

The Curse of Willow Lane



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Written by Linda Palmer

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Cover by Linda Palmer

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I really wished I had a hundred dollars for every stinking time my Dad made me, my Mom, and my two little brothers move. I'd have been able to buy myself that iPhone I'd been begging for, Adobe Photoshop software and a new sound system for my '65 Le Mans.

But the recession made things tough for every industry, so Dad followed the work, which in his case was music. Yeah, he was a musician--a song writing, guitar-strumming son of hippies who fell in love at Woodstock. Currently, he performed at the Corner Café downtown. As for my Mom, also talented, she taught piano, so managed to stay busy wherever we went. That meant I had to keep my little brothers, four-year-old twins named Thorne and Leif, out of the den in the afternoons. Thank God I adored them.

When we settled in North Carolina two months ago, Dad promised me I'd begin and finish my senior year there. So far, so good. I liked the school okay, and I'd made two close friends, Megan Winship and Laken Meers. I loved Megan because she had a little brother, too, and could totally relate to my pain. I loved Laken not only for his name--if he dropped that *n*, he could be another brother!--but also because he came out in eleventh grade and had enough self-confidence not to care what anyone thought about it.

Unfortunately, I'd also made an enemy at school, Portia Dixon. Portia was the type of airhead that judged people on their names or body build or sexual orientation. She also made fun of my ride, which was ancient in a cool sort of way that usually resulted in male interest. Come to think of it, maybe that's why Portia hated me so much. If me and my car were anywhere around, she didn't get the attention she craved.

Megan and I sometimes bummed around together at the city park on Saturday mornings so the little guys could play. Today we sat on a cushion of colorful autumn leaves, watching them murder

each other with Nerf bullets.

"Petal?"

"Hm?"

"Are you taking Thorne and Leif trick-or-treating tonight?"

I looked at her. "Of course. Why?"

"I thought you might want to crash Portia's masquerade party with me. She always throws one."

"Oh my God. Please tell me you did not just say that."

Megan blushed. "Can I help it if I get tired of not being invited? This year she's asked at least ninety percent of the school to come."

I laughed. "That's what...forty people?" Our town wasn't exactly large.

"Ha. Ha." Her words did not match her humorless tone. "Haven't you ever wanted to be popular?"

"No," I said, a big fat lie. At one time, I'd wanted exactly that. But what chance has a girl named Petal got? Especially if she enrolls in a new school every few months? My total lack of style didn't help, either. Give me ratty jeans and a Soundgarden tee, and I was happy as Pooh with a honey jar.

"Really?"

"No, but I got over that. You know you'd just leave feeling bad about yourself if you went."

"Not if I wore a costume with a mask. No one would even know I was there."

I dubiously eyed Megan's bright copper curls. *As if.* "So crash it."

"You'll go?"

"Nope. You're on your own."

She thought for a second. "What do you think they'd do if they figured out it was me?"

"Tar and feathers?"

"Very funny." Megan sighed.

"Forget that stupid party. You and Tim can trick-or-treat with the three of us." Megan's brother had a normal name. "It'll be fun."

"I'll go with you on one condition: you'll sit on the front porch of Willow Lane with me for one hour tonight, starting at midnight."

"The mansion that's for sale on the east side of town?"

"Yeah."

"And why would I agree to that?"

"Because I've wanted to do it forever. I guarantee there'll be some boys there. Maybe even Nate. It's, like, a very big deal if you can stick it out. We'd be senior class heroes." Megan had crushed on Nate since the seventh grade to the extent that if he walked into the same room, she hyperventilated. There was no way he couldn't know, but he never said anything to her, including "not in this lifetime," words that might've helped her snap out of it and move on.

"Is it haunted or something?" I couldn't believe I'd never heard this stuff before.

"Oh yeah." She switched to her creepiest voice. "A hundred years ago, the wife of the man who built it found out he was screwing around. She killed him and herself, but not before she cursed the house and future families who tried to be happy there."

"What kind of curse?"

"The oldest male living in the house mysteriously disappears."

I rolled my eyes.

"Seriously. It's happened again and again."

"Says who?"

"*The Morning Sun*. Cyndi Carson did a research paper on it last Halloween. She had the names of eleven men who'd vanished while living there. The last one was just four years ago. His name was Aaron or Adam or some other *A* word. The house has been empty since him."

What a crock. I don't know how I kept from laughing. "Sounds like fun. So it's trick-or-treating at six, we come to you, then Willow

Lane at midnight, I pick you up?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I ask Laken to join us for the midnight thing?"

"No."

"Good." I stood and brushed off my jeans. "Leif, Thorne! Time to go!"

Megan frowned. "What's your hurry?"

"Errands."

"Oh." She got up, too. "See ya later, then."

I nodded and gathered in the guys, who looked a little the worse for wear since they'd flopped down on the grass every time they were shot. I picked off the dead leaves clinging to their clothes and nudged them in the general direction of downtown, which lay a couple of blocks away.

We went to the pharmacy first and got a prescription for my diabetic Dad, then stopped at the dollar store to get each of my brothers a toy, bribes to keep them quiet while I did a little research on Willow Lane at the public library. Since I planned to major in journalism at college, this was good practice for later, when I worked for Fox News.

I liked the library, which smelled of old books and new shelves. Though small, the place was well stocked, thanks to some rich guy who'd remembered it in his will. I seated Leif and Thorne at a long wooden table in the Research section, gave them their Matchbox cars, and warned them to silence before I began looking through past issues of *The Morning Sun* on microfiche.

As it turned out, Cyndi hadn't made up her facts about Willow Lane. All those men really vanished, the last one being Aiden Grant, who wasn't a "man" at all, but a fourteen-year-old living in the house with his aunt. I found a photo and saw a cute guy with dark hair and eyes. I stared at it forever, strangely drawn in. I realized I felt bad for him. He looked like someone I'd hang with or maybe even date...if

he was older, of course.

That thought made me laugh out loud, and not because I knew no boy that hot would want me. I simply didn't trust this article or any of the others. For one thing, I didn't believe in the paranormal. For another, too many people had moved into the house knowing about the curse. At least I assumed they knew.

Maybe the realtor hadn't mentioned it. Or maybe they doubted the whole crazy story just as I did. A cheap price tag might also be an enticement. Who wouldn't want to buy a Victorian-type structure with nooks and crannies indoors, plus amazing flower gardens on the rolling lawn? I admit, I didn't know how bad things were inside, but beyond needing paint, a new roof, and a good weed killer, the place looked pretty awesome from outside.

While Leif and Thorne raced their cars on the varnished table, I tried to figure out what non-paranormal events could result in people going MIA. Maybe the town had a serial killer who took advantage of the folklore. Or maybe those guys wanted to go missing because of debt or something and simply used the house as a means to disappear.

I felt a tug on my tee. "Sissy?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to pee."

With a sigh, I abandoned my amateur investigation and walked both of my brothers to the men's restroom.

When they came back out, I zipped and snapped what needed to be zipped and snapped before tugging down their t-shirts.

"Can we go home now?" asked Leif with a pout that meant he'd had enough of being quiet at the library.

"Yeah, can we? I wanna watch SpongeBob."

I tousled Thorne's blonde hair, so different in color from Leif's and mine. My baby brothers were definitely not identical. "Okay."

I pocketed their cars and we left the library to walk to my Le

Mans, which I'd left at the park.

* * * *

The rest of the day, I worked on my brothers' costumes--no stupid store bought stuff for us. Parker tradition dictated we make our own.

Since Thorne wanted to be his favorite cartoon character, I fashioned him a square body from two pieces of the poster board I'd bought last weekend. I used a shoestring to connect the front to the back at the shoulders and sides, drew the pants and facial features with a black marker, and let him color everything.

Leif's choice, Harold of the purple crayon stories, required next to no work since he wore PJ's. I did put a fake flap in the back. I also made a Lilac, Harold's stuffed dog, from a couple of Dad's old socks.

The boys and I got to Megan's house around six. Tim looked adorable as a mini Spiderman. Knowing we had a couple of hours before dark, we set out on foot with the goal of hitting every house between hers and mine while we could still see to walk.

While the boys did their thing, Megan and I waited at the street and talked.

"Did you call Laken?"

"Yeah." I tossed Leif's purple crayon into the air and expertly caught it behind my back. "He's meeting us at Willow Lane at a quarter 'til."

"It'll be good to have him along. He's so sensible."

"Isn't he?" Laken had confided that he knew he was different at a very young age, but didn't figure out how until he crushed on a boy in the seventh grade. He told his parents how he felt; they sent him straight to a psychologist. Luckily, he got a good one, who gave him the courage to out himself. Not that he made a school announcement or anything. He simply told someone who couldn't

keep a secret. "Did he tell you he's going to San Francisco State University next year?"

"Yeah. I sure hope he finds someone there. He's got to be lonely."

I nodded agreement. Laken would never do anything to embarrass his family, which meant he kept to himself, romantically speaking.

"Look what I got!" Leif showed me his loot. "You can have the Butterfinger, if you want."

"Aw. That's so sweet." I kissed the top of his head.

Thorne peeked into Leif's bucket, too. "Where'd you get those Gobstoppers?"

Leif pointed at the house next door.

"I got bubble gum. Wanna trade?"

"We'll do that later," I said, firmly nudging them both toward the next stop. A safety check and massive candy swap always took place at the Parker house on Halloween. Negotiations were tricky and could last hours, which is why I planned on Mom supervising it this year.

* * *

As it turned out, we didn't get home until eight-thirty. Mom, who'd been handing out sweets for hours, looked a little frazzled, so I turned off the porch light for her.

"Dad's at the café?"

"Yes, until two a.m. A special Halloween performance."

With a nod, I headed to the kitchen to make myself a grilled cheese sandwich. I asked if anyone else wanted one, but the boys had consumed too much candy, and Mom had eaten cereal. While I nibbled on my supper, I petted our poodle and watched the Travel Channel, which featured a timely episode on haunted houses in the USA. Not thirty minutes into it, a photo of Willow Lane popped up on the screen. The narrator told the same story Megan

shared earlier, complete with photos of all the men who'd gone missing. When Aiden's likeness appeared, I hit the pause button, a luxury of digital cable, and studied his face forever. I could've sworn I felt a tug at my heartstrings, almost as if I'd fallen for a dead boy. Worse, I got teary eyed, which was so not me.

Did Laken feel this sad when he met a guy he could go for? Confused by my funky mood, I turned off the TV and went to Mom's keyboard, where I played every stupid, one-note song in the beginning piano book.

Finally, eleven-thirty rolled around. Since Mom and the boys had gone to bed an hour ago, I left the house as quietly as possible and drove by Megan's to pick her up. Not long after, I parked on the graveled drive of Willow Lane just outside the rusty iron fence. Three other cars and a pick-up truck were already there. We got out of the Le Mans.

"Should we wait on Laken or go on up?" I asked.

"Let's wait."

That suited me since one of the vehicles parked there belonged to Portia.

In minutes, the crunch of gravel announced our friend's arrival.

"You look very nice tonight," I said when Laken got out of his Honda. He wore jeans and a T-shirt that showed off his biceps, a byproduct of regular workouts at the gym.

Laken posed like a body builder. We laughed, and I impulsively hugged him.

"What's that for?" He sounded surprised, though he hugged me back.

Since I didn't want to admit I felt bad for him, I made up an answer. "Coming with us tonight. I'm not sure I'm up for it."

"You mean you believe that crap about the curse?"

"Not really, but you have to admit this place is pretty dang creepy."

"You got that right," said Megan, who might've been rethinking her big idea.

We all eyed the trees arching high above us, their limbs hopelessly tangled from years of neglect. It didn't help that the full moon had a dazzling orange-red cast to it. Wasn't that called *blood on the moon*? I shivered. Laken immediately began rubbing my arms through my denim jacket.

"You should've worn a heavier coat."

I nodded my agreement.

"This is so freakin' exciting." Megan now had her eyes on the prize. "Ready?"

Laken and I nodded.

Since someone else had cut the thick chain securing the gate, it opened easily enough, but with an eerie creak that sent another shiver up my spine. The three of us kept to the sidewalk, cracked and treacherous in the dark thanks to encroaching tree roots. It didn't help that several autumn's worth of leaves pretty much hid the way. The toe of my shoe caught once and would've sent me sprawling if my friends hadn't grabbed my arms.

At first, the night hid the other fools from view, but as we got closer, I made out faces. Portia, of course, and her lap dogs, James and Ethan, both burley football heroes. Cyndi of the research article and her long-time beau, Brendon. Ben and Malick, guys I had English with, but didn't know that much about. I didn't notice Nate until Megan softly gasped. Then I spotted him standing a few feet away in the shadows. I elbowed her so she wouldn't do anything else to humiliate herself.

"What are you doing here?" Portia looked pissed.

"Same thing you are," said Laken without missing a beat. "Does anyone know what, exactly, is supposed to happen at midnight?"

Cyndi laughed. "Well, it is the witching hour."

"So we're expecting a visit from Eugenia Willow?" asked

Brendon.

"Who the hell is that?" I could barely make out Malick's frown in the dark.

Cyndi explained. "The witch we have to thank for this, idiot."

"Oh, her."

"Anyone want a cold beer?" Ethan held up a six-pack.

I huffed my disgust. Did alcohol have to be the focus of everything? "Oh yeah. We all want to get arrested for underage drinking."

"Scared?" asked Portia, immediately peeling one of the beers from the plastic holder and popping the top.

"No, smart," I told her.

She took a long drink. "You can't be *that* smart. You're dating a fag."

I gasped.

"Cool it, Portia." Ben's words surprised everyone, Portia most of all. Or not. The glow of the full moon revealed that Laken looked as shocked as I'd ever seen him.

Of course, she wouldn't let it go. "My bad. It's Megan who's dating him, isn't it? Guess she finally gave up on you, Nate."

"Shut up," said Nate, stepping closer. He grabbed Portia's beer and poured it on the ground. "God, you're a bitch when you're drunk."

A quick glance at Megan confirmed what I expected: disbelief that the love of her life had come to her defense. Clearly, he did know she existed. As for Portia, I honestly feared she might attack Nate. Her eyes burned with fury, which told me the witch was already there, and her name wasn't Eugenia.

"Oh my God! Don't tell me you've finally let that puppy dog adoration go to your head. She's fat, Nate. Fat, with orange hair and Funyuns breath."

Megan instantly burst into sobs.

"Shut the fuck up." Nate now had his nose one inch from Portia's.

"James, Ethan...are you going to let him talk to me this way?"

"Nope," said James, moving closer. A jerk of his head put Ethan at his side. When Nate automatically squared off to face them, Laken stepped up to join him.

"This is so not going to happen." I squeezed myself between the four of them.

James gave me a hard shove out of the way. I actually had to jump to keep from falling down the front steps and then landed awkwardly on all fours on the ground.

From nowhere, a yowling black cat soared through the air, claws extended for the kill. James screamed like a little girl and fell backward over the porch rail, a drop of four feet or so, which luckily landed him on some shrubs. He thrashed around, trying to detach the cat from his face. *"Kill it! Kill it!"*

Ethan came to life and leapt off the porch, but kept his distance from the crazed cat until James squealed again. Quick as a hiccup, Ethan grabbed the animal's tail and pulled hard. The cat released James, who rolled off the greenery, whimpering.

Holding the struggling cat at arm's length by its tail, Ethan began to spin in place really fast. The poor animal helplessly splayed its arms and legs as it hissed, fur standing on end. I screamed my horror and lunged at Ethan just as he released it. The cat flew through the air and landed with a thud somewhere in the dark. Ethan fell back, taking me with him. We landed in an awkward sprawl with my body on top of his. Before I could scramble off, he rolled us over. His weight pinned me to the earth, his lips covered mine, and his hand groped my left boob.

Ewww.

I didn't dare scream for fear he'd stick his tongue down my throat, and all my attempts to kick him where it hurt fell short.

Roaring his fury, Laken dove off the porch. I didn't realize that Ben was right behind him until they lifted Ethan by his clothing and dumped him a few feet to my right. I jumped up, hastily wiping his slobber off my face.

Laken pulled me into his arms. "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Then let's get out of here. I've had enough of this shit. Megan...?" He looked toward the porch, clearly intending to round her up. Naturally, I glanced that way, too, and saw Nate tenderly wiping tears off Megan's face with the hem of his tee. Laken and I exchanged shocked glances.

"Maybe we could hang around a few more minutes." I kept my voice low.

Lane thought for a second. "Or maybe we could go to the Waffle House. It's the only place around here that's still open. Want to join us, Nate?"

"Sure." He looked down at Megan. "If you don't mind, that is."

She shook her head so quickly that she had to be dizzy.

"Can I come, too?"

Laken looked at Ben and opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

"Of course," I answered for him.

"You kissed her!"

We all turned at the sound of Portia's outraged screech and found her kicking Ethan, who rolled to avoid the jabs of her pointy-toed boot.

He leapt to his feet, rubbing his side. "Well, yeah. She's hot."

"Give me a break." Portia stomped his shoe and stalked over to James, who'd taken off his shirt and now dabbed the cat scratches on his face and neck. "We're outta here."

"But..."

"Now."

James and Ethan followed Portia to her car with their tails tucked between their legs. A second later, an engine roared to life. Portia sprayed gravel as she drove away.

"Are you guys really leaving?" asked Brendon.

My gaze swept everyone to be sure. I got nods all around. "Yes. Come with us...?"

"I have a better idea," said Cyndi. "Let's go to the Corner Café. They're open late tonight, and their live music is kick awesome."

I could only agree, but still checked my group before answering. "Sounds like a plan."

"Good. We'll see you in a few." Cyndi and Brendon left us.

"Ride with me?" asked Nate, looking at Megan.

Somehow, she found her voice. "Yes, thank you."

With a wave, they left us, too.

Laken looked at me. "Ready?"

"Not until I find that cat. It's probably hurt, and you know I'm a softy when it comes to animals."

"She got that from her Dad," Laken told Ben with a laugh. "He's a card carrying member of PETA with a heart the size of Texas. They have three Labs, a poodle, and a basset, all rescued from the pound, not to mention various little critters: two guinea pigs, a parrot, some tropical fish...."

"I have a Siamese." Ben grinned. "So I can tell you for sure that cats always land on their feet. This one probably ran off as soon as it hit the ground."

Laken nodded. "And they have nine lives, which means it has eight to go."

"What if this life was the last? I won't sleep tonight if I'm not sure it's okay. Besides...the Parker house could use a cat to round out our menagerie."

"Fine, then. But we'd better be careful. It might have rabies or something."

The three of us spread out and set off to explore the shadowy lawn of Willow Lane.

"Here, kitty kitty kitty," I called as I carefully set one foot in front of the other. I couldn't see squat and didn't want to step in a hole or trip over another root.

Ten minutes later, no one had seen anything.

"Ready to give it up?" called Laken from fifty yards away.

"Five more minutes," I yelled back. "Please, kitty. I want to help. Where *are* you?"

A soft mew stopped me in my tracks.

"Kitty?"

Another meow sent me flying through the leaves. I found the poor thing huddled against a towering oak tree, its green eyes oddly opalescent in the dark.

"Oh no!" Gently, I ran my fingers over silky black fur to check for injuries. Everything seemed okay.

"Be careful," said Ben, walking up. "He's probably scared and might attack."

Laken joined us. "Yeah. Watch those claws."

"What are you talking about? He defended me tonight." I scooped up the cat and hugged it hard. "Thanks for attacking James. You're my hero, and I love, love, *love* you." I placed a big, noisy kiss right between its eyes.

Suddenly the cat began to glow. It leapt from my arms as I sprang back with a yelp of surprise. Before us, the animal changed shape, elongating until it took on decidedly human characteristics soon hidden by a blinding radiance that forced us to duck and protect our eyes. When the light finally went out, I lowered my hands just enough to see a familiar looking, very naked teenage boy lying on the ground where a cat had been.

Holy freakin' crap!

"Aiden? Aiden Grant?"

"*You know him?*" the guys asked, their eyes wide with fear and confusion.

"I think I might." I dropped to one knee for a closer look at his face. "Oh my God. It *is* you. You didn't go missing at all. You were turned into a cat!"

"Yeah." He sat up and examined his arms and then legs, an action that resulted in him hastily scooping up leaves to hide his privates. "Sorry about that."

"No worries. I've seen one before." My thoughtless, humiliating blurt made Ben and Laken hoot with laughter. I hastily changed the subject. "Have you been hanging around this house the whole time?"

Aiden nodded.

"Are there other cats here? Old ones?" Maybe all the missing guys could be saved.

"None that I've seen. Where's my Aunt Lucy?"

"No idea. Do, er, did you have parents? Siblings?"

"No, just Lucy." Aiden looked at the guys. "I don't suppose either of you have any clothes you could spare."

"I actually have workout stuff in my car. I'll be right back." Laken pivoted and jogged toward the drive.

Ben shook his head. "So you're a real live shape shifter. That's fucked up, dude."

"You're telling me?"

"And the whole curse thing was real." I couldn't get my head around it, either.

"Yeah, but it's all over now, thanks to you."

By then Laken was back. He handed Aiden the clothes. I turned around so the poor guy could put them on.

"I'm decent," he told me seconds later.

I found him on his feet, fully dressed. My immediate, sweeping glance told me he was way past decent and well into just my type. I

didn't realize my expression gave away the state of my excitement until Laken and Ben lost it again. I punched Laken's arm so he'd chill.

"My bad," he said, sheepishly adding, "What now?"

Ben shrugged. "The police?"

"They'll never believe us." I tried to think. Wasn't easy with Aiden right in front of me. "How old are you?"

"What's the date?"

Laken told him.

"Then I'm eighteen."

"Hm. Let's go talk to my Dad. He'll know what to do."

Laken exchanged a telling look with Ben. "Petal, why don't you two follow me to my house so we can get the guy some real clothes first?"

I liked the sound of that.

Laken gave me a quick hug and whispered, "Will you be all right with him?"

"Absolutely," I said, for some reason not a bit afraid to be alone with this boy-turned cat-turned boy.

We walked to the vehicles. Ben and Laken got into his car. Aiden and I got into mine.

"You wouldn't rather ride with your boyfriend?"

"Huh?"

"That guy with the gym clothes. He's not your date?"

"No, he's just a friend."

"But you hugged. More than once."

He'd seen that? "He's. Just. A. Friend. Believe me."

"I do."

We drove in silence for a couple of blocks before I asked, "Have you been turning back into a boy every midnight on Halloween?"

"No."

"Then what happened tonight?"

"True love's kiss, I guess."

"What?"

"True love's kiss. That's what the witch said would end the curse."

"You mean you saw her?"

"Yeah." He sort of shivered. "She appeared in my bedroom the first night we moved in. Told me she was going to rid the world of one more man who couldn't be trusted."

"But you were only fourteen."

"Yeah, and she didn't give a shit."

Just as I drove down Main Street, his words really sank in. "True love's kiss?"

"That's right."

"Made next to impossible because the guys in question had been turned into cats." I looked at him. He looked at me. "But I just met you, and we've certainly never kissed."

"I know." He seemed as puzzled as I did.

"Not that I couldn't fall for you. I mean I totally could. You've got the most amazing eyes, and I..." With a gasp, I slapped my hand over my mouth. "Whoa! I just remembered something."

"What?"

"I did kiss you."

He arched an eyebrow. "When?"

"When I picked you up."

"Oh yeah. Right here." He pointed to the top of his nose. "And you also said you loved me."

"I did?"

"Times three. So do you?"

Gulp. "Well, it might be a little soon for that, but I could get there, as in give me a nanosecond."

He laughed. "I know exactly how you feel."

Bigger gulp. "Really?"

"Really."

I slowed down the car, pulled into a parking space, and killed the engine.

"Your un-boyfriend lives at the courthouse?"

"No. I don't want to wreck my Le Mans while I'm kissing you again."

His smile dazzled me more than that amazing full moon.

And our glorious second kiss...?

The jumpstart to true love as perfect as a curse on Halloween.