

All Hallows' Eve Frolic



A Raven Rock Story

by Nichole Louise

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Katrina Van Tassel wedges the sprigs of dried rosemary between the cairn's crevices and rests her hand atop the cold memorial stones. "May you rest well, Hulda." She pulls a gold-freckled, garnet-red apple from her satchel and secures it in a notch. "And you, dear Herkules." Her hand lingers, the memory of when war had come to Sleepy Hollow steals the solemn smile of nostalgia from her lips. She sighs, lifts her face in the direction of the churchyard housing the Hessian's grave. She closes her eyes and imagines the stone—erected there by her parents in gratitude to him for saving her life the night their cabin had been torched.

How she wishes to pay her respects to him in person, but she cannot risk another run in—unaccompanied most especially—with the schoolmaster Ichabod Crane. She opens her eyes, shudders at the memory of his unwelcome hands finding ways to touch her arm, her lower back, her cheek. She turns from the hollow and begins to disassemble the stones blocking Raven Rock's cave entrance. After the tragedy at the Battle of White Plains, Katrina's father and Hulda's uncle had walled up the healer's old abode fearing the townspeople would turn against her memory and denounce her as a bride-witch of Satan.

Katrina scoffs as she pushes the last rock aside. Since her mother had given her Hulda's book of remedies four years earlier, she'd often found refuge at Raven Rock for solitude and study. Those who knew this place dared not return, her parents included, but she was drawn. As a girl she hadn't remembered the way until she'd found a hand drawn map lodged in the pages of Hulda's book. In the years' since Katrina's first return to Raven Rock, she'd strengthened her

arms and endurance to move the rocks each time, secreting the place her mind and skills had flourished. The place she felt most at home. Curious, the place that had inexplicably drawn both she and Hulda had also been the place of her first breath and Hulda's last.

Placing her satchel aside, Katrina sets about starting a fire. The fire crackles to life as she sits and tucks her cloak beneath her petticoat. Drika Van Brunt, and Drika's mother Naomi, would not abide a gown dampened with mud and debris. Former indentured servants of the Phillipse family who'd fled to England after the war, Drika and Naomi had been taken into her father's employ after he'd saved enough to buy Philipsburg Manor from the provisional Continental government. Any enslaved peoples' working on the manor grounds had been granted freedom, as their former "master's" flight had deemed their bondage null and void. Many had left, though some had stayed on as paid mill workers and farmers. The Van Brunts had of course stayed. Themba, the formerly enslaved patriarch, had won his manumission through his deal of service with a Continental officer during the war. Now the Van Tassel's stablemaster, the family had saved through the years to move from the manor grounds to the old, rebuilt cabin once belonging to the Van Tassels. And Brom. Her dear, wild-hearted Brom had apprenticed to his father and had grown quite skilled as a farrier and horse trainer. A jolt of warmth blooms outward from her center. She wraps her arms around herself, imagining his touch. The circumstances of his birth had never been an obstacle, even before his family had "come up in the world."

The slide of pebbles draws her attention to the back of the cave. Any animal could find a passage to burrow in, and so she retrieves a knife from her satchel. She pads quietly to the cavern's back crevice, the candle and firelight not quite reaching its ebon depths. She readies the knife, willing her fear deep down.

Yet her fear evaporates when her nose fills with the earthy scent of hay and horse. She grins, then tip toes away and crouches behind a wide tree stump turned chair. She holds her breath when another slide of pebbles elicits a muttered curse. She peaks around the stump, catches sight of that blasted fur cap in the flickering light.

He stops short, hands fixed to hips, as he no doubt mulls the empty cavern. She pulls back when he turns around, and grumbling, his footsteps recede. She looks over the top of the stump to find him taking the way out. She bites her lip as she steals along the damp cave wall, quiet as a scurrying mouse into the passage. He is silhouetted in the mouth of the cave when she reaches for his broad back.

Her hand lands between his shoulder blades. He starts and spins, his arms raised before his face as if to blunt an attack, dark eyes wide with terror.

Katrina falls against the wall with laughter.

His face changes immediately to sheepish embarrassment.

“Your face!”

“I knew you were there,” he says, swiping the fur cap from his head and running a hand through his curly black hair.

“You did not!” She chokes out between laughs. “I cannot believe I got you—for once, *I got you!*”

His wide jaw splits with a slow grin as he steps toward her and encircles her waist with his hands. “Fine, so you did.”

“You thought you could get me!” Katrina teases, lifting her feet to meet his lips.

“I suppose there’s a first time for everything,” he murmurs between kisses.

“I smelled you, Brom Bones.” She pulls back and giggles.

“So I stink of horse shite, do I?” He leans back, the freckles sprayed across his light brown skin seeming to dance with his amused countenance.

Katrina raises a pale eyebrow. “I did not say that--”

He stops her with another kiss, this time deeper as he enfolds her in his arms. “I knew I’d find you here,” he whispers against her ear. “Hiding from that puffed up popinjay, hmm?”

She grumbles at the mention of the schoolmaster—and her singing teacher. As a gift, her father had paid him in advance for the season. There had been no sending him away despite her pleadings. Not only that, her parents seemed to find not an ounce wrong with Mr. Crane—in fact, they viewed him an apt match for their learned Katrina.

“Papa invited him to the All Hallows’ Eve frolic tonight, though I begged him not to.” She takes Brom’s hand and leads him into the cave. They sink down by the fire, Katrina settling her back against his chest. “Papa said it would be rude to invite the rest of the town and not him.”

Brom brushes her pale braid from her shoulder and kisses her neck. “Perhaps we can hide here o’er the night.”

“Would that I could,” she sighs. “My parents would send out a search party, Mr. Crane leading the pack no doubt to impress Papa.” She swivels to catch Brom’s eye. “Just the other day he was openly admiring the china, going on about how *he* would display it were the manor his home.”

Brom snorts. “’Tis already his home, with all your father’s riches, in his mind.”

“I so look forward to the frolic every year. Oh, why must he ruin it? Papa will make me dance with him—”

“Mr. Crane may still be occupied.” That familiar sly smile spreads over Brom’s features.

“What did you and the boys do this time?”

“Well, last I saw, he was airing out the schoolhouse and sweeping out soot. Somehow, the chimney got stopped up.”

“You didn’t!” she says with glee.

He kisses her cheek. “For you, Kat.”

“Tell me he did not see you, nor the way you came? I cannot risk him finding this place.”

“He was too busy with the chimney. Besides, I left Faas and the boys near the schoolhouse to make sure he didn’t go wandering.”

She nods. “I would have liked to see Faas,” she says, imagining his thick, soft gray coat beneath her hands. Brom’s dog, quite likely part wolf, had been found alone as a pup and reared in the stables. Faas had been a constant companion to Brom these past three years.

“How he barks and growls at Mr. Crane,” Katrina stifles a laugh. “I might feel pity for the man were he not so uncouth in his conduct.”

They sit in silence for a moment, Katrina relaxing into Brom as he hugs her close. “Did you bring Daredevil?” she asks of the black stallion who’d thrown him nearly to his death when he was a boy of ten.

“No, he’d attract too much attention.”

“Did you...did you *really* re-wall the passage from the inside and hide?”

When he doesn’t answer, she twists around again.

“Maybe.”

“Is there another way in?” she demands.

His face changes to concern when he seems to discern the panic in her voice. “No, Kat. Forgive me. You are quite safe here.” He stretches to retrieve Hulda’s book, positions it on

Katrina's lap. He rests his chin on her shoulder as she pages through to her own latest findings and remedies.

"That poultice you made for Faas's cut paw seemed to help. He no longer limps."

"I am glad to hear it," she says with pride, then retrieves her quill and makes note of her furry patient's progress.

He fumbles with his coat before pulling out a bit of folded newspaper. "I have something for you."

She places her quill aside, takes the paper with hesitance. She unfolds it, eyes flicking up at Brom watching her with a mixture of wonder and anticipation. She scans the page jumbled with news from Manhattan Island. "What am I looking for?"

"Halfway down."

There, her gaze is drawn to the word "Apothecary" and below it, an ad inviting apprentice applications. She reads it once, twice, her heart racing. "Me?"

He nods.

"But I can't...*Manhattan*?"

"It is not so far away."

"Yes, but—but, they will never accept my application. A woman with no formal education...these men would—no..." She folds the paper and stuffs it within the book. She sighs, folds her arms. "Can you *believe* Mr. Crane tried to explain to *me*, of all people, the healing properties of raspberry leaf?!" She slams her book shut, retrieves the fire poker and jams it into the flames. A small log is knocked aside, sending a puff of cinders onto her petticoat.

Brom quickly pats the embers out, leaving behind singed pock marks.

"Oh, now I'll never hear the end of it." Katrina tosses the fire poker aside.

“Tell me, Kat.”

She pries her jaw, stiff with frustration, open. “You know it all.”

“Tell me again if it will unburden you.”

“They are like to treat me as Mr. Crane has.” She lets out a shaking breath. “He acts as if I know nothing of the world, of books, of the very land on which I was raised. Treats me as a *child*. I am a *woman*. How could Mama and Papa wish me to be courted by such a man?”

“His income is secure at the schoolhouse, to say nothing of the standing of the family he must come from. He would not have achieved such learning without an early advantage.”

Catching a tone both mournful and resentful, Katrina looks up at Brom. “Do not go down that path again. You know my heart is yours and no other’s, as it has always been.”

“I merely speak the truth of the matter. We both know, in the eyes of polite society, Mr. Crane would be a fine match.”

She tries to push away. “How can you say it so?”

He catches her before she can. “I did not say I agreed, Kat.” He kisses her, then lowers her to the old fur blanket beside the fire. She softens at his caress, wills Crane from her mind. “You have my heart, and you have my faith. Apply to the apprenticeship under K. Van Tassel, make no mention of your sex.”

“Why should I be run out of *my home* by that man?” She huffs. “Besides, they would never believe...”

“How would they know?” His mischievous smile returns.

“And if they wish to meet me?” she asks as he brushes the hair from her cheek.

“Oh, I am sure we can concoct a ruse.” He kisses her earlobe. “It is, after all, what I do best.”

A giddy laugh bubbles from her chest, all woe temporarily forgotten.

“Well,” he says, pulling up her petticoat, “*one* thing I do best.”

Though she rolls her eyes, she draws his hips close. “We don’t have much time.”

“Have you taken your preventative brew today?” he asks as he unties his breeches with haste.

“Of course.”

“You’ve been sporting with Brom again, haven’t you?” Drika, Brom’s older sister, sets upon Katrina as soon as she slips into the kitchen. Mahogany curls drooping from beneath Drika’s cap sway from the fall breeze whooshing through the kitchen with the open and close of the door.

“Shh,” Katrina says through gritted teeth, quickly scanning for Naomi or Katrina’s mother. Her fear is soon soothed by their absence, and the pleasant scent of melted butter, nutmeg, and baked apple.

“They’re setting up the parlor,” Drika sighs, then takes Katrina’s wrists and lifts them as if to get a better look at her. “Disheveled hair, dirt-smudged and singed petticoats, muddied slippers...” she shakes her head with a *tsk tsk*.

“Please Drika, do not tell Mama.”

“Come, let’s get you out of those garments. I’ll wash them before she sees.” Drika links her arm through Katrina’s as they scurry up the stairs, avoiding all noise as they pass the parlor entrance, up to Katrina’s room on the next floor.

Drika closes the door quietly, avoiding the creaking floorboard closest to the threshold. Katrina throws off her cloak with a groan. Drika tugs the already askew cap from Katrina’s head

and begins to unravel her loosened braid. She flicks out bits of dirt and leaves. “It’s the bath for you, Kat.” Her sigh puffs into the back of Katrina’s neck. “Our mamas wanted our help preparing for the frolic, and now we’ll be spending the afternoon scrubbing your sins clean.”

“*Drika!*” Katrina looks over her shoulder.

Drika clasps Katrina round the head, turns her front facing, then tugs a little too hard as she teases the brush through Katrina’s knotted hair.

“Ow!”

“Serves you right, all the extra work you’ve created for me.”

“I shall help you with the laundry and mending, I swear.” Katrina winces for another volley of reprimand, but is startled when a low chuckle breaks from Drika’s lips.

“The schoolhouse chimney,” she begins. “I trust Brom told you.”

Katrina stifles a laugh. “Yes.”

“The boys said Mr. Crane was covered head to toe in soot—like some ghost emerging from the schoolhouse. He near scared the children to death!”

Katrina claps a hand over her mouth.

Her mirth dissolves when the door flies open, her mother’s usually pale face mottled with fury. “Katrina Van Tassel, where *have* you been?”

Drika’s hands slow.

“Drika, will you leave us for a moment?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Drika bends her head and flees the room, yet is soon met by the anger of her own mother in the hall.

Katrina’s mother closes the door, then balls her fists on her hips. “Well?”

Katrina clears her throat, begins unlacing her stays. “Picking herbs.”

“I told you, you were needed here today for the preparations.”

“I thought if I went early enough, I would be back—”

“Katrina,” she begins, then seems to check her tone. She sighs, then sits on the bed.

“Darling, you know I don’t like you to wander off alone.”

She bites her tongue from declaring she wasn’t alone.

“I know you enjoy your...herblore,” she says, ghosts of another time passing over her face, “but there are other things a young woman should focus on.”

Katrina unhooks her soiled petticoat, lets it drop, then sits in her shift beside her mother. “Mama, *you* gave me the remedy book.”

A shard of grief twists her mother’s face before she meets Katrina’s gaze. “Because she wanted you to have it. She was a true friend; did so much for us—for Sleepy Hollow. I wanted to honor her wishes.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes I fear I made a mistake—”

“Were it not for the book, I would not have found the remedy to cure your illness four years ago!”

Her mother concedes the point with a tilt of her head. “Katrina, you know I am proud of you? Of your keen mind, your knowledge of things of which I have no understanding.”

A seed of guilt blooms in Katrina’s stomach. She nods.

“I know you’ve had your...childhood attachment to Brom—”

“Mama—”

“Katrina, listen. I know your Papa indulges your attachment to him, but I think he views Brom as a type of cousin to you. Of course we are all fond of the Van Brunts. But Brom—people will not...” She takes Katrina’s hand. “I wish the world were different, I do.”

“But Wolfram and Hulda—”

“I know, I know.” She holds up her hand. “Hulda made her own rules. She always did.”

“Mama, why cannot I?”

“Because you are your father’s only heir, and all this—” she sweeps her arm to the window framing the fields dotted with rolls of hay, “will be yours someday.”

“My husband’s, you mean.”

Her mother stands. “I’ll send Drika back with a tub of hot water. Then we need your help in the parlor.”

“Yes, Mama.” Katrina studies the dirt smudges on her wool stockings.

“Give Mr. Crane a chance, Kat. He is very good with numbers and arithmetic—something this farm could benefit from after your Papa and I...”

Katrina’s head snaps up. “You and Papa are still young!”

Her mother flashes a weak smile, yet Katrina cannot keep the grimace from her face.

Mingled scents of spiced meats, cooked apple, golden pastry crusts, and tangy ciders ascend the stairs to Katrina’s room. She stands before the looking glass, Drika finishing the braided updo with a satin ribbon the deep orange of autumn leaves. Katrina fluffs out her skirts of a matching color, the faint shimmer of the damask catching in the setting sun’s golden light.

“Papa spent far too much on this,” she mutters, wanting nothing more than to throw on an old and unassuming petticoat. She brings her ankle forward, twisting it to and fro. “‘Tis a bit short, don’t you think? I wish he’d revealed this surprise to you earlier. Why—the hem doesn’t even reach my ankle!”

Over her shoulder, Drika's reflection seems to bite back a smile. An identical orange ribbon binds her mahogany curls. Her hazel eyes, so like her mother's, compliment the light brown, freckled skin tone identical to her brother. Drika steps back, adjusts her own new bodice and wool petticoat the color of coffee.

"*Your* petticoat is of a proper length, I see," Katrina says with a raised eyebrow. "Let us trade!"

"You are of ample breast and hip, the gown would drape off me. Besides, your father would be most upset."

Katrina huffs and Drika can only roll her eyes. "There was no time hem your petticoat, Kat!"

"I do not jest! Mr. Crane will take it as encouragement." Katrina whirls around and grasps Drika's shoulders. "Pray, do not leave my side tonight."

"I must assist in serving the guests." Drika lifts a curious box from Katrina's vanity. "Your father bid me give you this, too." Balancing the box on her forearm, she opens it outward. On a bed of black velvet sits ornaments of pure gold—dangling earrings and a necklace of intricate pattern to match.

"Oh dear." Katrina reddens, awash with shame for her riches when Drika has not half. "Where did he..."

"He said they belonged to your great-great grandmother in the old country. Wife of quite a well to do physician, apparently."

Katrina reaches to touch them, then draws back as if they are molten metal. "I did not know he possessed such a thing—" she stops short, cold fear running through her. "A gifted family heirloom can only mean one thing."

“What?”

Katrina can barely choke out the words. “Mr. Crane means to propose marriage.” She steps away, her back slamming into the bed post. “He must’ve asked Papa for my hand—this is a gift of celebration.” She shakes her head. “Drika, I cannot!”

Drika snaps the lid shut, discards the box on the bed, then takes Katrina’s hands. “Breathe, Kat.”

“Would that I could, but you’ve laced me too tight.”

Drika purses her lips. “*Even* if what you say about Mr. Crane is true...you still have the power of choice in a future union because of your father’s wealth. A power many do not have. Mind you well that, Katrina, and do not squander your privilege to do so.”

Katrina blinks, the panic receding. Like Brom, Drika has a way of calming her errant and wild thoughts of potential catastrophes. “You’re right. Forgive me.”

“Of course I am right,” Drika says, then retrieves the box.

“They are beautiful...but Mr. Crane will—”

“Oh blast Mr. Crane! Wear what you like, regardless of how he or anyone may take it!”

Katrina sighs. “I will wear them only to make Papa happy.”

Drika shrugs, then affixes the earrings to her lobes, drapes the necklace over her collarbone.

Katrina touches the rosy mottling of her cheeks—her anxiety still at the surface.

“I will try my best to stay near you,” Drika says, squeezing her hand. “And Brom will be here—he and Papa are playing music at the frolic.”

Katrina folds Drika into a hug. “Thank you!”

“But mark me, Kat, I am *not* getting stuck talking to that pompous ass Crane!”

A long table stretches the side of parlor, heaped with platters of ginger and honey cakes, apple crullers and pies, peach preserves and crumbles topped with crystallized sugar, pumpkin pies with buttery crusts, glistening ham and smoked beef, jugs of freshly pressed cider. Bound dried corn dangles from the rafters, leaf garlands snake about the room, carved pumpkins stand guard atop bales of hay at the entrances and exits of the parlor. The fire crackles in the hearth, casting a flickering world of shadows upon the merriment of guests already filling the room. Despite her trepidation at seeing Mr. Crane, Katrina's mouth waters. This year, her father has spared no expense for his annual All Hallow's Eve frolic.

Her father moves from guest to guest, his round face soft with good humor and pride in his accomplishments. With the shake of a hand or a slap on the shoulder, her father bids each guest to the sideboard of riches with a command to "fall to and help themselves!" She catches his eyes across the room and a smile as wide as the nearby jack-o-lantern splits his face. He weaves through the partygoers to her.

"My little pumpkin, look at you!"

"Why did you never tell me of these?" Katrina asks, touching the necklace and earrings.

His eyes twinkle. "A secret guarded close and safe. It's a wonder the Hessians never found them beneath the cabin." He kisses her cheeks. "A sparkling adornment to an already beautiful and accomplished young lady."

"Papa..." She grits her teeth, hoping the nearest guests have not heard the lavish praise as if she were still a child of seven.

"Baltus, leave the poor girl alone," her mother appears at her side.

“My dear!” Baltus pulls his wife close, her garnet gown swaying around her feet. “Say you shall dance with me this night?”

“Yes, my love, as long as you do not trip over my feet.”

Her parents fall into whispered talk, and Katrina breaks away to the sideboard. She picks a palm-sized ginger cake from a platter and stuffs it into her mouth. She sighs as the flavors burst on her tongue. Naomi Van Brunt has outdone herself this time.

“Another bite like that, my plump partridge, and I daresay you may never fit into that daring gown again.”

My plump partridge?!

She stops short, heart dropping, feels the cold at her back. Ichabod Crane is behind her and she cannot escape. She peers around for Drika but finds no refuge. She plasters a polite smile on her face and turns.

The deep-set green eyes in his pale face go wide, his gaze going instantly to the gold at her throat and very soon after to the décolletage beneath the sheer kerchief tucked above her bosom. She crosses her arms in reflex. His eyes move momentarily to the sideboard’s feast, his countenance growing even more ravenous.

“My dear, my dear, what riches abound!” He pulls her hand to him and plants a wet kiss upon it.

She dips her head if only to hide her disgust. “Good evening, Mr. Crane.”

“You look...” he still has not released her hand; her fingers caged between his clammy grasp. “You are a feast for the eyes. I hardly know if I should start with you or the table!” A shrill laugh escapes him and she fights the urge to rip her hand away and wipe a fleck of his spittle from her cheek.

“Ms. Van Tassel!” Drika’s voice is that of an angel. “Your mother needs you!”

She looks over her shoulder and spies Drika motioning her from the other side of the room.

Mr. Crane follows her gaze, then frowns when she looks back.

“Forgive me, Mr. Crane, I must part with you a moment.” She gently tugs her hand away, assuming he will release her, but he does not. He grins down at her in a way he no doubt thinks both salacious and charming.

She dislodges her hand and quickly loses herself in the crowd. She wipes her palms on her skirts, draws her sleeve across her cheek. She meets Drika by the door, just behind where her mother and father are greeting the arriving guests.

“You are my knight in shining armor,” Katrina gasps when she reaches Drika.

“Your eyes were as a hare cornered by a fox.”

“Do you and your mother need help in the kitchen?”

Katrina’s mother turns upon overhearing the question. “No, they have everything well in hand. Please be polite and mingle with our guests. The music and dancing will begin soon.”

Katrina hooks her arm through her mother’s. “I shall greet the guests with you.” She smiles as if nothing is amiss. “Good evening, Mr. Brouwer, Mrs. Brouwer.” She dips her head as the straw-hat topped couple arrive.

Barking draws her attention outside and her heart leaps. She rushes out the door, waving to Themba and Brom with Faas in tow. As they move into the light of the festive lanterns lining the crushed shell path, their cargo reveals itself. Brom, a fiddle. Themba, a guitar. Thoroughly scrubbed of their stable work, they are dressed in their best waistcoats and breeches of matching nut-brown wool. Wavering lantern light picks up the subtle mahogany tones lacing Brom’s dark curls and short beard.

Faas bounds to her, presses himself against her thighs and licks any remaining crumbs from her palms.

“Do not let that dog cover you in fur, Katrina!” her mother calls from the door.

“Good evening,” Katrina says to Themba.

He bends his head. “And to you, my dear.” He stands perhaps a few inches shorter than his son, his once black hair now a shock of light gray in stark contrast to his dark skin.

“We have quite a spread thanks to Naomi and Drika.”

At her mention, Drika descends the steps and produces a freshly baked roll from her apron. She tosses it to Faas, who catches it mid jump.

“Don’t you dare bring that dog in here, Abraham!” Naomi has also seemingly been conjured as she now stands with the Van Tassels at the door, a tray of some scrumptious treat just out of the oven poised in her hands.

Themba greets his wife at the door, trades her his fiddle to carry the platter into the parlor.

“I’ll take him back to the kitchen, he’ll be on scrap clean up duty,” Drika says, clapping her hands for Faas to follow.

Brom mouths a thank you to Drika, who casts a knowing look over her shoulder. He then takes Katrina’s hand and steals around the corner of the house, out of sight from any guests.

“You look very handsome, my love.”

“And you, Kat.” He leans over her in the safety of the shadows, and she can just make out the smile upon his lips. She laces her arms around his neck and bestows a hasty kiss.

She pulls away, eyebrows knit. “*He* is already here. Called me his *plump partridge!*”

“His *what?!?*” Brom takes a step back, his jaw squaring with anger.

“‘Twas horrible. Your sister saved me, if only for a moment, but I shall have to face him again.”

Her father’s disembodied voice calls for them.

“We must get back.”

He pulls her in for one last kiss, balancing his fiddle in one hand and her waist in the other.

“I will be near. You’re safe.”

She swallows her fear, nods. “Wait a moment, then come inside.”

The press of the room is dizzy with dancers and music and the stamping of feet. Naomi Van Brunt, coaxed from her duties by her husband and son, accepts Brom’s well-worn fiddle with a smile. She tucks her stray red curls beneath her cap and settles the instrument beneath her chin. Sweat from the heat of the parlor already glistens across her pale, freckled brow.

Katrina has so far managed to keep her distance from Ichabod Crane—always finding an excuse to take a cleared platter to the kitchen, to greet late arriving guests, to engage in drawn-out conversations of town gossip she would otherwise not care to know.

She pushes a window open to let in the brisk autumn air. The sweat on her neck cools and pimples with gooseflesh. With the earthy scent of dried leaves in her nose, she turns to find Brom striding toward her. He means to ask for a dance.

And then her vision is blocked by a coat of black, a swirl of dark hair bending as an almost skeletal hand not so much invites, but commands her.

“Would you do me the honor, Ms. Van Tassel?” Mr. Crane asks.

She freezes, glances from side to side at the knowing and inquisitive looks of the townspeople. From over his still bent shoulder, Brom's frustration is evident. Their eyes lock for a breath before he turns to Mrs. Van Houten; the young second wife of an elder gentleman all too eager to accept the hand of a young man.

Crane peers up at her, his pallid forehead puckering.

"I—" she searches for an excuse.

Themba and Naomi begin their jaunty tune. Crane grabs her hand and yanks her to him, his arm circling her waist before she can take another breath. Her nose bumps into his chest as he hops about the parlor with vigor. Katrina tries to create space between them, to bend her neck to the side to find her beloved Brom dancing with the buxom Van Houten.

Crane's stick-like hands span her waist as if branches poke her back. He tugs and pulls her along as a child carrying a ragdoll. The room flashes around her at a dizzying speed.

She digs her hands into his pointy elbows. "Mr. Crane!"

He bends his head, mercifully slowing his pace. "Yes, my dear?" His breath smells of cider and honeyed meat.

"You shall make me lose my supper if you persist in such vigorous movement."

His fingers explore the fastenings of her stays in a way he no doubt thinks sly. "My apologies," he says, green eyes flashing with petulance. "You mustn't have heard from the other ladies in town that dancing is one of my greatest passions."

He whirls her around the room as other couples spin by.

"I am prone to sickness from such movement," she pleads.

He crushes her closer. "I shall not let you fall, dear Katrina."

Her name on his tongue sends a shiver through her body. He smiles conspiratorially, as if misinterpreting her shudder of discomfort for one of pleasure.

“You have been quite the little coquette tonight, making me work hard for my prize. Those *ankles*.”

“Mr. Crane, I—”

“I know your game, fair Katrina.” He peers down his long nose at her. “Wishing suitors to fight for your heart as knights of old.”

“There is no game, I assure you.”

Laughter bubbles through his body. “Of course not.” He winks.

Her mouth dries. The part in the song has come for the men to exchange their dance partners. Like a drowning woman seeking land, she glances about for Brom. There—two couples dance between them.

Katrina jolts to decision by taking Crane’s waist and bodily guiding him in Brom’s direction.

“I knew you had a feisty nature!”

She tries to ignore his excited countenance at this development, which he likely mistakes for possession.

Guests standing along the walls of the parlor begin to clap as the couples switch their partners. Katrina and Crane nearly barrel into Brom and Mrs. Van Houten. Katrina artfully pushes off the schoolmaster without a backwards glance and spins into Brom’s arms.

Her taut muscles relax at Brom’s familiar touch as he guides them well to the other side of the room.

“Thank you,” she breathes, chest heaving.

“For a minute there, I thought he was going to devour you.”

She resists the urge to lay her cheek upon his chest. “I shall never escape him.”

As if changing his dancing style, Brom bends his mouth to her ear. “Slip up to your room without bidding anyone goodbye. I will block your flight. Lock your bedroom door. I will stay down here until I see him leave.”

“Mama and Papa have been practically guarding the stairs all night.”

“I’m sure Drika and I can come up with a diversion.”

The tune changes, indicating it is time for the men to once again exchange their dance partners. Her time with Brom is all too fleeting, as Mrs. Van Houten appears and nudges Katrina out of the way. Crane takes her up once more.

“That Mrs. Van Houten is a minx for a married woman!”

“I am sure Mrs. Van Houten is quite virtuous.” Katrina holds her breath until the tune finally ends. Crane will not release her hand as he bows. The applause makes her head ring.

“You look parched,” she says, hoping for an out. “Shall I fetch us some cider?” She starts to step away.

“You are too kind,” he says, winking again before releasing her.

When she finds the cider jugs empty, she offers her parents the hurried excuse of fetching more and descends the stairs.

Drika and Naomi are still making merry in the parlor, even Faas has gone from the kitchen perhaps already having had his fill of scraps. Katrina searches for a few moments but can find no cider. She welcomes the chance to cast the split door open and absorb the blast of cold air on her skin. Unhooking the lantern from the wall, she rounds the house and opens the cellar doors. The convivial sounds of the frolic recede to soft murmurs as she descends the creaking

steps and hooks the lantern overhead. She takes a breath, realizes she is shaking, then sinks to a barrel in the corner. She closes her eyes, inhales deep the scent of earth and pickling vinegar. The solitude is a balm after Mr. Crane's persistent attentions.

She sighs, rises, then begins checking their stores for another stone jug of cider. She is bent over the second shelf when one of the steps creak. She freezes with terror, but when the next stair creaks she lets the fear go. Brom has followed her to steal a private moment alone. She pretends to not hear his approach. With a whoosh of autumn wind from above, the lantern extinguishes.

A hand finds her waist, pulls her up. It's the kiss upon her neck that stops her cold, for there is no brush of scruff. Brom had not shaved for the frolic—he'd kept his whiskers.

She yanks away, stumbles into the moonlight illuminating the steps. Ichabod Crane looms like a specter before her.

"I knew you were playing games, my little coquette."

"No!" She tries to find her footing. "You are mistaken, Mr. Crane." She pushes away his slick hands.

"You fool no one with that short petticoat, Katrina." A long arm reaches to close one of the cellar doors with a bang. She jumps.

"You *wanted* me to follow you."

"No—"

He tries to force his mouth onto hers, but she pushes him away.

"Do not be afraid," he whispers, tearing away her neckerchief before his hand buries into her stays. "We shall be married soon. There is no sin."

Her ankle catches on the stair and she falls back. He is about to set upon her when she draws her knees in, plants her slippers on his chest, and launches him away with all the power in her body. He falls back into the darkness with a cry and the breaking of glass jars.

She rolls over, half crawling-half stumbling up the stairs and into the night. She runs, top bodice strings undone, her hair falling over her shoulder. Barking erupts behind her, followed by deep growling. Faas has found his prey and a measure of discomfort eases.

But she does not stop.

Ice in her veins propels her up the hill past the churchyard and into the woods. Branches slap her face, tear her gown, snag her hair.

She is covered in scratches and barely breathing by the time she reaches Raven Rock. She collapses at the base of the memorial cairn. She claws at her stays before ripping them off and throwing them aside. The cool air ruffles the sweat-dampened shift beneath, creates white puffs from her breath.

In their earlier haste, she and Brom had neglected to wall off the cave entrance. She stumbles inside; trembling hands and straining eyes fumbling to light a fire and fan it to life.

She'd also forgotten her satchel. Without knowing what exactly she is looking for, she pulls the book—Hulda's book, from her bag and begins flipping through.

"Please, save me from that man. Hulda, please! You must have had something to—"

Cold air blasts through the cave entrance, bending the flames and ruffling the book's pages. When it has dissipated, she finds the book has haphazardly fallen open to scrawled words and splatters inked in deep brown.

No, not ink.

Blood.

Her breath catches. She glances about as if waiting for a ghost to appear, then touches the page.

Somehow, she knows this is Hulda's blood. A last spell, and promise, inked from her own sanguine life. When had she done so--and why?

A voice from years long gone, German whisperings mingling to English. A call into the netherworld. A plea across time.

Protect her.

Avenge her.

The cave rumbles.

Katrina dashes out in time to see the cairn tumbling as the earth births a spirit stallion. With a smoldering ebon coat, a mane of black smoke, and flaming red eyes, it rears from its grave and gallops toward the hollow.

The ethereal call jolts the rider's spirit awake. He knows nothing before and nothing after. Only this moment. Only this task. He sees without seeing as he rises through the dirt of time. He and the stallion are joined as one, smoke and fire with all the power of a spell sealed with blood. Through the horse's blazing eyes the rider sets sight upon his target: a tall, pale man with dark hair and spindly limbs atop a gray and aged horse. A man with a determined, covetous eye. A man who is of great danger to the one he is bound to protect.

The horseman's directive echoes through the veil once more.

Protect her.

Avenge her.

With the might of a raging conflagration, they ride the man down—his old horse no match for the unseen forces driving the spirits. The pale man stops his horse short as if hoping to lose them, but in a flash they have turned and are galloping back. The man begins to sing some trembling psalm as if it were a shield, but his weapon is weak and shatters on his tongue. Both man and spirits ascend to higher ground, the moonlight now revealing the rider's identity. When the man accounts for the lack of his pertinacious pursuer's head, he screams out in terror and kicks his poor horse to hasten once more. The horseman dashes after him, embers and sparks flashing with each spectral hoofbeat. The dark-haired man bends his long and lank body over his horse's neck as if to compel it faster. The aged horse takes a sudden turn in the opposite direction. He plunges down into the hollow, toward the bridge crossing the stream.

The spectral stallion huffs hot smoke onto the horse's rump, causing it to falter. The heat melts the saddle clasps and the pale man clings with desperation to his horse's neck. The saddle slides to the ground and the stallion tramples it, the object turning to ash on touch.

The horseman hears the pale man's thoughts, *If I can but reach that bridge, I am safe.*

He believes water will thwart the spectral stallion and its rider, but it will not. The bridge will not save him, for the horseman will not relent until his task is done. They gallop up alongside him, smoke and cinders obscuring all else as if the spirits have transported the pale male to another realm. The spectral rider unsheaths a curved blade glowing the molten orange of banked coals. The horseman raises his weapon, now the only source of light in the darkness. The pale man screams as he struggles to lean away.

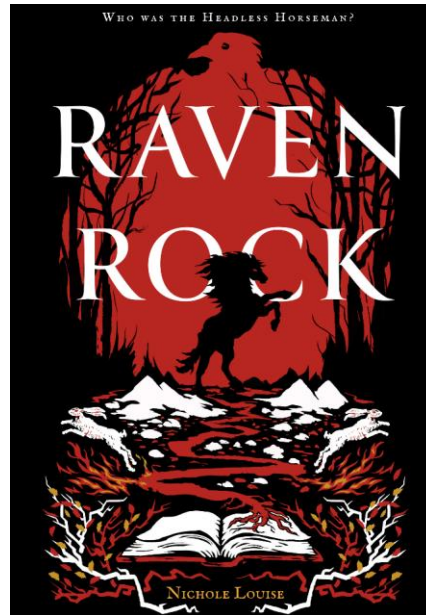
His face twists with terror before the flaming sword parts his head from his shoulders.

The body slides off and thumps to the ground. The aged horse, unscathed, keeps running.

The Headless Horseman circles back to trample the earthly remains. Pale flesh turns to ash at the stallion's touch, and the brisk winds of All Hallows' Eve carry the soot into the night.

Come morning, there will be nothing left to find.

THE END



* Honorable Mention - 2024 *Writer's Digest* Self-Published Book Awards

* Honorable Mention - 2023 Historical Fiction Company's Book of the Year Awards, Literary Category

* Semi-Finalist - 2023 Chanticleer International Book Awards, Goethe Award

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1776. Wolfram Kaspar Von Hultz of Hesse-Cassel is about to embark on a perilous journey to fight the American rebels with the Hessian force allied to the British Army. Although a reluctant soldier, he knows his birthright is to fulfill his duty to the Landgraf. Wolfram takes his place in the world under the guidance of his surrogate uncle and mentor, the charming yet calculating Colonel Johann Rahl.

Across the ocean and on the outskirts of Sleepy Hollow, Hulda Aupaumut lives in a cave beneath Raven Rock. Although shunned as a witch by the wary townspeople owing to her Bohemian-Mohican heritage and skill as a healer, Hulda remains to aid and protect those dear to her from the impending doom of war. As violence approaches, Hulda unknowingly discovers mysterious new abilities through her family grimoire from Bohemia, and its connection to the unexplainable power of Raven Rock.

Wolfram and Hulda's paths draw closer until they become forever entwined in Sleepy Hollow, united in the common goal of protecting the town and seeking revenge against the man who, twenty years earlier, unknowingly changed both of their lives.

Raven Rock exists within the canon of Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, weaving together details from the classic American horror tale, local folklore, and the historical context of the American Revolution.