

THE CHILLING HOUR

BY
ALAN DRAVEN

The Chilling Hour

Dracula and the Wolf Man stood at opposite corners of the room. The life-size cardboard cutouts of Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney Jr. were permanent fixtures in the CKBC studios in Bitternest. Every DJ was allowed a couple of things to personalize their work environment. Nicholas Kubrick, horror aficionado extraordinaire, chose these two Universal Monsters for his contribution to the cause. Nick worked Monday to Friday from seven PM to midnight. The part he loved the most, the evening he waited all week for was the Friday night slot. That's when he really got to do what he loved: to talk about horror culture. His show, *The Chilling Hour*, ran from ten PM to midnight and had quite a few hardcore followers. There, he discussed the latest horror movies, DVD releases, books, and soundtracks all the while playing the best horror scores and music from Midnight Syndicate, amongst many others.

Summer was just around the corner and with the beginning of a new month, he decided to go for something new and avant-garde, in true Nick Kubrick fashion.

“We’ve just heard the title track to the *Phantasm* soundtrack; I tell you folks, this one brings back memories. I wish I would’ve been old enough to see it when it came out in 1979!”

At twenty-five years old, he hadn’t even been born when the film had initially been released. “Coscarelli’s masterpiece if you ask me. *Beastmaster*’s a great fantasy flick, but *Phantasm*, man, now that’s a horror movie!”

Scarlet, the secretary, came in the DJ booth with a root beer for Nick. She’d been doing some overtime for the past two weeks and always checked in on Nick before she called it a night. He cued the next song, “She Sells Sanctuary” from The Cult, and went off the air.

“Thanks, I really needed this,” he said, gulping the dark brown liquid.

She smiled. “No problem; I know how much you enjoy it. I’m leaving; do you need anything else before I head out?”

He shook his head, a silly grin on his face akin to the one a man has when he just had an orgasm. “You sure you don’t want to go see the new Argento movie with me tomorrow? It’s a premiere; it won’t be in cinemas for awhile.”

“No, I really can’t make it, Nick. Besides, I’m sure you’ll be able to find a date amongst all those girls that send you e-mails with pictures of them in bikinis.”

“Aw, you know I’m not like that,” he said, winking.

“Yeah, right, Mr. Ladies Man,” she looked inside her purse to make sure she had her car keys. “Have a good one, Nick. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” He waved at her as she left the room, and got back to the console.

“All right, TGIF, everyone! Hey, tomorrow it’s the night of the full moon. Is it true that more people get their hair cut on days when the moon is full?” He sipped his drink again. “I’ve been teasing you with the promise of something exciting and interactive, well, tonight’s the night I spill the beans.” He adjusted his seat and sat back in his comfy leather chair. “As you all know, Bitternest is a city filled with dark myths and beliefs deeply anchored in the supernatural. I was thinking, what if I set out to debunk those myths, one by one. You, the listener, would decide which one I tackle. Every month, the first Friday of the month, I’ll pick amongst all your suggestions. The listener whose myth I pick will win a cool prize. Now, how awesome is that? I’ll spend the rest of the month investigating and researching the myth. I’ll then report back to you on the last show of the month with my discoveries and whether the myth is reality or not. Hit me with your feedback and suggestions. Just for tonight, since it’s the debut of this ambitious endeavor, you’ll only have the next hour and forty-two minutes to submit ideas. I’ll choose from what I’ve received so call in, e-mail me or drop by—just kidding about the last suggestion.”

He hit the play button as he switched from ON AIR to OFF AIR and the Dio-era version of Black Sabbath began wailing “Die Young” on the airwaves. The e-mails immediately began pouring in. Myths ranging from vampires residing underneath the cemetery to dwarf like yellow-haired creatures flooded his inbox. The phone was ringing off the hook—more so than on any regular Friday night. To say that listeners loved the idea was an understatement—they were ecstatic. To have their favorite DJ play Kolchak and seek the truth behind all the rumors and folklore sounded like a novelty.

By the time it was five to midnight on the Felix the Cat clock, Nick had made his pick. One more song and he would reveal this month's winner. The music faded and he grabbed the microphone while rummaging through the drawer of freebies to find a prize.

“And as the clock strikes the witching hour, I'm proud to announce that our winner for the first pick is Mrs. Sadie Marsh. You suggested the myth of the gargoyle watching over Bitternest. Well, you got it, darling. Yours truly will get to the bottom of this. As for your prize, you're going to get a copy of Black Feather's newest CD! On that note, I bid you a fine farewell and I will talk to you next Friday for your weekly dose of horror on *The Chilling Hour*. Until then, stay scared, Bitternest!”

Nick exited the CKBC studios on Whyte Avenue and walked to his car in the adjacent parking lot. He drove a black 1971 Plymouth Barracuda, a car he'd inherited from his father when he passed away. This was a man's car, if he'd ever driven one. Not one of those modern “sporty” looking cars on the streets that looked so ordinary. Sure, it cost a lot to fill the tank, but it was worth it. Besides, it was a babe magnet and that never hurt.

A white sheet was tucked in under one of the wipers; he hoped it wasn't a ticket. It was most likely someone advertising their night club or an upcoming concert. He dislodged it. It was a note printed from a computer using Arial font size 32. It read: PICCADILLY SQUARE. SATURDAY 3 AM. A MYTH WILL COME ALIVE. COME ALONE.

“What the hell?” he glanced around the parking lot; only two other cars were still parked there. The nightly fog rolled in and the quietness of the lot only added to the mystifying sensation left by the note. He got into his car and drove off. What was at Piccadilly Square? Top of his head, he couldn't remember. One thing was for certain; whoever had printed the note definitely knew how to pique his curiosity. There was no way

of telling if it were a prank or not. He was too tired to ponder the question so he decided he'd deal with it tomorrow.

Saturday night, 2:54 AM. Nick shook his head behind the wheel. He still couldn't believe he had come out here. On account of a stupid note? *I'm becoming gullible in my old age*, he thought. The square was deserted; it figured at this time of night. Only clubbers were out, heading home, waiting for the bus or puking on the sidewalk. He opened his car door and set a foot on the blacktop, then brought it back inside and shut the door again. He hit the steering wheel with a clenched fist. "Damn it!" he said out loud. "I'm gonna regret this if somebody shows up with a gun and says 'Give me your keys and your wallet,'" he said aloud, talking to himself. He had a habit of doing that; it reassured him in times of doubt. One more glance at the square and he finally walked out of his muscle car, crossing the street, heading for Piccadilly Square less than thirty feet away.

A homeless man slept on a bench, a bottle in a paper bag lay at his feet. Nick stood in the middle of the square and did a 360 degree turn to get a good look at his surroundings. Nothing out of the ordinary. On the other side of the square, a tall man dressed in dark clothing walked at a rapid pace toward him.

"What are you doing here?" the man asked.

"Me?"

"No, the bum on the bench. Of course, you."

"Are you the one who wrote the note? Because if you are, it's—"

The man was now less than twenty paces from him and closing in fast. "Note? What note?"

Nick could discern that he had a beard and was in his late thirties. “Never mind. Someone told me to come here.”

“At three in the morning?”

“What can I say; I don’t have much of a social life, contrary to popular belief. What about you; who are you?”

The man stopped his stride. He now stood less than five feet from him. “The name’s Terry Graves. I’m a detective, but I’m off-duty at the moment.” He looked like he hadn’t slept in a week. Under the lamppost, Nick could tell his eyes were red and there were rings under them.

“You sure don’t look like a cop.”

“I said I was off-duty,” he said, grabbing Nick by the arm and pulling him toward the path leading outside the park.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“It’s not safe here. You shouldn’t be out at this time.”

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m a big boy; I can take care of myself,” Nick said, trying to break free of Graves’ grasp. “It’s okay, you can let go, now.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to be here right now,” Graves said, glimpsing at his watch. He hesitated to go get the homeless man off the bench but refrained from doing so.

“Who do I have to worry about? Sleeping Beauty on the bench over there? Look at him; he’s harmless.”

“We don’t have time for this. I’m parked across the market; we can talk in my car on our way out of here,” Graves said, in a somber tone.

“What? Am I under arrest or something?”

“I’m off-duty, remember?”

“Then let go of me! I’m not going to your car. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, there are plenty of things wrong with me. But none of them you have to worry about for now; what you need to be concerned of is what’s coming in less than two minutes.”

Nick stopped his mad dash. “All right, that’s it. What’s this all about?”

“I don’t have time to explain. It’s not safe here; we need to get to my car.”

Nick eyed him for a moment. The poor detective seemed terrified.

“Fine. You win. I’ll come along, but there’s no way in hell I’m leaving my ‘cuda here. Come, I’m right across the street.”

They ran to the other side of the street and hurried to the black car.

Nick sniffed the air. “Where’s that coffee smell coming from? Smells like someone burned their pot of coffee.”

At these words, Graves became frantic. “Get in the car now!”

“Okay, okay! Jesus! What’s wrong with you?”

Nick obeyed and the Barracuda purred as he drove away from the foggy square.

“I want you to remember that smell; whenever you smell it, make sure you’re indoors and block the windows.”

“The smell of coffee?”

“It just smells like coffee, but it ain’t; trust me on that one.”

“All right; where are we running to like this? No, let me rephrase; who are we running from?”

Graves glanced at the rearview mirror. They weren’t there yet. Curious, Nick did the same, and then he looked over his shoulder.

“Who’s back there? What did you do?” Nick asked, slowly becoming spooked.

“I didn’t do anything and your question shouldn’t be ‘who’ but rather ‘what’ is back there. You’ll know soon enough.” Graves had his eyes glued to the rearview mirror. “Make a left here; we’re going to the warehouse district.”

“At this time of night? On a Saturday? Isn’t everything closed?”

“That’s the point. There’s an abandoned factory; windows are all sealed. I know a way in. They’ve smelled us at this point and they won’t stop until they get us.”

“You’re not making any sense, man.”

Graves’s eyes doubled in size. “You wanna know what’s after us? Look in your rearview but keep your foot on the gas. Thank God we’re almost there.”

Nick strained his eyes, looking in all three of the rearview mirrors. “I don’t see nothing, man.”

“Look closer but keep your eyes on the road. Turn right at the next stop sign.”

Nick did and again, he couldn’t see anything. “Is this some kind of prank to scare me because I wanna debunk the gargoyle myth? Is that what this is?”

“What the hell are you talking about? This isn’t a prank.” Graves stuck his head outside the window and looked back at the warm night air behind them. “We’re here.”

“What? The old shoe factory? That place is falling apart!”

“It’ll be fine; I’ve used it before. I need you to stop at the last loading dock and then run out of the car as soon as you turn off the ignition. From there, follow my lead.”

The car sped into the factory’s yard and Nick burned rubber until he made it to the door. “You’re really starting to worry me, man.”

“Good. Maybe you’ll do what I tell you without asking so many goddamn questions.”

They exited the car, hurrying to the loading dock. Graves unlocked the chained lock. Nick stood next to him, peering into the darkness of the night.

“There’s nothing out there, Detective. You sure you didn’t have a few beers too many tonight?”

Graves unlocked the chains and threw an arm around Nick’s shoulders and pointed into the distance at seemingly nothing. “What do you see?”

“I told you; nothing!”

“What do you see?” Graves raised his voice.

“There’s nothing apart from that patch of haze. Is that what you’re talking about? The haze?”

“The shimmer in the air, like when it gets hot in the afternoon and the sun is boiling. That’s what’s after us.” Graves pulled the door up a dozen inches. “Come on; they’re here. Slide under there.”

They both crawled inside and Graves shut the door tight once they were in.

“Now what?”

“You’ll see.”

A loud clang resounded when the door was struck, as if it were being rammed by a bulldozer. It sounded like a tornado was getting ready to rip the roof to pieces out there. The commotion was all around the empty factory, encircling them and brushing over their heads. It sounded like a hail storm assaulting a glass roof. Every noise was intensified by the echo in the factory.

“What the hell is going on?” If Nick had been worried before, he was scared now.

“They’re called the Dark Emissaries.”

“What do they want from us?” Nick was growing paler and couldn’t feel his legs anymore.

“They need our life-force. They usually get it, too. We’ve had dozens of unsolved deaths in the past months. The victims look like they’re stone figures after they’re through with them.”

“So what are we gonna do? We’re trapped in here.” Nick’s words echoed in the empty space, giving them more meaning.

“No, we’re safe in here. A friend of mine who knows about all things supernatural in Bitternest told me how to get away from them.”

“What makes him such an expert on these Dark Emissaries, as you call them?”

Graves smiled. “Finch is a mystery, but he knows a lot about this stuff. We have to wait it out; in an hour they’ll be gone. They can only come out from 3:00 AM to 4:00 AM. They have one hour to satisfy their cravings, after that, they vanish into thin air. You can sometimes smell them a little earlier than that in the night; that means they’re doing some recon, seeking potent life-forces. They’re harmless at that point, but when three o’clock strikes, watch out!” Graves made a gesture with his hands.

Seconds later, the ruckus and wind came to a sudden stop. All was quiet again.

“I thought you said this was going to last an hour?”

“Something’s wrong; they never give up this fast.”

“Maybe they’re just pretending to give up so we come out and they get us.” Nick shook his head. “I can’t believe I was stupid enough to venture out at three in the morning.”

“They wouldn’t do that; that’s not how they work. And they don’t look like anything more than murky outlines in the haze. They’re pure energy beings. They drape over you and suck the life out of you in ten seconds flat. I’ve seen it happen.” Graves finished his sentence with a look of regret on his face. “That ain’t no way for a man to die.”

“Well, then, if they’re not trying to trick us, why don’t we take a peek outside?”

Graves hesitated for a moment. Then he walked over to the door and pulled it open an inch or two. He waited. Satisfied the danger was gone; he pulled it up high enough so they could get out.

Outside, everything seemed normal. Nick was worried they would have done something to his precious car, but it was just as he had left it.

“They gave up easily,” Nick said, opening his car door.

“No, something happened. I don’t know what, but something else caught their attention.”

“Where to now?”

“Just drop me off at my car back at the square.”

Nick turned the key in the ignition and the Barracuda flew into the night.

Twenty-nine days after the incident with Detective Graves, Nick was getting ready for his show the next night. Ever since the night of the encounter with the Dark Emissaries, Nick had been obsessed at finding out more about them. He’d gone back to Piccadilly Square every Saturday night at three in the morning, video camera in hand, in hope of confronting the invisible force that had nearly done him and the good detective in. It had been all for nothing—no sign of them—or Detective Graves, for that matter. He’d done some research and had interviewed a couple of Bitternest history buffs on the subject of a gargoyle watching over the city and this too had proven a dead end. In fact, the only trace of a gargoyle was the statue resting atop of St. Jude’s church, which could be seen in the distance from Piccadilly Square.

Nick was beginning to think this great idea about investigating myths in the city wasn’t such a good one anymore. For one thing, he didn’t have anything interesting to tell his

listeners the next night other than the fact that the Bitternest gargoyle was simply a myth. He didn't want to get into the Dark Emissaries incident; it was so surreal that sometimes he wondered if he hadn't dreamt up the whole episode. If only the person responsible for the note he'd received a month ago would come forward. Then he'd finally have a clue of what he was dealing with. He was about to give up when a glimmer of hope shone in his direction.

"Hey, Nick! So, you got everything you need for your famous second show on myth debunking?" Clint, another DJ asked while he was getting ready to pass the reigns to Nick.

"Things could've gone better. Turns out there isn't much to talk about. So much for revolutionary ideas, huh?"

"Don't worry about it. It'll get better. Give it time, buddy. It's your first crack at this. Look at me; I run a club every night after I get out of here. At first, I made tons of mistakes, nearly went under at one point. But now I've got the hang of it. I know what to do to attract a clientele. I have my finger on the pulse of what the clubgoers want. You're trying out a new format; it won't be an overnight success. Believe me; you don't want it to be. You won't be able to enjoy it as much if you get everything easy. Just keep at it; it'll happen." Clint tapped him on the shoulder. "Speaking of club, I have to get going. It's a full moon tonight; all the weirdoes will be out."

"There's a full moon tonight?"

"Yep. It's good for business but you gotta be prepared. I need to have more security, an extra bartender, extra waitress, and extra set of eyes behind my back to make sure things stay under control. People just go nuts on the nights of a full moon; fights, rapes in the washrooms, overdoses, and assholes setting things—and people—on fire. It's a jungle out there."

“Well, good luck with that,” Nick said, his mind deep in thought.

“Have a good one, Nick.”

As Nick sank back in his chair, it occurred to him that the night the Dark Emissaries had made their appearance it had been a full moon as well. This might just be the break he’d been waiting for.

The evening went by at a snail’s pace and it was one of the rare times Nick didn’t enjoy his job. He was too consumed with the Dark Emissaries and desperate at finding a gargoyle story to take pleasure in what he was doing. When he finally went off air, Nick ran down the stairs and outside to his trusty black Barracuda and raced away into the night.

At 2:45 AM, Nick stood next to his car, camera in hand, across from Piccadilly Square. The full moon loomed overhead and its brightness lit the square on this exceptional fogless night. It reminded him that it hadn’t been very foggy either the night of the encounter, twenty nine days earlier. The air was charged with energy; he could sense that something was about to happen. He crossed the street and walked into the deserted square. He could get a clear view of the gargoyle statue standing watch atop the church from where he stood. He zoomed in on its grotesque face with the video camera. For half a second, he thought he saw its eyes blink. He looked again for a good amount of time and the stone idol did not move again.

“My eyes are beginning to play tricks on me,” he said out loud.

When 2:55 chimed in on his wristwatch—a last chance for him to turn back while he still had time—the familiar smell of burnt coffee flared his nostrils. His hunch about the full moon had turned out to be right. His heart began to race and beads of sweat formed on his forehead. He wished Detective Graves would show up like last time but he was nowhere in

sight. Had he given up on the Dark Emissaries or did he know something Nick didn't? He cursed himself for not having tried to get in touch with him through the police precinct.

When three o'clock struck, the smell of burnt coffee permeated the air and a hissing sound resounded in the open area. His eye in the camera, trying to snatch any footage of the Dark Emissaries, Nick nonetheless began backing up toward his car for a quick getaway. He wouldn't go to the shoe factory; he'd thought of a better place: his uncle's steel shed. It was windowless and only a few miles from here. His uncle was out of town on vacation in Florida for the summer. Nick had the keys to feed the fish and water the plants.

The air shimmered and Nick began filming the apparent nothingness as it took on a dark shape in the moonlit night. Nick was pushing the limits of his luck; he had to make a run for it. He started for the 'cuda and in less than ten seconds, he was already behind the wheel with the motor purring. He took off leaving a blaze of dust behind. After two left turns and three right turns, he had almost made it to his uncle's place. A quick glance in the rearview mirror reaffirmed that the Dark Emissaries couldn't be shaken off easily. It was only when Nick crossed the train track that he was forced to hit the brakes; the air was distorted ahead of him. It could only mean that the Dark Emissaries were trying to trap and crush him like a tomato in a vice.

Without enough distance between him and the shapeless menace at his back, he couldn't back up.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" he shouted as he hit the steering wheel. He didn't have a choice; as much as he hated it, he had to abandon ship. He pushed the door open and started for the field. He had no idea what to do next. He was panting and he could feel the air thickening around him, the smell of burnt coffee making him sick to his stomach.

He glanced over his shoulder and was thankful that the Emissaries didn't move any faster. On the other side of the field stood the Evergreen Estates, a multi-million dollar real estate project. His goal was to make it there. But what then? If the Emissaries could go through any window, where would he hide? He was in an open area and the only option was to run straight ahead. He could hear their hissing sound behind him growing closer.

"I can't believe I'm gonna die!" As he said that, he tripped on a gap in the ground and fell. He got up as quickly as he could, realizing that he had ripped his jeans. When he began running again, a pain shot through his knee and almost made him lose his footing. Out of breath, Nick was just about ready to give up.

That's when he felt something grab him under his arms and lift him up like a feather. Within seconds, he was two hundred feet above ground. He felt a cold breath down his neck. He turned his head to peek at what had gotten hold of him. It was a winged creature made of stone with a wingspan of at least fifteen feet—the gargoyle from St. Jude's Church. He couldn't believe his eyes. Behind them, the Dark Emissaries hovered in the night air.

The gargoyle gained altitude and flew toward the buildings on the Evergreen Estates. The creature was heading for the tallest building—a towering glass structure at least forty stories high. It landed on top of it, gently setting Nick down on its roof. Then it stepped away from him and eyed him for a moment, tilting its head.

"Thank you; you've saved my life," Nick said, still stunned by the gargoyle that stood before him. The only response from the winged creature was a slight nod of the head in acknowledgment of his gratitude.

Below, the Dark Emissaries lingered, circling the building like vultures over carrion.

“They can’t fly any higher than this? Is that it?” Nick stared at them, grateful to be alive. The gargoyle took a few steps toward him and startled him. Before Nick had time to add anything more, the gargoyle took flight and the Emissaries went after him.

“Hey! Wait! You’re just gonna leave me here?” Nick sighed. At least he was safe. He took a quick look over the edge of the roof and saw that the air was still hazy; some of the Emissaries had stayed behind, sneaky little bastards that they were. He looked at his watch. “Forty-two more minutes. That’s how long I gotta last. After that, you’re history.”

He laid down on the rooftop and watched the starry night go by. Forty-one minutes and fifty-five seconds later, his wristwatch announced 4:00 AM. He rose and peered over the edge of the building; the Dark Emissaries were gone and so was the smell of burnt coffee. “Now to get out of here...”

The next evening, back at the station, Nick was getting ready for his show. After much thought, he decided he wasn’t going to reveal the existence of the gargoyle. It had saved his life and judging by the way it had interacted with him, it was probably watching over Bitternest, guarding it from evil. It wasn’t his place to reveal the creature’s secret like this. Sure, it would make for a boring show, but he could always mention something about the Dark Emissaries without going into too many details.

Nick was coming out of the washroom when an all too familiar smell sent shivers down his spine: the hallway reeked of burnt coffee. A hissing sound pierced the air. Nick hit the ground running past the front desk to where the smell emanated from. His nose led him straight to the employees’ lounge.

He burst in, wheezing with beads of sweat glistening on his forehead.

“Stay away from the windows!” he yelled.

The five or six employees all turned around to look at him.

Scarlet, the trusty secretary, was both startled and perplexed. “Nick! What’s happening; you look like you’ve seen a ghost! And what’s wrong with the windows?”

Relieved, Nick shook his head. “I thought ... never mind.”

Scarlet lifted a pot of coffee. “Would you like some coffee? I’m afraid I left it a little too long.” She smiled and poured him a cup.

The End