

THE MAZE

Alice Winters

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“Tell me a secret, Lane,” I say as I look over at the man who is clearly trying to ignore me by leaning back in the recliner and closing his eyes.

His earbuds are in, but I know he can hear me. He’s like a fucking bat. Always able to hear, especially when I don’t want him to.

“Lane,” I grumble.

He opens his eyes and stares vaguely in my direction even though he knows he can’t see me. “I have no secrets. I’m an open book.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “And I’m Santa Claus.”

“You have been letting yourself waste away recently. All you need is a sack and a beard.”

“I already have a sac, I just need the beard,” I inform him. “Two if I count yours. Which I will. It’s mine.”

“What do you want?” he asks as he pulls the earbuds out.

“I want to go to a haunted house,” I decide. “You know how most children grown up wishing they were a princess and a sexy man would whisk them away on top of a white stallion?”

“Most people?” he asks like he’s suspicious.

“I always dreamed about going into a haunted house where my sexy man would fight off all the terrors for me,” I say.

“Uh huh...okay. Have fun.”

“Ah, you were confused, were you? Because I mentioned the sexy man part, and clearly, you’re not. Or are you scared of haunted houses? You can hang onto me if you’d like. That sounds just as sexy.”

“If I had to bend over that long to hang onto you, I’d have a backache for a week.”

“I’m taking your father,” I decide. “I’ll make sure I scream a lot, so he comes and protects me.”

He grimaces at the thought. What he’s thinking about, I’m not sure, but it’s clearly not as PG as I had implied.

“Gross,” he says.

“Not that way, you idiot. He can be my daddy.”

The disgusted look on his face deepens. “That’s even worse.”

“My poppop.”

“Please stop.”

“My silver badger.”

“What’s that one even mean?” he asks.

“I don’t know, Lane. I just want a family who loves me!”

“Do you ever think that you’re asking for too much?” he asks.

“Come here.”

I quickly get off the couch, glad he’s taking me seriously enough to comfort me. I walk over to the handsome man who’s looking quite comfortable with his raggedy university hoodie that I swear I threw in the trash.

“You want me to sit with you?” I ask with a smile as I reach for him.

“No, my phone’s dead. I want you to plug it in.”

I glare at him even though he doesn’t get the full effect. I feel like he has some type of supernatural senses though and can smell my irritation because he grins. “And what do I get if I plug this stupid phone in?”

“A kiss,” he says.

I snort. “Not from you.”

“You want one from my daddy?” he asks.

I can’t keep the grin at bay. “No! You’re going with me to a haunted house.”

He takes a deep breath. “The things I do for you, Felix.”

“It’s true love.”

“Painfully true,” he grumbles.

“While I plug your phone in, think of what costume you want to wear.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing!” I exclaim at the thought and the jealous looks I’d get as I hang off his bare arm. “*Alright*, that’s my kind of Halloween costume. You might need to wear a sock, though, or you could get arrested.”

“They won’t arrest someone who is blind,” he assures me.

“Even if they did, you’d have no idea you were even in jail. It’d defeat the purpose.”

“Correct,” he says sarcastically.

I grin at him as I head back to our bedroom. I find Copper sleeping on the bed. He has his butt on Lane’s pillow, so I leave him be as I find the charger. He opens his eye just enough to see that it’s me and not a burglar, wags his tail once and goes back to chasing dream squirrels.

Once the phone is plugged in, I walk back into the living room. “You’re going as Daredevil,” I decide.

“I’m not going as Daredevil!”

“Don’t you look sexy as Daredevil?” I ask. Since I’m cheap and he wasn’t interested in wearing anything, literally, we settled on a pair of black pants and tight black top. And I decided to go as Starlord, which confused Lane because he hasn’t unleashed his inner nerd yet.

“I don’t feel sexy,” he says.

“That’s because you don’t have the mask on yet.”

“Are you wearing the edible clothing like I asked?”

I hold my arm up to his face. “Yup. Eat it off me, you sexy beast.”

He grabs my arm and plucks at my coat. “Doesn’t feel edible.”

“All clothes can be edible if you’re determined enough,” I say. “How determined are you to get to the prize beneath?”

“Ah yes, I’d like to see you eat through a coat.”

“I would to save your life.”

“That took a dark turn.”

“That’s how much I love you,” I assure him. “You stay here, I’ll run in and get them.”

“Alright,” he says as I slip out of the vehicle and head into the house. Lane’s parents are waiting inside with Jenny’s child, Hailey, in Tom’s arms.

“Hey, guys,” I say. “Are Jenny and Robbie ready?”

“Felix!” Janet, Lane’s mom, says. She wraps me up in a hug, so I greedily grab onto her. “Lane isn’t coming in?”

“He said for us to wait in the car, but I told him that I really wanted to see you guys,” I say as I squeeze her.

“You’re such a sweetheart,” she says as she kisses the top of my head.

I grin at her before looking over at Tom for more confirmation that I’m better than their own children.

“Hey,” Tom says.

I’ll win that silver badger’s heart if it’s the last thing I do.

“We’re coming,” Jenny says as she comes around the corner. She’s dressed up. As what, I’m not sure. Unless she’s trying to get a job as a hooker. Her husband comes out with straw sticking out of his shirt, which adds to my confusion.

“Thanks so much for watching Hailey,” Robbie says as he follows me to the door.

As I’m walking by, I pat Tom’s shoulder, feeling like maybe I’ll get a hug and an “I love you” out of him before I get gray hairs.

The three of us head out to the car, and I leave Robbie and Jenny to fend off Copper who is ecstatic about the company.

As I slide into the front seat, I look over at Lane. “Your sister’s dressed as a hooker, and Robbie is a bale of straw,” I explain, so he doesn’t feel left out.

“I’m not a hooker!” Jenny says as she pets Copper, who has worked his superhero mask down so it’s hanging around his neck. I’d cut it out of one of Lane’s shirts I can’t stand him wearing.

“Sorry,” I say. “She’s a *sexy* hooker.”

“Felix,” Lane says in a warning tone. “Wench is the word she likes.”

I look back at her in mock shock. “I’m so sorry, Jenny! I like your wench outfit.”

Robbie starts laughing as we look over at Jenny, who is unsure who to glare at. Even though Lane started it, she knows it won’t have any effect on him and aims it toward me.

“She doesn’t appear to like that word either,” I inform Lane.

“Huh. That’s odd.”

“I am *Dorothy* from *The Wizard of Oz*,” she says. “Clearly.”

“Dorothy must have started working the street corners,” I tell Lane, and Robbie barks out a laugh.

When he realizes that the glare is now on him, he reaches out to her. “I think you’re very sexy. It’s just because he’s gay and scared of the female body.”

“That’s alright. I can handle being street-corner Dorothy,” she decides.

As Jenny tries to readjust Copper’s mask, I back out of the driveway and head toward the haunted house that takes place in an old reformatory that is supposedly haunted.

“I honestly can’t believe you’re getting Lane to go to a haunted house,” Jenny says.

“Why?” I ask curiously.

“He was always the biggest chicken when we were kids. There’s no way I could ever get him in a haunted house.”

I look over at Lane in surprise. There he sits, the epitome of masculinity. Black shirt tight over his muscular upper body. When he’s around, I feel like I could walk through a pit of vipers, and he’d

protect me. They'd bounce off his muscular pecs, teeth unable to penetrate.

"You don't like haunted houses?" I ask.

"I'm not particularly fond of them," he admits.

This night just got a bit more fun. "Will you hang on me and let me protect you?"

"Nope."

"What else are you scared of?" I ask.

"Your cooking."

I walked into that one. I led him right to it. And I regret it.

When we get there, Jenny has to try to figure out if she can pull her shirt down any more to hide her ass, but I feel like if she pulls it down any further, I'll get a lesson on female anatomy.

Copper has finally given up on trying to rub his mask off and wears it like a pro as he leads Lane. We buy our tickets and get into line.

"It's cold out here," I say.

Jenny looks at my long red coat as her skimpy outfit struggles to cover her. I feel like this is the moment that I should try to win my new sister over. I should give her my coat. But if we really were siblings, I definitely wouldn't give up my coat.

She crouches down, since the line isn't moving, and wraps her arms around Copper. "You'd make a nice pair of gloves," she assures the dog. Copper is fine with that because his tail wags harder.

"Here," I say as I grudgingly pass my coat off to her.

She greedily takes it, so I press against Lane for warmth and an easy opportunity to stroke his muscular arm without coming off like the creep I am.

"You don't need to be kind to her," he assures me as he wraps an arm around me. He's warm and everywhere he touches heats up. I decide that my hands need some warmth and slip them under his shirt. He cringes away from me.

“Why are you cringing away like you did when I tried sticking my finger in your butt?” I ask as I flip my hand over to warm the other side. The look Robbie gives me is worth it.

“Are you dead? Why are your hands so cold?” Lane asks.

“They’re not anymore,” I assure him as I slide the other under.

He yanks them out but cups them between his hands to warm them up. The gesture makes me smile for some reason. Even though he’s probably doing it to save his back from freezing, it seems sweet.

I lean into him. “You know, a really warm area for my hands would be in your pants,” I whisper.

He grins but shakes his head.

“I could drape your balls over them.”

“If that’s what it takes to keep you from getting frostbite.”

“What are you two whispering about?” Jenny asks, clearly feeling left.

“Your brother’s balls.”

She stares at me like I’ve mortally hurt her.

“The sign over there says no one with heart issues is allowed as well as people who are blind,” Lane explains.

“We don’t like rules. Wait, are we going to terrify Copper?” I realize that I hadn’t thought about the dog.

“You’re right, we are. We shouldn’t do this,” he says. “For Copper.”

“What if we do the corn maze first, then he can wait in the car for the haunted house?” I suggest.

“That’s fine as long as I can keep your coat,” Jenny says.

Once they call the next group for the corn maze, we head out with them. They let the four of us go out as a group.

“I’ll try to describe everything as we walk,” I say to Lane. “Cornstalk, cornstalk, cornstalk, corn—”

“I get the point,” he says.

“Wait! Cornstalk, corn—”

“What about now?” Lane asks.

“Beans. Just kidding, corn.”

We reach a split in the maze before I can continue to describe the scenery for Lane.

“We’ll go left, you guys go right. Whoever reaches the end last has to buy hot chocolate for everyone,” Robbie says.

“Deal,” I say as I take Lane’s hand and veer off to the right. That’s when I realize that Robbie was probably tired of me describing everything.

As soon as we’re a few feet from them, Lane starts powerwalking.

“What are you doing?” I ask as I struggle to keep up.

“We’re getting free hot chocolate,” he says.

“Well, I hope your sense of direction is excellent because mine’s not,” I say as we promptly end up in a dead end. “Wrong way.”

“This is taking too long,” he says.

“I have an idea. What if I get on your back and look *over* the corn?” I suggest.

“You just want me to carry you around like a pack mule.”

“That should have been your Halloween costume. You could have been a stud, and I could have been your cowboy.”

“We can play that tonight,” he decides.

“I’ve been dying to use those spurs I got,” I joke.

We keep walking but seem to pick the dead end every time. “We may be lost here forever.”

“If my sense of direction is correct, then out is that way,” he says as he points.

“Okay,” I say.

He steps through the wall made of corn, making his own path.

“We’re so naughty,” I say with a grin.

“Not as naughty as what I’m going to do to you when we get home.”

“You’re just trying to make me forget about the haunted house and want to go home.”

“That may be true,” he admits.

We ignore all paths and continue to cut a straight line through the corn and out the other end. The stalks whip me in the face, and I end up with more than one spider on me, but we make it through.

“We did it!” I say, only to realize that the exit isn’t on this side. Instead, we’re facing an empty field. “I think we fucked up.”

“That’s alright,” he says as he reaches out to me.

I smile at him as I take his hand. “You’re right, walking together with you is all I need.”

“Who said anything about walking? We’re running. I’m not paying for that hot chocolate.”

I look at him in disbelief, but he has his determined face on. “You’re kidding. It’ll be like ten bucks!” I say as he takes off. I realize then that he didn’t take my hand out of love or affection, but so he could drag me after him. The run is long and horribly torturous. Lane jogs like we’re out for a Sunday stroll while my feet cry that they’re too cold to be put through this torture.

When we reach the exit, I’m no longer cold. In fact, I’m panting for breath on wobbly legs. Jenny and Robbie are waiting for us, much to Lane’s despair.

“What were you two doing in there?” Jenny asks with wide eyes. “You know what, I don’t even want to know.”

“No...you don’t,” I pant as I try to give her a wink. It probably looks like I’m having a seizure because her eyebrow rises skeptically.

Together, we walk back to the car where we put Copper inside before heading toward the tour. Thankfully, we get in quickly because my sweat is turning cold.

Robbie and Jenny end up in front of us as I take Lane’s hand.

“Don’t punch any of the people who jump out,” I say.

“I might,” he says. “Headlock, down to a pin. Make them regret getting off on scaring people.”

“I... I’m not sure they get off on it,” I say. “I mean, I know I would, but I’m not sure these guys do.”

We didn’t need to worry, though, because I think Lane and I spend more time laughing at Robbie’s screams than anything. It makes the eeriness of the place evaporate as his level of masculinity drops.

When we’re finally through, Lane and I head to get hot chocolate while Robby and Jenny walk to the car to sit with Copper.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” I ask.

“Did my sister marry a little girl while I was gone?” he asks.

I grin. “He sure sounded like one, didn’t he?” I ask as we head toward the drink stand. “I wanted you to at least be a little scared, so you could hang on me.”

“I’m sorry,” he says as he grabs me in a hug and picks me off the ground. “I’ll use you as a shield.”

“I would be a shield for you,” I say as I breathe in his cologne. I feel like I sweated all mine off during the disgusting run.

“I know you would be,” he says as he sets me down. “But you better not ever be.”

I lean against him. “I would be anything you asked me to be. But right now, I want to be a sexy cowboy determined to break the wild stallion.”

He laughs. “At least wait until we drop my sister off.”

“Tonight was nice. It’s like I could almost forget that you’ve managed to piss off some really angry people who may or may not want us dead.” We get into the back of the line.

“I pissed them off? You stole their shit!”

“Let’s not get into this again. I didn’t *steal*, I borrowed. Just like I borrowed Jenny’s wallet for the hot chocolate. I consider it payment for her wearing my coat,” I say as I wave Jenny’s wallet around.

“You stole her wallet?”

“Borrowed, Lane,” I correct.

“Ah, right. I’m blind, I don't know the difference,” he says as he holds his hand out. I set the flowery thing in his hand and he opens it. “She owes me twenty for gas the other day and then remember when she borrowed that money for that book she wanted?”

“I’d take everything that’s in there,” I say.

“It still wouldn’t pay for what she owes me,” he says as I step up to the window.

“Four hot chocolates,” I say. Lane flips through the money as we wait for the guy to finish with our drinks.

We walk back to the car where Jenny, Robbie, and Copper are standing with a guy I don’t recognize.

“There’s a guy with them,” I say warily. It seems like lately, anyone I don’t recognize, I don’t *want* to know.

“What kind of guy?” Lane asks.

“Human.”

“Felix.”

“Twenties, blond hair, I can’t tell much else. He’s a little taller than Robbie.”

Jenny looks up at me with wide eyes and shakes her head.

I’m not sure what that means. “Jenny is shaking her head.”

“Just...walk up, see what he wants.”

“What’s going on?” I ask as we walk up.

“Give me your money,” he shouts.

I pull the lid off the hot chocolate and throw it at him.

“What the bloody fuck?” he yelps as he jumps back. He looks at me with wide eyes like *I’m* the crazy person.

Lane, who’d been moving past me to reach for the guy, stops. “You,” he growls. “Everyone, get in the car. Felix, run him over.”

“It was just a joke!” the man says with a shrug.

“Run him over twice,” Lane says as he gets into the car. Robbie and Jenny are already inside, so I get in without hesitation and start the car.

The man knocks on the window and Lane rolls it down a crack. “What?” he grumbles.

“You’re a grumpy fuck, arentcha?”

“Hit him,” Lane says as he rolls the window up.

“Do I stay or go?”

“Just leave,” he says.

“Got it,” I say and start driving. “Mind telling me who that is?”

“An idiot. I just want to know how he found me.”

“A sexy idiot,” Jenny interrupts. It makes Lane scowl and I wonder what history they had. Not that I’m jealous but because Lane seems to get himself into interesting predicaments.

“Did you hit him yet?” Lane asks as I pull out of the parking spot.

“Right now... bump bump. See?”

“That wasn’t convincing,” he says.

“You don’t care what he wants?” I ask. Although, it’s clear he doesn’t even care if he lives.

“Nope. I care about going home and playing cowboy.”

“Excuse me?” Jenny asks.

“Oh, here’s your wallet, Jenny. I used the money you owe me for hot chocolate.”

I glance in the rearview mirror as the man staggers around. He looks like he’s drunk, and now that I think about it, he smelled it too. He glances down at his wet shirt before wandering off.

Why can’t my life ever be boring?