



A Hallowed Warning

Nikki Duncan

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A Hallowed Warning
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Moody music and eerie sounds floated through the air from speakers hidden in the trees. One side of Eden Maverick's yard had been turned into a graveyard—complete with fog, flickering torches, ancient looking tombstones and a few *fresh* graves. The other side was a fully enclosed maze with promised haunts and horrors.

"Sometimes I wish you could see." Kieralyn wrapped her arm through Ian's and laid her head on his bicep as they walked toward the door. "I think you'd appreciate what Eden's done with the yard."

"Kieralyn." Ian stopped and looked down at her, his brandy eyes sparkling in the shifting light. "I see it all through you. And later, when we go through that maze, I'll show you a new kind of fun to have in haunted mazes."

"Really?" She slid her hands around his waist, disappointed that his costume kept her from feeling his body. "How so?"

"It's dark and scary." His voice dropped to his sexy rasp. He sat his hands at her waist, slid them down until he cupped her ass and then pulled her against him. He kissed her just below her ear. "You're adrenaline will be pumping as you try to brace for what's around the corner. Lovemaking on an adrenaline high—"

"Would be amazing." She sighed and leaned deeper into him. Her man knew how to excite her. How to turn her knees to jelly with a touch. "We could go in now."

"Too many people in there. I want you alone."

"How... Nevermind." She should be used to his hearing giving him advantages—like knowing there were people in the maze. He probably knew how many and where they were. "Will you know what surprises are coming before we get to them when we go in?"

"That will depend on how good Eden and her crew are." Ian lifted her so that her feet dangled off the ground.

His mouth claimed hers. He devoured her with an intensity that made her want to drag him into the tunnel and yell fire to scare everyone out. Her skin tingled and heated. Her thong moistened and rubbed against her clit. If she wasn't wearing such a short, tight skirt she'd have her legs around his waist. Next time she dressed up as a naughty fed she was wearing micro shorts. Then again, with sex in the maze on the agenda, the skirt may be the better choice.

Someone cleared their throat. "Get a room, Batman."

Ian pulled back but didn't release her. "Planning on it. Shortly."

Kieralyn looked at Breck, her team leader. He stood in a small flood of light dressed in his habitual suit and tie. "Couldn't you wear some sort of costume? Even a mask?"

She smiled at the nickname her team had given Ian when they'd gotten a glimpse of his hearing abilities. It suited him, both as a blind listener and as her personal superhero.

It had been the perfect costume for him, but she was ready to strip him naked now that he'd stirred her up. "This is a costume." Breck lifted the tie. A silver shark shimmered. "I'm a corporate mogul. Not all of us can be a superhero."

"How original of you, Breck." Ian slid her to the ground, but didn't let her go. "Speaking of costumes, someone tell me again why we're wearing these getups in the middle of summer."

"Because Eden asked us to. Halloween was Andrew's favorite holiday. This is her way of feeling like he's here for her birthday." Kieralyn's heart broke a little every time she thought of Eden facing almost two years without the man she loved because he'd just vanished one day. She'd seen how similar circumstances had torn at Ian, and she hoped that one day Eden would have answers too.

"What are you, K? A hooker?" Breck stepped between Ian and Kieralyn wrapping an arm around their shoulders to lead them to the front door. "I prefer a maid uniform."

"I don't need to know your preferences, Breck. And I'm a naughty fed."

"Who'd have guessed?" Her team had accepted her as one of them after she'd proven herself on a recent case, but they still hassled her about how she'd gone temporarily rogue and hooked up with Ian on the first night.

Ian chuckled as they entered Eden's home through the open door she'd covered with strips of black cloth. A broad grin spread across the lower half of his face. "I knew she was naughty the first time I heard her heartbeat."

"Great! You guys made it." Eden, dressed like a short-haired Lara Croft, left a crowd of people hovering near the kitchen and hustled up to them glancing around. Considering that she was a relic hunter in real life, it was a natural choice for her. She probably already had everything for the costume in her closet. "Where are Aidan, Liam and Tyler? Are they coming?"

"Their flight was late, but they'll be here."

Kieralyn closed her eyes for a moment as pleasure washed over her. The rest of her team had returned from Cuba with the few remaining women that had been sold into slavery. With their return and the imprisonment of the *owners*, the case was officially closed.

"Good."

Breck kissed Eden on the cheek. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you." Eden gave Breck the once over and shook her head. "Are you trying to pass yourself off as a corporate mogul?"

Breck frowned. Kieralyn laughed at how well Eden knew him. "Aww, he doesn't like that you have him so easily pegged, Eden."

"He's too busy admiring what I assume is a skimpy outfit on Eden."

"There's nothing wrong with a man appreciating an attractive woman." Breck winked at Eden. "You look great."

“Thanks.”

Ian laughed. “That’s not appreciation.”

Eden looked down at her tight, tank top and super short shorts. She shook her head. “How do you do that, Ian? Can you teach me any of your tricks?”

“Oh, Eden,” Kieralyn said. “Don’t get him started on the details. Just trust that he somehow catches details the rest of us mortals can’t imagine.”

“Speaking of that…” Eden shifted. Her shoulders tensed and shadows darkened her eyes.

“What?” Kieralyn shifted closer to Eden and grabbed her hand. “Is everything okay?”

Breck nudged Kieralyn back and took Eden’s hand in his. His eyes sharpened as he kicked into FBI-Team-Leader-I-can-solve-anything mode. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Forget it.” Eden shook her head. “This is supposed to be a party. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Too late.” Kieralyn jerked her head toward Eden’s home office before grabbing Ian’s hand to lead the way. She closed the door behind them and turned to Eden. “Spill it.”

“It’s nothing… it’s—”

“Something.” Breck cut her off as he headed toward her desk. He sat on the corner and crossed his arms. “Tell us what’s going on.”

Eden sighed. Her shoulders dropped. “I got an email.”

Breck stiffened. “Another one?”

The hairs on Kieralyn’s neck stood on end. She’d always appreciated Eden’s ability to stay calm and in control. She could only think of one thing that would rattle Eden. And she was rattled. “Andrew?”

They’d first met Eden when she’d camped herself in the waiting area of their offices almost two years ago. Her business partner and lover, Andrew, had just gone missing and despite her resources, which didn’t appear to be very limited, she wasn’t finding any clues. Soon after that first meeting, she’d received an untraceable email with the Pearl Jam song *Alive* attached.

She’d confided in Kieralyn that the email had come at the lowest point in her life. She’d yearned to see it as a message from Andrew. Self-preservation and a need to manage expectations had her brushing it off as a cruel joke.

“I don’t know. It has a brief message and there’s a sound file attached, but I can’t hear anything on it other than the slight humming of whatever it was recorded on.” She paced the length of the desk. Her fingers tapped the gun holsters strapped to her thighs. “I’ve used every trick I know to track the IP. It’s untraceable.”

“Like the last one.” Breck caught her hand when she passed him. “What’s it say?”

Kieralyn shook her head to clear her confusion. After she'd almost been killed on a recent case, Breck had gone from an overbearing ass with the attitude that she had no place in their team to a pest treating her like a prized sister that needed protection. Regardless of how he'd changed, he was still an emotional commitment-phobe. It surprised her to see him treat Eden with kid gloves—the way he now treated her more often than not.

"It's on the laptop, but I'm telling you it's untraceable."

"Eden," Kieralyn glanced at Ian and knew that he was mentally recording Eden's heartbeat and breathing to register her reactions. "You think it's from Andrew. Why?"

She glanced between Breck and Kieralyn. Pain pinched her eyebrows together as she turned back to Breck. "I'm really sorry. I wanted to take a chance with you."

"Stop." Breck waved off her apology. "What's it say?"

As long as Andrew was missing with no explanation she would never move on. She would remain emotionally unavailable, which made her safe for Breck. Though it appeared that she was quickly getting slotted into the *sister* camp with Kieralyn.

"'For your love is better than wine. Draw me away'."

"I don't get it." Breck shook his head. "Those are conflicting messages, right?"

"It's from the Song of Solomon."

"Did that have significance for you and Andrew?"

Eden pulled back and started pacing again. She'd wanted to feel like Andrew was with her tonight. That email and this conversation was messing her up.

"Breck." Kieralyn cleared her throat. How should she word this? "She hunts and recovers Biblical relics. All aspects of the Bible, from the scriptures to the people and their relics, are Eden's specialty."

"I know."

"Okay." Surely the man couldn't really be that dense. "The love of her life up and disappeared two years ago without a trace. Now, out of nowhere, she gets a second anonymous and untraceable email talking about love and staying away at the same time."

"He's letting her know he loves her though he can't be here."

Kieralyn smiled at Ian. Maybe it took a man in love to understand what drove Eden. "Or at least that's part of it."

Eden stopped at the end of the desk opposite of Breck. Her fingers fidgeted nervously at her sides. "If it's from Andrew, the real message is in what he left unsaid."

"Explain." Breck's jaw tensed. Instinct told Kieralyn that he was fighting an internal battle. He wanted to care for Eden, to explore an intimate relationship with her. But when truth time came he had to admit and accept that she would never be his someone special.

“The first part was to let me know which part of the Bible. He knew that I’d recognize it. He said that when...” Eden trailed off and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“The second part could be an explanation.” Kieralyn stepped up, trying to give Eden a moment to collect herself. “Is that where the message ended?”

Eden nodded. “But the next part of the verse—the part that I think was intentionally left unwritten—is ‘we will run after you’.”

“You’re being threatened?” Breck surged to his feet and paced the room looking for something to pummel.

The heartless-one-night-stand-master isn’t so heartless.

“I don’t know. It seems that someone is.” Eden fisted her hands in her hair. A small growl emanated from her throat. “But is the threat aimed at me? Am I being told that he’s in danger? Or is it all aimed at someone entirely different?”

“Eden.” Ian stepped forward. “Do you have a set of headphones? Could I listen to the attached file?”

“Yeah.” She went to a drawer in the desk and pulled out some headphones. “Thanks for doing this, Ian.”

“Not a problem.” Ian pulled off the Batman mask, moved to her side and had her identify the controls on the computer that he’d need. “This might take me a little bit. You can keep talking, but do it quietly.”

While he got to work on the attachment, Breck, Eden and Kieralyn moved to the far corner. Kieralyn watched Ian as his shoulders stiffened with intensity. She’d watched him work enough to know that he felt a huge weight when he listened to files for people. Everyone wanted him to find some piece of magic that would solve their case or ease someone’s suffering or vanish their worries. She’d been no different when she’d gone to him with her recording. Eden was no different now as she nervously watched him.

Kieralyn rubbed her hand along Eden’s arm. “He’s the best. If there’s anything on the file he’ll hear it.”

“I didn’t invite you guys here for this.”

“We know, but you could have.” Breck tilted his head and smiled kindly. “We’d still have come.”

Eden crossed her arms over her chest, hugging herself. “Thank you.”

“Now, back to the email. I think it’s a threat, or a warning of a threat, aimed at you.”

Breck didn’t like the gray shades of a case. They were Kieralyn’s favorite area because there were more possibilities and the shades between black and white kept things interesting. “Is there anyone that knew you and Andrew well enough to know how something like this would get to you? Maybe someone that you’ve gone up against on a hunt that is trying to get even?”

Eden’s forehead wrinkled as she shook her head. “Not that I can think of. I haven’t been on a hunt since Andrew...left.”

She was trying to consider the possibility that Andrew had chosen to leave her behind. Her struggle stabbed at Kieralyn, but it was an avenue they had to explore. "Can you think of a reason that Andrew would have been silent for all this time and is suddenly reaching out to you?"

"Have you considered that it isn't him?" Breck asked.

"No and yes." She dropped onto the arm of a chair, shifting her back and neck as if to relieve tension. "Other than death, I can't think of anything that would have kept him silent this long. If he'd been put in prison somewhere I would have found him, or he would have reached out to me. If he'd decided to end our relationship... No. He would have told me if he was leaving me. There would have been some signs."

"Women miss signs all the time."

"Sure they do." She looked up at Breck with tumultuous eyes. "I don't. Take you."

"Me?"

"There are plenty of signs that you don't want a long-term relationship, but the way you watch Ian and Kieralyn proves that you do. You want something like what they have. You want something like Andrew and I had." Her throat bobbed in a swallow. Emotion thickened her voice. "I've had two years to analyze my time with Andrew. I've dissected every aspect of our lives, our relationship, his actions and his words. There were no indications that Andrew wanted out."

Breck didn't acknowledge her ability to read him. "You don't think he's dead."

"No. I don't." Silence hung in the air while the party kicked up a notch in the other room. She rested her hand over her heart. "I could always feel his pain if he was injured. Even hundreds of miles away, I knew he was hurt before he'd call. I would feel the loss if he was dead."

If he was alive and Eden was right about him not wanting out, that only left the possibility that he had been kidnapped. From everything Eden had said about Andrew, he seemed like the kind of guy capable of handling himself. It didn't seem plausible that he'd be a random kidnapping victim. There was something far more sinister at play.

"I know what you all are thinking. You're leaning toward the possibility that he walked out."

"It's a fair assumption."

Kieralyn shot Breck her best wither-and-die look. "If you're callous and don't want to admit that men exist who would risk their lives for the sake of keeping the woman they love safe."

It's what the email message hinted at, and damn it Ian had proven such men existed when he'd carried her from a burning kitchen seconds before it exploded.

Kieralyn looked at Ian and recalled the brief time she'd thought they wouldn't be together. Pain gripped her chest. Eden had been suffering doubts and fears for nearly two years. Now she was being forced to accept that maybe she'd been abandoned rather than a victim by extension.

“Come on, I’m not that much of an ass. I don’t want to believe that he left willingly.” Breck stepped closer to Eden, but he didn’t reach out to her. “For what it’s worth, I think any man would be a complete dumbass to walk away from you.”

“Thank you.” Eden took Breck’s hand in hers. “That means a lot coming from you because I know it’s not out of pity or sympathy.”

“Okay, so let’s go for now on the assumption that Andrew is alive and did not choose to leave.” Kieralyn glanced between Breck and Eden and waited for their nods of agreement. “Good. Eden, is that the kind of message Andrew would send you? Is there anything in it that makes you think it’s not from him?”

“Two years ago I would have said no to him sending something like that. Andrew doesn’t, or didn’t, do cryptic.” Eden tilted her head and studied Breck. “He’s straight forward like you, but maybe he’s involved in a situation that’s forcing him to act differently.”

“We’ve seen similar behavior on cases.” Breck was going along without a fight. He really did care for Eden. “Tell me something. You said Halloween was Andrew’s favorite holiday.”

“Yes. He loved the decorations and pulling pranks and trying to scare people.”

“Do you think that he or someone who knew about his pranks might have used this party as a chance to upset you?”

“I’m not sure.”

Kieralyn considered the timing of the invitations, the party and the email. It might not be a coincidence. “We should question everyone here, but especially everyone that declined the invite or didn’t show.”

“Good point. Eden, we’ll need a list of anyone who helped with the decorations and set up. Anyone who has had access to the house.” Breck checked his watch. “Aidan, Tyler and Liam will be here anytime. We’ll have them help.”

“I’ll need to hear something with Andrew’s voice to confirm it, but I don’t think the email is a prank.” They all turned to see that Ian had pulled the headphones off. “The recording was likely made with the sound recorder program that’s preloaded on computers. There’s a man whispering. He identifies himself as Andrew.”

“What’s he say?” Eden rushed to the desk. “When was it made?”

“I’m not certain of the when, but he says you’re in danger and that he’s coming back.”

Eden dropped into a chair and gasped for breath. Breck hurried over and pushed her head between her knees. As soon as she recovered some control, she sat back up.

Breck knelt before her, watching her cautiously. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.” She stiffened her spine. “I’ll hope to hear from him soon. It’s time for answers.”

About the Author

Nikki Duncan, jokingly known to some as Naughty Nikki, juggles her time between writing, multiple jobs, household duties, and family. Of all the things on her To Do List, Nikki neglects the household chores most frequently. Then again, who doesn't want to ignore laundry and dishes?

Before turning to writing, Nikki passed her spare time with a hundred or so romance books a year. While the reading has tapered off a bit, her love of books and reading is stronger than ever. She now spends large chunks of time indulging in her love of creating stories that will hopefully offer people the peace that, regardless of whatever is wrong with their life, hope and faith in something better can always be found between the covers of a book.

To learn more about Nikki, please visit www.nikkiduncan.com. Send an email to Nikki at nikki@nikkiduncan.com. To check out Nikki's Samhain releases, please visit <http://samhainpublishing.com/authors/nikki-duncan>.