The Lantern House

By Sarah M.

The fog rolled in early on Halloween night, thick and silver, wrapping around the town of Hollow Creek like a shroud. Porch lights flickered. Jack-o'-lanterns guttered out one by one, their carved grins collapsing into darkness.

Only one light remained.

At the edge of town, on the hill where no one dared to trick-or-treat, the old Victorian known as *The Lantern House* glowed with a strange orange light. The house had been abandoned for decades, but every Halloween, someone swore they saw that same flame burning in the attic window.

Maya Rivers stared up at it from the sidewalk, her breath fogging the air. "It's still lit," she said.

Her best friend, Eli Thompson, shivered beside her. "We shouldn't be here. Everyone says the boy who lived there—"

"—died in the fire," Maya finished. "Yeah, I've heard the story." She adjusted her flashlight and grinned. "Which is exactly why we're going."

Eli's eyes widened. "You're serious?"

"Of course. Don't you want to know what really happened?"

He didn't, but he followed her anyway. He always did.

The iron gate groaned when they pushed it open. The air inside the yard was colder, the grass black with dew. Maya's flashlight caught the edge of something glistening along the path—melted candle wax, dripped in a trail leading to the front steps.

She crouched to touch it. It was still warm.

"Maya," Eli whispered. "Someone's here."

"Or something," she said quietly.

The front door stood slightly ajar. It creaked open on its own as they approached, revealing a hallway of cobwebs and shadows. The smell of smoke lingered faintly, like the house still remembered the fire.

They stepped inside.

The door slammed behind them.

Eli jumped, spinning around. "Okay—haunted house confirmed!"

But Maya's flashlight caught something stranger: a wall lined with portraits. The faces were so detailed they looked alive. One portrait showed a small boy holding a lantern, his painted eyes glowing faintly orange.

"Eli," she said. "Do you see—"

The boy in the painting blinked.

They both screamed.

Somewhere upstairs, a floorboard creaked. Then came a voice, low and broken:

"Don't let the light go out."

They climbed the staircase slowly, each step whining under their feet. The air grew colder the higher they went. A thin orange glow leaked from a door at the end of the hall.

Inside was the attic.

The room smelled of ash and candle smoke. A single lantern sat on the floor, its flame bright but flickering. Beside it, crouched in the corner, was a boy. His skin was pale as dust, his eyes hollow and tired.

"You shouldn't have come," he said.

Maya's voice trembled. "You're… the boy from the fire."

He nodded. "My name was Elias. I tried to stop it before, but the Shadow—" He pointed behind them, and his voice broke. "It's awake again."

A whisper crawled through the attic. The light in the lantern dimmed. The corners of the room thickened, black shapes writhing like smoke.

Eli's flashlight flickered. "What is that?"

"The dark," Elias said. "It feeds when the lights die."

The shadow rose taller, stretching up the walls, forming long, crooked limbs. A whispering voice hissed:

"The light belongs to me."

Eli backed away. "Maya, what do we do?!"

Elias shouted, "Return the lantern to my grave! Before it takes the flame!"

Maya grabbed the lantern, its handle searing hot. The flame pulsed wildly. "Where?"

"Across the street," the ghost gasped. "Graveyard… under my name. Go!"

The shadow lunged.

Maya's flashlight burst to life, a beam of white cutting through the darkness. The shadow shrieked and recoiled, the room shaking with its fury. Maya yanked Eli's arm. "Run!"

They tore down the stairs, chased by whispers and the sound of footsteps that weren't theirs. The portraits screamed silently as they passed, eyes glowing, mouths stretching in terror.

The front door flew open before they reached it, as if pushed by invisible hands. They stumbled into the yard, gasping, the lantern still blazing in Maya's grip.

Behind them, the Lantern House groaned like it was alive. The windows rattled. The light from the attic flared bright, then turned black.

"Graveyard," Maya said. "Hurry!"

They sprinted through the fog, across the cracked road, and into the old cemetery. The lantern's flame was dimming fast, struggling to stay lit.

Rows of gravestones loomed like teeth in the mist. Eli pointed. "There—look!"

A small headstone leaned beneath an oak tree, its carving nearly worn away. But they could still read the name:

Elias Ward, 1893–1904.

Maya fell to her knees and set the lantern on the grave. "Please," she whispered.

The flame flickered once, twice—then exploded in a flash of white light.

The shadow screamed, twisting into the glow before vanishing completely.

Then, silence.

When Maya opened her eyes, dawn was creeping over Hollow Creek. The fog was gone. The pumpkins on every porch had relit themselves, candles burning bright and steady.

Eli sat on the grass beside her, breathing hard. "Is it over?"

"I think so."

She turned to the grave. The lantern was dark, its glass cracked, its light finally gone. For just a moment, a faint shimmer hovered above the stone — the outline of a boy smiling softly. Then he disappeared into the morning air.

Maya stood, brushing dirt from her hands. The air felt lighter. The weight that had hung over Hollow Creek for years was gone.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go home."

They started back toward town, the sky brightening behind them.

But when Maya turned for one last look, her heart froze.

Far up on the hill, the attic window of the Lantern House flickered once more — a single orange light, faint and distant, like the blink of an eye.

Then it went dark.