
Chapter 1

Autumn Pumpkin drummed her fingers on the café table and glanced out the window. On the sidewalk outside, various people, most of them elderly, hurried from casino to casino, laughing and joking.

“They have money to lose,” she whispered to herself. “I don’t.”

She glanced at her watch. The man she was supposed to meet was due any moment. She hoped he showed up on time, and was willing to pay for what she had in her purse.

“Please, please, let this go right,” she said.

“Did you say something?” the waitress asked. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, thanks,” Autumn said.

“You’re not here to gamble, are you?” the waitress asked. “We’re so far off the beaten track that most people don’t come here for any reason except to hit the casinos.”

Autumn took a sip from her tea and said, “Seems to me there are a lot of people out there. And it’s a Wednesday. I imagine it’s really busy on the weekend.”

“The casino owners run buses from Vegas, bringing people

here for the afternoon to lose their money and then take them back.” The waitress shrugged. “The Vegas people don’t like it that we’re basically stealing their customers, but the Hollis Creek people think there is plenty go around.”

Autumn nodded. “What other reasons do people come to Hollis Creek?”

“Reasons? Just to gamble.” The woman shrugged. “We used to be quite the little tourist town, with people coming to visit the abandoned mines and shop for trinkets. Then they bought out the old Victorian houses and turned them into casinos, and it drove out all the tourist shops. My folks had one on Lead Street. They sold rock candy and key chains, t-shirts, you name it, they had it. They ran tours out to the old abandon mines. Now, all people think about are the one-armed bandits.”

“I’m sorry,” Autumn said. She wanted to ask about Shawn Hollis, the man she was supposed to meet, but she was afraid being so blunt would raise questions. So, she decided to try a different tack. “I’m sure there are lots of dude ranches in this area. I mean it’s very rugged, and people like to think they’re living in the Old West.”

The waitress narrowed her eyes and said, “Are you one of them?”

“Them?” Autumn asked.

“Are you waiting for someone from the Silver Creek Resort?” The older woman spat the words out as if they were poison.

There was no sense in lying to the woman. “I am,” Autumn said. She wanted to add that it wasn’t for the reasons the woman was picturing, but she decided to keep her mouth closed.

“Then you can wait in silence.” The formerly amiable waitress turned her back, right before she slapped her towel against the counter, as if she were swatting a fly.

Autumn looked away. Well, she hoped the woman’s reaction didn’t bode well for Autumn’s upcoming meeting. The man had been nice enough in emails, and over the phone. Of course,

maybe the townspeople didn't take too well to a BDSM facility being near their gambling houses.

Frankly, Autumn had been surprised when her research had led her to the Silver Creek Resort, which catered to ladies and gentlemen who enjoyed domination and submission. You expect things like that in larger cities, but not in places like Hollis Creek.

While she'd been trolling the web, she'd wondered how the local residents felt about the resort. Now, the waitress' words answered that question. But Autumn wasn't here to taste someone's whip. She had other business to discuss with Shawn Hollis. She patted her purse and prayed he would hurry up. The air in the café had grown distinctly chilly.

He was due at three, so she had just ten minutes to wait. Seconds after that thought crossed her mind the door opened, and a man strode in; he was tall, with muscular shoulders and a large chest. He wore jeans, a wide western belt and a black t-shirt that hugged his muscles. When he took off his hat she noticed his cropped black hair.

He looked around, and then moved toward her. He sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"I have to ask, is your name really Autumn Pumpkin, or is this just one big joke?"

Autumn sighed heavily. She was used to this question. Most people received her automatic, "Do you really think I'd make up such a name?" answer. But she wanted to do business with this man, which meant she needed to be nice. She reached into her purse and pulled out her wallet.

"My license," she said.

He took it from her and examined it. "Autumn Leigh Pumpkin," he read. "Do you have a sister named Winter? Or Spring? Or Summer?"

"I'm an only child," Autumn said. She didn't smile. This was a long-standing joke to people. She no longer found it funny.

"I'm not here to discuss my family. You know what I want to talk about."

"Yeah, I do." He looked around. Autumn followed his gaze, and noticed the waitress had not turned to greet him. "I don't suppose I can get a glass of iced tea, Sally."

The waitress ignored him, and he stood. Autumn watched as he threw a ten-dollar bill on the table. "We'll find a place better suited for our conversation."

Autumn followed him out of the café. "I should have known better than to suggest the café. I apologize for the scene."

"The waitress doesn't care for your business."

From this distance she could see his eyes were a light green, mixed with a little bit of brown. "We don't force people into the lifestyle at Silver Creek. They come there of their own accord. Sally's sister is there, and Sally hates us all for it."

"Oh." Autumn wasn't sure what else to say.

"She's married to one of our employees, so it's not like she's been kidnapped," Shawn said. "Now, we can go to one of the casinos. They all have little restaurants, but it's hard to hear there, and I'd rather not have our conversation be overheard. Or we can go to the park down the street, where we face the same trouble, or we can take a ride in my truck. Your choice."

Autumn wasn't sure getting into a car with a strange man was a good idea, and she could tell her expression betrayed her concerns by the smile that appeared on his face.

"Let's hope the park's not busy." He indicated they should walk toward the north.

Some of the ladies they passed took a good, long look at the man who walked next to her. Autumn couldn't blame them. He was definitely one that attracted attention. She could see how a female could give herself up to him.

There was unused playground equipment at the park, along with a few picnic benches, which were also empty. Shawn guided

her to the one farthest from the front of the park and sat. He indicated she should take the spot opposite him.

“Hit me with it,” he said when she was seated.

Autumn cleared her throat. “As my email said, I believe there is bank robbery money buried on your land and I’m willing to sell you the map.” She paused. “For fifty-thousand dollars.”

He stared at her, his expression static. But then he smiled.

“Bank robbery money? You’re sticking with that story?” He laughed. “I checked after you contacted me the first time. There isn’t even a legend about a bank being robbed around here. Nice try.”

“Then why did you agree to see me?” Autumn fought back her anger.

“Lots of ladies who want to come to Silver Creek are nervous about it. I thought that was the case here,” he said. He turned so that his back was against the picnic table. “If you wanted to come visit the ranch, all you had to do was ask. We welcome lovely submissive ladies like yourself.”

“I’m not a sub, and I’m not lying,” she said. Now, she wished she’d given him more information in the email, or on the phone. “The bank was robbed in Denver and the nefarious partners had a falling out.”

She reached into her purse and took out an envelope. “Here, read this.” She offered it to him, but at the last minute she pulled it back.

“What’s wrong, afraid I’ll figure out it’s a forgery?” He leaned toward her. “I can spank you for that. A nice, hard spanking that will put pretty stripes on your bottom.”

“Um, um...” Autumn wasn’t sure what else to say. She hadn’t expected that sort of reaction from him.

“It’s not a forgery,” she finally managed to say. “I told you, I came across it when I purchased a storage unit after the renter had stopped paying his rent. There was only one box inside, and this letter was in there.”

It still stuck in her craw when she thought about the storage unit. She'd paid seven hundred dollars for one box. Brent Mach, the fool she often fought against in auctions, had laughed at her when she'd opened the door. She hadn't opened the box until she was home, and now she was happy that she hadn't tossed it, as she'd originally thought when she'd realized she spent seven hundred dollars on a lousy box.

Inside she'd found the letter, and a few fiction books that had been first editions. She'd sold those to a book dealer that was near her cousin's store and made a whopping total of forty-two dollars, since they were not in that good of shape.

But then, after she'd gotten over the fact she'd lost roughly six hundred and fifty dollars, she'd opened the letter. She'd read it once. And she'd read it again. And again. And then she'd done some research.

And suddenly her box hadn't seemed like such a bad purchase after all.

"Are you going to let me read it, or are you going to read it to me?" Shawn asked.

"Okay, here goes," Autumn said. "My Dear Earnest, I want you to know that I hate you. If that hurts your feelings I don't really care. Do you want to know why? I saw you kissing that woman today. It was mere hours after you and I made love in my home, you know the one, it's where I live with my husband, the bank president."

"Shame on her," Shawn said. "I don't go for sneaking around behind your spouse's back. Please, continue."

Autumn cleared her throat. "When I saw you kissing her it occurred to me that the only reason you paid attention to me, and started a relationship, was so you could learn about the inner workings of the bank, and use me to rob it."

She glanced at Shawn, who nodded. She had him hooked. The fifty thousand was almost hers. "Go on."

"It occurred to me, since we decided to hide the money in the

safety deposit box of another bank until, as you said, the heat was off, there was one way I could hurt you. That, as you might have guessed by now, is by taking the money. Which I have done.”

Autumn paused, because there were several blank spaces between the paragraphs. She glanced at Shawn. She took a deep breath before she continued.

“I am going to make it so you will never find the funds. You might ask why I don’t just turn you over to the authorities, but that would be too easy on you. I want you to spend the rest of your life knowing there are thousands of dollars out there, dollars that you thought would make you rich. Instead, the funds will be buried in the ground, and you will never discover where.”

“Seems like a creative way to get back at him,” Shawn said. “Although he could have come after her and killed her.” He paused and said, “Did he? Did you research this? What happens next?”

Oh, yes, she had him.

“One more thing, how do you know it’s on my land?”

Autumn laughed. “Let me finish the letter and I can tell you the rest.”

“All right, finish the letter,” he said.

Autumn nodded. “I wish you well, my darling, as you try to find the place I have buried the money. To that effect, perhaps you should buy a shovel, and start digging. With much luck in your future endeavors. Kate.”

She folded the paper and put it back in the envelope.

“So, how did you put this all together, figure out that the money was supposedly buried on my land?” he asked.

This was where the money came in. “I did research. I have lots of records that you can have, along with this letter and a map I have put together that shows where the money is buried.”

“May I see them?”

“The letter was for free.” Autumn worked to keep her voice

steady. She didn't want him to think she was nervous. "The other papers will cost you."

"Fifty thousand dollars," he said.

She almost sighed in relief. This was going to be much easier than she'd thought. "That's right."

He laughed, and she realized she'd misread him.

"The letter doesn't list an amount," he said. He stretched his legs out in front of him. "How do I know this so-called bank robbery money is worth the fifty thousand dollars you're asking for? How much money was taken in the robbery? When did this happen? For the amount of money you're asking for, you need to provide me with more than just an old letter."

She had expected a little resistance. She hated the idea she would have to negotiate. Maybe she would end up with forty-five, or even forty thousand.

"I did a lot of research into this," she said. "I paid for copies, and record searches. I have police reports about the robbery. I have newspaper clippings."

"When did it happen?" he asked.

"July 9, 1964," she said. "It was a Thursday. There was a partial solar eclipse that day. The police wrote in their reports that the eclipse happened in the morning, and lots of people were gathered on the streets to watch. That's why, according to the report, they think the robbers chose that time, because they could blend into the crowds when they ran from the bank."

"They ran?" His face showed total disbelief. "No get away car? No get away driver? Did the police look at the bank official with the wandering wife? Listen, I want to believe there is treasure on my land. I mean, who doesn't? The idea of finding money that you didn't even know existed is, for lack of a better word, awesome. But you don't have enough to convince me to give you that amount of money."

He leaned toward her. "It has been a pleasure meeting you, though. I think you would have a good time coming out

to Silver Creek. Perhaps I can talk you into coming for dinner, maybe tonight? Or tomorrow? Where are you staying?"

Autumn didn't want to tell him she didn't have a hotel room yet. Her plan was to meet him, take the money and head back to Pueblo where she lived.

"Mr. Hollis, I appreciate the offer, but I'm not here about anything sexual." She waved the letter at him. "I want fifty thousand dollars for the letter, and for my research."

"I thought you said the letter was free," he said. He grinned sheepishly.

"You know what I mean," she said. "Listen, Mr. Hollis, this letter is the best thing I've ever found during my career."

"Your career?" he asked. "What exactly do you do for a living, Autumn?"

"I was a journalist, but well, things are slow in that area now," she said. "I worked for a newspaper. I got a little bit of a severance package when the paper closed. Now, I'm a close to forty-year-old woman who finds items to sell to my cousin for his antique store."

"And you do it by buying storage units that are default," he said.

"Sometimes," she said. She couldn't help but laugh.

"So, you work for your cousin?"

"I freelance for him," she said. "I paid for the storage unit out of my own pocket."

"Does he know you're here?"

"In the land of handcuffs and casinos? Um, that would be a no." She shook her head, feeling as if she'd failed, yet again.

"Where does he think you are?" he asked.

"Reno," she said. "I told him I knew of an auction tomorrow and I wanted to go down and get a head start."

"That's some ways from home," he said.

Autumn didn't answer him.

“Answer me this question,” he said. “How much money do you really think is buried on my land?”

“Quite a bit,” she said.

“Enough to cover my fifty thousand,” he said. He sounded intrigued, and that made her happy.

“Yes,” she said.

They were silent for what seemed like forever. “Come to dinner at the Creek,” he said. “Better yet, we have cabins for rent. I can put you up in one for free, and we can go over your research. Then I can make a decision about your plan.”

Oh, things were looking up again. Autumn turned to him. “You might actually give me the money?”

“Autumn, fifty thousand is a huge amount, not something that I can get my hands on just by snapping my fingers.” He held up a finger to indicate there was a but attached to that sentence. “I have partners, and I want to discuss this with them before we make a decision. I want them to meet you. If you really want to continue with this you need to come with me to Silver Creek, and we can figure out what to do from there.”

It all sounded good, but how did she know what would happen if she went with him to his BDSM resort?

“I’m not planning on whipping you for dinner and then strapping you to a St. Andrew’s Cross for dessert,” he said. “If you want a chance at the fifty-thousand-dollars you’re asking for, this is the only way you’re going to get even close to it.”

“You’re not making it easy on me,” Autumn said.

“You have my offer. Take it, or leave it.”

She really didn’t have much choice. “Okay, take me to the Creek.”

“I will,” he said. “I just have one more question. Is your cousin’s name Pumpkin, too?”

They left the small town of Hollis Creek and traveled on a paved road for about fifteen minutes, and then it disappeared. There was a sign announcing the entrance to the resort.

They traveled a little farther down the road and came to a gate. She pulled to a stop behind Shawn's truck. He got out to open the gate, and she found it interesting that there wasn't a clicker to the job.

Once they were on the other side, and driving again, Autumn wondered how far off the road they would travel before they came to the resort.

You would have to be far off the beaten path, Autumn thought, so you could make your submissives scream and no one would call the police.

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. Why would someone want to have the type of sex that would make you scream? Screaming in pleasure was one thing, but from pain?

As she considered one person's desires pitted against another's, she remembered her mother making fun of Trey's antique shop. "Why would he want all of that trash in his store?"

"One person's trash is another person's treasure," Autumn had said. "You collect troll dolls, remember?"

"I collect dolls," her mother had answered. "Just a few of them are trolls."

"One person's trash," Autumn said, and they had both laughed.

While Autumn enjoyed the hunt in finding what some people might consider treasures, she didn't understand the fascination with BDSM. Why would you enjoy something that caused pain? It just didn't make sense.

She had to admit when she'd done the records search in the land office and figured out where the money was hidden, then searched out the name and found the Silver Creek Resort, she'd thought it would be easy to be on the land and search for herself.

But then she'd gone to the resort's website and been greeted

with a page she hadn't expected to see: This site is for persons 18 years of age and older.

Being of age, she'd clicked on the enter site, where she'd been asked to put in her birthdate. After that, she'd been greeted by the photo of a large bullwhip crossed with a riding crop. She'd backed out of the site quickly and stared at the search screen.

She'd left the computer and went to the box. Before she'd sold the books, she'd searched through them to make sure there hadn't been any information related to the envelope, and she'd found nothing.

The books, the envelope and the paper with the coordinates on it. That had been the only thing there. Hopefully that was all they would need. After her search she'd gone back to the computer and delved deeper into the site. It was quite expensive to spend a week there. There were several options. Singles could come and find company with one, or two subs or doms. Couples could come to use a cabin. All the cabins were equipped with dungeons.

There had been a photo of one, and the objects she'd seen had made Autumn gasp. There was no way she would allow someone to slap a riding crop against her ass.

As an experiment, she'd gone to the 'Book a Stay' page. She'd tried several different dates to see they were heavily booked. Obviously, Silver Creek was a popular resort.

She'd nixed the idea of going in undercover in a heartbeat. There was no way she would be able to find a way into the wilds on her own without raising suspicion in the owners, especially the man riding in the truck in front of her.

Shawn had accepted her tale much easier than she thought he would. Of course, that didn't mean they would be able to convince his partners to help them search. Unless they were greedy. The amount of money taken from the bank robbery was significant. Neither the letter nor the newspaper articles, mentioned an amount, but the police report had. It was an

amount that had made Autumn gasp. If Autumn had been the robber, she would have thought she was set for life.

She rethought her idea of selling them the information for the fifty thousand. Maybe she'd get more than fifty thousand. The idea was incredible. When she'd been planning this, she'd thought about what she'd be able to do with fifty thousand dollars. If she lived frugally, she would be able to pay her rent, buy food, clothes, books.

But if they found more than what the report listed? How much would a bank have on hand in 1964? Enough to make a robbery worthwhile. Autumn hated living paycheck to paycheck, wondering where money was going to come from, of if a storage unit was going to yield something good, or cause her to lose money, as this storage unit had done.

They topped a cliff, and in the deep valley below them, Autumn saw a large, two-story house that looked like it could house several dozen people. Dotted around the house, at distances she thought would provide privacy, were at least a dozen cabins.

One thing was for sure, Shawn and his buddies did not need the money. Maybe, just maybe, she would go on an adventure, find the money on her own, and leave them holding the bag.