

Lantern Jack

"Grandma!" I gasped, eyes wide. "Wait! Don't!"

But it was too late. Her cane was already swinging down, aimed right at the pumpkin. The impact was surprisingly violent. Chunks of orange flying out in all directions as the pumpkin exploded. Who knew my tottering only grandmother had *that* kind of strength in her?

She whacked the ruins of the pumpkin over and over, showering orange goo all over the both of us. By the time she was done swinging, both she and I were coated in it. And the pumpkin? Well, that was barely more than a pile of sloppy mush.

"What the fuck?!" I snarled when I finally found my voice again. "Why did you?"

"Quiet now, Maisy," Grandma said, planting her cane on the floor and leaning on it as if nothing had happened, as if she wasn't covered in pumpkin gore. "You know the rules."

Rules. Grandma's stupid Halloween rules.

No Jack o' Lanterns. No open flames. No fire of any kind. Always wear a costume, a good one. Never show your real face on the day of Halloween – All Hallows' Eve. Dumb, silly rules.

"You can't just- You can't smash something like that! I paid for that pumpkin with my own money! It's mine!"

Grandma shook her head, muttered something in Gaelic, turned and began walking away.

"Hey!" I called after her, wiping pumpkin grime off my face. "What the fuck?!"

It was evening when, grumbling and annoyed, I entered the living room. The thirtieth of October. The day before Halloween. In just a few hours, the clock would strike twelve and the worst day of the year would begin.

It wasn't that I disliked Halloween. In concept, I kinda liked the idea of a spooky holiday. It's just... Well, my family take it way too seriously. Even now, as I stepped into the living room, I saw that my Grandmother was already in full costume. A white sheet covering her entire body, with only two holes for eyes. And, underneath that, I didn't doubt she had a *second* costume on.

Stupid family traditions.

"You're not wearing your costume," the old woman noted as I sat down, glared at the TV screen. Some black and white, prehistoric horror movie was playing.

"It's not Halloween yet," I grumbled.

At least Mom wasn't here. Bad enough that I had to deal with Grandma's bullshit. If I'd had to deal with Mom's too... Thank fuck she was out of town on business.

"Better to be early than to be late," Grandma hummed.

Late for Halloween? I rolled my eyes. Like *that* was a thing.

"Your mother hasn't told you yet, has she?"

"Told me *what*?!" I snapped.

"Why we do what we do," Grandma said, a sharp edge to her voice. "Why we *have* to."

I wanted to scream, to shout at her for being so ridiculous. But I didn't. Instead, I kept my eyes forward. Kept the anger and annoyance bottled up inside.

"No..." Grandma said, eyes on my face. "She hasn't."

The TV screen turned off. My head napped round to look at Grandma, who was setting the TV remote down beside her. The old bitch's eyes were on mine, gaze cool and cold.

"Before our family migrated to the New World, we came from a little farmer town in Ireland. Hundreds and hundreds of years ago. The name of the town doesn't matter. What

matters is the story that took place there.”

Oh *great*. Yet more of Grandma's nonsense to sit through.

“There were two brothers - twins. Sons of a wealthy man. One was named Sean, the other was Jack. Two souls so different and contrary that you'd never have believed they were family, if not for their identical appearances.”

I was barely listening. I'd mastered the art of *looking* like I was paying attention a long time ago. But, as my Grandma spoke, my mind wandered and daydreamed by itself.

“When their father passed away, Sean and Jack inherited a large sum of money. It was split evenly between them. Now Sean was a good, kind man. He hadn't need for such wealth, and so he gave it all away. To people in need, to the church, to charity. Jack, on the other hand, kept a tight hold on his newfound wealth. Refused to spend it, even when he owed money to others. He was greedy and stingy with his coin.”

Blah, blah, blah. Get to the point already, bitch.

“For his charity and kindness, Sean earned the favour of God. And, for his greed and selfishness, Jack likewise gained the Devil's attention.”

Uh-huh. God and the Devil, got it Grandma. Real riveting stuff.

“The Devil came to Jack, and Jack thanked the Devil for taking his father's life and making him rich. The Devil did not accept Jack's words, however, and demanded physical compensation instead – proof of Jack's gratitude. But Jack, being greedy and unwilling to part with his coin even now, hatched himself a plan. He went out into the night, returned to the Devil the next morning with a stolen turnip. He handed the turnip to the Devil as the 'payment' the Devil had demanded.”

Yaaaawn.

“The Devil, as you can imagine, was not thrilled. But a deal was a deal, and so the Devil departed. For the next ten years, Jack brooded over the Devil's displeasure. He knew which afterlife he was destined for, and knew that having annoyed the Devil as he had would only make his afterlife all the more unpleasant. And so Jack hatched another plan.”

I resisted the urge to *actually* yawn. I'd come here and sat down to relax, and now I was getting a lecture in folk-tales? No thanks.

“He summoned the Devil, invited him out for drinks. The Devil, surprised by Jack's sudden generosity, agreed. The two went to the local tavern, ordered drinks, waited. But, when it came time to pay, stingy Jack didn't want to. He convinced the Devil to turn himself into a golden coin, with which Jack could pay for the drinks. The Devil agreed, transformed into a coin. But, instead of using that coin to pay for the drinks, Jack kept it instead. He slid it into his pocket where a holy cross was waiting – trapping the Devil in his pocket.”

What should I dress up as tomorrow? I already had a costume set out – a mummy – but that was boring. Halloween was all about wearing something nice and sexy. And mummies were *not* sexy.

“He made a deal with the Devil in exchange for the Devil's freedom. When the Devil claimed his soul and took him to Hell, he'd be lenient with Jack. Merciful. The Devil agreed, and was released. And Jack lived happily and peacefully for another ten years. But, as he grew ever older and his death drew ever nearer, Jack began to hatch yet another plan. One that would guarantee him a wonderful, happy afterlife. He summoned the Devil one last time.”

I had a plaid skirt. Add a white blouse and some high heels and I could be a makeshift schoolgirl...

“As the two talked, Jack an old man now, the Devil noticed Jack's cough. A dry throat. Meekly, Jack asked the Devil to climb a nearby tree and fetch a juicy fruit for him. The Devil agreed, climbed the tree. But, as he was getting the fruit for Jack, Jack was scattering crosses on the ground below – trapping the Devil on the tree's branches. He offered the Devil one last deal, and the Devil was forced to accept. Freedom from the tree

in exchange for never claiming Jack's soul and taking it to Hell. The Devil departed, and Jack lived several more years before finally succumbing to death."

Or maybe I'd do the same thing as Grandma. Wear a bedsheet with some holes cut out – two small ones for eyes, two huge ones for my tits. Really go wild with the slutiness.

"Knowing Hell couldn't accept him, Jack went to Heaven. But, being the sinner he was, he was rejected. It was only then that Jack realised his flaw. He rushed down to Hell, begged the Devil to let him in, but the Devil's hands were tied. He could not allow Jack entry. The greedy man was forever cursed to wander the darkness of death alone. As Jack began to disappear into the abyss, the Devil took pity on Jack. He pulled out the turnip Jack had given him so long ago, hollowed it out and filled it with eternal Hellfire. A lantern to guide Jack's way."

Was the story finally ending? Thank fuck for that.

"And, ever since, Jack has wandered the darkness alone. Only able to interact with the world one day of the year. All Hallows' Eve. It's the lanterns you see, the flames. They guide Jack back to the moral world, allow him to manifest."

"Yeah, Grandma," I sighed. "Cool story. Can you turn the TV back on now?"

"You don't understand," Grandma said, shaking her head. "While Jack has spent centuries alone in the abyss, his twin brother has been in Heaven. Jack resents that fact, hates Sean more than you can possibly imagine. Which is why he seeks out his brother's descendants on Halloween. Punishes and torments them in Sean's place."

Let me guess, *we* - me and Mom and Grandma – were descendants of 'Sean'? Yeah, sure, whatever you say Grandma.

"Open flames allow him to manifest and appear in our world, lanterns give him sight. Costumes hide us from him, but it depends on the costume itself – how much it hides and conceals."

I stood up, left the living room. If Grandma wasn't going to turn the TV back on, I'd just go to bed. There was a big party tomorrow night anyway. I *definitely* wanted to be awake for *that*.

As I walked down the street, my makeshift schoolgirl costume barely covering my body, the Jack O' Lanterns on either side of the suburban street flickered. I ignored it, told myself it was just the breeze. Only there was no breeze.

The pumpkins watched me as I walked, eyes glowing.

The street was deserted, empty save for me.

A sound behind me made me spin, heart thumping heavily. But there was nothing there. Only an empty street.

I turned back, jumped.

A dark-haired man stood in front of me, eyes hollow and skin pale as snow. It wasn't his lean face my eyes were drawn to, though. No, my gaze followed the glowing object he held in his hand. A bright, darkly-shining turnip held in a white-knuckled grip.

"Maisy, is it?" The man smiled. "Pleasure to meet you. They call me-"

I bolted. Sprinted in the opposite direction.

Laughter followed me. A malevolent, cruel cackle.

I ran hard, didn't stop or slow down, didn't look back. My heart raced, my lungs screamed. I didn't think, couldn't think.

When I finally came to a halt many minutes later, hunched over and almost collapsed as I gasped for breath, I patted down my body – searching for a phone that I didn't have on me. No pockets. Fucking stupid, *stupid* costume. Why didn't skirts have *pockets*?!

I needed to get home. I needed to call Grandma somehow and-

"As I was saying," a voice whispered behind me. A cold breeze ticked the back of my neck. "They call me Jack."

Slowly, I turned to look at him.

Still in suburbia. Still surrounded by carved, smiling, staring pumpkins.

"You know," the man said, eyes looking me up and down. "I always thought he was a fool. Kids? They're just a waste of money. You have to feed them, house them, pay for them. Why bother with any of that? But now..."

He took a step closer, hand outstretched. A shudder ran through me when he brushed my cheek with bony fingers.

"I can see the *appeal*. Might just have to make a few myself. What do you say, Maisy? Care to help an old man out?"

"Please..." I choked, gulped.

Jack's hands slid off my cheek, glided down my throat.

"Don't you worry your pretty little head," the ghoul smiled. "Uncle Jack's gonna take care of everything..."