Sharon responded. “You can go look about for a bit if you wish. The snack won’t be ready for about 15 minutes.”

Mary made her way to the tower. Her room in the history of this house. She climbed familiar steps and opened a simple door. All the drapes in the tower room were open. Mary could see completely around the entire estate. It was still spectacular. But what surprised her more was her room was intact. It was exactly the way it was when she left over a decade ago. Not a sheet was moved nor a hairbrush out of place. It was as if it had become a memorial to a time long past. To Mary it was a bit sad and sorrowful. She had moved on. But apparently the house had not.

Mary eventually found herself in the study. She hadn’t planned on staying in the house. Her initial plans were to sell the estate, liquidate anything she could, and donate the bulk of the estate to the many charities she supported. However, when Mary got a first look at the books and her estimated wealth it became immediately apparent it would take years if not a lifetime to give away her fortune. Her family, despite how they treated her, was rich, very rich. Amazingly wealthy. It was also old, old money. She was receiving income from assets centuries old. She owned land, titles, and homes in four continents. The family checking account alone held almost ten million dollars. The checking account. That one with the large checkbook.

But it was the businesses she now owned that caught her attention. One was established in England in 1460 BCE. 1460! What they sold was beyond her comprehension. Newts, plants, old skulls, even ancient dirt was traded in this shop. The return on the items was phenomenal. She owned other companies now in many more markets. None of which sold the common goods like food, fuel, or clothing. Mary sat back in the chair. She was now more confused than ever. What the hell were her mother and father in to?

Sharon walked in just as Mary finished her cursory inspection of the books. She smiled as she saw the look on Mary’s face.

“Surprising isn’t it, Miss Mary. They and you were quite wealthy. Well, just you now, of course.”

Mary just looked at Sharon in disbelief. Sharon smiled then placed an envelope on the desk before Mary. It was a black envelope with her name written in red on the face of it.

“Well, then. I guess you best be getting on with it.” Sharon stood up and walked out of the study.

Mary reached for the envelope and opened it. “Trial 1” was written on a black card in blood red ink. That was it.

As soon as Mary placed the card back on the desk the lights went out, and a blood-curdling scream filled the study. A demon exploded from the depths of hell right before her. Fire and brimstone cascading all around him. The study door slammed shut. Then the black form with eyes of deep red fire reached for her.

Mary sat stunned for but a moment. Then the hot sting of demon nails raked the skin of her arm. Mary shrieked, then jumped back. Her mind was in focus now, complete focus. She knew this, she knew how to defeat this apparition from hell. Memories kicked in. Memories from long ago. Childhood memories from when she was but four years old. Memories from an abandoned childhood spent with a cold uncaring father. A father that time and again coldly made her recite ancient verses and learn physical techniques until they were done on remote.

She remembered his beatings when she forgot. She remembered his constant tests throughout her life with him. Tests that brooked no deviation. Failure meant severe punishments. Mary cursed her father first. Then she cursed the demon before her. Mary felt the warmth of her father’s ring on her hand. The ring guided her hand to the demon blade that hung above the mantle. Mary made the leap, a leap learned long ago in some girl’s school gym class. A leap that seemed ridiculous when learned, but so important now.

With that leap Mary gained the mantle. Her hand grabbed the blade. An ancient curse escaped her lips. The curse repeated so many times in this very study. The demon roared as the curse fell from her lips. It reached once more towards Mary. Mary leaped back and struck. The room went dark. The hell fire extinguished. Mary fell onto the floor. Darkness engulfed her.



## Chapter 3

The sun shone through the gaze curtains hanging in the bedroom. The chill was on the windowpane. Mary turned toward the sun. She was exhausted. Suddenly she remembered the demon. Mary sat up with a start. Where was she? How the hell did she get here?

Recognition soon returned to her thoughts. She was at the mansion. Oddly enough she was laying in her mother's old bed in her old bedroom. Creepy. Mary didn't quite fancy sleeping on the bed her mother died in. A short knock and the door opened. Sharon walked in.

"I see we are up. Good. Fresh towels are in the bath suite. I have hung your clothes in the closet. Don't worry. Your mother's clothes were removed much earlier. We also replaced the bed and bedding. Doesn't do to lie in death, dear." Sharon placed a pot of coffee on a small table next to the window.

"What the hell happened last night?" Mary was confused. This was so surreal. She fights a demon and everyone carries on as if nothing had happened.

"I have no idea what you are referring to Miss Mary. Why don't you get yourself settled then come down for some breakfast. We can talk more then." Sharon smiled, turned on her heel and left.

It was simple, quick, and a complete non-answer. Mary took a moment. Then she used the facilities, shower and all. She drank a quick cup of coffee, found her clothes, and made her way to the kitchen.

The house seemed warmer as Mary ate her breakfast. Sharon fussed about talking about little things of no consequence. Mary was just about to interrupt when Henry came into the room.

"Your first appointment will arrive in thirty minutes, Miss Mary. I left the folder on your desk." Henry turned and left.

Mary looked up at Sharon. "First appointment?"

"Why of course, Miss Mary. You own quite a few companies now. The directors and managers will be coming to introduce themselves and get to know you. Just all a bit of formality now until you make final decisions on what to do with your new fortune. Best hurry." Sharon moved Mary into the study.

Mary found a black file folder on her desk. 'Hampton's Herbs and Spices' was written on the folder in dark red ink. Mary was getting used to the stationary. She opened the file and read an impressive summary of the company and its directors. Soon there was a knock on the door to her study. Sharon opened the door from the outside and brought in a distinguished gentleman. He wore what could best be described as a formal mourning suite, suitable for any funeral. He introduced himself. He was kind, direct, and informative. After about an hour he left.

Mary took a small break and was given another black folder. In a half hour another director showed up at her office door. This woman was in her mid-forties at best, but replete with a black hat, dress, and shoes. Another simple introduction. Another direct and informative presentation. Another break. Then another folder. The routine went on for hours. It was dark before the appointments ended.

Mary had suffered through it all. She hadn't quibbled. She hadn't protested at the routine. She greeted each with formality and interest. But by the last appointment she had just about had it. She could not escape the similarities of this experience with that of watching her father each and every day. It reminded her so much of how he used these meetings to avoid intimacy. After the last meeting Henry opened the door.

"Miss Mary. Dinner is served in the dining room."

Henry waited until Mary passed by. Then he closed the door and led her into the dining room. Sharon had a complete meal set out for her. Wine was included. Very fine wine. Very fine china was being used. The china Mary remembered from her childhood. Mary took a drink of the wine. Then tasted the main course. She then turned to Sharon who was waiting by the kitchen door.

"Sharon, am I being tested in some way? This whole experience. Last night. The meetings all day. The routine. It seems planned."

Sharon smiled. "Of course you are, Miss Mary. Everything every day is a test. You might want to take a break on the front porch tonight. It is a wonderful full moon."

With her final comments Sharon left the room. Mary finished her meal and decided to take Sharon up on her suggestion. Mary walked out on the front porch and looked at the full moon. It was beautiful. Mary saw Henry on the front lawn. She heard his howl before she saw the transformation. Memory kicked in immediately. A fucking werewolf!

Mary turned and headed into the house. Henry was just behind her. Mary slammed the door closed. Henry beat it down with his claws. Mary backed up and looked at Henry. There was no use talking to him. He was in full transformation. He was all raging wolf. He stood a solid seven feet on his hind legs. He had slicked back fur. His jaws were open and saliva dripped from his lips. His eyes were in rage as he looked at Mary. To him, Mary was nothing but meat.

Mary's hand with her father's ring guided her to the weapons display on the wall. A silver arrow was mounted next to a bow. Henry knew Mary was heading to the display and raced her to the wall. Mary was much quicker. Time running from all types of angry, hungry critters in the bush in Africa ensured Mary prepared to win the race.

Henry swiped and roared as he just missed killing Mary with one of his powerful paws. Mary twisted, turned, and flipped. She came up but feet away from Henry. But the bow was in her hands, and the arrow was loaded. Mary took aim. It was a difficult shot to hit Henry in the neck but not kill him. If done right it would end the fight, until next month. But he would still be her Henry until then. Mary took the shot while Henry leaped to strike once more. Another howl went out as the arrow hit. His pay landed square on the side of Mary's head. She fell and blacked out.





## Chapter 4

“You’ll have to be getting up, Miss Mary. Mistress Jacobsen will be here with the others in less than 90 minutes. You know how she likes promptness.” Sharon was setting down the pot of coffee.

The sun was shining through the window. Mary was once again safely rising from her bed in her mother’s own bedroom. Her bedroom now, she supposed. Mary was confused. “Miss Jacobsen? Did she know Mistress Jacobsen. Oh, yeah. One of her mother’s friends. What was she still alive?”

Those thoughts entered her mind as Mary followed Sharon’s advice on nothing but muscle memory. She was just too confused. What had been happening the past few days was jumbling her brain. She was looking for any solid object to settle her thoughts.

Mary exited from the shower and reached for a small cup of coffee. In addition to the pot was a simple red rose in a black vase. Under it was placed a black card with red lettering. ‘Nice shot. Thank you, Miss Mary. Henry.’

Mary smiled. Apparently Henry was still with them. She was pleased. She always liked Henry. She was especially glad she had taken all those archery classes in school. National championship ratings finally paid off.

The day was a whirlwind. Unlike her father, her mother’s days were all chaos all the time. Mistress Jacobsen came with ten. They met in the conservatory. Discussion ranged from charities, to balls, to the local gossip of who was sleeping with whom. Truthfully, Mary quite enjoyed this part. Leaning each of the names and committing to memory was a bit of a challenge. But her mother had prepared her extremely well in manners and grace when it came to these meetings.

Mistress Jacobsen was very concerned the family foundation would continue supporting her favorite charities. Mary confirmed they were indeed in line for future donations. Mistress Charlene wanted support for societies formal ball season. Mary assured her she would consider all requests. That meeting ended and was followed with a trip to the local zoological society. A presentation and discussion on macaws was given. Then a trip for lunch at the local club. Her mother’s table was reserved, and Mary took many visitors as brief guests.

A meeting at the club. Introductions all around and acknowledging old acquaintances. Finally, a quick trip to the Alumni Association for her old school. Mary hadn’t seen those halls in more than a decade. A meeting with headmistress lead to a meeting with her former classmates. She had never really been close to any of them, but she had participated with them in many functions. Archery, gymnastics, theater, and chemistry club were her sanctuaries in those years. You can’t really participate in any of these organizations without at least becoming teammates or club mates.

After the past few days of speaking and talking with men and women so much older than her it was a relief to at least be with people her own age. People that knew how to use a cell phone and stream decent music. Mary got to laugh and reminisce. She agreed to a generous donation to the school in her parents name. She also agreed to update the archery equipment. Then it was off to a meeting and diner at a fine restaurant. One apparently she now owned.

It was close to eleven when Mary finished her social calendar. A better appreciation for her mother’s daily efforts settled on Mary. Still didn’t make up for the lack of personal attention. But it did explain the lack of time. Mary was much more appreciative of the social skills she learned at her skirts. Deflecting requests, learning without providing information, grace even in the face of anger. She used all of these skills and more during the day. She left even those in opposition in grace.

The car pulled up to the front entrance of the porch. The chauffer for the day, Henry was obviously recovering, opened the door and let her out. Mary felt it immediately as the car pulled off. The barrier. A strong barrier preventing entrance to the homestead. It was advanced magic. The house was not involved.

Mary's memories had felt it before. Another test. What was this, the third one? Mary was getting pissed. How many times must she be tested? The she heard the cackle.

A witch's cackle. Mary recognized the voice. It was Sharon. Mary's broach glowed in anticipation. How Mary's mother loved a challenge to her authority and power. So did her broach apparently. And now, tonight, after the day she had. After the past two days she had endured. So did Mary.

Practiced movements done on regular late-night excursions she had made as a teenager found the needed plants. How many times had she had to break into her own home when she was out late searching for some fun? Mary ground the plant leaves in her hands. She chanted the chants she knew by heart. A throw at the barrier and a bit of force exploding from her fingertips and the barrier broke. The game was on.

"You witch. I'll find your ass and teach you from keeping me out of the homestead!" Mary screamed. This was dangerous. Mary could be seriously injured or hurt. Death could be a result. But it could also be fun. At the least it could be a pressure release and after what Mary had just endured. She could use the release.

Mary marched up the stairs. She threw an enchantment at the front doors. They exploded off their hinges. Her mother would have been proud. She had taught Mary that very move time and again over twenty years. Mary took the time to sniff the air. Enchantments and spells filled the homestead. Mary was familiar with all of them. Eighteen years of daily drilling didn't diminish with a decade of time in the jungle. Mary could also smell Sharon. She was in the kitchen.

Mary tore through the enchantments. The broach on her top glowed with power. It offered more and more to Mary's efforts as she blasted through each spell, each enchantment. The dining room table and chairs were but wooden sticks as she tore the enchantment apart. The lobby was destroyed at her entrance. Curtains were in shreds, rugs ripped, walls stained as each and every spell or enchantment dissolve under her anger and pain.

Mary kicked the door of the kitchen open. There stood Sharon in full regalia, witch's hat, black dress, and a black pot boiling on the stove. Her broom stood to her left. They let loose. A full witch's duel. Mary had never been in one for real. She had heard stories. She had practiced moves and enchantments. She had been forced for many years to study and learn how to win. Only how to win. And to win, you committed, fully. Oh, Mary committed.

Burts of fire sprang from fingertips. Spells chanted and counters screamed. Closer and closer they got to each other. Naught but a few feet separated them. Anger filled their eyes. Hatred fed their moves. Mary reached out to grab that bitch of a witch with her bare hands. Sharon turned and grabbed the hot black pot on the stove. Mary's instincts kicked in. She knew that smell. It was the deadliest poison. If any got on her she was done.

Mary seized Sharon's own broom and swung it at her head. It was distraction enough. A quick flash of fire from her fingers demolished the pot and spilled the poison on Sharon herself. Sharon was enraged. As she fell a last curse exploded in Mary's head. It was a protection curse. But for who? Mary's world went black.



## Chapter 5

Mary awoke in her bed. The sun was shining on a cold autumn day. There was a knock at the door and Henry walked in with her tray of coffee.

“Miss Sharon sends her apologies. She will need this morning to recover for the night’s festivities.” Henry was polite. An injury was healing on his neck.

“Thank you. Thank you for informing me of Sharon’s absence. May I ask what festivities are you referring?”

“The annual Halloween party, Miss Mary. You are the hostess this year. The first time you will be hostess as I recall.” Henry bowed and made his way out of the room.

The annual Halloween party. Mary had almost forgotten about the party in her anger over her parent’s lost affections. It was by far the biggest party of the year. All of her mother and father’s closest friends were invited. Indeed, almost the whole town was invited. There were treats for all the kids dressed in costumes. It was the one time of year Mary even brought some of her schoolmates over to the house.

There were bands, contests, laughter, and tricks. The front yard was filled with all sorts of decorations from the gateway inside to the ball room itself. If it was ghoulish, ghostly, weird, or haunted it was welcome. Fun was the keynote to this gathering. Now this, if it was a test, was a test Mary could get in to.

Mary came out of the shower and found her costume for the day and evening on her bed. It was a full witch’s ensemble. Mary could tell it was an old costume. It also had some of her mother’s touches on it. It was also exquisite and irreplaceable. Her brooch set neatly within its folds. It came with a set of heels, a hat, and even an original broom from the 1600’s.

Mary took her time and dressed slowly. She wanted to feel each fabric, tie, and bow. When she put on the final shoe and grabbed the broom it seemed as if the whole outfit became a part of her skin. Mary felt the homestead shudder. The homestead approved.

It was a light day. The morning was spent mostly on directing where the decorations would stand. The rooms Mary had demolished the night before were already repaired. Mary didn’t know how but knew she didn’t have to know. What she needed to know was who was coming, when they were coming, and why they were coming.

Mary was studying the guest list in the kitchen when her head began to get fuzzy. She decided she needed to lay down and went to her room. A quick nap would help. That is when the noises filled her mind.

She awoke to darkness. She was no longer in her witch’s garments. She was in bed wearing a simple nightgown. What had happened? Where was she? Was the party over? Days of fighting and then blacking out only to awake in her own bed made her circumstances less strange. But this time she awoke in the darkness, not the light.

Mary heard a sound. Something was clawing at her door. Mary moved cautiously to the door and opened it only a crack. It was enough. Faceless ghouls were clawing at her door. They were trying to get in. Ghouls in black with red eyes. Ghouls in white with dark black eyes. All wanted her. They all wanted her soul. Mary shoved the door hard and managed to close it. She put a lock spell on the door and moved to the bathroom suite. There was a window there that looked on the front lawn. She hoped to see what was outside. Where did the party go. She was searching for any clue, any idea.

Mary went to look out the window and saw nothing but ghouls trying to break the glass and get inside. They were trying to get to her. Panic was starting to settle in. Fear like ice was starting to run through her veins. Mary needed a way out. She ran to her bedroom. Her bedroom window was clear. The ghouls had not gotten to that window yet. There was an old oak tree there. She had climbed down it numerous times. Mary flung the window open and climbed down the oak. She ran into the woods

## Under the Stairs

Mary had found her way to this old farmhouse. She shivered under the basement stairs. She covered her thin nightgown with the old blanket she had found on the floor.

The frame of the old farmhouse groaned and creaked under the assault of nature and aging timbers. Mary curled harder against the wall seeking the shelter of darkness from her pursuers. She didn't know who they were. They just came in the middle of the night pounding on her door. Demanding to be let in. She had flung open a second-floor bedroom window and climbed down the old oak to escape. Then she ran wearing nothing but her nightgown. She ended up in this old decrepit farmhouse far on the outskirts of her family's land.

But did she? Did she really run? Mary's mind fought itself. She knew something was wrong. Something wasn't right. Why was she in such a panic? Where did this old farmhouse come from? Mary reached for the top of her nightgown. Then she felt it. The broach. It was warm at her touch. Mary grasped it like she was holding onto a life ring in the middle of the ocean. The broach grew hot in her hand. Its magic flowed into her body. Slowly the fog of her mind lifted.

Mary fought her way back. She was in her bedroom. Night was just falling. She was wearing her witch's clothing. Her eyes focused.

"Everything's a test. Every day." Mary muttered as he turned over in her bed.

She was stunned. Sitting beside her was Junla. Her greatest friend from Africa.

"I told them it was a waste of time. You knew too much about Voodoo to be taken in." Junla laughed her wonderful laugh.

Mary jumped up and hugged her.

"Who did you tell?" Mary was curious. Junla would always give her an honest answer.

"Some old white-haired gentleman from an old fogey law firm. I didn't get his name. Said they had to give you a mind test so you could get your inheritance. They contacted me just after you got on the plane."

"Well, there will be hell to pay." Mary stood up. "How do I look?"

"Like you are ready for a party. I hear there is going to be a good one downstairs." Junla gave another laugh.

"Damn right. Let's go!" Mary went to open the door. There stood Sharon, a bit worse for the wear and a bright scar on her neck. But she was smiling.



## Epilogue

“Miss Mary. There is an important message for you in the study. I believe you should see it before the party.”

“It’s that important Sharon?” Mary was sincere in the asking. She needed a party.

“It is. I will escort Miss Junla personally to the party.”

Mary made her way to the study. There, on the desk, was a laptop computer. It was open, on, and a thumb drive was attached to it. Mary sat down at the desk. She pressed play on the computer. A screen opened up and there were her mother and father. It was in their later years. Mary must have been gone for more than eight years by then. They looked so old. Her mother began speaking.

“Mary. We were not good parents. We tried to be. We wanted to be. But we didn’t know how.” Her mother started. A tear tried to fall down her cheek. She refused to let it.

Her father spoke next. “Dear Mary. We were born of royal blood in a time when royalty meant something. Duty was always first. Affection, if there were any, always came last. Affection in our families was considered a weakness.”

Her mother spoke again. “Our marriage was arranged. It was a marriage of two old dynasties to form an alliance against those opposed to our houses. We weren’t supposed to fall in love, but we did. You were an unexpected but wildly anticipated product of that love.”

“As you have probably discovered over the years our families consisted of warlocks and witch’s. That is just who we are. That is who you are, a witch. We built businesses to support our kin and kind. We built protections to ensure their survival.” Her dad interjected.

“Since we didn’t know how to be affectionate we decided to ensure your survival and prosperity. That is the only way we knew how to show our deep love for you. The constant tests, activities, and social events we made you attend were our attempts to make sure you were prepared for your life ahead. I hope you don’t hate us for that. We do love you so much dear.” Her mother added.

“If you are seeing this video it is because you have passed every test the family and our friends required for you to take your rightful place in our family. Both families. We were against it. But the families insisted. You will, after all, control not only a large fortune but the future of both families. Old families with great heritage. I know it will be a burden. I do apologize for placing such a burden upon you. But I also know you can handle it.” Her father added to the explanation.

“Dear Mary. You are a princess by royal blood. Not a princess of any geographic area or realm. But a princess of our people. You may even by now have ascended to the title of Queen. Yes, that is your heritage. I am sorry we never told you. But we thought it best that you live your life without the trappings for as long as you could. We wanted you to have your life. We hope you have.” Her mother dabbed at her eyes.

“Henry and Sharon will assist you in any way they can as they have assisted us. Their family is bound to ours and you can trust them. The homestead is yours as well. Yes it is in fact enchanted. It has been for hundreds of years. The house knows you as well as you know yourself. It will serve you. However, you are not required to live in the homestead. You may not want to live there considering the feelings you have had growing up in its embrace. Home is where you make it, my darling girl. With your resources that can be anywhere on the planet.” Her dad added.

“Just know we love you and loved you in our way, Mary.” Her mom ended her part of the video.

“We love you, Princess. I love you, Mary.” Her dad’s last words. Words she had always wanted to hear were now hers to listen to whenever she wanted.

Mary closed the laptop. There was so much to take in, to understand. But that was for tomorrow. Tonight, her father and mother told her the truth. They loved her. That was enough. A small knock came at

## Under the Stairs

the door. Sharon opened the door a bit and looked in. Sharon saw the tears in Mary's eyes and smiled. All was as it should be.

"Princess Mary. Are you ready for your party?" Sharon asked.

Mary looked up with a heartfelt smile. She wiped her eyes. Princess Mary went to join her party.

