

PUMPKINS

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BY KEVIN MILLER

CHAPTER ONE

These have are the most impressive pumpkins I've ever seen! You really have an 'orange thumb,' if you know what I mean." Fifty-five-year-old Brewster Burton, the wide-bodied owner of the Greenleaf Market in the small town of Somerville, Saskatchewan, stood up from where he'd been crouching in the pumpkin patch and grinned at his own joke. The gap between his two front teeth accentuated the broadness of his grizzled face as he hooked his thumbs into the useless belt-loops of his faded jeans, his gut having reached the point where the wide, bright-red suspenders he wore were now his only hope of holding up his pants.

The owner of the pumpkin patch, Nina Witherspoon, an attractive twentysomething woman in dreadlocks and wearing overalls that came down to her knees, smiled in response. "Beginner's luck, I think." She scratched her left bicep as she looked

over the patch, her arms etched with a multitude of tattoos and her face glistening with so many piercings that, if melted down, they would probably provide enough metal to build a Smart car, or so Brewster imagined. “Not only is this our first year doing it,” Nina said, “as far as I know, no one’s ever grown pumpkins on this land before. And this isn’t even our best patch. In fact, my wife—”

Brewster snorted a cough. “Your . . . wife?” His expression mirrored the confusion in his words.

Nina put a defiant hand on her right hip. “Does that surprise you?”

“No, I . . . that is, you’re a . . . and I just thought—”

Before Brewster could say what he thought—in fact, he had no idea what he thought about such matters, having never encountered someone like Nina before—another young woman approached pushing a wheelbarrow with something in it that bulged under a dirty green tarp. Like Nina, she also had dreads, although her hair was dark, whereas Nina’s was blond. The woman was also wearing overalls, and her arms were similarly covered in tattoos, though the only piercing in her face was a delicate silver ring in her left nostril.

“Here she is now,” Nina said, turning to the other woman and smiling. “Hey, honey. I’d like you to meet Brewster. He owns Greenleaf Market, and he’s going to take some of our pumpkins.” She turned back to Brewster, who was still struggling to put two and two together. “Brewster, this is my wife, Greta—”

“Gainsborough? Greta Gainsborough?” Brewster squinted as he tried to match the woman in front of him with his memory of the little Gainsborough girl who used to come into his market each week for a bag of Pink Lady apples.

Greta smiled and set down the wheelbarrow. “Hello, Mr. Brewster. It’s good to see you again. It’s been a while. You got any Pink Ladies for me?”

Brewster stared at her in stunned silence as he shook her hand. “Yes, of course. But my, you’ve . . . changed.”

Greta’s smile widened as she put her arm around Nina. “Yes, I guess I have. Ten years’ll do that to you. But I’m glad to see some

things haven't changed. Like you. You're just like I remember. As handsome as ever."

Brewster reddened slightly and grinned, tugging at his dirty ball cap. "Well, I don't know about that." He patted his gut, which was putting the tensile strength of his red-and-black plaid shirt to the test. "I'm built more for comfort these days than speed, if you know what I mean. But as I was telling your, uh, as I was telling Nina here, you young ladies have done a remarkable job considering this is just your first year. And Nina was saying you have another patch somewhere?" He raised himself slightly on the balls of his feet and looked over the field, which was bordered by a dense forest of deciduous trees, as if he might somehow spot the other patch.

"Yes, we do," Greta said. "But we're saving those pumpkins for something special."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"The fall fair," Nina said. "We're going to enter one or two of them in the produce categories, and we're also going to donate some to the pumpkin-carving competition."

Somerville was famous for its fall harvest festival, which featured prizes for the biggest as well as the strangest looking produce in a number of categories, including pumpkins, potatoes, turnips, and carrots. Other activities included a pumpkin-carving contest, a pumpkin pie-eating contest, a corn maze, and all sorts of other fun events for children and families.

"Speaking of which," Greta said, stepping over to the wheelbarrow, "here's a sample." She pulled off the tarp, revealing the largest, brightest, most perfect orange pumpkin that Brewster had ever seen.

"That's incredible!" he said, stooping to examine it. Normally, pumpkins that grew to such a size were flat on one side due to the pumpkin's weight, but this pumpkin was almost perfectly symmetrical. It looked so perfect that Brewster had to lean in and sniff it and then thump it with his knuckles to ensure it was real. His nose was greeted by a sweet, earthy scent, and his ears were met by a satisfying thud.

"How did you manage it?" Brewster asked, straightening up

again with no small amount of effort.

Greta winked at him as she put her arm around Nina. “Our little secret. But I’ll tell you what, if you like, you can put that pumpkin in the front window of your store and raffle it off. Any money raised can go to the food bank. It’ll be a great promotion for your store and our farm.”

Brewster’s eyes brightened at the thought. “That’s a brilliant idea! Would you really do that?”

“Of course!” Greta said, grabbing the wheelbarrow’s handles. “In fact, Nina and I will help you load it onto your truck right now.”

Brewster followed the two women toward his old blue-and-white Ford pickup, its wheel wells rusted out and its box slightly askew due to its dilapidated suspension. “Just be careful with the old girl. My truck is on its last legs, and that pumpkin looks like it weighs a ton.”

“We will,” Nina said, setting down the wheelbarrow and lowering the truck’s tailgate.

“And next time you come in to the store, there’ll be a bag of Pink Ladies waiting for you,” Brewster said with a grin. “On the house!”

As the two young women hefted the pumpkin onto the back of the truck—under Brewster’s close supervision—a wind kicked up, sending a tangle of dead leaves and straw into the air. They drifted up over the pumpkin patch and soared above the trees.

Down below, a trail twisted through the forest, terminating in a clearing. Standing out in stark contrast to the lush green trees that surrounded it was a dense carpet of orange pumpkins, each one as perfect as the pumpkin that Greta and Nina had just donated to Brewster, though none of them quite as large.

Just when it seemed like the pumpkins couldn’t glow any brighter, a cloud passed in front of the sun, blanketing the forest and the pumpkin patch in a deep, dark shadow.