

THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

A Short Story

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THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT

Eleven-year-old Tommy Gallagher balled up his fist and pounded on the door. “Com’n, you guys! Let me out!” *I’m scared*, he wanted to add, but he didn’t. He couldn’t admit that. He’d sound like a baby, and that, he’d never live down at school.

He thumped on the basement door again then pressed his ear hard to the wood. How could the doors in this old dump of a house be so friggin’ solid? He strained, trying to hear his friends on the other side—snickering and scuffling around, shoving each other and giggling at his expense. Anything, so he’d know they were still out there. But when he didn’t hear a sound, Tommy Gallagher got truly scared. *What if they really did leave me?*

Behind the locked door, the blackness was so complete he couldn’t even see his hand in front of his face. He stood balanced on the narrow top step, a long flight of wooden stairs invisible below him in the darkness. When Jerry and Dickie and Stew had shoved him in and slammed the door shut, he’d almost fallen down the steps. Now, in the pitch dark, he clung to the cold brass doorknob, twisting it, as he kicked and punched the door and yelled at the top of his lungs. “Let me out of here!”

What if I can’t get out? What if they don’t tell anyone I’m here?

Mom and Dad will never know what happened to me. They’ll have no idea.

Tommy Gallagher beat on the door with renewed vigor. “It ain’t funny no more. LET ME OUT!”

His fist stung from hitting the solid old door. Panting, Tommy stopped to take a deep breath and tried to calmly think of something else to do. There had to be another way out of the basement. There had to be. But—he turned and stared into the black void below him—it would mean going down...there!

There's nothing to be afraid down there. It's just a dumb, old basement. In his head, he heard his dad's voice; *Be brave, son. Make me proud.*

Thinking, Tommy fingered the house key he carried in his pants pocket. Suddenly, it struck him. His key ring! He had a tiny flashlight on it his grandfather had given him last year for his birthday. He'd forgotten all about it 'cause he'd never had to use it before.

Excited, he pulled it out and fumbled with it in the dark, trying by feel to remember how it operated. Suddenly the little light flashed on. He blinked, and grinned. He aimed the weak beam down the stairs. He could only see about two steps below.

Two steps at a time, he thought. Then two more.

As he started down, the saggy old boards creaked under his weight. With each step he took, his heart thumped so hard he thought it would burst out of his chest. He hoped he'd find one of them storm doors, the kind like he had in the basement of his house. If there was, he could get out that way. *Won't Jerry and Dickie and Stew be surprised when I just walk right on out of here?*

Tommy reached the bottom step. Below it was a small concrete pad. Before he could go any farther, though, he had to wave gobs of spider webs out of his way. They clung to his face and to his hands. He coughed. *Yuck. Gross.*

Then he stepped onto the dirt floor and panned his weak flashlight beam around. The smell of rotted wood and damp dirt filled his nose, making him sneeze. In the gloom of his light, Tommy saw a door at the other end of the cellar. His pulse rang in his ears, so loud it sounded like the big drums in their school's marching band. Scared, sure, but excited now too, he ran for the door.

This one was made of thin, tongue-and-groove boards, way flimsier than the door at the top of the stairs. The wood banged and slapped against the frame when he pulled on it, but it wouldn't open.

His heart hammering away, Tommy used his light to examine the edges of the door. It didn't take long to find out why it wouldn't open. Up near the top he found a rusty hasp, locked with a shiny, like-new padlock attached to it.

No. I'm too close, No stupid padlock's gonna stop me now.

Tommy panned his pathetic light around the cellar. In the shadows he found an old screwdriver lying on a bench. He jammed it between the hasp and the wood, and he pried. He

had to put all his weight into it, all ninety-six pounds, and he grunted mightily as he pulled, hard as he could.

To his giddy surprise, the hasp popped off the door and its frame. The hasp, with the lock still attached, hit the dirt floor deadening soft thump. The wood had been too rotted to hold the rusted screws.

Grinning, Tommy tossed the screwdriver back on the bench with a clatter. He wrenched open the door and ran inside, sure he would find a set of stairs in there to lead him up and out.

He was wrong.

Beyond the door was just another room. A room with no stairs, only four concrete walls and some hand-made, built-in shelves, and no way out.

Maybe there was something inside he wasn't seeing. A crawl space, perhaps, though he shuddered at the thought. Tommy went in, looking around. Then he stumbled over something on the floor and fell, crashing into the plywood and two-by-four shelves, and banged his head. *Ouch*. He sat up and rubbed the bump forming on his forehead. Fumbling with his key ring flashlight, he passed the beam over the floor, looking to see what he'd tripped over.

The hue of light illuminated, half buried in the dirt, a human skull.

It stared up at him with black, empty eye sockets and an open, grinning mouth, silently laughing at him. Tommy scrambled back against the concrete wall...and screamed!

Detective Brandie Addison pulled in behind the squad car parked at the curb and shoved the gear shift of her unmarked Crown Vic up into park. *Unit 12*, she thought, eyeing the squad car. *Crap*.

It was Graham Caine's car. It figured Sergeant Graham Caine would roll on this call. Well, what did she expect? In a town of five-thousand people, just north of Squam Lake, the Holderfield Police Department only employed twenty sworn officers, just four sergeants, and one full-time detective—her. She had a one-in-four chance of drawing the asshole.

She climbed out of the battered, midnight-blue vehicle and squinted in the late afternoon sun. Dusk was gathering. It would be full-on dark soon.

She cupped a hand over her eyes and glanced up at the dilapidated three-story, wood frame, gabled house, with its decrepit, wraparound porch, pointed turrets, and boarded-over windows, the plywood adorned with decades of spray-painted tags. Desolate and bleak, the house sat at the

end of the long, narrow lane, surrounded by thick, rustling woods on three sides, which kept it shrouded in deep, bone-chilling shadow, even on the brightest of summer days.

Known to residents as far back as anyone alive could remember as the Hendricks' house, the home was abandoned now, and had been since long before Brandie was born.

Did it have to be this house?

She had hoped to never set foot inside it again.

But fate was a cruel bitch. Brandie moved past the stone-pillared gateway and up the cracked sidewalk to the front porch, noting that the coroner hadn't arrived yet, but the state had already sent a criminalist—if the black van parked on the dual strip of concrete driveway was any indication.

She wondered who they'd sent and shivered, as much from the dark, shadowy gloom that enveloped the house like an ominous fog as from the memories the old place dredged up of things she'd done here, of things done to her. Dead leaves skittered across the cracked sidewalk and bare wood steps as she climbed the porch stairs. The wind picked up and stirred the leaves in the trees as if in angry warning to Brandie: *Don't go inside. Bad things happen in this house.*

Caine stood in the open doorway, his hands planted firmly on his hips, waiting for her. Since he was a sergeant, technically, he was her superior officer. *In rank only*, she reminded herself. In every other way, he was just a jerk, and had been ever since high school. "About time you showed up, detective."

She tried to think of a biting retort, but came up blank. "Get off my case, Graham, just tell me what's going on."

"What's with you, get up on the wrong side of somebody else's bed this morning?" He pulled out his notebook and flipped it open.

She flipped him the finger.

He shook his head with an expression she read as disgust. Whatever.

He said, "An eleven-year-old kid named Tommy Gallagher got locked in the basement by his friends as a prank." Caine hooked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the interior of the house. As if she wouldn't know which house without his help. "Trying to find another way out, he broke open a door thinking it would lead to a storm door or something. Well, it did lead to something all right."

Brandie frowned. "How'd he finally get out?"

“Hollered his damn head off so loud even the bullies took pity on him and set him free.” Caine moved aside to give her access to the house, returning his notebook to his back pocket. “Goes to show, kids haven’t changed any since we went to school.”

Brandie nodded, but didn’t say anything.

She stepped past him and got a strong whiff of his AXE cologne. She coughed. *What’d he do, bathe in the stuff?* Inside, she forced back a sneeze from the swirling dust motes.

Facing them, a set of stairs led to the second floor. Off to the right was a study. The formal living room lay to her left. Brandie took a moment to reflect. She knew this old house well enough. It had been a magnet for kids’ pranks, mischief, and haunted house party dares for generations.

Behind her, Caine asked, “You okay?”

Brandie blinked. “What? Yeah. Just remembering.”

Caine came up beside her, looking around. “We sure did have some good times in here, didn’t we? I drank beer for the first time…” He pointed into the living room. “Right over there. Polished off a six pack of Black Label beer we stole from Slick’s dad. You remember Slick?”

Slick Styles had been a skinny kid with long, greasy black hair and oily skin so bad his face gleamed, as if he were sweating all the time. Everybody hated him, but his parents were the only one so clueless they never questioned the missing booze from their house.

“Course I remember him. It wasn’t that long ago.”

“Ten years, Brandie.”

Ten years. She’d been captain of the cheerleading squad and Graham Caine was the quarterback on the varsity football team. “Does seem like a long time ago, you say it like that.” She glanced up the stairs. “I lost my virginity up there.”

“I know. To Wesley Wilkes.”

She gasped. “How’d you know that?”

Caine grinned. “He wrote it on every men’s room stall in the school. In big, black magic marker.”

She felt her face flush. “Give a creep like him a sympathy lay and that’s what I get? What a dick.”

“Right.” Caine shook his head.

“Wait. What do you mean by that?”

“You. A sympathy lay. Give me a break, Brandie.”

“Hey, What—”

“Enough reminiscing,” he said, changing the subject. “Let’s get downstairs so I can show you what the kid came across.” He brushed past her and moved down the hall toward the rear of the creepy old house.

The plywood barrier had been pried off the back door, probably how the kids had snuck in. Shadows from the trees outside shimmered on the wall, making the dark, floral patterns and peeling paint chips appear to be moving, as if thousands of slugs were trapped just beneath the surface, squirming—making the wall look as though it bubbled with movement.

Every surface in the kitchen was graffiti tagged. *Kristen luv Stevie. J.C. + M.P. 4ever. Tyrell sucks...*

The built-in cabinet doors had long ago been torn off and used for fires in the living room fireplace. Caine stopped at the door leading down to the basement, which was propped open with a wooden wedge. Brandie stepped around him, but stopped short at the door’s threshold. She stared down into the rectangular maul of darkness beyond. Her pulse raced.

Damn it, what have they found?