

The Waif



By D. L. Courtney

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Chapter 1

When the sun is shining and the water in the pool cools your thoughts you forget about the waif waiting for the long shadows and cool night air. Each redundant lap in your swimming routine settles your mind into a numbing oblivion that provides momentary relief and a possibility of a future. Steve thought of that moment in the sun as he sat on the front porch of the old mansion and watched the leaves fall softly on the grass.

Steve thought of the freedom of the sun. He thought of the feel of the water as it flowed past his body. Steve thought of the blue sky and the possibilities of the future such scenes explode into your mind. Then his thoughts turned dark. They turned back to the waif.

The waif, his own personal hell. The ghost that filled his life and haunted him each autumn. The waif that made life a living hellscene until the last chime of Halloween's witching hour. Worse was Steve had willingly bought this torment and brought it upon himself.

Steve was young and stupid. No ethereal form could haunt him. They were old wives' tales. Superstition and fantasy wrapped in a lie. He was twenty-five years old with an arrogant lust for land and power.

The realtor had disclosed the haunting. They even listed the haunting at closing in the documents. Steve didn't care. Steve scoffed at the thought. He dismissed the lie. A ghost? What did they take him for, ignorant?

The price was right. More than right. Steve hadn't seen any property, let alone a mansion, this cheap in this neighborhood ever. It was a property Steve could easily afford. A quick fix upper that he could flip for tens of thousands more. Steve was on his way to his fortune.

The shadows had gotten long shortly after the purchase. The air turned cold, frost was on the pumpkins, and Steve met the waif. It showed up on his back porch just before sunlight. Steve was up early prepping for the day ahead. The old back porch is where he had placed all his tools, random sawhorses, and renovation materials. He stepped out on the porch hot coffee in hand and saw him.

He was a child, well more teenager than child. If an age could be given to a ghost Steve would have believed the waif almost thirteen. But it was hard to tell. He was so emaciated. He even stunk. Steve had no idea ghosts could smell so incredibly bad. The boy was dressed in rags. Rags you may have found on a discarded rag heap from a century ago. Nothing of what he wore related to this time or place.

His shirt, if you could call it that was an oversize tunic. No buttons on the front. Something you would pull over your head. The tunic had long sleeves that ended in tatters at the boys' wrists. His pants weren't jeans. They were pantaloons, bulbous oversize leggings that came to his mid calves. The pantaloons were tied in place with a rope around his waist. He wore no shoes.

His hair was disheveled. His face was smeared with dirt. His legs, what could be seen below the pantaloons, were covered in filth, cuts, and bites from any number of insects.

What really struck Steve was his appearance took on the idea of death. Steve could swear the boy and all around him appeared in black and white. The waif was a monochrome vision of misery.

Then Steve saw his face and eyes. The waif had turned toward him to look upon Steve. His eyes were big, but hollow and sunken. His eyes carried a whole world of hurt, anger, and loss. The streaks of tears, long fallen, still tracked on his cheeks. His face was dirty, very dirty as if the dirt of ages couldn't be cleansed. His skin carried the pallor of death, a depressing white with little color besides the dirt that lined it. Finally, his lips were thin lines defining a hunger that had never been satisfied.

Steve was repulsed immediately upon seeing the waif. Being in his presence dampened any happiness or hope. Steve was about to speak out, to yell at the boy to be gone. Then, in that moment, the sun rays pushed past the treetops announcing a new day. The waif vanished with the light.

The whole encounter stunned Steve. He didn't believe what he saw. Steve wandered over to where the boy had stood. He saw nothing. He felt nothing. Steve waved his hand around as if trying to touch something. Something to prove he wasn't going insane. There wasn't anything there. Steve dismissed the vision as a trick of light, maybe the gummy before bed. He shook the encounter off as best he could and began the work of the day.



Chapter 2

That first encounter was five long years ago. Steve had come to the full realization the waif existed. He was also aware the waif was not a ghost to be ignored. The waif was dangerous, evil, and vengeful. Whatever hurt he had suffered in his life. Whatever evil had existed in his mortal soul. He was reaping on the owners of this house tenfold.

Whenever the waif touched natural wood, it aged. The wood aged so much it disintegrated. Steve lost hundreds of dollars in remodeling lumber before he understood what was happening. Steve changed plans to update the house. He used modern LVP planks or other building products to circumvent the waif.

This angered the waif and he began the howling. He howled long mournful howls at irregular hours of the night. It was as if sadness had no end. The howling would wake Steve. It would terrify him. It kept him from sleep or any rest. Eventually, Steve took up residence at a nearby motel.

But the haunting didn't end there. The waif destroyed his tools, broke new appliances, and constantly ruined, rearranged, or simply destroyed any new furniture, bookshelf, or addition to the house. As it got closer and closer to Halloween, the attacks got more serious. Steve was at the mansion on Halloween. He was there late gathering his tools. Then he saw the waif fully formed.

The old grandfather clock in the hall had been loudly marking the passage of time. A clear tick tock of the grandfather clock could be heard throughout the house. Then the clock chimed the witching hour. Each dong of the clock's bell signaling the dropping of the veil between the real world and death itself.

Steve turned around and there before the old clock stood the waif. He was no longer a vision, a ghost, but he stood before Steve as real as life itself. It was as if the waif had been waiting for the moment. He stood ready, poised. He looked directly at Steve. His eyes wild with anger. At the final chime of the witching hour the waif lunged at Steve with a howl reserved for hell itself.

The waif's fingernails were long, dirty, and sharp. Steve had just enough sense left to dodge the full attack. But the waif's claws did make a mark. Steve was bleeding. Reality hit Steve quickly along with the pain. His life was in danger. He had to move. Now.

Before the waif could make another attack Steve dropped his tools and fled. He ran through the front door, across the front porch, and down the steps. He heard the howling once again.

Steve turned to see the waif on the front porch. The waif was bound to the building, unable to gain the ground needed to finish his attack. The waif thrust his arms into the air, his hands reaching out as claws on a rabid animal. The waif screamed and howled as if to curse his existence and Steve's.

Then the waif disappeared. He just disappeared. The chime of the old grandfather clock had marked the passing of the witching hour in increasingly loud, demanding, haunting tones. Its sound had flooded the entire estate from its perch in the hall. As the last moments passed the chimes had increased in physically wrenching intensity and volume. Then with a thunderous crash the chimes ended.

At the last chime, the waif vanished. The old clock that had been recording time in deafening tones for the last hour returned to its quiet, regular, drum. It was as before. The clock ticked and tocked, counting each minute in its monotone cadence. The entire house was once again as any empty house on any street in any neighborhood. It was shocking. The visitation just ended with a last thunderous chime on an old clock.

Steve had shuddered in fear as he watched evil itself wail on his front porch. He had never been so scared as he was that Halloween night. The memory burned in his mind. It was then Steve knew ghosts and evil existed. Steve had sat terrified, exhausted, and shook in fear all night on the front lawn. His back against the trunk of an old oak. He was in shock, disbelief. He couldn't trust his senses. But Steve knew it was real. From his soiled pants to the blood still oozing out of his skin, Steve knew it was real.

Sunlight eventually came. The light found Steve still sitting on the front lawn, his knees pulled tightly to him. He was rocking back and forth. The warmth of the sun eventually thawed Steve's senses. As he looked once more at the now deathly quiet mansion. It dawned on him that his quick bargain was a huge loss. He was now condemned and bound to this old mansion.

Steve found his strength and finally stood. He wandered up the front steps and into the mansion. He looked in fear at the grandfather clock. He stepped quietly to the old back porch sure he would see his ghostly companion waiting for him. But the waif was gone. There was no more visitation.

Tentatively, over the next few weeks, Steve began to repair the mansion. The repairs began to go smoothly. Floors were repaired. Roofs were fixed. By spring all that needed done was done. Steve moved in furniture and staged the mansion for sale. But there were no takers.



Chapter 3

No real estate agent would list the house unless the haunting was included in the declarations. All the locals knew of the haunting and wouldn't go near it. Many of the old timers just nodded knowingly. Spring came and went. Summer was in full then faded. The long shadows of fall appeared with the accompanying chill of the air. Steve had moved into the mansion to save costs and tried to prove to potential buyers that the house was not haunted. The chill of the nights proved him wrong.

Steve woke to the banging on the back porch. His gut churned inside. Steve began a cold sweat. He pulled the blankets over his head hoping the vision would just go away. It didn't.

When light finally came Steve went downstairs. He looked at the back porch first. Outdoor furniture had been upended and tossed about. Light fixtures had been destroyed. What was once an idyllic setting was a disaster. Steve knew this was just the beginning.

Steve didn't wait. He backed up a truck to the door and took everything out of the house that wasn't nailed down. Then he left. Steve rented a small house for two months until Halloween. Every day after sunrise Steve returned to the mansion and noted what had been destroyed. There was always something destroyed. On All Hallows Day Steve returned to the old mansion. With Halloween behind him, he repaired and replaced what had been destroyed.

It had been like this for 5 long years. There was no end in sight. Steve couldn't sell the house and the constant need for repairs every November condemned him to living in that hell. Steve had been thrust into someone else's nightmare. Despair was his constant companion. He had become a pariah in the small town. No one wanted to be near him or his proximity to the evil that surrounded the mansion.

It was late May or early June, four years after his first encounter, when Steve found himself sitting alone in one of only cafés that allowed him service. He was at a small table perched next to the kitchen. A plate of half-eaten eggs, a small glass empty save the remnants of the local orange juice, two half eaten pieces of toast, and half cup of hot coffee sat before him. His head was in his hands. He was tired in body and soul, and it showed.

He closed his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them an old beaten and worn manilla folder sat next to his plate. Steve looked up to see who had placed it on the table. No one was near. The waitress was in the back. The old-timers were bitching and having coffee in the front. No one was looking at him.

Steve reached for the folder and opened it. Inside were newspaper articles and old pictures of his mansion. Yellowed, half torn pieces of paper including a copy of the original deed lay within the folder. It was the known history of the mansion. Steve with little else to do began to read.

It was an in-depth collection of the history of the mansion. It took time to read and understand it all. When he was finished Steve found himself sitting on the front porch of the mansion. He didn't know when he had made his way back to the mansion. Steve only knew he was there and a summer night was falling.

What Steve had found out was the mansion was built by a successful merchant. He and his family had lived happily in the mansion for decades. It once was the center of society in that small town. The mansion was eventually sold in an estate sale.

The new owner was a vile man, with an equally vile family. The origins of their fortune were drenched in blood and treachery. They wanted to buy station and acceptance in society. But their very nature only elicited anger and hatred. The family was duplicitous, resentful, deceitful, and of the lowest class. It was said their servants were bound to them through slavery and dark magic. Howls of pain and anguish could be heard frequently from the depths of the mansion basement.

The mistress of the house was especially known for her affinity towards inflicting pain and demanding complete obedience. However, when anyone of importance or station inquired, none of the servants would speak ill of their masters. Eventually the house and the household were left to their own, isolated, nightmare.

It was just after the notation in one of the reports that Steve found a small clue or at best an idea of the origin of his specter. In barely two paragraphs of a gossip column in a now defunct local paper, it was reported the vile owners of the mansion had welcomed two more individuals to their household.

One was a young female of no more than fourteen years. The other was her twin brother. Apparently, they were the niece and nephew of the master of the house. That was all. No names or place of origin were provided. But for Steve, who had witnessed the specter. A young man of fourteen fit the specter's age exactly.

What was especially noteworthy to Steve was the fire two months after the two arrived. The fire had started next to the coal bin in the basement. It was not unusual in that day and age for house fires to begin in coal bins. Nothing was suspected when the fire brigade arrived. They had come quickly and successfully put the fire out before it could spread.

What drew Steve's attention and suspicions was that after quickly repairing the damage the vile family moved from the mansion never to return. The mansion was never sold. It sat abandoned for decades. Eventually the state claimed the mansion and its grounds. They were both sold for back taxes.

This is where the current history of the mansion began. Article after article in long forgotten magazines and newspapers tells of the mystery of the lone waif. There had been seances, ghost hunters, and even exorcists called to cleanse the house. None ever succeeded. A trail of previous owners had bought and sold the house over time. Each subsequently almost giving the property away to quickly leave the evil behind.

Finally, Steve had bought the mansion. His concern with price and profit completely overshadowed the need for due diligence and research. The owners before him probably couldn't believe their luck when he signed the papers. Now the horror was his.

Steve went to the study inside the mansion and sat down at a desk. He drew his computer close and began to search. He didn't have all the deeds and paperwork, but he did have access to the Internet and Clerk of Courts websites. Steve was sure he could find the names of the vile owners and trace their ancestry. He had time and a need.

It was four in the morning when he finished tracing the lineage of that vile family. Le Corsaire was their surname as they presented it to others. Corsaire was what it was shortened to over time. The Corsaire's were French privateers or pirates.

The male Corsaire that bought the mansion was a notorious pirate married to a witch if the rumors were true. He, with his wife, had raped, pillaged, and tortured their way across several oceans. To avoid prosecution, they had left the seas and ended up in this mansion. Further research had discovered they did have heirs. One of them lived four towns over. Steve took an address from the computer, hopped in his truck, and drove to meet this heir.

Steve pulled up to the house just as a middle-aged woman stepped out with a cup of coffee in her hand. She looked toward Steve's truck as it pulled up. Then she saw Steve. Her shoulder slumped. The woman acknowledged Steve then waved him up to the porch. When Steve reached the porch, the woman had a cup of coffee for Steve and invited him to sit down.

"You own the mansion now." She said.

It was a statement, not a question. Steve nodded his head and took the seat she offered.

"That damn mansion has been a family curse for generations. This is all I know."

Steve listened as she told the story. The Corsaire's, at least the man, was a French pirate. He did marry a woman that claimed to be a witch. They were not the best people. They also abandoned the mansion. The family did not know why. The story was quick, succinct, and apparently rehearsed after years in the telling.

Steve was quiet. He listened. He didn't interrupt. When she was done speaking, he asked only two questions.

"Who were the twins they took in? What were their names?"

The question caught her off guard. It was obvious she didn't expect it. Steve began to wonder if she even knew. But the look in her eyes, the shudder in her form, and the slump in her shoulders confirmed she did.

"Jason and Jessica Dubois. They were the children of his brother. They were taken to the Corsaire's' after his brother and his wife were murdered. Family stories claimed they were murdered in retaliation for something Corsaire had done." She responded.

"What happened to them? They didn't leave with the family, did they?" Steve pushed.

"Family stories don't say what happened to them. The stories do say the mistress of the house despised them. She saw them as rivals. The gossip was she tried to turn them into servants. Beat them down and demean them. But they rebelled. She retaliated. No one really knows but her and them. Their dead and they ain't saying."

The woman stood up, partly in defiance. Also to let Steve know his time was up. Steve gave her his coffee cup, then turned without comment. He climbed into his truck and left.

When Steve returned to the mansion he went back into the study. He had names. He had dates. He had some history. He began searching again. It was a hard search. Records weren't exactly digital back then. He often had to rely on innuendo and speculation. He fell asleep at the desk waiting for responses. Finally, an email pinged on his computer. It woke him from his slumber.

The response was from a small town in France. A simple local archivist had gotten his query and looked back into dirty files from decades past. He found the family name, Dubois. It was a

semi-prominent family when the town was founded. They had two children, twins. They were named Jason and Jessica. The husband and wife were murdered in their sleep. The children were sent to be with their uncle.

That was all the archivist had, just a few lines in tax records, birth, and death records. The archivist also sent an attachment. They had found a rendering of the children in an announcement. Steve opened the rendering and looked at the face of his tormentor. There was no doubt. Steve would never forget this face. Jason was the waif, the demon of the mansion.



Chapter 4

With the name revealed Steve was able to lay in his bed and rest. His mind cleared as minds do when solutions are achieved. But with a clear mind Steve had to wonder why the waif stayed at the mansion. Why was the waif compelled to wreak havoc and destroy the mansion every fall? His mind told him the old coal bin had an answer.

Late morning found Steve in the basement. The basement was the foundation the mansion had been built upon. The ceiling was low. A man of barely five foot five could stand in the room. The floors were packed dirt, the walls were hard rocks, river boulders, and various patches of old plaster. Spiders were the primary residents. Slits of glass resting just at ground level provided most of the light in these darkened chambers. Steve carried a strong large flashlight even at midday to navigate the underground rooms.

Steve made his way back to the old coal chute. The coal bin would be next to the chute which would have been next to the coal furnace. The furnace was gone. So was the bin. The chute was the only remaining remnant. Steve took a shovel and began removing dirt from the area that the coal bin would have been located. He shoveled dirt that had settled over the ages. Three inches down Steve's shovel hit flagstone. Flagstone was the original flooring put in this old mansion.

Steve cleared the area. Evidence remained on the flagstones of the fire that had consumed the area. The stones were scorched with black markings. It was obvious the fire had been intense. Steve stood back and let his light shine over the stones. His mind was troubled at what he saw. Something seemed off. Most of the flooring stones were set to matchup perfectly with each other. But the stones on the left. The ones closest to the outer wall appeared to have been pulled up and then laid back down without any care.

Steve moved over to the errant stones and put the blade of the shovel under one of the stone's edges. The stone moved. That wasn't supposed to happen. Flagstones were set in the floor. They didn't move. Steve pried the stone up and moved it to the side. He took his light and looked. He just about shat himself. A skull with hollowed eyes and a distended jaw looked back at him.

Steve gave a howl and jumped back. Then he cautiously moved forward to confirm what he saw. There, staring at him, accusing him, was a filthy, grimy, dirt filled skull. Its hollow eyes stared at him. Its jaw, partially open, looked as though it was screaming in agony. Just as Steve regained his senses a large centipede crawled out of the dirt embedded in the skulls mouth. Steve ran. He just ran. He left that hell hole and called the police.

Five full days they worked in the basement. Five days of stress and anxiety. Five days before anyone from the coroner's office or the police would tell Steve what they found. It wasn't good.

There were two bodies in the basement. Twins. A young girl and a boy. Evidence pointed to them having been beaten and tortured while they were alive. It appeared that the girl was dead when she was buried. But the boy had been alive. Both were buried when the fire had consumed the coal bin. The clothing around the skeletons suggested they were servants as they wore little but rags.

They were able to determine the time and date of the burials. That cleared Steve of any wrongdoing. The two skeletons were young adults of a much different time. The police asked if Steve might know who they were. Steve gave them the names of Jason and Jessica Dubois.

The skeletons were removed from the basement. Steve paid for their reburial in the local cemetery. It was a bit of a news story. So, the gawkers and curious did attend. Most kept the day reverential. Steve attended out of respect and empathy.

July turned into August. Steve found himself swimming at the local club every day. It was where he could think. The water would just flow across his body. Nothing but the strokes of his arms and the sun on his back interrupted his thoughts. Steve thought about the mansion. He thought about the Corsaire's. Steve thought about the twins, their lives in that house, and their deaths.

The long shadows and cold nights returned. This year Steve didn't remove his furniture or move to another house. This year Steve stayed.

It was just before dawn on a cold morning that Steve sat in a chair on the back porch. He had a cup of coffee, a warm blanket, and a sense of calmness. Steve was sure Jason would appear again. His body wasn't there anymore. But his revenge wasn't complete. Hate could carry hard for decades.

Jason did appear. One moment the space before Steve was empty. The next moment a raging young man was staring with hatred right at him. Steve didn't move. The sun slowly rose above the tree line and Jason disappeared just as he had come, in a moment.

Every night Steve waited in the rooms that Jason would appear. Every night Jason saw him and raged. Steve didn't move. He watched. The week before All Hallows found them in the study just an hour before midnight. Jason was becoming more fully formed.

Steve knew that on Halloween Jason would, for an hour, regain his physical presence. Still Steve did not run. He built a fire in the fireplace instead. He made sure Jason watched as he built the fire. Every night for a week before Halloween Steve built a fire in the fireplace. Jason screamed and tormented the house, but he did watch Steve build the fire.

Halloween finally arrived. Steve, this night, built the fire in the fireplace. But that night he built the fire just before the old grandfather clock started chiming the witching hour.

At the first chime of the witching hour Steve was standing on the front porch. The door to the mansion was open. Steve could see the grandfather clock and watch as Jason appeared. Jason appeared with such rage, such anger, such hurt. His eyes blazed with the need for revenge. His form shook and bulged in desperate need to salve his lust.

Steve watched as Jason's eyes turned toward the study. The same study where Steve had built a fire for the last week. With the last chime announcing the witching hour. Jason, now fully formed, ran with an anguished scream towards that fire. The fire built by his hated nemesis. Steve slowly descended the front steps and turned his back on the mansion.

Steve heard rather than saw the explosion of fire. The mansion was consumed instantly. Steve wasn't surprised. Hellfire was not subtle. Not even the fire protection system he had installed could abate the complete destruction of the mansion. He never expected it would. The fire happened fast. It consumed everything. It burned with white hot intensity.

The fire department came quickly. There was nothing they could do but control the burn. Steve just watched from a distance. He had heard the scream of release as that hated building exploded into ash. Steve made his way to the local motel.

The fire was ruled accidental. All the protections had been in place, and all the proper procedures were followed. Steve had fire insurance for one million dollars on the mansion and its contents. The insurance company paid out quickly once the Fire Department report was filed. Steve sold the land. Since there was no livable house on the land there was no need to disclose the haunting. The sale for the land went quickly as well.

After five years of hell, Steve finally flipped the house and made a profit. He had made his profit by destroying instead of building. What Steve really got was peace of mind. Jason needed his revenge. For all the pain, hate, and hurt Jason and Jessica went through, Jason needed his revenge. There wasn't any way Jason would move on without it. Ghost hunters, exorcists, and seances were not going to quell Jason's anger. He needed his revenge. Steve finally let him have it.

What Steve had learned from his research is sometimes there is no moving on. There is no passing over after unresolved issues are met. Sometimes you must let hell have its fire. Sometimes revenge is all there is. Then, only then, peace can come.

On his last day in town, Steve made his way to the diner. He sat at the table where he sat when he received the folder. Steve lay the folder on the table with a new insert included. The insert was the article on the fire at the mansion. Steve ate his meal, paid his bill, and left. He left the folder on the table.

Steve got in his car and drove. A new job awaited in a distant, far distant, town. He was looking forward to it. Steve didn't even look in the rear-view mirror as he drove away. He had had his fill of real evil.

