

Some Enchanted Autumn

Linda
Andrews



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*Some Enchanted
Autumn*



by

Linda Andrews



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SOME ENCHANTED AUTUMN

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To . . .

...my husband for his unwavering support,
my critique partners who keep me on track,
and everyone who still enjoys Halloween.

CHAPTER I

Familiar eyes with new sight. Tonight I beheld such beauty that my breath departed my body just to be close to yours.

Anonymous
August 8th, 1918

Man killed with skeleton.

Avalon Lynch scrambled down the tree. Fifteen feet to the ground. Ten feet. Bits of black bark heralded her descent, tugged at her artfully tattered skirt and chewed holes in her fishnet stockings. Ignoring her pounding heart and sweat slick palms, she toed down the trunk to find a footing on the last branch.

When she discovered who had put the skeleton in the tree, she would curse them until their descendants evolved.

Of course, she might have to stand in line behind the man. *The man*. Balancing on the thick tree limb, she dried her palms on her skirt. Perhaps he wasn't dead. Perhaps he was just stunned.

She glanced up through the branches of the dead oak. Old Reidon had been wedged about twenty-five feet up. Twenty-five feet times gravity would give her the force behind the crash. Lonnie chewed on her bottom lip. Well, it would if she could remember the conversion factor from feet to meters.

Still, Old Reidon couldn't weigh that much. He was made of the new lightweight plastic, much better and more durable than the old skeleton. In fact, the impact hadn't damaged the bones at all.

The stranger was another matter.

"Enough, Lonnie. Geez, if cowardice is going to become an integral part of your character after thirty-four years, you might as well just donate your spine to medical science now."

Cowardice.

Coward. She shrugged off the accusation. Okay, so she'd skipped town before giving Orren an answer to his marriage proposal. That didn't make her a coward, did it? She'd always faced the consequences of her actions before.

Which is why you're up a tree now instead of down on the ground, tending to the man you bombed with a skeleton?

Broken broomsticks, when had her conscience become so acerbic?

Exertion burned along her thighs as she squatted then gingerly plopped her behind onto the branch. Tufts of dead grass beckoned from five feet below. A crow hopped into her landing space and pecked at the ground. Her grease-filled lunch threatened to shoot out of her stomach. Five feet. Four inches less than her modest height, yet a daunting distance when hovering above the earth.

Bark confetti rained onto the ground as she shifted on her perch. She'd have to jump sometime—her victim needed first aid. The breeze carried his low groan to her. At least, he wasn't dead. Unconscious, not dead. Not that she actually believed manslaughter was an appropriate punishment for cowardice.

Jumping Jack-o-lanterns, that nasty noun had popped up too often today.

So she'd left—but she always returned to Pumpkin this time of the year. In fact, her vacation request had been in her personnel folder since she'd started working at the Prior-Tea Clinic. Orren's proposal and her departure was a simple case of bad timing. It most certainly did not indicate any invertebrate tendencies on her part.

"Caw. Caw." The crow cast a yellow-eyed glance at her before hopping away.

Now was not the time for self-analysis. The man was hurt, and she just might remember enough of her first aid training to help him.

Lonnie pushed off the branch. Her landing rattled up her bones and out her skull. Knees complained as she straightened; she would feel her daring rescue of Old Reidon in the morning. As for the stranger, he was feeling her rescue of the skeleton now.

She stepped into her boots. Their buckles slapped worn leather as she circled the trunk.

“I hope you got ID, buddy.”

The throaty growl stirred the hair on her arms. What was so appealing about a deep baritone? Sure, that velvet rasp was a real asset for phone sex operators and jazz singers but put it on a priest, a teacher or a doctor...

Lonnie stopped as her heart picked up tempo. Orren Prior was a doctor. A doctor with a normal male voice. A doctor with good looks, old money and an older family name. With those assets, he didn't need a voice like liquid chocolate. And he certainly didn't need her.

So why had he asked her to marry him?

“And wipe that grin off your face.” The sinful voice truncated her speculation. Bones rattled like chips in a soothsayer's cup as he shook his attacker. “Assaulting a peace officer is a serious offense.”

Lonnie palmed her giggle. Not many men would have a sense of humor after being knocked unconscious by a skeleton. Unconscious? Brain trauma. Concussion. What other horrible repercussions could result from the skeletal walloping?

“Are you all right?”

Startled, the man bounced on the ground. After stuffing the skeleton behind his back, he turned to face her. Cobalt blue eyes flicked over her with the precision of a laser.

“I just had the wind knocked out of me. Have you been standing there long?”

“Don't worry.” Lonnie resisted the urge to squirm. She hadn't done anything wrong, precisely. Old Reidon plunging on top the man's curly brown head was an accident. “I won't tell anyone you were consorting with a skeleton.”

White teeth flashed in his tanned face. He settled the skeleton next to him and wrapped his arm around the bony shoulders.

"Alas, she's not my type. I prefer someone with a little more meat on her bones."

Interest flared in the blue depths.

Lonnie clasped her hands together. She was practically an engaged woman, would be engaged if she had answered Orren. And she wasn't flirting. She was simply sharing a laugh over the absurd situation.

"I believe weight to be the least of your problems."

She squatted before him. Evenly dilated pupils focused clearly on her lips. She could probably rule out a concussion. A wisp of Old Spice aftershave teased her. Her nose twitched. The clean scent hinted at subtle layers waiting to be discovered. She should keep him under observation, maybe even overnight observation. Just in case.

"You willing to share my problems with me, honey?" The right corner of his mouth lifted, propping up the dimple in his cheek.

Honey. Chocolate. Rich, decadent and forbidden to anyone on a diet or almost engaged. Regret swung across her shoulders as she pulled back. If only she'd given Orren an answer before she left. A no would have allowed her to flirt with Mr. Sinful and a yes...

She stuffed away the useless thoughts.

"Old Reidon is definitely a man, not a woman."

"How can you tell?" Brown eyebrows met over his aquiline nose. "I mean without the obvious, er..." Embarrassment darkened his cheeks.

"The obvious?" Amusement trickled through her. Such chagrin over the simple mention of body parts. Her gaze flicked over him. Not that his weren't a fine example of his gender. Broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped. Waves of muscle played over bones. A fine example of manhood, indeed.

He cleared his throat and stared over her shoulder.

"The obvious plumbing facilities still intact."

"His pelvis." Her gaze dropped. Gurgling cauldrons, his zipper was going to pop. She forced her attention back to his face. "A man's and a woman's pelvis are different."

His gaze slid down her shoulder to linger over the area in question. Desire cast heat across her flesh. This was no clinical observation; this was her treacherous body layering innuendo onto a scientific explanation.

"A woman's hips are wider, flared to cradle a baby and...and a man."

Images flickered inside her skull, an 8-mm film of skin and passion. Lonnie shook her head, scrambling the thoughts. What was she thinking? Fantasizing about a total stranger. A good-looking stranger, true, but she might be an engaged woman, an almost-wife.

She cleared her throat and straightened. Whatever spell he had cast over her would have to be broken. She needed to think clearly—without pheromones, animal musk and that bulge in his pants distracting her.

"It would be easier to explain if I laid a man and a woman side-by-side."

"Oh, I think I can appreciate the difference." The dimple flashed again, there and gone, there and gone, as if he were trying to mesmerize her. "Although if you feel the need to instruct me further, I won't complain."

He pressed his hand to his chest, swept those blunt fingers over firm muscle. Her breasts tightened. His actions were suggestive but tame compared to the minefield of sexual implications in his statement. Delightfully sinful; decidedly taboo. Lonnie ignored the smile tugging on her lips. She had only one weapon in this game: innocence.

"Unless you're planning to consort with any more skeletons, I don't think you'd need a crash course in anatomy." Science tackled his sensuality. *It's for the best, Lonnie.*

"I didn't plan on this one." He blinked, banking the interest blazing in his eyes. "I don't suppose you saw who did it? Attacked me with this skeleton, I mean."

"Attacked you." She clasped her hands behind her back, milking her fingers. *Attacked* was such a harsh description.

"Don't worry, I can protect you. I'm a peace officer."

"Protect me?"

Crime statistics flipped through her head. Jumping Jack-o-lanterns, this was Pumpkin not Phoenix. Crime didn't exist in her hometown. Or did it? Her parents had insisted she attend the community meeting at the Between the Towns Gospel Church, yet the hazing between the feuding communities was good fun, not criminal.

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"Perhaps I should check you out."

His blue-eyed gaze returned to hers.

"Your injuries, I mean."

"Huh, yeah." He twisted on the ground, presenting her with his back.

His silky hair slid between her fingers. Nice hair. *No broken skin. I wonder what kind of conditioner he uses. A little red patch here. Nothing fruity but definitely spicy.*

Air hissed through his teeth.

"You have a nice goose egg back here."

"Thanks for not using any fancy medical jargon." He brushed her hands aside and cupped the swollen skin. Pain laced the grin on his lips.

"About this Prankster—what has he done, exactly?"

"Little things at first. Stole a few signs. Changed Happy Halloween to Happy Holidays, switched poinsettias for pumpkins, Santas for scarecrows."

Lonnie smiled. All standard issue in the Holly High bag of tricks. All met equal retaliation from the Pumpkin Predators when the Christmas season rolled around.

“Sounds harmless.”

“It was, until the Frankenstein monster machine began arcing and snapping. Someone had messed with the electrical system. Sparks flew—literally—and caught a hay bale on fire.” He stared into space. “Thank God, someone thought to try out the thing before opening the Haunted House. As it was, the mayor got himself a nasty burn on his arm when he shut the power off.”

Mayor Russell. Tutmoses Russell, her old high school beau and captain of the Predators football team, was now mayor of Pumpkin. Not that his election to office was a surprise. Most nominees had to be coerced, bribed or tricked into running for the position. Lonnie tucked her hair behind her ear. No, what surprised her was that Tut, a diehard Pumpkin native, had hired an outsider to keep watch.

“At least, he has you to investigate.”

“Not quite.” Muscle bunched against his clenched jaw. The man pushed off the ground to sway on his feet.

Lonnie followed him up and steadied him. Corded muscle tensed under her touch. She waited for him to pull away, reject her assistance. He didn’t.

“How so?”

“No one from Holly’s set foot inside Pumpkin for almost a century.”

She blinked. From Holly. From Holly. She snatched her hand off his arm. The only thing worse than an outsider was someone from Holly. How could this be? He didn’t have reindeer antlers on his head or sleigh bells around his neck. And if he’d jumped out of some bad kid’s closet on Halloween, their fathers would be running for the shotgun for an altogether different reason than slaying the scary monster.

“You’re from Holly?” she croaked.

“Born and raised.” Pride glistened on his face like an oil slick on the ocean.

Lonnie’s stomach bucked. She had dropped Reidon on a resident of Holly. And not just any resident of Holly, but its peacekeeper. No one on either side would believe it was an accident.

“You’d love Holly. It’s a quaint town, lots of charm and character. I would be delighted to—”

“Nicholas!” A man’s voice boomed across the clearing, strong and authoritative. Lonnie swallowed a groan. Her day was going from boiling caldron to bonfire near a stake.

“Nicholas Dugan, where have you gone to?”

Dugan. Every child in Pumpkin knew the name of the boogeyman. It was *The Dugan*. A whimper squeaked through her tight throat. She had conversed with a Dugan from Holly. All of her ancestors were clawing their way out of their graves to curse her. She had to get away; she must get away.

She stepped backwards, tripped over Old Reidon’s boney arm. A hand wrapped around her elbow, pulled her forward.

“Over here, Father Bean.”

Disbelief spread through her. The serpent actually beamed at her. Could he really not know who she was?

“You’ll like the Father.”

She shook off his touch. If he didn’t know now, he would soon. Father Bean had been determined to mend the rift between the two communities since his Volkswagen van broke down outside the towns in 1972.

Lonnie stumbled backwards; her shoulder slammed into the tree trunk. Cinders and snakes, the stupid skeleton seemed to have wrapped itself around her feet.

“Ah, Nicholas, there you are.” Father Bean pushed aside the branch of weeping willow, waddled through the white picket fence and trod onto the dead grass. “I believe you would serve the communities better inside the church. Indeed, I must insist—”

He faltered mid-step. Brown eyes widened in surprise as they gazed at her.

“Father Bean, allow me to introduce my savior, Miss...”

“Lynch.” Lonnie hefted the skeleton off the ground, tossed him over her shoulder and strode toward the clergyman. The priest would protect her from The Dugan.

“Avalon, child.” Father Bean’s brown robes swept over the grass as he strode forward. Strong arms wrapped her in his embrace. Incense wafted off him, mingling freely with the pungent fragrance of homegrown maryjane. “It is good to have you home.”

"Father." Lonnie returned his embrace, resisted tugging on the gunmetal ponytail winding down his back. No one knew what denomination had ordained the aging draft-dodging hippie, but everyone respected his calling. Besides serving as preacher and justice of the peace, he was the only mediator the two feuding towns respected. And she would need a mediator. A Holly jail cell was no place for a witch.

She slipped out of his hug and faced her victim.

"It is good to *be* home."

"Home?" The sexy baritone rumbled like thunder. "You mean you're from around here. No, let me guess." Fists landed on his hips. "You're from Pumpkin, aren't you? Of course, you are. With a name like Lynch, you wouldn't be from anywhere else."

"Nicholas, do stop harassing the girl."

His gaze slid from her to Old Reidon. A heartbeat later, light flared in his eyes. He had made the connection but leapt to the wrong conclusion. Lonnie raised her chin and met his accusing stare. Father Bean would help her with The Dugan.

"You dropped the skeleton on me."

She squeezed her eyes closed as he reached for her. The Christmas Curse—one touch from The Dugan, and every time you opened your mouth Christmas carols would pour out.



"You won't be able to stop yourself." Her father's voice rang in her head.

"Is there a cure, Daddy?" her five-year-old self asked.

"Only for good little witches."



The Dugan's touch was soft—a gentle tug on her hair and it was over. She peeked through her lashes. A black twig spun in his fingers.

"Admit it, that's why you just happened to be on hand. Isn't that right, Miss Lynch?"

Had she been cursed? Lonnie filled her lungs. She wouldn't know until she answered him.

"Don't go getting a wedgie over it." Relief shook her legs. She hadn't been cursed.

"I'll take that as an admission of guilt."

"It was an accident." She turned to face Father Bean yet kept the Dugan in her peripheral vision. He might not have cursed her, but his family was guilty of a far greater transgression. "I saw old Reidon sitting up in the tree and thought to get him down. I guess the Prankster must have struck again."

"Nice story, lady. But how are you gonna explain it if the only fingerprints on him are yours and mine?"

"I imagine you'll find several people's prints on him."

"Yeah, well, there are your other talents to consider."

Other talents. Witchcraft. Lonnie straightened. Was history about to repeat itself? Was a Dugan about to publicly out another witch?

"Just what are you accusing me of?"

"Never let a Pumpkin-eater miss a chance to stir up the rivalry." He unsnapped the handcuffs from his belt. "Lots of folks would be real happy to know I caught the Prankster. I knew it had to be a Pumpkin-eater."

"You've drunk too much spiked eggnog, pinecones-for-brains. I just got back into town."

"Nicholas."

"You heard her admit it, Father."

"Yes," the priest sighed. "I heard her admit that Reidon was in the tree and that she dropped him on you when she went to rescue him."

She dodged left and crashed into The Dugan's chest. Cold metal wrapped her right wrist. She jerked away before he closed the other. The free handcuff slapped her forearm.

"It was an *accident*."

"That is quite enough, you two." Meaty hands clamped down on her shoulders. She was turned and propelled through the gate. "This is God's yard, and you will not fight on it."

"Yes, Father," Lonnie agreed.

"Yes, Father," The Dugan repeated.

"Now, I must say—"

"Lonnie!" The screech disturbed the pigeons parading across the green grass. "Lonnie Lynch. I never would have believed it if I hadn't seen it for myself." Primary colors swirled around

the thin woman sailing past picnic tables laden with baskets, platters of delicacies and bowls of food. "Guess I should have read my tea leaves after all."

Gold bracelets, hoop earrings and rings jangled to a stop as their owner folded Lonnie into a welcoming hug.

"Honey." Lonnie shrugged off her cousin's embrace. Excitement sparkled in the kohl-rimmed eyes staring at her and curved the scarlet lips. "How have you been?"

"Not as good as you." Honey's gypsy outfit floated around her like a rainbow haze. Crimson nails drummed her cocked hip as her gaze slipped off her cousin. "Mm-mm-mm. Are all men in the valley so delectable?" Bracelets jangled as she pinched Lonnie's arm. "I can't believe you waited three whole months to shackle yourself to this one." She flicked the handcuff dangling from Lonnie's wrist and licked her lips as she strolled around The Dugan. "Tell me, sweetheart, are there more like you at home?"

"What?" Nicholas jumped as if *he* had been pinched. And knowing Honey—Lonnie fought to keep the smile off her face—he probably had been. "I am—"

"He's not Orren, Honey." Lonnie pulled her cousin out of harm's way. His touch may not have cursed them but one never knew what could happen if The Dugan was riled. "I left Orren in Phoenix."

"Well, she tried to, anyway."

Orren Prior, only son of the founders of the exclusive Prior-Tea Clinic, strode onto the grounds of the Between the Towns Gospel Church. His designer silk shirt and soft wool trousers flattered his gym-toned body and reeked of money.

Lonnie shook her head. If someone had told her ten months ago that people could smell like money, she would have laughed. Ten months and one day ago, she hadn't worked for the Prior-Tea Clinic, hadn't known a clinic could resemble a five-star resort, that check-ups routinely lasted ten days or that breast lifts were emergency surgery. And the money coming in would soon quadruple thanks to the multimillion-dollar additional wing dedicated to holistic and naturopathic medicine.

"Orren!" Lonnie clasped her hands behind her back. Small wonder The Dugan hadn't used the Christmas Carol Curse—he

had a more diabolical revenge up his sleeve. She bared her teeth at him and turned to greet her almost-fiancé. "What are you doing here?"

She smoothed her costume over her hips. Spiders and frog's lips, she hadn't meant to sound so annoyed, but what could he expect? Irritation wiggled over his face before he smiled. His smile was as fake as hers.

"I guess you wouldn't believe that I was just passing by?" He frowned as his gaze raked her from head to toe. The ragged dress, the buckled shoes and funky stockings could only add up to one thing: *witch*.

"Out here?" She resisted the urge to squirm. This wasn't the Inquisition. This was the twenty-first century. She was a doctor, a scientist researching at a prestigious clinic where vain clients valued reputation over skill. *Orren's* family clinic and *Orren's* clients.

"Yeah, well." A cloud scuttled across his sky-blue eyes. Options considered and dismissed. His jaw tightened. A shudder rippled through him. He had made a decision. "Penny told me you'd come home for a family emergency, and I thought now would be a good time to show my future in-laws what a great husband I'd make for their only daughter."

"Oh, how wonderful," she lied. Lockjaw couldn't stop the office gossip from spewing her venom. As for *Orren*...

Her insides writhed like snakes in a sack. His presence was a harbinger of things to come. But were those things good or bad? She was afraid she'd find out all too soon.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" An elbow poked her in the back.

"Honey, this is my..." Lonnie swallowed the word *fiancé*. She hadn't given her answer yet. "This is *Orren Prior*. *Orren*, this is my cousin Honey O'Bitz."

"O'Bitz." *Orren* moved closer, smooth as a panther on cornered prey. "That's an unusual name."

"They're all unusual in Pumpkin," The Dugan piped up.

Lonnie edged him out of their group.

"And the only other people worth introducing are Father Bean and Old Reidon." She held out the skeleton's hand.

"Father." Orren nodded to the priest then, ignoring the skeleton, faced The Dugan. "I suppose you have a son running around, and the only way anyone can tell you apart is by the quaint country tradition of tacking an 'old' on your name."

"No." The Dugan smirked as they shook hands. "No son, no fiancée and no quaint country tradition. My name is Nicholas Dugan. I'm the peace officer of Holly."

"A Dugan!" Honey sidled behind Father Bean.

"Holly?" Orren managed an artfully confused look. "I thought you hailed from Pumpkin, Avalon. Isn't that where this family emergency thing occurred?"

"I do hail from Pumpkin." Interest sharpened his features. "And...And..."

"Holly and Pumpkin are sister cities."

"Stepsister cities," The Dugan interjected. "One ugly—"

"Nicholas." Father Bean laid a hand on The Dugan's shoulder. "There is strife between the two towns despite their founding by the same wagon train."

"And your mother?" Orren waved away the town's history. "I assume you are here to see she gets transferred to a more modern facility?"

"I—" For an instant, Lonnie's mind blanked. Why would she want her mother in a facility? *Family emergency*. Orren's earlier words surfaced. "My mother isn't ill."

"She isn't?"

"No, she isn't, and the only family emergency is the town feud." Father Bean nodded to the people streaming out of the church into neat, well-separated lines. "Things have escalated this year."

"The Prankster has injured two people." The Dugan glared at her.

"Injured?" Dollar signs flashed in Orren's eyes.

"It was a simple bump on the head." Lonnie ignored her maybe-fiancé. He might own the clinic she worked at, but she was on vacation and in the midst of proving her innocence. "You didn't even require a Band-Aid."

"I might have a concussion. Old Reidon might not look like much, but he packs a wallop being hurled from a tree."

"A man was thrown from a tree?" Orren gasped.

Lonnie stared at the sky. *One Mississippi. Two Mississippi.* Legend hadn't magnified the Dugan gift for exaggeration.

"Old Reidon slipped from my grasp when I was up a tree."

"You climbed a tree?" Orren planted himself between her and The Dugan. "Where is this Reidon fellow now?"

"He's the bones," The Dugan snapped

"The skeleton is Reidon?" Orren deduced.

"Yes," she hissed. Pickled toads, Orren hadn't seemed this dense in Phoenix. She had to get him to *return* to Phoenix. She needed time to think. "Now that all the introductions have been made—"

"Not quite." A hand was shoved between her and Orren. "Tut Russell, mayor of Pumpkin. Did I hear you say you're engaged to our Lonnie?"

"Avalon and I will be married in the spring." Orren preened under the official attention. "Mother has a list of dates the country club is available, and we'll need to let the wedding planner know so she can arrange the theme. Do you have a preference?"

"Jailhouse Rock' comes to mind," The Dugan snickered.

"I am *not* the Prankster!"

"Of course, you're not," Tut barked. "Who would even suggest such a thing?"

"Someone with pinecones for brains."

Her friends turned to the only one from Holly in their group.

"I see more of my flock has come out into the pasture." Father Bean wedged himself between the citizens of the two towns.

"Now seems like an opportune time to announce the apprehension of the Prankster."

"Allow me, Nicholas." The priest beamed.

Betrayal whipped through Lonnie. The clergyman couldn't really believe she was responsible for the tricks. Sure, she'd done her share of mischief in the past, but she had been out of town for this latest batch.

"Be my guest, Father."

The priest clasped her hand and gently squeezed it then turned to face the crowd spilling onto the lawn.

"Ladies and gentleman, I believe I have the perfect solution to our problems." He shoved her forward, The Dugan kept pace.

"You gonna perform a weddin' ceremony, Padre?" A voice wheezed from the quieting mob.

"I have another union in mind, Mr. Henderson." Father Bean smiled down at her. "The Montagues and the Capulets have joined forces."

"Who's he talking about?" whispered a voice to her left.

"Shakespeare, you idiot. *Romeo and Juliet*."

"I know who *they* are, just don't know who Monty Cue and Caplet is."

Father Bean raised his hands, and silence once more cloaked the crowd.

"Nicholas Dugan has agreed to represent Holly in the investigation of the recent troubles. We all know the Dugans are good people, one of the founding families of our community. We are fortunate that he has spent the last three years as peace officer, as well."

"Now see here." Tut jostled her shoulder as he moved to stand in front of the priest. "We are not going to take the word of a Pine—er, person from Holly. It's their kind behind these pranks."

"You calling us liars, Pumpkin-eater?" A dark-haired man shoved to the front of the crowd.

"If the sanctimonious bull fits." Tut shoved out his chest and raised his fists to his waist.

Lonnie would bet the farm her old beau could take the newcomer—she slipped her hand through Honey's—but a little magic never hurt. Rumbling rolled through the crowd. More flesh appeared as sleeves were rolled up.

"People, people—settle down, please," Father Bean soothed. "No, Tutmoses, I don't expect you to take Nicholas at his word. That is why Avalon Lynch will be his partner. You don't have a problem with Lonnie, do you?"

"Uh, no." He blinked. "No problem with Lonnie."

Lonnie nodded. *She* had a problem with this little assignment. Scratch that. She had a *big* problem with being paired with The Dugan.

"Good. I expect both sides to give our investigators your full cooperation."

“But, Father, she—”

“She has just arrived back in town after a year’s absence, Nicholas,” the priest informed.

“Deer droppings.” The Dugan kicked the ground.

“Do I have the town representatives’ approval?”

Mutterings filled the air. Say no, Lonnie begged. Don’t let a Dugan into Pumpkin. Fear rumbled through the townsfolk. For the first time in her life, she wondered what the folks in Holly said about them. Were Pumpkin residents the equivalent of the Grinch or Scrooge? And how would they feel about one in *their* town?

“Good.” Father Bean clapped his hands. “Now that is settled, I think we should save our lovely picnic from the flies. God’s peace be with you.” He blessed them all before turning away and heading toward the heavily laden tables off to the side. “Honey, a word with you, please.”

Lonnie watched her cousin trail after the priest. What did he want with Honey? No way to find out unless she eavesdropped. Her feet turned her in the proper direction.

A hand stopped her from moving.

“*This* is your family emergency, Avalon?” Scorn dripped from Orren’s well-modulated voice. “A prankster? Don’t you have any lawmen to do this? I mean, you are hardly qualified to handle this sort of affair. For Christ’s sake, Avalon, what if word reached Phoenix. Do you have any idea how it would look?”

Lonnie swatted at a fly buzzing by her head. When had a cyclone sucked up her life in its destructive vortex? More importantly, how was she to make it stop?

“I’ll tell you how it would look.” Orren’s blunt fingers punched the air next to his head. “People will say—”



“Nicholas Dugan! What is the meaning of this?”

Nick resisted the urge to hide in the crowd. He was thirty-three, long past the age where he was accountable to his father. Except...

Except he would always be his father’s son.

"Have you lost your ever-loving mind?" Anger darkened Burl Dugan's already ruddy complexion. "Volunteering to go into that...that place"

Nick swallowed the denial. He hadn't exactly volunteered to go. And yet, he couldn't quite regret Father Bean's nomination. He, Nicholas Dugan, was to be the first adult resident of Holly to set foot in Pumpkin in almost a hundred years. Maybe he could even discover the truth behind the rift in the communities. He hitched up his pants. After he got to know the delectable Miss Lynch a little better.

"Now, Burl..." His mother skidded to his father's side.

"This is not a 'now Burl' moment, Mattie."

"I know, dear. I know," she soothed.

"Then you know why the boy can't go."

Nick ears twitched. They were going to try to talk him out of seduc—er, investigating.

"Well, I don't know," he said, "and since this 'boy' is thirty-three perhaps he'll go anyway."

"Nicholas, that is no way to speak to your father."

"Oh, so you two did notice me standing here?" He cleared his throat. He was a man, not a child being deprived of candy. "From the way you two carried on, I thought maybe I had accidentally activated my cloaking device."

"You'd be wishing for a lot more than an infernal cloaking device if you set foot in Pumpkin."

"Gee, Dad, I left my phaser cannons and quantum torpedoes in my other saddlebags."

"This is not the time for levity, son." Burl's hands wandered over his barrel chest. "Your rash actions could have consequences far beyond this generation. Solid sugar! What if the next bride doesn't survive?"

Nick scratched his head. "Bride? Survive?" Had he missed part of the conversation? "What are you talking about?"

"The curse, boy." His father wiggled his fingers inside his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. "The *curse*."

"Curse? What curse?"

"The reason why no one in Holly has set foot in Pumpkin for almost a century," Burl pronounced, handing Nick the piece of yellowed paper.

Brown letters marched across the torn and crumpled parchment.

A broken heart is not the only harm a Dugan
can do.

Love will raise an ill wind whenever souls mate,
With a spoken vow the only safe harbor.

A pentagram was stamped at the bottom. A witch's mark.
A witch's curse.

The hair rose on the back of his neck. Lonnie Lynch was a witch. Sweat stung his eyes. She'd also paid particular attention to a certain piece of his anatomy.

"Is something going to fall off?" He casually cupped his hands in front of his pants zipper.

"Fall off. Break. Explode." Burl shuddered. "The curse didn't specify what tragedy would befall the Dugan women."

Nick relaxed his guard. Women, not men. The curse would affect his niece and...

"Mom?"

"Sure. Well, your mother survived." His father paled and ran a finger between his collar and neck. "Barely."

"Egypt survived as well." Martha Dugan hugged her husband. "We had hoped that time had lessened the efficacy of the spell, but surely you understand why you can't go over there and stir things up again."

Nick stared at the paper. A curse on the women of his family. His resolve hardened. He had to protect his niece. She was just a child, an innocent and those...those witches had cursed her.

"This is the reason for the split between the towns."

"Of course, it is. Look, son, I know you're proud of your job, but you simply must not do this. Let someone else. Tell Father Bean you changed your mind."

"I could write you a note," his mother offered.

"Father Bean is not going to accept a note from my mother. This is my job, not a grade school assignment." Nick folded the paper with the curse and tucked it into his pocket.

“He’ll understand. Your grandfather filled him in on everything when he first came here.”

“He knows about this curse?”

“Of course he knows about the curse,” Burl chided. “What have we been talking about these last fifteen minutes?”

Nick slid his hand over his empty handcuff loop. Finding the Prankster would provide the perfect cover to find out who had cursed his family. As for his seduction of Lonnie...

“Do you know who cursed the women?”

“Not the women, son. One of those blasted witches cursed my Granddaddy Dugan. Turned every male offspring into a homicidal maniac every time we lust—er, meet our future mates. It’s like a force from beyond the grave takes over and tries to kill our intended using our bodies.”

“One of those witches?” His new partner was a witch. One of hundreds, if you included the entire female population of Pumpkin. He had to find a way to narrow the list. Motive. Motive tended to be quite specific.

“Pumpkin’s full of them.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why did they curse us?” Burl scratched his head and shrugged. “Why do elves make toys? Because it’s what they do. And witches curse people because it’s what they do. And they enjoy their job just as much as the elves. If not more.”

“So you see why you are going to march right over there to the good Father and tell him you’ve changed your mind.” His mother snuggled closer to his father. “You un-volunteer.”

Nick shook his head. He was going. His family needed him.

“I’m a peace officer. I need to go and find out who is responsible for these pranks. If they continue through Halloween our Christmas season is going to be a nightmare.” Warmth blazed up his arm.

“What is that?” His mother pointed to his arm.

Nick looked down. One shackle of his handcuffs circled his wrist. His warm wrist.

“What the heck!”

“Don’t worry, Nicholas.” Father Bean wiped the chicken crumbs from his mouth as he waddled over to them. “It’s just a

simple binding spell. You and Avalon will remain no more than twenty feet from each other at all times during your investigation."

"Twenty feet!" He couldn't go home. Neither could he do a little late-night snooping.

"Yes, well, it will allow for a little privacy, but as neither side is very trusting..." Father Bean shrugged apologetically. "I believe you two could end this feud business, once and for all."

"That's all very well you for to say," Burl Dugan growled. "It isn't your family tree threatened by the chainsaw."

"Why can't he stay in Holly and investigate?" Mattie wrung her fingers.

"Because the trouble is in Pumpkin." Father Bean offered her a gingersnap. "He'll be fine. The mayor has guaranteed his safety. Well, Nicholas, are you up for the challenge?"

"What about the witches?" Burl Dugan prodded. "It was a coven what did the dirty deed."

"I'm ready." Nick stared at the cuff one last time. Curses, witches, pranksters and Lonnie Lynch—autumn in Rim Country was never dull.

CHAPTER 2

Alone we are tempting prey. Let us walk
through this life's journey together.

Anonymous
August 25th 1918

"Looks like you should have put a bonding spell on your fiancé." Sarcasm laced The Dugan's voice.

"What do you know about bondage?" Lonnie swallowed her bite of chicken. *Bondage*. She had said *bondage*. She had *thought* of bondage, of binding *him*. Red scarves at his wrists and ankles with nothing in between but yards of flesh and her own imagination.

She stared at her plate—chicken bones, crumbs and a smear of potato salad. What was happening to her? Plain, frumpy Lonnie never, ever thought such things, and about a Dugan, no less. Then why...?

She sniffed her plate. Someone must have added an aphrodisiac to her food.

"Something wrong with your food?" His concern jerked her chin up with all the dexterity of a puppetmaster's fingers.

"Mayonnaise tends to go bad in this heat," she hedged, dumping her plate atop the flies buzzing around the open gar-

bage can. Was it just her or had he emphasized *bad*? She wiped her hands on her skirt. Her lunch burbled in her stomach. Maybe she should have resisted the banquet. Answering Orren's proposal was enough to give her indigestion. Add in the Dugan...

Focus, Lonnie. "What were you saying about bondage, er, bonding spells?"

His dimple winked at her before disappearing in his stern expression.

"I seem to be the victim of bondage." He held up his wrist. A handcuff dangled from it. Three silver links rested against his corded forearm.

"Why don't you use your key and undo them."

"I would, sugar, but I can't seem to find the keyhole."

"The—" Words stuck in her throat. Surely, she hadn't heard correctly. He couldn't have just said he'd lost the keyhole. He better have meant *key*.

"I'm sorry, Lonnie." Honey skidded to a stop; her numerous scarves pelted Lonnie's costume. She eyeballed The Dugan, backed up two steps and fidgeted in her purple boots. "Father Bean made me do it."

She poked Lonnie's arm. A silver bracelet hung from *her* wrist. Not bracelet—handcuff. A match to the one on The Dugan, linked by an invisible chain of magic to his. Moisture evaporated from her mouth.

"A binding spell." She swallowed. Maybe it wasn't that bad. The handcuff spun as she twirled her wrist. No keyhole. This was bad.

She had hoped to refuse Orren before he learned about her magical heritage, before anything he witnessed here could lend credence to the rumors in Phoenix and destroy her credibility as a researcher. She ignored the ominous moans welling within her. At least she was home. There were no fire- and pitchfork-wielding villagers to—

She shut out the memories.

"How far apart can we be?"

"Twenty feet. Seems you don't trust the law over there in Pumpkin."

“We don’t trust those from Holly.”

Twenty feet. Bitterness coated her tongue. The Dugan would witness her rejection of Orren’s proposal and his reaction. She glared at him. No doubt the man would not let her forget it, just as with that little slip about bondage.

“Everyone in Pumpkin has the utmost respect for the law, both nature’s and man’s.”

“Sure, sweetheart.” He winked.

Lonnie’s irritation melted. The man was flirting with her. Flirting, like she was free to do something about it. Suspicion hissed from the corner of her mind. Cinders and snakes, the man was a cad. For all he knew her fiancé hovered nearby. Wicked thoughts trounced her conscience. Orren wasn’t going to be her fiancé, and The Dugan needed to learn a lesson about flirting.

“Can you undo it?” Honey strangled Lonnie’s forearm. “I would except I promised not to.”

“I don’t know.” Lonnie eyed The Dugan from the corner of her eye. Very slowly, she moistened her dry lips.

His eyes had narrowed.

“I might actually decrease the distance. I mean, we could end up all over each other.”

The Dugan shifted, clasped his hands over his groin. Ha! Now it was his turn to be teased by unattainable ideas. She bit the inside of her mouth to keep from smiling.

“And after that, well, I might very well lose control and take advantage of the situation.”

Red bloomed in his cheeks. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

“What are you talking about, Lonnie?” Honey stomped her foot. “Just undo the spell before Father Bean demands you give him your word that you won’t.”

“Can one witch undo another’s spell?”

Irritation pricked Lonnie’s skin. How had he recovered so fast? Must be from experience. Her earlier erotic thoughts lingered like after-sex cigarette smoke above a rumpled bed. Guess there was something to be said for inexperience.

“Just what did you promise Father Bean?”

"I gave him my word I wouldn't undo the spell." Metal jangled as Honey glanced over her shoulder. "I never said anything about asking you to do it."

"Are you certain?"

The Dugan shuffled closer.

"What's the big deal? People break promises all the time."

"It's not the same for us." Lonnie turned to face him. Despite their magical heritage, the people of Holly and Pumpkin were very different.

"Burn the witches. Burn the witches." Flames twisted the fear and hate on the villagers faces. Patients who only hours before had been happy for medicine now demanded their blood, their lives...

Lonnie pinched the stench of gasoline from her nose. No one would think to burn someone for celebrating Christmas, even if magic helped reindeer to fly. She must remember that. She must remember who he represented, what his ancestor had done.

"Once we agree to something we are committed to it until the person who received our pledge releases us."

"What happens if you break a promise? You get a wart or something?" He tapped the end of her nose.

As she wiped off his touch, relief bubbled through her. Smooth skin, no wart. Not that she'd expected one. The Dugan's power lay in knowledge, not spells or curses. Except maybe the Christmas Carol Curse.

"Very funny."

"Warts," Honey snorted. "As if anyone feared warts as much as they feared a visit from the..." She slapped her hands over her mouth. Her eyes bulged in her head from the pressure of the swallowed word.

"The...?"

"The Dugan," Lonnie whispered. Shame rippled through her. Spiders and frog's lips, she had done nothing wrong. The legend was firmly rooted in fact. There were seven headstones in the Pumpkin graveyard to prove it.

"The Dugan?"

"That's the name of Pumpkin's boogeyman."

“You use my family name to frighten children?” His voice boomed across the lawn, smashing conversations and destroying appetites. Children stopped a game of tag and ran to their parents. En masse, the residents of Pumpkin shifted away from him.

“What did you expect?” She tossed her weight onto the balls of her feet. This was the Dugan of her nightmares—a bold slash of eyebrow, a slit instead of a mouth, quivering nostrils and a set-in-stone face. Meaty fists dangled from rigid arms. A quiver of fear shot through her. Her careless words had unleashed a creature steeped in rage and bent on destruction. She had to deflect his wrath.

A thin wail rose into the warm air. A mother cradled her baby close before scurrying toward the church. Others quickly followed. Misgiving filled Lonnie. If they were this frightened on neutral ground, how would they react once he was in Pumpkin proper? Father Bean should reconsider his plan, or at least his choice of investigator. The Dugan—

She halted mid-thought. Not *The* Dugan, exactly, just one of his descendants. Perhaps, if everyone saw she was unafraid of him, they would be, too. She hoped.

“Mr. Dugan?”

“Burnt Christmas cookies.”

A shudder rippled through him, then another. His fists loosened into curled fingers. He stared over her shoulder, his lips forming unspoken words. Lonnie blinked—not words, numbers. He was counting.

“Just give me an hour or so to calm down. It’s not every day you learn you’re the boogeyman incarnate.”

“Maybe a little distance would help.”

“Twenty feet isn’t far enough, sweetheart.”

“I was thinking away from the others.”

“Are you certain you wish to be alone with...” He swallowed hard. “...with me?”

She tucked her hand in his arm and tugged him toward the church gates. His footfalls thudded next to hers.

“I’ve lived outside of Pumpkin for more than a decade. I’ve learned there’s far worse than the...boogeyman.”

An artery ticked at his temple. *Nice going, Lonnie. You were supposed to distract the man. Distract as in the opposite of remind.*

"Would you like me to speak of something else?"

"Yeah." He swatted at a gold aspen leaf fluttering around his head. "That might be real helpful."

She nodded. Now all she had to do was find a nice safe topic. Ideas flew in her skull like bats in the night, indistinct and fleeting. Well, cracked cauldrons, what did she have in common with the man?

A toothy grin saved her.

"Look." She pointed to the skeleton sitting on the park bench. Crows perched on the tree limb overhead, eying the doughboy's helmet tilted on the shiny skull. "Old Reidon is sitting under Deadman's Tree. I wonder who put him back."

"Probably the same person who had a vested interest in messing with my crime scene."

"Your crime scene?"

"You said someone had taken him from his usual perch and put him up that tree." The Dugan shook off her arm and strode over. He shaded his eyes from the afternoon sun and peered into the branches. Emotion drained from his features. Impersonal, distant. Cop mode. "Of course, if you're willing to confess, then I imagine folks in Pumpkin will sleep a whole lot happier knowing their boogeyman is far away."

Lonnie tucked her hair behind her ears. Okay, sure. It was a shock to learn generations of townsfolk had been terrorized by the mere mention of his name, but the Dugans were hardly blameless in the whole affair. They were the ones who had told of the covens of witches along the Rim.

"I'm sure you've told similar things about the folks from Pumpkin. Admit it. I've seen the looks. Little Holly-ites are just as afraid of me."

He tugged a notebook and pad from his shirt pocket.

"It might be the outfit." His cobalt gaze roamed over her body before settling on her face. "Or the wart at the end of your nose."

"Very funny."

"When was the last time you had custody of Old Reidon?"

"Custody?" she snorted. "He is—or was—an adult."

"I'm trying to establish a time line. Someone had a motive for messing with the scene of the crime."

"Give me a break. Anyone could have done it. The whole of Pumpkin walked right through here to get to church." She was back to being a suspect.

"Exactly what I was thinking." He squatted; his blunt fingers walked over the brittle grass.

His answer simmered in her mind. Had he found something to give direction to his investigation? She inched closer. *Their* investigation. Brown-and-yellow grass dotted with the occasional bird dropping. Nothing suspicious there.

"So, when was the last time you had him?" He straightened and strode to the lowest tree limb to test its strength with his weight.

"At the buffet. Tut took him to get some pie, although Honey thought he should have some supper first. And I think Aunt Olivia had him for a bit." Lonnie shrugged. "He kind of got away from me after that."

"He seems to do that a lot for a dead guy." The Dugan ended his inspection of the tree limb and surveyed Old Reidon.

"Dead but not at peace." Lonnie sauntered to his side. Goose bumps raced over her arms. "He died under this tree, you know. Broke his neck falling off his horse, or so the story goes. We bring him back every year to watch over his farm."

"That's morbid."

"It's not morbid." She picked up the polished mahogany cane and set it across the boney knees. "Old Reidon was a war hero. Wounded twice in France during the Great War, he survived an influenza epidemic on the hospital ship bringing him back to the States."

"Where he was thrown from a horse and broke his neck."

"Most people die within a mile of their home." Sadness settled in her gut. The handsome war hero had been loved and respected, yet he had died alone on a foggy October night. It didn't make sense, she thought with a sigh, but then, death rarely did. "Are you ready to talk about it now?"

"Can one witch undo another witch's spell?"

She shrugged off the twinge of disappointment. So he had arrived at the same conclusion—their alliance wouldn't work. It was just as well. This attraction shimmering between them could only mean trouble.

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"But one witch can undo another's curse or spell, right?"

"It depends on how powerful one is in comparison to the other." Lonnie glanced at the solid circle of stainless steel. Not a fissure of weakness to be seen. "I've always been able to reverse Honey's spells—she's not very powerful. Then again, I haven't practiced in a while."

"So you can break it."

"No, she can't." Tut buttoned his suit jacket as he walked over to them. His dark-brown hair lay neatly against his head. Concern settled in the shallow wrinkles in the corner of his eyes. "This truce is fragile, and quite frankly, there are plenty of folks gunning for my head so, no, she can't break the binding spell. I'll have your word on this, Lonnie."

"Couldn't I just increase it to thirty or fifty feet?"

"No." Tut shook his head, "Absolutely not."

"But—"

"Lonnie." Firm hands settled on her shoulders, shook her gently. "Think of the children."

"Fine." She batted his hands away. "You have my word that I will not try—"

Tut cleared his throat and arched an eyebrow. The sun-warmed air filled her lungs. That was the problem with small towns. Everyone knew everyone else's tricks.

"That I will neither try to break nor break the binding spell."

The mayor nodded his approval. Great, now she was reduced to the role of juvenile by a man not only two weeks her junior but also one she had taught how to French kiss.

"Not that I planned to, anyway. I trust Father Bean's judgment."

"Not to mention he usually has a good reason." Tut fished in his pocket and pulled out a miniature coffin. Gold, silver

and copper keys tumbled out of the box, filling his palm with the colors of autumn. "Here are the keys to the town."

"Gee." Nicholas frowned. "I feel so welcome."

Tut dropped the lot into her hands. "There's the Haunted House key as well as some of the other attractions. It might help to have a professional eye look them over before the crowds start arriving in earnest."

"A professional?" Nicholas stuck his hands in his pocket and rocked back on his heels.

Lonnie poured the keys back into the coffin. He was angry again, not that she could blame him. Leave it to Tut to praise the man and insult him in one breath. Well, she refused to apologize for the mayor's bumbling. This adventure would be fraught with enough crow-eating possibilities of her very own making.

"Father Bean says you were with the county when that scandal broke."



Scandal. Nick donned his "I don't give a rip" mask. The scandal was bound to come up. They had to have known—the case had made national headlines. Still, the very mention of the events five years ago touched a nerve still throbbing in his abraded flesh. Three men had died. Three of his friends had rotted in an unmarked grave while a corrupt sheriff and his lackey deputies counted their millions.

Power was a dangerous thing, especially when it resided in the greedy hands of the unchallenged or the untouchable.

He looked at the handcuff on his wrist. An hour into his investigation, and he was shackled to another by magic. Magic he was powerless to fight. Father Bean had promised he wouldn't be harmed, and he trusted Father Bean. Except the old hippie had also insisted on the binding spell.

Expectation hung on the air. Nick sighed. They were waiting for a reaction—everyone wanted dirt on the scandal.

"Ancient history."

"When it affects those you know," Mayor Russell corrected, "it might as well have been yesterday."

Nick stared at the departing man's back. Was that a threat or a warning? What did it matter? He had more important things to do than puzzle through the mayor's enigmas. He also had a partner he didn't trust but wanted. He glanced at her breasts. One situation was so much easier to deal with than the other.

"You sure do make the men pant, sweetheart." Perhaps he should scratch his itch before the investigation intensified.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Her chin rose a notch. A lone black curl bounced against her forehead.

"You have a fiancé who drives all the way up from Phoenix to see you. The mayor practically drools in your presence, and you were flirting with me."

"I was not flirting with you." One chipped fingernail poked his chest. "*You were flirting with me.*"

Nick resisted the urge to smile. Her response meant she, too, had impure thoughts. At least his partner was not afraid of him. Kris Kring! They thought he was the boogeyman. Him, the peacemaker of the Dugan brood. He would have laughed if it had been funny.

On the positive side, though, she had already thought of him while she was in her bed. Now all he had to do was get there.

"I wasn't the one batting those big brown eyes at me, or patting my hair, and I certainly wasn't shoving breasts in my face." His gaze returned to her chest. Lush and perky. Maybe he shouldn't have complained about that part. Resting his head against those firm little pillows had been worth a bump on the head.

"I was attempting to discern the extent of your injuries."

"Afraid I'd sue for malpractice?"

"I'm not that kind of doctor," she sniffed.

Ice filled his veins. Not that kind of doctor.

"What other kind of doctor is there?"

She shook her head and tried to look at the back of her skull.

"Obviously, your head was the safest place Old Reidon could have landed. You already have brain damage."

Brain damage. The lady was quick with the comebacks, but she would answer his question.

“What kind of doctor?”

“I have a Ph. D. in botany, okay?” She grasped hunks of her hair and flattened them against her scalp. “Look this isn’t going to work.”

“Why not?” Nick rolled his shoulders. Time for the boogeyman to let her know where she and her friends stood. “Are you afraid I’ll discover one of Pumpkin’s elite is really the Prankster?”

“No.” She tsked. “It’s because we can’t seem to be together without making some snotty remark. And I would hate to hurt your feelings again.”

His feelings? He wasn’t the cook suffering from heat exhaustion. Not that she was going anywhere. Aside from this shared attraction, she was his one shot at breaking the curse on his family.

“Truce then.” He offered her his hand.

“Truce.”

The skin of her hand was smooth and soft in his. How would the rest of it feel sliding against his, lubricated by sweat and perfumed by desire? He would find out soon enough. Hopefully, when there was a bit more privacy.

Focus on the curse, Nick. At least until you’re somewhere twenty feet is a huge distance. Like a bedroom. Or a living room. Or a shower.

“What makes you think it’s someone from my town?”

“You grew up here. You know what the high school seniors do. Heaven’s angels, it’s almost like a rite of passage to to switch out jack-o-lanterns, change signs or swap Santas for scarecrows. That Haunted House business is different. Someone actually went into a building. I would have heard about it—no teen would resist bragging.”

Doubt hung on the corners of her mouth.

“Maybe it was an adult.”

“No adult sets foot in Pumpkin.” Conviction filled him. The Prankster was local and not from his town. “Deadman’s Farm is the boundary and has been since—”

“God, Avalon.”

Orren the Borin’ tiptoed across the dead grass. Nick stared at the tree branches. *One. Two.* What did she see in the fellow? *Three. Four.* He knew fine ladies less feminine than that guy.

“I know some people find these things quaint, but a picnic?” He swatted at a fly. “I was going to ask if it was catered but no cook in their right mind would make a wreath-shaped Jell-O mold. What could they have been thinking?”

A pansy with bad taste in fine dining. Someone must have hexed the witch if she thought this one was worth keeping. Good thing for her Nick Dugan was about to show her the error of her ways.

“I imagine my mother thought something cool and sweet would be welcome after the town meeting.”

“Yes, well.” Borin’ cleared his throat. “I hope you’re ready to leave now. I’m quite anxious to meet your parents, Avalon. And I’ve brushed up on my reading. You must have inherited your astounding botanical abilities from you talented mother. Did you know the number of papers that reference her works is well over ten thousand?”

Botanical abilities. Nick stepped backwards. The shadow of the dead oak fell over him. *All the better to spy on you with, my dear.*

Borin’ noticed the movement and drew Lonnie farther away. The increased distance jerked on Nick’s wrist, heated the metal cuff. So *that’s* what happened if they were separated.

“Orren.” Lonnie tossed Nick a warning glance and hid her handcuffed wrist behind her back. “My parents left for the airport this morning.”

Could it be that Orren the Borin’ didn’t know his fiancée was a witch?

“Oh, well, that’s good.” He smoothed his lapels. “It will give me time to finish reading some of her more, hmm, lengthy papers.”

Her brown eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“How many have you read?”

"No need to be jealous, love. Do you know, some researchers actually believe intelligence is inherited from the mother? It's nice to know our children will be brilliant."

"I doubt that's the only thing her children will inherit," Nick muttered.

"Are you still here, Sheriff?"

"This investigation has me on a short leash." Nick gave up his hiding place. This binding spell could quickly become a nuisance.

"I hope that doesn't preclude us from getting a little time together, Avalon. I was hoping to have a quiet dinner and formally propose. I mean, when I heard you were leaving and I thought I would never see you again..."

Borin' cleared his throat while his hands fumbled in his pockets. Deer droppings, the man was going to propose. Now. In front of the man who planned to bed his fiancée.

"I didn't want you to think that my proposal was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I've been considering it for some time, and I want to do it right." He tossed his handkerchief onto the ground and dropped to one knee. His fingers strangled a small black velvet-covered box.

Bile burned Nick's throat. If he had to listen to those two knocking the headboard against the walls, he'd chew off his hand.

"I hope you have thick walls in your house, sweetheart."

"I hardly think Avalon's walls are any of your business, Sheriff." Borin' rose to his feet, the velvet box tucked in his fist.

"I've invited him to stay with me."

Nick caught the look she tossed at him. Was it his imagination or did she actually seem relieved?

"What! God, Avalon. You are taking your civic obligations too much to heart."

Borin' latched onto his fiancée's arm and dragged her away from the tree. Nick followed, rubbing at the bracelet on his wrist. Not that he had any choice in the matter. At least no one could accuse him of eavesdropping—he was duty-bound to her side. He hid a grin behind his cough. Maybe he'd exag-

gerated the nuisance of the spell, especially since he could fulfill duty and curiosity concurrently.

"I'm certain no one expects you to shack up with him."

"I'm afraid there's no choice."

Halfway to the paved road, Lonnie jerked her arm free and stopped. Anger lit fires in her cheeks. Nick halted two yards away. Now she'd let Borin' have it. First, he'd lied about reading her mother's papers, then he'd fobbed her off with some lame excuse about heredity and now he'd tried to publicly propose. The sniveling lout was about to get a verbal kick in the balls. Nick popped a piece of cinnamon gum in his mouth. And he had a front-row seat.

"This is a big tourist time for Pumpkin," she said. "The hotel's always booked solid this time of year."

"Surely they'd make an exception for you, Avalon."

"I understand if you don't wish to stay at my grandmother's place, Orren. I mean, it has been closed up since she died almost forty years ago."

"I was talking about *him*." Borin' jerked his head in Nick's direction.

"Nicholas is staying with me."

Pleasure whipped through Nick. *With her*. He liked the sound of that. Maybe too much. She was still a witch, and a witch had cursed his family. A crow cried out behind him. The caw chilled his bones. A witch had powers he couldn't fight.

"Perhaps you underestimate your family's influence. Half the town is employed at your family's factory, aren't they?"

"How did you know about my family?"

Nick's tucked his doubts aside. The tone of the conversation had shifted, misting the atmosphere with tension and frost. Orren the Borin' was ignorant of Lonnie's abilities. A situation she undoubtedly worked hard to preserve.

"Naturally, we had to investigate the products you were testing at the clinic." Borin's gaze shifted farther down the road. Lonnie wasn't the only one with secrets. "Prior-Tea Clinic must maintain its reputation. As a researcher you know that credibility is everything. It is why you chose my family's clinic, isn't it?"

“Orren, he’s staying at the house.”

“I must protest. How would this look, Avalon? You’re a future Prior—”

“No, I’m not.” Eyes wide in her chalky face, Lonnie slapped her hands over her mouth. “I’m sorry, Orren. I really am, but I don’t think I could make you happy or...or be the wife you deserve.”

“Avalon—”

“I’d like to see the Haunted House before midnight, Lonnie,” Nick interrupted. Borin’ proposed, she refused—case closed. One case, anyway. They still had the Prankster to consider, his family curse and her seduction. He buttoned his half of the handcuff under his sleeve.

“All right. All right.” She glared at him, but her body jerked between the two men. “Geez. We’ll go now.”

“My car is this way.” Orren reached for her again. “We can talk in the car.” She dodged his touch but fell into step beside him.

“Uh, Lonnie.”

She ignored him and continued marching beside Borin’. No flipping way he was going to be led around on a leash. The bracelet jerked on Nick’s wrist. Dangling doorbells, his brother’s dog Pete didn’t tug this hard. He held his ground. She jerked to a stop and stared at her wrist.

“We’ll take my motorcycle.”

“Your motorcycle?” She glanced at the bracelet than him.

“I left my horse at home.”

“We’ll take my car.” Borin’ wedged himself between them and slowly pushed Lonnie backwards. “You can follow.”

Nick’s hand rose. He was going to look foolish in a minute

“Stop it. Stop it.” His partner shoved Borin’ out of the way and came to stand by Nick’s side. “Cinders and snakes, I am not a wishbone.”

“I can’t ride by his car. The road is too narrow.”

“Yes, fine. I’ll ride with you.”

“Avalon.”

“I’m riding with him, Orren. Follow if you want or don’t. The choice is yours.” She stomped toward the church.

Nick resisted the urge to gloat.

"I'm glad we got that settled."

She rounded on him, planting her index finger in the middle of his chest.

"Let's get this straight, buddy. My personal life is not your concern, got it?"

"Uh-huh."

"No. No uh-huhs. Say it."

"It."

She drove home her point with a soft jab. Dang, the woman needed to work on her sense of humor.

"Your personal life is not my concern. Okay?"

Her gaze raked him from head to toe.

"Okay."

Her personal life wasn't his concern. *Yet*. Once the curse was lifted, the Prankster caught and relations restored between their two towns then all that wonderful sex he planned to have with her might turn into something else.

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