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# *Pumpkin Eater*

*By Selena Kitt*

## *Chapter One*

“Two more days, pumpkin...”

They were stacking them close to the road and the hand-painted sign that read: “Punkins Here!” All these years and it was the same misspelled sign.

“We’ll have a full moon to work by, too.”

The childish anticipation on his face gave her hope. She might get a bath tonight.

“Cage!” His tone changed suddenly.

She clutched the collar around her throat and the jolt that went through her made her lose her footing on the old wagon they used to bring the pumpkins in from the patch. She stumbled, moving to catch herself, an exposed nail leaving a long gash in the tender flesh of her wrist.

The blood welled up on her arm, and she sat, still stunned, as the cruiser kicked up dust on the road heading toward them. There were no lights or sirens. It was probably just passing. The inclination to scream and wave her arms had been squashed out of her long ago and all she could think of was getting to the safety of her cage inside the house.

“Now!”

Another shock hit, and then another, his hand buried deep in his pocket while she scrambled to stand, the buzzing in her head and neck making her nearly blind with pain.

In her haste, clawing at the thick collar tucked under the high turtleneck she wore, her feet tangled in her long skirt and she went down again, sprawling

on the lawn behind a line of pumpkins. Her body jerked as he continued to hit the button in a panic, more like a man waiting impatiently for an elevator than someone with what amounted to a trigger in their hand wielding 10,000 volts at a pop.

Still, she didn't make a sound. The car was slowing and she heard the tires crunch to a the back row.

"Hide!" he hissed, giving her another small shock for good measure, and she scrabbled her way around the big wagon wheel to cower underneath in the shadows.

"Well, hullo there officer, what can I do you for?"

"Hey there." The cop eyed the pumpkins on the lawn, glancing over at the heavysset man who was shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun off the cruiser. "Noticed you had some nice big ones this year."

"Bigger the better," the man laughed, slapping his distended, overall-covered belly with one hand. "That's what my mama used to say."

"Hi, I'm Will." The officer extended his hand. "You are—?"

"Belcher." The heavy man reluctantly slipped his hand from his pocket to shake the cop's. "Call me Belch. Nice to meetcha."

"They really do seem to get bigger every year." Will nudged a pumpkin with his toe. "My son says he wants the biggest one I can find."

She crouched lower and hunkered back, watching the officer tip his hat and scratch his head as he studied the selection of pumpkins on the lawn. His large hands were careful as he hefted one of the orange globes to inspect it.

“You want big? Come on out to the back, then!” Belch jerked his head toward the house. “I’m fixin’ to break the world’s record soon—biggest pumpkin ever.”

“Yeah?” Will smiled, leaning one of the pumpkins to the side to look at its bottom. The sun glinted off his badge as he stood and she noted his thick, heavy belt, the holster and radio visible, one on each side. “Guess everyone wants their fifteen minutes, right?”

“World’s largest was fifteen hundred and two pounds. Some guy in Rhode Island broke the record just this year.” Belch watched the cop walking up the front row of pumpkins, his hand back in his pocket. When his eyes met hers for a moment as he glanced briefly towards the wagon, he noted she was still safely tucked away in the shadows. “Last year, my biggest was fourteen ten. I’m gettin’ there.”

“I don’t think that would fit in the trunk!” Will laughed and she liked the way his eyes crinkled at the corners. It reminded her, that expression, of some forgotten kindness in the world.

“No, sir.” Belch pointed to an enormous hollowed-out pumpkin on its side near the tree. “Can fit a coupla yow’ins in there at least. Kids who come, they like to get their pitcher taken in it.”

“Great gimmick.” Will smiled. “And now I know it definitely wouldn’t fit in the trunk! So how much for the big ones in the back row there?”

“Eight dollars.” Belch edged between the wagon wheel and the row of the largest pumpkins. “Ten for these here. These are the biggest I have left.”

“Well, they’re no half ton beauties, right?” Will winked, reaching back for his wallet. “But I guess my son will have to make do.”

“Sure ‘nuff.” Belch plucked the ten from the cop’s hand and took a step back. “Take your pick.”

Staring through the wooden spokes of the wagon wheel, she watched as the cop—*Will*—squatted down, tipping each pumpkin back to look at its face. Belch had given him a little more room, but lingered near the wagon, and she saw his hand working in his pocket and just knew he was fingering that little button.

“Gotta find one with a good stem,” Will murmured.

Belch nodded in agreement, rocking back on his heels. “Stem’s mighty important.”

From this angle, she could see the strong line of the man’s jaw, how crisp and clean his uniform shirt looked in the dappled sunlight. Reaching down, she touched the tattered black skirt she wore, the stained dark turtleneck, and shrank further beneath the wagon. The sound of tires on the dirt road made her jerk her head up as another cop car pulled in behind the first.

“Hey, Will!” A young man, younger than Will, leaned to call out his squad car window.

Will gave him a friendly wave. “Hey, Mike.”

“You still haven’t gotten a pumpkin, yet?”

“Howdy there, officer.” Belch’s face showed none of his inner turmoil, but she saw his hand working faster in his pocket, and she touched her throat, tensing and waiting for the collar to go off.

“This is Belch.” Will introduced him. “He’s trying to grow the world’s biggest pumpkin in his backyard.”

“Uh huh.” Mike looked the heavy-set man up and down and then dismissed him, turning his attention back to the older cop. “So, you got your son for Halloween then?”

Will sighed, standing and turning toward the car. “Just because it so happens to fall on my weekend. You don’t know my ex.”

She saw a cloud cross his face and her heart lurched in her chest. Everything in her protested at the thought of the man with the kind eyes in pain. Belch’s attention had shifted to the new cop, and while he was distracted, she reached her hand out for one of the pumpkins Will had been looking at, rolling it slowly under the wagon.

“You mean Bitchzilla?” Mike grinned.

“I had one of them once,” Belch snorted.

Will smirked. “I guess her reputation precedes her?”

In the dim light under the wagon, she rubbed her finger across the long wound on her wrist, the blood there tacky. Mixing it with her saliva, she worked fast to make the four-letter word on the shiny underside of the pumpkin.



“She’s something else,” Will was saying. “Halloween’s Friday. We’re gonna have to carve our pumpkin before we go trick-or-treating. Guess what he wanted to be?”

The question was directed at Belch, who shrugged and shook his head in response. Under the wagon, she blew gently on the pumpkin and then, satisfied, turned it over, placing it near the man’s leg. Belch rocked on his heels, looking back and forth between the two officers.

“A cop!” Will and Mike said it both and once, grinning. Belch just nodded and smiled, as if he were in on their joke.

“Well, I’m outta here.” Mike waved. “Happy hunting! See ya back at the station.”

Belch looked visibly relieved as the cruiser pulled away, leaving a cloud of dust hanging over the road in a dusty haze behind it.

“This is a good one.” Belch lifted a large pumpkin from the pile and held it out to Will.

“Little flat on one side,” Will noted with a shrug, turning back to the selection.

The officer squatted down where he stood, not two feet from where she was crouched. She held her breath as he tilted a pumpkin back and forth—the one she just had in her hands.

“This is a good one,” he decided, smoothing his hand over the ridged orange surface.

Belch rocked and fiddled. “Yep, sure is.”

The officer hefted it in his hands and she watched as he smiled down at the pumpkin's face. *He's thinking of his son.* His expression was soft, his eyes crinkled in the corners again.

"Well... hello there."

She froze, her hand going to her throat. Behind the cop, Belch's face was twisted into an expression caught between anger and terror. Will leaned in closer to peer at the girl under the wagon. Her dark hair was thick and long, covering a great deal of her face as she dipped her head, hiding her eyes.

"What's your name?"

She shrank further back under the wagon, seeing Belch tramping up behind the officer.

"She don't talk."

*I have a name.*

She struggled to remember it. Belch only ever called her "girl," and sometimes "girlie" when he was feeling magnanimous. It had been years since anyone had spoken her name out loud.

Elizabeth... *Beth. I was Beth.*

Will frowned, seeing how she cringed away when he reached a hand out toward her. He couldn't see her very well in the shade of the wagon, but her face and hands were filthy, her feet bare, and he thought her thick hair might actually be matted. She looked tiny to him, and he couldn't tell how old she might be.

He saw her staring at the pumpkin in his hands. "Do you like pumpkins? This is a nice one, isn't it?"

"She's simple," Belch explained, rocking and fiddling again.

Will's jaw tightened at the man's phrase. "Developmentally disabled?"

"Yeah," Belch agreed. "Not used to people much."

Will stood, looking at the big man with a frown. "I didn't know there was anyone else at this residence?"

"My niece," Belch lied, nodding his head. "She don't come out a lot."

"How old is she?" Will asked, glancing at his watch. It was ten o'clock on a Wednesday morning. She was young, or small boned—or emaciated? "Does she go to school?"

"Lordy, no!" Belch laughed. "Girlie turns twenty-five come November."

Beth (*I have a name*) turned her face up toward him. Was it true? Was she really so old?

Will frowned again, looking at the petite form huddled under the wagon. "Well... thank you for the pumpkin, Belch... Belcher... what was your last name again? Want to make sure I can look that world's record up in Guinness!"

The heavy man's lips pursed. "Buckland. Belcher Buckland."

"Good luck with that great big pumpkin!" Will juggled his own and Beth watched as he opened his cruiser door and set it beside him to ride shotgun.

"Fuckity fuck fuck," Belch whispered under his breath, still smiling and waving as the cop car pulled away.

She saw the officer glance back at her and she raised her hand, but she knew he couldn't possibly see her anymore in her hiding place. Sucking at her wound, the coppery taste of blood in her mouth, she waited for Belch's reaction.

It didn't surprise her at all when the collar went off, jolting her so hard she hit her head against the underside of the wagon. She didn't remember anything else after that.

## *Chapter Two*

"Will Walker, you are a million miles away today."

He started when the young waitress slid into the booth across from him with a coffee carafe in one hand and waving a check slip in the other. She slid the paper across the Formica surface, her eyes meeting his over what was left of his meatloaf sandwich.

"You know, I've asked you three times if you wanted any dessert." Propping her chin in her hand, she shook her head at him and smiled.

"I'm sorry, Carrie," he apologized, offering her a smile of his own. "Guess I'm just spinning yarns today."

"Halloween." She nodded knowingly. "Perfect day for that."

Will glanced over at the counter, looking for Dora, the woman whose name was etched on the glass of the front door, but didn't see her.

"Carrie, you know the old Buckland farm out on Cherry Hill Road?" He took a sip of his cooling coffee and grimaced.

"Sure." She tipped the carafe up and filled his cup when he set it down.

"Thanks." He searched the container of packets sitting on the table for Sweet'n'Low. "Why doesn't anyone carry the pink stuff?"

"Here." She craned behind her and grabbed another clear plastic dish full of packets. Will couldn't help noticing how nicely her uniform stretched over her figure as she twisted to reach, her blouse pulling out of the waistband of her skirt just slightly, showing a small expanse of flesh.

“Doc said I had to cut out the sweet stuff,” Will sighed, tearing open a pink packet. “They say Nutrasweet is the devil and this Splenda stuff hasn’t been out long enough to know anything—that leaves the pink stuff.”

“But all the mice died,” she said. “Isn’t that the deal with saccharine?”

He snorted. “You’d die, too, if they fed you the equivalent of three sacks of sugar a day.” Will tipped another cream in and watched the color change.

“So what is it you’re spinning yarns about?” Carrie nudged him under the table with her knee and he enjoyed the contact, giving her another smile.

“The Buckland place...” Will tested his coffee and found it satisfactory. “You know Belcher Buckland?”

Her eyes widened. “You mean old Peter-Peter-Pumpkin-Eater?”

Will raised an eyebrow. “Is that what they call him?”

She flushed. “Well, we did when we were kids. I think they still do.”

“How come?”

“He’s an odd duck,” she went on. “He’s been selling those pumpkins since I was a little girl. We used to go stand at the edge of his field and watch him, out in the dark with some miner’s hat on, digging for pumpkin seeds.”

He nodded, remembering the man’s mannerisms, the way he fiddled with something in his pocket the whole time Will was there. “Do you know if he has any family living out there with him?”

Carrie shrugged. “My mama said his wife up and left him. Not that I blame her. He never remarried, as far as I know. They never had any kids.”

Will took another sip of his coffee. “Thought so.”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” He shrugged. “Just curious.”

“Come on, Sheriff.” Carrie rolled her eyes again. “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“No?” He winked. “Hey, you wanna bring me a slice of Dora’s homemade pumpkin pie?”

She nudged him under the table again. “I thought you said Doc told you no more sweet stuff!”

“He did.” Will grinned, nudging her back this time and enjoying the surprised, pleased look on her face. “But it’s Halloween, doesn’t that count as a special occasion? Besides, I promised Jordy I wouldn’t steal any of his candy this year, so I better get my sweet fix now.”

Carrie stood, picking up the check. “You taking him out trick or treating tonight?”

“Not around here,” Will admitted with a sheepish smile.

“Oh, I don’t blame you,” she agreed. “We used to go into Richmond to trick-or-treat. The houses here are spaced so far apart, we could never get enough goodies.”

“Yeah, I’m taking him to my sister’s over in Fairview.”

She let out a low whistle. “That’s a hike!”

“Just an hour.” He shrugged. “His cousin, Brent, is about his age. They like to go out together.”

“With Dad tagging along?” She picked up the coffee carafe.

He winked. “At a respectable distance, of course.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “Pumpkin pie, then?”

“Please.” He nodded. “Thanks.”

By the time he was finished with his dessert, Carrie had disappeared into the back. He left her a hefty tip and paid the check.

Across the street at the station, Mike was on the phone with his girlfriend. Will knew the drill. *You hang up first. No, you.*

“Did you run him?” Will tapped his long fingers on the top of Mike’s computer. They’d just gone online two years ago.

Mike cupped his hand over the receiver. “It’s on your desk. He’s clean. No priors.”

Will sank into his chair and looked through the printout. Belcher Buckland had been born in that farm house on Cherry Hill Road fifty-four years ago and had never left Dukkerville. His mother and father were deceased. One record of a marriage to a Sarah Buckland, née Davis, but no record of a divorce. Mike was right—no prior arrests, nothing out of the ordinary.

“Come on, Katie, I’m working,” Mike whispered into the phone. “He’s right here!”

Will sighed, rubbing his fingers against his forehead. He was picking Jordy up from school at three, and he still had a ton of paperwork left to finish about a tractor vs. motorcycle accident last week.

“The school girl outfit, definitely.”



Will leaned back, glancing at Mike tipping back in his chair and shook his head with a smile. Halloween was going to be quite a night for his young deputy, if Katie McFee was going to wear a plaid skirt and knee socks.

“No siblings,” Will mumbled, sitting up suddenly and flipping back through the papers on his desk. Belch Buckland was an only child. “He couldn’t have a niece.”

Every time he closed his eyes, he could see her thin, pale face, the way her dark eyes followed him through the maze of pumpkins. So maybe his wife had siblings, he thought, sifting through the papers again. Spinning yarns, he decided, slapping the papers into his box. I’m just spinning yarns.

Still, he’d have Mike run her, just in case. He tented his fingers under his chin and stared out the window across the street at the diner, lost in thought, until it was time to go pick Jordy up from school.

## *Chapter Three*

*Elizabeth Foster.*

Beth whispered her own name to the tile walls while she scrubbed her hair as clean as she could with a bar of Ivory soap. She prolonged the bath as long as possible, her body weightless and floating in the water, and for the first time in years, she cared who she was. It didn't matter how dirty she was going to get later—right now, she felt impossibly clean and new.

"Come on, girlie!" He knocked impatiently at the door, his voice filled with anticipation.

Sighing, she stood, catching a glance of herself in the mirror, all brittle angles and sharp edges, as she reached for one of the stiff, faded towels. He dried them outside on the clothesline, and the water was so hard it made the terrycloth feel like sandpaper over her skin.

She touched her neck gently, sore from his zealousness and panic. She had waited all of yesterday with a knot in her belly, jumping at every announcement of tires on the gravel drive, listening for the sound of sirens. Cars came and went with last minute pumpkin buyers, but he hadn't returned. Whatever fleeting hope she'd had of being rescued had gone.

"Come on, girl!" He was pounding now. In spite of the old corrugated, aluminum pole barn roofing he had nailed over any possible escape route in the house, including the bathroom window, the closed door made him nervous.

Beth took the old, tattered house dress from the counter, lifting it to her nose for a moment to smell the faint trace of clean left in it after sitting in the

drawer for months. In spite of the slight mustiness, she felt positively new when she slipped it over her head, the material swirling around her emaciated frame.

Looking at her hazy reflection in the clouded mirror, she touched the faded, curling picture tucked in the corner, the woman in the photo wearing a similar dress, sitting at a picnic table with her chin resting in her hand. There was a twisted silver ring on her finger and her long dark hair fell like a waterfall around her pale face.

*That's not me.* The thought was exhilarating. She flipped the edge up with her thumb, reading the faded writing on the back, "Sarah—Briarwood." *I'm not Sarah.*

When she opened the door, he was standing there with her collar in his hands, waiting to snap it back on. She accepted it with a bent head, feeling the thick metal band click together and she waited while he fumbled with the lock. The house smelled like cooked meat and her stomach clenched, knowing none of it was for her. He had generously given her an extra helping of mush—Wheateena and scraps—for her daily meal that morning in a bowl on the floor.

"Almost dark," he said with gleeful anticipation, turning and going out into the kitchen, his hand moving absently in his overalls pocket.

She followed him, the smell of food making her dizzy with hunger. Searching the counter for any remains, she found nothing. The dishes were loaded into the dishwasher, and the table was spread with newspapers, one of his *Rouge Vif d'Estampes*, what laymen called the "Cinderella Pumpkin," opened on the table, its insides waiting to be removed.

“Help me.” He sank a large hand down into the red-orange fruit and extracting a large, ropy mass of seeds and pulp.

She obediently began sorting, her tiny fingers working both quickly and deftly, separating the slippery seeds from the soft, gelatinous muck. He continued to empty the pumpkin onto the table with his big hands, humming to himself.

The smell of the pumpkin made her stomach growl. She wanted to stuff a plump, juicy piece into her mouth, and her hands trembled with the effort she had to exert to stay them.

“Almost dark,” he said again, his voice tight with excitement. He peered out the small peephole he had left in the aluminum covering the kitchen window that looked out over the backyard and the pumpkin patch. “Next year, we’ll break the record, girlie.”

Beth sucked her fingers, licking the slightly bitter taste of the fruit off them while he was distracted, quickly going back to sorting when he turned her way again.

“I wish Grandpa Romani could see it.” He began his own slow, methodical sorting. Belch held a seed, watching it glisten in the light. “Pumpkin seeds are good medicine, he always said.”

The brief taste of pumpkin made her mouth water and she snuck another taste, a little more flesh this time, sucking it silently as she worked and listened to him ramble. “You know, the farmers wouldn’t go out into their fields on Halloween night,” he went on, his fingers spreading the slick seeds on the

newspaper. "Grandpa and the other gypsies would just go break open the pumpkins and take their seeds..."

She swallowed the pumpkin flesh, her stomach clamoring for more. He was lost in thought, telling himself a story, and she slipped a larger piece off the table with one hand while she sorted with the other, waiting for the opportunity to sneak it up toward her mouth.

"Good medicine," he nodded. "Gonna make the biggest pumpkin in the whole world."

She slipped the peach-colored flesh into her mouth. It was like a bittersweet balm and she sucked gratefully, but the hand that grabbed her wrist was strong and thick with gummy orange pulp as his eyes turned to meet hers.

"Hungry?" He squeezed her wrist so hard she could feel the bones grinding together. She swallowed quickly without chewing, dropping her eyes to the floor and bracing herself for her punishment.

"You know better than to steal food!" He sounded exasperated, starting to reach into his pocket and then looking down at his sticky hand with a sigh. He rubbed the gooey fluid between his fingers thoughtfully, lifting his face to hers.

"You like this?" He rubbed his fingers over her mouth, smearing her lips with viscid orange wetness. "You want some of that?"

She winced when his meaty fingers shoved their way past her teeth, wiggling against her tongue, but her stomach convulsed, asking for more.

"Here." He dipped his fingers deep into the flesh of the pumpkin and bringing his gooey hand back to her mouth. "Suck it off."

Eagerly, she sucked at his fingers like they were fat sausages, her tongue working between them, looking for every last bit of bittersweet pumpkin juice. He watched her, the look of disgust on his face changing as she licked at his palm and sucked his broad thumb deep into her mouth.

“You really like that, huh?” He reached to unfasten his overalls. She didn’t pay any attention as they dropped to the floor, clasping his hand in both of hers, her tongue working over the pads of each finger.

“Want some more?” He yanked on his shorts and let him pool at his feet. His belly was distended, almost pendulous, and hung down far enough to cover his genitals. He sat down in the chair, leaning back and reaching his hand around his paunch to grasp his hard cock with his sticky palm.

Beth’s mouth followed his fingers, still licking and sucking at them as he stroked up and down his shaft. He had to strain his neck to see her, looking around his fatty bulk to watch her tongue lapping at his flesh. When he moved to dip fingers deep into the pit of the pumpkin’s belly, her hungry eyes followed his hand from his cock to the pumpkin and back again.

“Suck it off.” He smeared his hard little shaft with the juicy insides and he groaned when she fastened her lips over the head, sucking the short, fat length of his cock deep into her mouth.

Beth was hungry, so very hungry, and she kneaded his doughy belly out of the way with her hands so she could snake her tongue further down to where sinewy bits of pumpkin meat were trapped in the dark thatch of hair between his

legs. She swallowed them eagerly, moving back up to the head of his cock where he was slathering himself with more pumpkin guts.

“Oh yeah!” He groaned as she began to work him furiously with her tongue, her hands leaving tacky prints on his thighs as she steadied herself.

Belch’s head went back, his face twisting with pleasure, and he sank his hand into the reddish head of the pumpkin on the table, his fingers squeezing through the pulpy flesh as her greedy mouth tried to swallow him whole. Seeds squirted through his meaty fingers as he squashed the goo in his fist.

“Biggest pumpkin in the world,” he whispered, thrusting up to meet her mouth. “Biggest fucking pumpkin ever...”

His motion was so furious now she struggled to keep herself steady. Shifting position, Beth jumped when her collar went off, sending a quick jolt of electricity buzzing through her head, and she moved back a little, startled. Belch just groaned at the sensation, his eyes still closed, working his cock in out of her orange-smeared lips.

Confused but unable to extract herself, she saw both of his hands in plain sight, one up under his shirt, tugging at one of the tiny brown nipples topping his teats, and the other wrapped around the base of his cock. With a dawning realization, Beth searched the space between her legs, finding the shorts and overalls pooled around his feet.

*It’s in his pocket.*

Without thinking, she found the small, rectangular box and slipped it into her housecoat as Belch worked himself deeper into her throat. His hand was

buried in the pumpkin shell, mashing the insides between his fingers over and over, the wet sound of it filling the room as he whispered to himself about giant pumpkins.

Trembling, her heart pounding, she worked him toward the finish, wanting time to digest what had happened and decide what she was going to do with the unexpected treasure in her pocket. Shoving his hand out of the way, she worked both fist and mouth up and down his shaft, latched on so tight her cheeks were hollow as she tried to suck him dry.

“Hungry little bitch,” he moaned. Beth had a moment to lament her clean hair as he grabbed it in his clammy fist, shoving her head down onto his shaft, her nose buried in the soft dough of his swinging belly as he fucked her throat. “Swallow it all!”

She had no intention of doing anything else, coming up for air before sinking back down one last time, the soft velvet heat of her throat urging his cum up from his sticky balls. He blasted her soft palate with his heat, waves of acrid white fluid coating her tongue, and she made hungry noises as she swallowed it all, licking her fingers and his softening cock until he shoved her away with a grunt.

“Damn,” he swore, panting as he glanced toward the window. “Dark already. Come on, girl, we have seeds to harvest.”

She stood, her legs still shaking, and wiped at her orange-slick mouth with the back of her hand. He didn’t bother cleaning off his genitals before he pulled up his overalls up and fastened them over his t-shirt.



“Heigh-ho.” He grabbed a miner’s hat off the table. “Let’s go.”

## *Chapter Four*

“Why can’t I go by myself?”

“I told you why.” Will sighed and pulled the pickup into his sister’s driveway, cutting the engine. There were trick-or-treaters out in force already and it wasn’t even quite dusk.

“Brent and I can go together,” Jordy went on, the whiny edge to his voice making Will cringe. “Aunt Donna said we could go by ourselves—if *you* said it was okay.”

“But I didn’t say it was okay.” Will grabbed the pumpkin sitting on the seat between them, watching as some kid dressed as Sponge-Bob waddled by with a ninja.

Glancing at his watch, he wondered if they were even going to have time for the pumpkin carving. “In fact, I clearly remember saying it was very much *not* okay.”

“But Dad—”

Will shut the driver’s side door, and balanced the pumpkin against his side with one hand. Jordy followed out the passenger side, still talking, all the way into the house, through the side door and into the kitchen.

“Hey, sis.” Will leaned in to kiss the top of her head where she was kneeling in front of her son, a needle and thread in her mouth.

“Hey, Uncle Will, I’m Captain Jack Sparrow!”

“I can see that.” He pursed his lips. “All you need is the mascara.”

"Will!" Donna admonished, threading the needle through the hem of her son's tunic. "Jordy, did you eat dinner? There's spaghetti on the stove."

"We stopped at McDonald's." Will set the pumpkin down on the kitchen table. "Put us a little behind."

"There, all done." She stood and adjusted her son's eye patch. "I guess you are running late, you didn't even have a chance to change out of your uniform?"

"You got any newspaper?" Will glanced into the living room. "I promised Jordy we'd carve this bad boy... and I wore my uniform because he asked me to."

"We match," Jordy said proudly, puffing his chest out and pointing to his shiny plastic badge.

Donna was digging through a blue bin in the corner. "Here's some newspaper. We carved ours days ago."

"Thanks." He began to spread it out on the table. "Jordy, you wanna do the guts?"

"Yeah!"

"Here." His sister handed him a strange-shaped serrated knife with a red plastic end.

Will frowned. "What's this?"

"A pumpkin knife," she said. "Kid-safe."

"Can I do it, Dad?"

"I don't know..."

"It's perfectly safe, Will." Donna spooned spaghetti sauce into a Tupperware container. "Brent did just fine with it."

The doorbell rang and they all heard a chorus of "Trick or Treat!"

"I'll get it." She headed toward the door. Brent followed, probably to snag some candy, Will thought, and smiled.

"I'm not a baby, anymore, Dad," Jordy insisted, holding his hand out for the knife. Will handed it over, taking a step back. "Thanks!"

Will watched his son with interest, letting him figure out where to insert the knife, how to manage the weight and size of the pumpkin as he worked it around the in the flesh. He thought to remind him to press it in on an angle, so the lid wouldn't just fall straight through, but then decided not to. He wanted to do it by himself.

"See!" Jordy looked up in triumph. "I told you I could—"

It's always the cockiness that gets you, Will thought, as the pumpkin slipped out of his son's grip and rolled across the table, the red top of the knife still stuck in.

"Got it!" Will caught the heavy fruit as it slipped off the edge. "You're doing great, Jordan."

"You should have seen that little butterfly." Donna came back into the kitchen, Brent following with a mouth full of Snickers. "What a doll!"

Will stood with the weight of the pumpkin in his hands, her voice receding, suddenly very far away.

*help*

The letters were rust-colored and smeary, spread on the shiny orange surface in a hurry, he imagined. He stared at the word and saw her thin, waxy face, her great big eyes staring at him from underneath the wagon.

“Dad?” Jordy sensed something—his voice had that concerned tone that kids of divorced parents seem to learn like most kids learn to walk.

“Donna, I have to go.” Will set the pumpkin on the table and turned to look at his sister’s puzzled face. “Can you take the boys out?”

“What?” She shook her head. “What about the trick or treaters? I—what do you mean, you have to go?”

“It’s important.” He looked over at his son. “Jordy, I want you to take a flashlight, and I want you both to be very careful.”

His son’s eyes lit up as he realized what this meant. “Thanks, Dad!”

Will closed his eyes for a moment as his son’s arms flew around his waist, his smooth cheek resting against his chest, and he hugged Jordy with one arm, taking his sister’s hand and squeezing it with the other.

“I have to go,” he insisted again, and she saw on his face that he did. His last words to Jordy as he went out the side door were, “Remember, son, be careful!”

## *Chapter Five*

“Heigh ho, the seeds’ll grow, big fat pumpkins in a row...” Belch sang with what couldn’t be called anything else but impish glee.

She watched his miner’s hat bobbing in the dark as he set up the screens in rows on the ground next to one of the giant pumpkins. Shivering in bare feet and house dress, Beth looked across the patch, the land stretching as far as she could see in either direction. The nearest farm could be gleaned only by a few faint squares of light in the distance.

The pumpkins reflected the moonlight, seeming to glow among the rows. Most of the smaller ones had been harvested weeks ago, but a dozen or more of the giants at the back of the patch spread impossibly fat and wide, their corpulent hulls like the broad backs of beached white whales.

“Here we go!” he roared, firing up the chainsaw, the sound cutting through the night, and she took a step back as the blades tore into the pumpkin, bits of flesh and gore landing wetly on the ground at her feet as he sawed through the stem-end. This pumpkin was lying on its side and the vines had been cut weeks ago in preparation for tonight, allowing the seeds to mature inside.

“This is our heavy-hitter!” Belch shut off the chainsaw and tossed it aside, grabbing the edge of the pumpkin lid and pulling hard. She could hear the thick, sinewy ropes of flesh inside tearing away as he worked the top of the pumpkin off and then rolled it aside, like a rock from a tomb.

“We had too many blowouts this year,” he panted, already tired from his effort, pointing to another elephantine giant less than ten feet away, its side split

open, seeds and pulp spilling out onto the ground. It had literally outgrown its own skin and exploded.

“In you go, girlie.” He handed her a shovel and waved her past.

She pulled her dress up past her knees, sinking to the soft ground and poking her head inside the pungent mammoth. Her own headlamp illuminated the strands of sinew hanging from the top like stalactites, but she was going after the rich mash of pulp and seeds pooled at the bottom of the pumpkin like liquid gold. Her knees sank into the fleshy mess as she made her way into the cavernous opening, the warmth inside always a surprise, like she was crawling into the belly of some beast.

“Ready,” he called as she maneuvered around, scooping the mass of seeds and goo out toward the opening with her short, fat shovel. Outside, Belch had positioned a big white tub and she scraped the bottom of the pumpkin as she went, urging everything toward the waiting container.

“Thatta girl,” he encouraged, fingering the seedy mass as she propelled it out of the opening. “Look at these beauties!”

The smell of the pumpkin was making her stomach growl again, and she licked her fingers as she worked, maddeningly surrounded on all sides by a source of food. Using her shovel, she scraped the roof of the pumpkin above her head, seeds raining down around her. Scooping them up, she shoveled them out into the tub, catching a whiff of night air, cool in her lungs after breathing in the thick, humid odor of pumpkin.

“We got ‘em!” Belch gave a satisfied sigh as she stuck her head back out, gasping for breath.

That’s when she slipped. Her hands on the pumpkin’s wet edge simply slid out from under her and went deep into the tub set at the opening. She tumbled headfirst into the seeds, taking the tub over as her momentum carried her onto the soft dirt, spilling the thick orange goo wetly over her torso as she sprawled, dazed, staring up at the moon.

“NOOOO!” He screamed, his miner’s light illuminating the white outpouring of seeds in the dirt.

She braced herself for the jolt, closing her eyes and waiting, and then she remembered, groping the pocket of the house dress.

*Gone.*

She sat up, her hands slipping in the thick mess around her, searching the ground with her light.

“You little—” He reached into his pocket, his face set like stone, and she watched as his expression changed to confusion and then dawning realization.

That’s when she saw it, nestled up next to the lip of the upended tub. And she saw he saw it, too.

“NOOOOO!” Her voice was thick and hoarse from being so long silent, and she lunged for the small rectangle on the ground, grasping it in her slippery fingers and rolling away from him as he belly-flopped toward her, arms outstretched.



He landed hard enough she could actually hear the wind being knocked out of him, his voice a reedy whisper as he swore. Beneath him, the prized seeds sunk deep into the dirt.

Then she was running.

The ground was soft under her feet, and she could hear him moving behind her already, bellowing. She threw her headlamp to the ground as she ran, cursing the full moon as her shadow played catch-up beside her. There was only one place to go.

“Get back here!”

She chanced a glance over her shoulder, seeing him standing with his legs planted wide, his fist raised in the air as if he were imagining her dangling from it. At least he wasn’t running toward her. She might have enough time.

Ducking behind one of the giant pumpkins, she switched to the back side of the row, her side aching already, and she wasn’t even halfway there.

“Elizabeth Foster,” she panted, resting her cheek on the huge, ribbed side of the pumpkin. “Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...”

“You can’t run from me!”

The sound of his voice, closer, got her moving again, but this time she stayed low, using the pumpkins’ mountainous bodies to hide her as she slipped from one to the next. Hers was the last one in the row, just four away now.

“Damnit!” Belch yelled, wheezing somewhere behind her. Too close.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she scrambled toward the next hulking bulge, but her bare foot caught on a vine and she tripped, landing square

on one of the smaller pumpkins, hearing a sickening crack and feeling it split open beneath her. *Rotten*. The putrid smell that rose around her made her gag and, panting, she rolled away and rested her cheek against the dirt, listening for him but hearing nothing.

Three pumpkins away now.

She scrambled, trying to get to her feet, her hand slipping on the smashed face of the pumpkin beside her, sliding through its thick insides, looking for purchase. The smell of the rank pumpkin rose around her and she fought the urge to vomit, grasping something thick at the bottom of the shell just to keep her balance.

Standing in the moonlight, she saw the thing in her hand, the twisted silver ring encircling one of the rotted fingers, the jagged edge of bone and decaying flesh, and almost screamed. *Sarah?* Instead, she let it fall, and ran, whispering her own name to the wind as she flew past each pumpkin mound until she found her own.

Rotten, that's what he said. Early on, they noticed the outside starting to crack with red veined lines, spreading thickly across the ridges. His biggest that year, his real contender, it was a thick, swollen, two thousand pound mass of betrayal. Stay away from that one, he said bitterly.

But she followed a spider inside that day—hungry, so hungry—and had discovered the hollowed out center of the universe, a momentary hiding spot, a place to whisper her secret hopes. This one was hers.

There was a small hole near the bottom of the massive fruit on each side and she wiggled her way in, curling herself into a ball against the soft insides that were impossibly smooth and clean. Tucked inside the hollowed-out hull, the sound of the outside world was muffled. She could smell the slow decay of the pumpkin around her, and on each side near the bottom was a circle of light where there was what amounted to a small, jagged door, made bigger with her hands. Her eyes moved from one to the other, waiting for him to appear.

In the distance, she heard the sound of the chainsaw and her heart leapt in her chest. She didn't know how she knew, but she knew—he was splitting them all open, spilling their flesh and guts into the moonlight. The sound of his screams rose over the ripping of the saw, growing closer.

“Elizabeth Foster.” She rocked in the darkness. “Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...”

Outside, the angry roar of the chainsaw drowned his words. Covering her head, she cowered, waiting.

“Where are you?” His panted words were muffled, the thunder of the chainsaw gone. “Don't leave me... don't leave me...”

Horrified, she heard him sobbing. She grasped the rectangle still clenched in her hand, her finger moving over the edge of the button, and touched her collar. At the low entrance, she could see a flash of light, his headlamp, in the darkness.

“Don't leave me!” he screamed. “Don't—”

The silence beat in her chest and then a light appeared at the opening, his round moon face shoved into the hole.

“Get out here, Sarah!” His face twisted as he struggled to press his way inside.

Huddling further back, she turned her face from him, her whole body trembling.

“What did you do to my pumpkin!?” he demanded. Then he was gone, and she was in darkness again. When the chainsaw started up once more, she screamed and covered her ears.

“Hells fucking bells!” Belch swore loudly as the saw sputtered and died in his hands. She heard him pulling the cord, but nothing happened.

When the light appeared again, she was rocking against the pumpkin’s shell, whispering, “Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...” over and over again.

“Get out here!” He wiggled against the pumpkin’s flesh, his shoulders slipping through the entrance.

She shook her head, still whispering, refusing to look at him as he squirmed bit by bit through the narrow hole.

“THAT’S NOT YOUR NAME!”

One of his arms freed, he reached for her. Howling, she pulled her bare foot, still slick with pumpkin juice, out of his hand. He was struggling hard now, his thick, soft middle catching on the hard edge of the pumpkin’s shell as he twisted and bellowed his way through.

She watched in terror as he used his arms to press himself up, arching and widening the hole as he went. The look of triumph on his face set her in motion and she dove to the other side of the pumpkin, headfirst out the small hole there. Even as thin as she was, this entrance was tight, and she had to squeeze through a bit at a time.

“NOOOOO!” His hands captured both of her calves as she freed her shoulders and arms and clawed through the dirt. His grip was like iron and she weighed nothing to him as he began to pull her back through the hole.

She kicked and screamed, her legs slick, making it hard for him to keep a good hold. They struggled together, inch by inch, as she made her way into the pumpkin patch in the moonlight.

Panting, exhausted, when she looked back over her shoulder and saw him, his head and shoulders were out of the hole, his miner’s hat gone, stuck inside the pumpkin, giving it a strange, eerie glow from inside.

“You’re not going anywhere.” His hands still gripped her ankles. “You’re never going anywhere again!”

A thick scream rose from her throat and she kicked back hard, her slippery flesh surprising him, blood spurting from his nose as her foot made contact across the bridge. He screamed, then, too, covering his face with his hands.

“You little bitch!” The muffled words reached her as she crouched among the vines, gasping for breath, and she saw the blood seeping through his hands.

“My name is Elizabeth Foster,” she whispered. “And I’m going home.”

She stood then, and ran.



## *Chapter Six*

After spending almost an hour in the truck on his way back, Will nearly ran her down in the road. She sat huddled in the middle of it, her wild eyes wide, rocking and whispering something over and over.

“Are you okay?” He unsnapped his holster guard before squatting down beside her. She flailed, and he grasped her arms, something thick and tacky on her skin. In the light of the truck’s headlights, he couldn’t tell if it was blood. She smelled ripe and pungent, like... *pumpkin pie*? “Are you hurt?”

“Elizabeth Foster, 472 Westdale Road...” She looked up at him, and he saw the dark eyes he remembered lost in the pale sliver of her face.

“Is that your name?” He put his arm around her. She didn’t resist, and sank against him as he helped her stand. “Do you remember me from the other day? I bought your pumpkin.”

“Will.” Her eyes lit up in recognition.

“That’s right,” he nodded. “I saw what you wrote.”

“Help,” she murmured. “The spider ate the pumpkin. I ate the spider.”

Will frowned, remembering what he said about her being “simple” as he led her toward his truck. “Where is the man you live with?”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” she wailed, slipping down and curling into a ball on the floor of the front seat as he shut the door.

“Did he hurt you?” Will got into the driver’s side and put the truck in gear, heading back up the road.

“Heigh-ho,” she whispered. “The seeds will grow.”

Will studied the girl in the dimness. "I'm going to take you back home."

"Home!?" She scrambled onto the seat as the truck rolled to a stop, seeing the farmhouse, the sign out front, *Punkins Here!* "This isn't my home!"

"Where is he?" Will searched the perimeter of the house with his eyes. "Is he in there? Did you run away?"

"It ate him." She shook her head.

Will sighed, reaching for his radio to call Mike and remembering he was in the truck, not the cruiser. *So much for backup.*

"Listen, I'm going to go in there—"

"No!" She clung to him, her hands sticky on his neck. "Please, no!"

"Where is he?" Will asked again. "You have to tell me."

"Out back," she whispered. "In the pumpkin patch."

"Alright," Will extracted her arms from around him. He looked at her and saw the panic in her eyes. "You're not going to listen to me if I tell you to wait here for me are you?"

She shook her head wildly.

Will sighed. "Okay. You stay with me, though. Alright? Right behind me. Can you do that?"

She nodded, staring at him with those wide, dark eyes.

"You promise?"

Again, a nod.

Will climbed out of the truck and she clambered after him, her thin frame pressed into his broad back.



“Well, you seem to be able to follow directions, anyway,” he murmured, feeling her hands gripping his belt from behind. “Maybe not quite so close?”

He could feel her trembling. “I won’t let anything hurt you.”

Her grip loosened slightly as they moved toward the house. Will drew his gun as well as his flashlight and crossed his wrists, academy style, as they edged around the corner. The girl was shaking against him, from cold or fear, he couldn’t tell which.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured, glancing back. “Talk to me. You’re okay, I promise. You’re going to be ok. Can you tell me who Belch is?”

“No one.” She followed his footsteps slowly forward. “Everyone. I wanted a pumpkin.”

“I don’t understand.” Will swept his flashlight over the house. It was dark. “Tell me what happened to you.”

“My daddy and me.... we used to come here...”

Will’s heart lurched in his chest. “To get pumpkins?”

She nodded against his back. “Wanted to surprise him... driving home for Halloween... just wanted a pumpkin...”

Her hands gripping his belt and her sob stopped him. “Daddy! Where’s my daddy?”

“It’s okay,” Will said with dawning horror, turning to put his arm around her shoulder. That’s when he saw the collar. “What is this?”

Looking up at him, she reached into the pocket of the housecoat and handed him what looked like a small remote control. “Yours. You keep.”

He stared at it, then at her. "Oh my god."

"Can I go home?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Yes." He swallowed past something thick in his throat. "Elizabeth, I'm going to take this off you."

His hands felt around the metal collar on her neck, finding the lock at the back. She held her hair out of the way as he looked at it with his flashlight.

"I need bolt cutters." His voice shook as he looked at the reddened, scarred skin showing underneath.

She dropped her hands to her side and Will turned the remote over, flipping the back open and knocking the nine volt battery out into his hand. He ripped the wires free and tried to give the remote back to her, but she refused.

"I doesn't work now," he explained, touching his finger to the button. "See?"

She winced, gripping her collar and collapsing against the side of the house as if she had been jolted. The surprise widened her eyes when she looked up at him. "Help?"

"It can't hurt you anymore..." He held his hand out and brought her to standing. "He can't hurt you anymore."

Slipping the remote into his pocket, he asked, "Where was the last place you saw him?"

"In." Her hands gripped his waist.

"In where?" Will frowned, edging around the corner of the house, his gun pointed straight ahead. He remembered telling Jordy to be careful. *It's always the*

*cockiness that get you.* He hesitated, shining his flashlight through the twisted row of vines with an occasional splash of orange.

“In the pumpkin.”

Will stopped as he finally took a step around the house, staring at a something blazing at the far edge of the field. “What is that?”

“The pumpkin.”

Will took off toward the light, the girl sticking close to his side as they ran through the rows toward the luminous glow. He stopped so short she ran into his back and he grabbed her arm as she stepped around him, pulling her away from the sight.

“What happened here?” He stood staring at the gigantic pumpkin, a light coming through its thinned skin, as if it were glowing from inside. Halfway out of what looked like a gory, bloodied mouth, Belch lay face-up, bisected and crushed under the pumpkin’s impossible weight, his arms thrown over his head, his dead eyes still wide with terror.

“The pumpkin.” She knelt in the dark soil and reached out to touch his plump, twitching hand. “It ate him.”

***Author’s Note:***

*There is a belief in gypsy folklore that includes pumpkins that can turn vampiric. Legends vary about the cause of such a phenomenon—perhaps the fruit was left outside during a full moon, or kept too long off the vine. One of the signs a pumpkin is about to “turn” is the appearance of “blood” on its skin (in*

*actuality, probably some sort of red creeping fungus.) While this superstition was believed in gypsy culture, most weren't too afraid of pumpkins—"because they don't have teeth."*

*Of course, back then, they didn't grow pumpkins of the giant variety that we see today...*

*In October 2008, Steve Connolly grew a pumpkin weighing 1,878 pounds and measuring 16 feet around, beating the Guinness world record of 1,689 pounds.*

*The End*

## ABOUT SELENA KITT



Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company ([www.excessica.com](http://www.excessica.com)) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her e-publishing credits include: [\*Rosie's Promise\*](#) published by Samhain and [\*Torrid Teasers #49\*](#) published by [Whiskey Creek Press](#) featuring two short stories, *French Lessons* and *I'll Be Your Superman* in 2008. Her stories and poems are in the following anthologies: [\*Coming Together: For The Cure\*](#), [\*Coming Together: Under Fire\*](#) and [\*Coming Together Volume 1\*](#) and [\*Volume 3\*](#). Two stories, [\*Sacred Spots\*](#) and [\*Happy Accident\*](#), have been published by [Phaze Publishing](#), and her novels [\*Christmas Stalking\*](#), [\*Blind Date\*](#), *The Surrender of Persephone* and *The Song of Orpheus* are coming soon. She has also been published online in [\*The Shadow Sacrament: a journal of sex and spirituality\*](#), [\*The Erotic Woman\*](#), and her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the [\*2006 Rauxa Prize\*](#), given annually to an erotic short story of "exceptional literary quality," out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read "blind" (without author's name available.) She can be reached on her website at [www.selenakitt.com](http://www.selenakitt.com).

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