

**Excerpt:**

## **PROLOGUE**

### **SLEEPY HOLLOW**

If the fine denizens of Sleepy Hollow are to be believed, every single person who lives here has had at least one supernatural experience. It's a ghostly place still firmly rooted in its past, steeped in tradition and superstition. It's a dreamlike and drowsy town only disturbed by the ghosts and shadows that still haunt it. Something holds sway over the people who live there; it fills their minds with dark stories, strange visions, and bizarre beliefs. The town of Sleepy Hollow, many say, is haunted.

There are some haunted by memories, some by tradition, while others insist they are haunted by the spirits of this ghostly place. Some tell tales of having witnessed the apparitions of dead soldiers replaying their last moments on the battlefield, or a sinister set of eyes peering at them from the hollow of an old tree, or of hearing whispers dancing on the breeze just over their shoulders while they walk deserted forest paths. But the spirit that seems to dominate their minds and imaginations most is the phantom of a headless man astride a black spectral horse. The Headless Horseman.

It's believed he was a Hessian trooper who lost his head to cannon fire during the Revolutionary War. It's a ghastly image: the poor man's head being carried away by a cannonball, never to be found again. This spirit haunts the nightmares of the children of Sleepy Hollow, only to creep back into their dreamscapes years later when they are adults.

The Hessian's body was buried in the churchyard, and it is rumored his ghost travels from his resting place to the scene of the battle in search of his head. But by all accounts, this ghost isn't confined to reliving his final moments or restricted to wandering the same paths again and again: The Headless Horseman has been seen astride his dark steed on forest paths and dark roads, both common and rarely used, and often on the almost entirely hidden path that leads to the Oldest Tree, one of Sleepy Hollow's most cherished landmarks.

For beneath that tree, half-hidden behind the twisted low hanging branches, many residents of Sleepy Hollow say they have seen the ghost of Katrina Van Tassel whispering to the spirit of the Headless Horseman, who some believe resides within the venerable oak.

## **ONE**

### **THE LONGEST TWILIGHT**

Make no mistake about it—this isn't Ichabod Crane's story. Oh sure, he blunders in and out of our tale, tripping over the pages and making the usual fool of himself, but this

adventure belongs to Katrina Van Tassel and her granddaughter many times over, Kat Van Tassel.

Kat's tale begins when she is eighteen, on the two hundredth anniversary of Katrina Van Tassel's death—the night known in Sleepy Hollow as the Longest Twilight. Like many in the little town of Sleepy Hollow, Katrina loved twilight, the time between day and night right before you are expected to be snug in your home, safe from the apparitions that creep out of the shadows when the darkness comes.

According to the legend, on the night Katrina died the last vestiges of twilight stretched on until midnight, the Witching Hour: a time when the dead come out of their hiding places and move among us, a time when anything is possible. And though not since Katrina's death has twilight stretched so far, the people of Sleepy Hollow still call the anniversary of her death the Longest Twilight.

Kat Van Tassel grew up with these traditions and superstitions. She had heard stories about Katrina and the ghosts of Sleepy Hollow since she was a little girl. As far back as she could remember, the town would gather together to decorate Katrina's grave with her favorite flowers on the Longest Twilight. When she was five, she had asked her mother why everyone in town took sprigs of those flowers home with them to hang above their doorways. *To appease the Headless Horseman*, her mother said. *The legend says the ghost will pass your house by as long as you pay proper tribute to his dearest love, Katrina.*

Five-year-old Kat had closed her eyes tight, and tried not to think about what would happen if he *didn't* pass their house, a thought that would haunt her until she no longer believed in ghosts.

The Longest Twilight was one of the most revered traditions in Sleepy Hollow, second only to the Van Tassel Annual Harvest Ball, which always followed a few days after. And on the night Kat's story begins, the Van Tassels had been preparing for the ball in a fevered frenzy, pausing for the evening to pay their respects to their ancestor, Katrina Van Tassel. The Longest Twilight was not a night for harvesting pumpkins to carve, planning menus, sewing costumes, and hiring bands. It was a night to dim the lights and sit by the fire, an evening of stories, and of peering out windows in hopes of catching a glimpse of the Headless Horseman. It was a night the eldest members of the family told stories about the great Katrina Van Tassel.

However, the festivities did not go on as Kat's parents would have liked, for everyone had been at the cemetery to honor Katrina except Kat. Right before twilight ended, Kat came bounding into the house in her usual fashion, causing a great commotion by dropping her pile of books with a loud thump before thundering up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Kat Van Tassel, don't you dare go off to your room. You come down here this instant!" Kat's mother, Trina, always got this way when preparing for the Harvest Ball, and Kat had been hoping to avoid her this evening. She was late, and she knew it. "Great Hollows Ghost,

Kat, you are testing my patience, now get down here!” her mother bellowed from the kitchen.

“Yes, Mom?” Kat asked as she peered into the kitchen a moment later.

“Home right before dark, as usual,” said her mother, putting down a stack of papers she had just been looking at.

“I lost track of time reading.” Kat’s mother opened the oven and looked in. “What’s for dinner tonight?” Kat added, trying to distract her from the tirade she knew was coming to her after arriving home so late and missing the Longest Twilight celebration at the cemetery.

“You know very well what’s for dinner! We have it every year on this night! Katrina’s favorite, chicken with olives and garlic. Speaking of which, where were you when we decorated Katrina’s tomb earlier? Every one kept asking, ‘Where’s Kat? Where’s Katrina’s namesake?’”

Kat sighed. “We’re all Katrina’s namesake, Mom.” Kat’s mother closed the oven, took off her apron, and put her hands on her hips. “That’s right. And you’re a bit too much like her if you ask me!”

Kat felt bad that she hadn’t met her family in the cemetery to decorate Katrina’s grave, as they did every year in the late afternoon on the Longest Twilight. In her mother’s opinion, that tradition was the most important part of the Longest Twilight celebration, and Kat missed it. She hadn’t intended to; time had just slipped away while she was reading, and now she felt bad. “I’m sorry, Mom, I really should have been there. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Her mother smiled. “You can put the sprigs of flowers over the doorway outside. They’re on the dining room table.”

Kat went into the dining room, where the table was already set. The light was still golden outside, making the room look warm, like it was already glowing with candlelight. She saw the flowers sitting there, bound together by a purple ribbon. She loved the scent of them, thick and heavenly and filling the room.

As she was walking toward the front door, her father, Artis, burst in like a bear in stocking feet, which made Kat laugh because that is what his name meant—*bear*. “Kat! It’s almost dark, get those flowers up immediately! And where’s your mother? I have to talk with her about something!”

Kat laughed at her father. He was such a strong, sturdy man, and gruff most of the time, but she couldn’t take him seriously in his stocking feet. Kat’s mother demanded long ago that he take off his boots before coming into the house if he had been out in the fields with his workers. Which of course he didn’t need to do, but insisted upon it anyway. *The Van Tassels are working people*, he would say. Even if they did have more money than anyone else in the county, her mother and father tried to live their life modestly.

“She’s in the kitchen. *Where she always is.*” Kat said the latter half under her breath. She went outside and hung the flowers on the black wrought-iron hook that had been there since she could remember. For all she knew it had been there when the original Katrina was a little girl.

Kat stood there looking at the flowers, wondering if the Headless Horseman was real. She wondered what would become of her life, living on her family’s estate like all the other Katrinas before her.

All the women in the family were named after the first Katrina Van Tassel, and they had all found ways to make their names more individual. Kat’s mother, for example, went by Trina, and Kat’s grandmother was Kate. The original Katrina had decided in her time that the succession of inheritance would go to the firstborn daughter of every generation, but they couldn’t inherit unless they were named after her and they kept the name Van Tassel. Which would mean the men who married into the family would have to be pretty open minded, especially during the generations when such a thing was unheard of, but then again, it took a special kind of person to marry a *Katrina*.

Kat hated having her fate already decided for her. If previous generations of Van Tassel women were any guide, she would spend the rest of her life on this estate, and marry a man who would oversee the farm, their numerous crops, and their enterprises. If she had an interest in farming and the running of an estate, then she didn’t see why she couldn’t just run things herself! But the fact was she wanted to go away to school, but her family insisted she stay in Sleepy Hollow and receive her education at Ichabod Crane High from teachers who taught her nothing of the world because they had never ventured outside of Sleepy Hollow.

Kat thought it was ridiculous that her high school was named after the most historically hated man in Sleepy Hollow. But the name was a warning about what may befall those who didn’t take the Legend of Sleepy Hollow seriously. Crane High offered the usual array of subjects found at any other high school, however there was always some sort of supernatural aspect that seemed to eclipse the subject at hand. Math, for example, included the study of numerology and divination through the use of numbers. The history curriculum always highlighted historical legends both in and outside of Sleepy Hollow (even from places with high supernatural activity like New Orleans and San Francisco). Why ghost stories were considered “historical events” was beyond Kat’s comprehension. Kat didn’t believe in ghosts, but her teachers and classmates didn’t share her skepticism, or if they did they didn’t make it known. And since it was the only school in Sleepy Hollow, she had to attend the high school founded by Ichabod Crane.

Despite being a nonbeliever, Kat loved a good story, no matter its subject, and she made it her business to read as much as she could. She would slip away as often as possible, sit at her favorite café or by the Oldest Tree and read. She read all manner of books, fairy tales, mysteries, ghost stories (just because she didn’t believe them didn’t mean she didn’t enjoy them), science fiction, romance, vampire stories, anything she could get her hands on.

And that's what they were to her: stories. Fiction. Just like the stories she grew up with in Sleepy Hollow. But her true passion was nonfiction. She loved reading about other countries, their monarchs, and his

tory. Not their legends, but the actual events that took place. And she had a large collection of travel books. She loved sitting for hours just reading about all the places she would love to visit, but feared she would never see.

Life felt small to Kat, every day doing the same things, seeing the same people, walking the same paths, and as much as she loved it, sitting under the same tree, and hearing the same ghost stories on the same nights every year, books were a way to make her life feel larger. A way to escape.

"Kat! What are you doing just standing there, day dreaming as usual? Light the candles and shut out the lights. You act as if we've never celebrated the Longest Twilight," her father grumbled as he came back into the dining room. Kat sighed and went to the fireplace, taking a long matchstick from its box. She struck it along the side and watched the flame burst to life. She went about the room lighting all the candles, and then turned off the lights. Every year, she remembered how much she loved this room by candlelight, the way the flames cast shadows on the walls. Sometimes she could swear she saw Katrina's silhouette in the shadows. She remembered being a little girl and watching the candlelight dancing on the walls while she listened to her family tell the Longest Twilight story, and she was sure they were surrounded by ghosts. And then it occurred to her that everyone in Sleepy Hollow was doing the same thing she and her family were this evening, sitting in candlelit rooms, watching the flames and shadows dance, and telling stories about Katrina Van Tassel the first. She longed for the days when she still believed in all the old stories, and wondered exactly when she had started to doubt they were real.

"Kat, go help your mother bring dinner to the table." Kat's father was a hulking man with rough hands and a weatherworn face from all of the time he spent outdoors. But Kat thought he was a handsome man even if the lines in his face resembled chiseled rock, and his large, intense eyes always looked a little too serious. He was the perfect partner for her mother. Content to spend his life with the running of the farm while she dedicated her life to the running of the house. It was all a bit antiquated for Kat, but it seemed to work for her parents. They were quite the pair, the two of them, her father with his dark hair and eyes, often with a full dark beard, and his massive build and height, and her mother so small, soft, and round, all golden, and peaches and cream. Kat had inherited her father's height, dark eyes and hair, and his darker complexion. She was the first Katrina Van Tassel not to have blond hair, and she rather liked it.

Kat did as her father asked and went to the kitchen to help her mother. They could have a cook and a legion of servants if they wanted, but Kat's mother preferred to do almost everything herself. Of course, she would hire help for the harvest ball and other grand events, but the

daily running of the house was entirely on her mother's shoulders, with one exception: Maddie, who had been with the Van Tassels for as long as Kat could remember. She was more her mother's companion than anything else, but she did help with the running of the house, making trips to the market, and helping Kat's mother with anything she might need. Maddie was an older woman, originally a part of Grandma Kate's household when the house was bursting with servants. Kat's mom couldn't bring herself to let the woman go because she had been more like a second mother to her than anything else, and she didn't want to deprive the woman of her wage, which she depended on since being widowed—and Kat's mom knew Maddie wouldn't except money without working for it. Kat was happy to always have Maddie in the house—she loved her really, she was like a grandmother to her. An opinionated, sassy grandmother, but a grandmother nevertheless.

"Where's Maddie, Mom?"

Kat's mother gave her a queer look. "I gave her the evening off to spend with her gentleman caller, of course. I fear we might lose Maddie to him. I can't imagine life without her," she said, brushing away a long strand of golden hair that had fallen into her face.

"'Gentleman caller?' Who even says that anymore?" Kat's mom made her laugh sometimes. The way she talked, it was as if they were still living in Katrina's day and not two hundred years later.

"Kat, stop teasing me. Can you please just take all these serving dishes to the table while I freshen up? I hate for your father to see me looking so untidy." Kat smiled at her mother. She thought her mother was beautiful. She looked like all the Katrinas before her: blond and buxom, with peachy skin and rosy cheeks. She wondered what the first Katrina would think of Kat's dark hair and long willowy frame. She was so different from all the other Katrinas.

Kat took all the serving dishes into the dining room, where her father was waiting. Kat loved this room, with its dark woodwork, built-in china hutch with china dating back to Katrina's time, and the grand, ornately carved dining table that was far too big for just the three of them. This house was built for entertaining, which they did quite often, but this evening it would just be family. Her father was standing at the fireplace and lighting his pipe. Ever since Kat was young she loved the smell of her father's pipe smoke, and she enjoyed watching it curl in billowing plumes, swirling and then filling the dining room. Her mother hated it and wished he would smoke his pipe outside. Family legend dictated there was a long line of men who smoked at the fireplace and wives who disapproved, which made Kat laugh because it seemed to her nothing in her family—or in Sleepy Hollow for that matter—ever changed. This was vividly and painfully illustrated every time her parents nudged her toward marriage, and she was gearing up for them to raise the topic again this evening. She was only eighteen, about to graduate from high school, and the last thing on her mind was getting married. But things ran differently in Sleepy Hollow, especially if you were a Van Tassel. Sometimes it felt

to Kat that the world moved on without her, and indeed moved on without Sleepy Hollow, where time felt as if it had stopped.

“Your mother is off sprucing herself up, I suppose?” her father said, laughing.

“Yes, but you’re not supposed to know that. You’re to think she magically looks perfectly put together and beautiful even though she’s been cooking all day.”

Kat’s father smiled. “Your mother always looks beautiful, sprucing or no.” It made Kat happy her parents were so in love and seemed so content in their roles. “Where’s Blake?” Her father looked at his watch. “It’s not like him to be late.”

Blake was Kat’s boyfriend. Kat could hardly remember a time when Blake wasn’t in her life. Every memory of her childhood included him, so it seemed natural as they grew up they would fall in love. He was like most of the young men in Sleepy Hollow: obsessed with the occult and the supernatural. He ran around with the Sleepy Hollow Boys trying to raise spirits from the dead, doing seances, and trying to find the resting place of the Headless Horseman’s head. Of course, nothing ever came of it, but it seemed they had a good time winding each other up, playing elaborate pranks, and trying to make each other believe they had found the Hessian soldier’s head.

Kat wondered if the Sleepy Hollow Boys thought that name was original, but who was she to comment on the unoriginality of names? She was, after all, one of many Katrina Van Tassels.

“I told him I would rather spend the evening alone with you and mom tonight,” Kat said as her mother came into the room.

“Blake isn’t coming over this evening? Well, that’s a shame.” Kat’s mother stood under the archway that separated the dining room from the library. She had refreshed her makeup and hair and looked perfect, as always.

“We don’t have to spend every day together, Mom.” Kat was annoyed. She knew what was coming. “I suppose there will be time enough for that once you are married,” her mother said, winking at Kat as she sat down at her place at the table.

“Who says I’m getting married, to Blake or anyone?” Kat’s father dropped his fork onto his plate with a clatter, causing her mother to jump.

“Now, now, don’t upset your father. I’d hate for my china to pay the price for your insolence.”

Kat took a deep breath. She didn’t want to have this conversation again.

“I’m not being rude, Mom. I’m just saying how I feel. I don’t know if I ever want to get married. What’s the big deal?”

Kat’s father cleared his throat with a deep grumble. This was usually a cue that he was about to say some thing he felt was important and he wanted everyone’s attention.

“It’s a very big deal, Kat. You have a legacy to uphold, traditions to pass down, and responsibility to this community. You and your future husband will have a duty to run this estate together after your mother and I step down. We employ most of the young men in this county, and a good number of the women depend on our crops to make their preserves and the baked goods that they sell to the city folk who visit here.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “Do you even hear yourself, Dad? Men working in the fields, the women at home baking?” Both of her parents looked dumbfounded at her question.

“This is how it’s been here for generations, my girl.

I don’t see what you’re balking at. I’m getting old, Kat, I can’t keep doing this forever. We need a younger man running things here so your mother and I can enjoy our twilight years, hopefully with little grandbabies bouncing on our knees.” The thought of having children, at least anytime in the near future, made Kat cringe. She loved her parents but hated how old-fashioned they were.

Kat got up from her seat, walked over to the window, and opened the curtains with a violent snap. All the curtains had been closed to protect against the spirit of the Hessian Rider, and her parents gasped.

“The last thing I’m thinking about right now is marriage and having children. And honestly, I’m sick to death of talking about it, let alone all our traditions and superstitions. Have either of you seen the Headless Horseman even once? Do you actually believe the stories you tell on the Longest Twilight or on All Hallows’ Eve? Tell me? Does anyone in this town? It’s like some mass hallucination.”

“Katrina! Close those curtains this instant!” Her mother ran over and shut the drapes herself. “My name is Kat! And I’m not going to marry Blake or anyone else just because you think I should.” Kat stomped off and up the stairs to her room. Her mother sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, darling. I’ll go upstairs and talk to her.” She kissed her husband on the cheek.

“Please talk some sense into her, Trina. I don’t like what I see in that girl lately.”

“Don’t worry about Kat. She has a lot of the first Katrina in her.” She put her hand tenderly on her husband’s. But Artis only frowned.

“I know, my dear, and that’s what worries me most.”

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Kat slammed her bedroom door behind her. She instantly felt silly for making such a fuss. It was typical teenage behavior, and Kat hated to be typical. “Kat, can I come in?” It was Kat’s mom on the other side of her bedroom door. The last thing Kat wanted to do was talk to her mom, but she knew if she didn’t let her in it would hurt her feelings and only make the situation worse.

"Come in." Trina opened the door slowly, careful not to knock over the many stacks of books by the door. Kat's room was filled with books, stacks of them everywhere, on her desk, the floor, and in her window seat.

"Kat, you have too many books. You should really put these away in the library. It's getting crowded up here," she said, looking around the room and then sitting on the chair near the window. "What's gotten into you, Kat? Did you and Blake get into a fight? I don't understand where all of this is coming from. Saying you never want to marry? He's exactly the sort of man you should be happy to settle down with."

Kat got up from the bed, knocking over a pile of books and swearing under her breath.

"But that's just it, Mom. I don't think I ever want to get married. Especially not with you, dad, and Blake pressuring me."

Kat's mother's eyes grew wide with excitement. "Has he asked you to marry him? Why didn't you tell me?" Kat scoffed. "He hasn't asked, Mom. He just assumes we'll get married after we graduate, and honestly that's part of the problem. Everyone just assumes. I've never traveled outside of Sleepy Hollow, not once. Not even to go to the city. You and Dad won't let me. You believe we live in a haunted town, Mom, *a haunted town*; how dangerous would it be for me to visit New York? Everyone here thinks we have a ghost who chops off people's heads, but you're afraid to let me go to college. It doesn't make sense."

"Kat, you're the heir to a great legacy. You have a duty not only to your family but to the people of this town. To the Legend of Sleepy Hollow itself!"

"Mom, you're acting like I'm an heir to the throne or something and it's my royal *duty*. Do you have any idea what century this is? You should be encouraging me to go to college, not pressuring me into getting married. I know people here get married after high school, but I don't want to be stuck here forever."

Kat's mother got up and went to the foot of the bed, where there was a large trunk. Kat had never opened it—she was supposed to wait until she was married—but her mother opened it now.

"What are you doing? We never open that," Kat said. Her mother was busy looking for something and didn't answer.

"Here," she said finally, and pulled out a book. "Kat, I want you to read this."

"You just said I have too many books."

"This is the first Katrina's diary. You missed her ceremony this evening and pretty much made a debacle of dinner, the least you can do is read about the great woman you were named after, and once you're done reading her story, I want you to come to me and tell me if you think our traditions and stories are, what did you call it? A mass hallucination."

Kat smiled at her mom. Kat had been rotten at dinner and her mom was actually being pretty cool about it. She was right, it was the least she could do, even though she still planned to live her life as she chose. She didn't bother pointing out to her mother that if she did have a mind to stay in Sleepy Hollow and run things wouldn't she be in a better position to do so with a college education? But there was no arguing with her parents on this topic, and she didn't want to keep her mom's hopes up about her sticking around. She was leaving one way or another.

"Thanks, Mom. I will read it." She put the book on the bed and stood up. "Sorry about dinner. Should we go downstairs? Dad is all alone down there waiting for us."

"You stay here and read Katrina's diary. I'll bring something up for you to eat in a little bit. Let's give you and your dad some time to cool off." Trina gave her a playful wink before she left. Kat's mom liked to wink; it was her thing, and Kat thought it was cute. There were a lot of things about her mom she liked, actually. She started to feel bad that she ruined the Longest Twilight, even if she felt she had a reason to be annoyed and angry with her parents.

Kat sighed and looked down at the book on the bed. It was a thick brown leather-bound book. Across the front, in gold lettering, it read: katrina van tassel. The gold lettering had started to flake away in spots, making it seem as though it read kat van tassel, which made Kat smile, because Katrina was sitting in Kat's favorite spot, under the Oldest Tree, in the first diary entry Kat read.