



THE LANTERN'S EMBER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

COLLEEN HOUCK

SNEAK PEEK

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For Daniel and Mitchell,
who still love my Scooby-Doo cartoons,
even though the monsters
give them nightmares



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I spot the hills
With yellow balls in autumn.
I light the prairie cornfields
Orange and tawny gold clusters
And I am called pumpkins.
On the last of October
When dusk is fallen
Children join hands
And circle round me
Singing ghost songs
And love to the harvest moon;
I am a jack-o'-lantern
With terrible teeth
And the children know
I am fooling.

—Carl Sandburg,
“Theme in Yellow”

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CHAPTER 1

CROSSROADS

Jack sat on top of the covered bridge in his favorite spot, his arm draped over his carved pumpkin. The gourd wasn't his first choice to house the ember of his immortality, but then again, he'd never really been given a choice.

It wasn't the first time he'd heard of foolish men who'd made deals with the devil. During every scary story he'd been told as a child on long winter nights, he'd clutched his covers to his throat imagining frightening specters, red demons, or wicked-clawed ghouls looming out of swaying shadows, ready to snatch up unmindful children and trick them with beguiling words. His imagination never came close to the truth. And he'd certainly never envisioned those devils walking earth as mere men, dressed as pirates, storing stolen souls in harvest vegetables.

The devil who'd conscripted him five hundred years ago was named Rune. Jack barely remembered the town he was attempting to save by negotiating with Rune, or the boy he'd been when he'd done it. Now all the villagers were long dead. But not Jack. He

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wasn't so lucky. Instead, Jack was stuck in a monotonous job, the same job Rune once had. And Jack had the pleasure of looking forward to another five hundred years of doing exactly the same thing day in and day out.

It wasn't like the job was too difficult. It was mostly quiet, but when it wasn't, he did everything from exporting entire herds of gremlins, to clearing caves full of werewolves, to capturing a flock of Otherworld bats. Jack had even done the highly dangerous job of evicting a nest of half-breed vampires from an underground necropolis, entirely on his own.

Admittedly, the swaggering pirate Rune had come to Jack's aid a time or two, helping him avert what could have been disasters. But Jack quickly learned he didn't appreciate how Rune handled mortals. Too many of them died or went insane under his care.

Eventually, Jack ended up at his current assignment, a quiet New England town called Hallowell that butted up against one of the most boring, sleepy crossroads in the entirety of the Otherworld. Rune had probably thought Jack would complain about the placement, but the town was pretty, if small. There were plenty of large oaks and maples, elms and dogwood trees to offer him shade during the day. And in the fall the colors were beautiful. There was something to be said for a quiet life.

It was lonely, but Jack was used to being alone.

He was about to summon his horse so he could ride through the forest while the red, orange, and yellow fall leaves rained down upon his head, when he heard a noise.

"Must you sit all the way up there?" Rune grouched, emerging from the covered bridge and looking up at him. Smoke trailed in after the large man, pooling around his polished boots and caressing his ankles with long fingers. Stepping forward, Rune peeled off

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black leather gloves and stroked his short, boxed beard, shaved in thin lines and curls. "Someone could get past you before you could intervene. Besides, I hate craning my neck to have a conversation."

Jack shrugged. "I like keeping my pumpkin far from the road, so there's no risk it could get trampled on. Besides, I'd hear someone long before they got close." Jack's pumpkin never aged or decomposed, but it could be broken, and that made his soul vulnerable.

"Yes." Rune fingered his firefly-shaped earring, a far better choice of vessels for a lantern to hide his ember than a fat orange gourd. He smiled up at Jack. The shaggy hair that slipped from his careless queue hung down to his shoulders, dark, except for a white streak that fell across his eyes. "I suppose, then, that's a wise choice."

"What do you want, Rune?" Jack asked.

"There's been a rumor."

"About?"

"Your town. It would seem a witch wind is blowing and it's coming from your crossroad."

"My crossroad?" Jack said, leaping down with his pumpkin and landing easily next to Rune, feeling thin and pale next to Rune's sun-kissed tan and deep-V silk shirt. "Are you certain?"

All the lanterns were apprised when a witch wind blew. The Lord of the Otherworld gathered winds from the mortal world in a great funnel. Most of the time, the winds blowing through the crossroads were normal, but every so often, a special wind blew, indicating that a witch had grown strong enough not only to enter the Otherworld but to undo it completely. Unless the witch was captured and his or her energy contained, the Otherworld as they knew it could be destroyed. Only one witch was permitted in the Otherworld. She was trusted not just to avoid destroying it, but also to run it. She was the

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high witch, the Lord's wife, and provider of all the magical energy in that realm. All others were a dreadful danger.

"There are whispers," Rune insisted. "Whispers in the wind of a powerful witch. One much more skillful than any you or I have dealt with before." Rune's own light glowed brighter, his earring winking as his dark skin brightened showing the skeleton lying beneath.

Jack sighed. "You must be mistaken," he said. "I've peered beneath the skin of every citizen of this town. There's not a drop of witch blood among them." He was relieved to be able to tell Rune the absolute truth for once. Hallowell was full of very content, happy mortals.

"It's not that I'm doubting your abilities, Jack," Rune said, giving him a meaningful look that made Jack wince. "I just need to verify it for myself. You understand."

Jack waved his hand in resignation and Rune sent his firefly high above the town. It zipped back and forth, pausing occasionally while the lantern himself stared into space, seeing through the eye of his light. His eyes glowed with a silver sheen and then finally dimmed.

"Told you," Jack said. "Do you think it's possible she got the location wrong? You could tell the high witch to look again."

"If a witch wind is blowing, you can be sure there's a witch or warlock out there. Look, I'm just asking you to watch. Be on your guard. And, if you see something, let me know." He clapped Jack on the back. "Don't worry, son; if you can't finish the job, I've always got your back."

Jack frowned, bristling at the slight. "Fine. I'll send word if I find any trace of a witch," Jack said.

"You do that."

Rune left and Jack was too distracted to head off on his morning ride after all. Jack sat thinking about how strange it was for a witch

wind to blow in his territory three times. Most lanterns never even had it happen once, but he'd been there when witches were detected at both Roanoke and Salem. It didn't make sense. Perhaps he was just terribly unlucky.

He was thinking about it all day as he walked the borders of the town, and into the evening as he settled down for the night on top of his bridge. The light flickered in his pumpkin and he turned it so he could trace the eyes with his fingertip. He'd long ago hollowed out the orange globe and carved a smiling face. His only companion on long days and even longer nights. It comforted him to see his ember's glow in the pumpkin's expression. The light warmed him, giving him hope that somehow, somewhere, there was a spark of freedom waiting for him, even if it was at the end of a very long, weary road.

Jack had just fallen asleep when he heard the thunder of hooves on the road leading to town. Summoning his black stallion, he leapt off the bridge and onto the monstrous horse's back as it materialized from the Otherworld, nostrils steaming and eyes glowing with fire. The horse reared and Jack, with the pumpkin tucked beneath his arm, kicked the horse's sides, and they galloped toward the road.

He stopped on the hill and saw a carriage, shiny and new, a fine pair of horses pulling it quickly down the path. Jack chose not to show himself, but sent a moaning wind that frightened the driver who glanced right and left and cracked his whip to make the team run faster.

Jack, the lantern, sat and watched as the carriage made its way to town. Just as it passed him, the curtain moved and a small, white face was lit by a moonbeam. It was a wide-eyed little girl, her brown hair curled in ringlets. She pressed her hands against the glass and her pink mouth opened in a circle as she stared right at him.

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