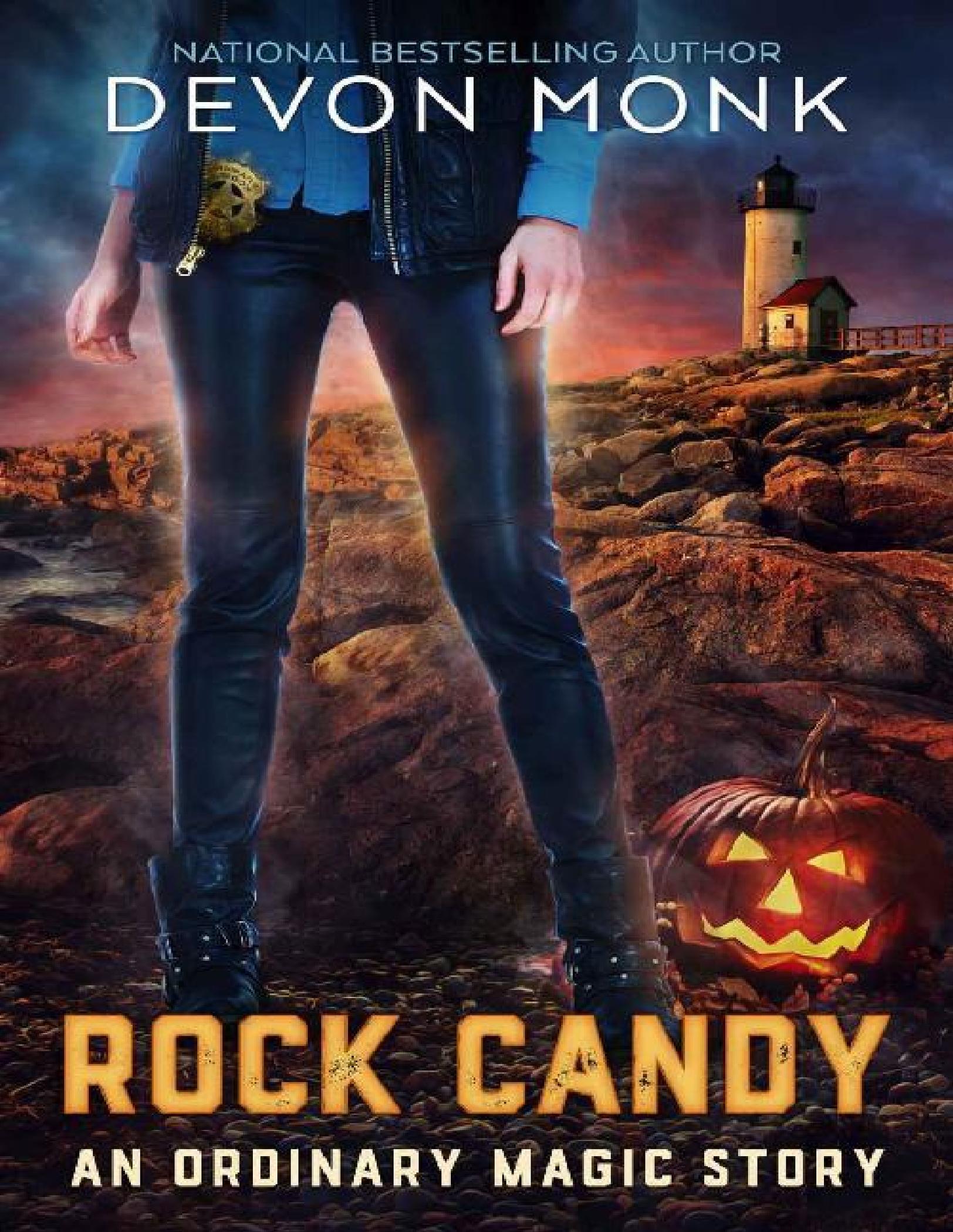


NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DEVON MONK



ROCK CANDY

AN ORDINARY MAGIC STORY

ROCK CANDY

An Ordinary Magic Story

DEVON MONK

Odd House Press

For all you mischief makers who love this spooky time of year. And for my family, who know how to keep Halloween crazy, fun, and oh, so happy.

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Just An Ordinary Halloween...

Police officer Jean Reed doesn't normally mind pulling the graveyard shift in Ordinary Oregon, the sleepy little beach town where gods vacation and monsters reside. But October in Ordinary is anything but normal. One mob of cursed gnomes, one haunted harbor festival, and one chilling visit from Death makes this October stranger than most.

But it's Jean's boyfriend, Hogan, who really has her flustered. With their six month anniversary ticking down to Halloween, she wonders if their time together is anything more than a casual fling. When she discovers Hogan has been keeping secrets, Jean must decide if their relationship has been nothing but a trick, or if it's been the one treat she's always wished for.

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 Created with Vellum

Chapter One



Late. I, Police Officer Jean Reed, was late. I threw my controller onto the chair next to the couch and jogged to the bathroom. The alarm on my cell shouted the Venture Bros. theme song from somewhere in the pile of discarded clothes at the side of my bed. I hadn't done laundry in a week because I hated doing it, so my room was a bit of a mess. I had three minutes to shower (made it in two), one minute to get into my uniform and boots (nailed it), and half a second to kiss the very sexy man lounging on my couch.

Hogan mumbled against my lips and slid a little sideways, crookeding up our mouths as he simultaneously tried to look past me at the screen where he was a tiny rock with a knight's helmet and sword on a quest to fight a paper dragon.

"Watch for the sand pit, boyfriend," I said.

"Got it."

"Don't stay up too late." We were still kissing, our words tumbling between our lips.

"Got it."

"Don't go in the scissor forest without me."

"Got it."

"Watch the hammer hail!" We both broke the kiss. I was still leaning over him, my knee between his spread legs, one arm braced on the back of the couch. His pliant body went tense and alert beneath me.

It was sexy as hell.

We both stared at the screen while he totally shielded up and threw his sword into the clouds. Sunlight broke through and melted the storm of hammers.

I exhaled. "Nice."

He paused the game. "Come here." His hands slid over my hips and he tugged at me, drawing me down. He had that warm hungry look in his clear-blue eyes, his dark features softened to a dusky purple from the glow of the game.

"No. No way." I pushed up, loving the slow friction of his palms resisting as I tried to get him to release me. "I am late. You need to go home and go to bed so you can wake up early and make me spicy maple bars, baker boy."

"Pumpkin glazed cinnamon buns, actually. They can wait."

It would be easy to stay, to wrap up in the mellow low tones of his words, to tease

out of him the slight Jamaican accent he'd inherited from his mother.

But I was late. And super responsible. And...Hogan lifted up to press a kiss at my collarbone.

What was I saying? Oh, yeah. I was a police officer. Badge, duty, and justice for all, etc., etc.

"I think," I said, as I finally pushed onto my feet, "that you better lock the door behind you and remember to put your cup in the sink this time."

Hogan shifted until he was fully sitting. Such a fine-looking man, tall with nice wide muscular shoulders, a long torso that tapered to narrow hips. He had thighs that made me envy his jeans, and a butt I couldn't keep my hands off.

But more than his ample physical aspects that drew me to him, he also had this deep, quiet gentleness that had surprised me when we first started dating after meeting on a gaming forum. His steady eyes and heart never missed anything, but he didn't feel the need to talk all the time. Didn't feel the need to judge, to declare, to order.

He was like tides, rolling in and out with an endless calm, with grace, with beauty.

It was no wonder he ran a bakery like a boss in our little seaside town where gods vacationed and monsters worked and lived. Not only did he have an amazing talent of teasing out the best and most unexpected combinations in pastries, breads, cakes and cookies, he also had a way of teasing out the best in his customers.

And in me.

That was a startling thing I still hadn't come to grips with.

We were just dating. This was a casual thing. Fun. Fleeting.

And yet...

And yet Hogan had come over after his early shift ended and before my late shift began for five months now. Five months was almost half a year. I'd never dated anyone for so long.

I'd never wanted to until now. It scared the pants off of me.

"Ah, now you're doing it."

"Doing what?" I asked.

"Thinking too hard about us."

"Like there's anything to think too hard about. Us." I tried to make it sound flip, but it came off as a question. Darn it.

"Go to work." Calm, easy.

His smile said other things. His eyes said other things. And when he stood and kissed me, his lips said oh so much more: Yes, there was an us. Yes, we were still good. Yes, this thing was going to last another week, another month.

Yes, this was good and he was here, a part of this strange little life I lived in this strange little town I helped take care of.

Yes, all that, all me, was still enough for him.

I wanted to hear that from him. Wanted to know that he knew we were something that would last. Wished we had a promise between us, a pledge. Because I worried. Hogan had traveled. He was smart and successful. There was no place in the world where he couldn't belong.

Sometimes I wondered if he could really be satisfied living here. Happy being here. Not just with this little town, but with me.

Experience told me the odds were not good on that. Most of my ex-boyfriends had left town the first chance they got. Had left me.

But there was a part of me that hoped this would be enough for him. That he'd stay here, and live here for a very long time.

He cupped my cheek with his palm and kissed me again on the forehead, a benediction, a habit, a good-bye ritual he'd done ever since I'd been hit by a car a month ago. "Be safe."

"At my desk? Not a problem." I patted his butt, because who could resist that? Certainly not I. "Hatter's going to take the graveyard shift patrol. It's all good."

"I know." And that smile. That smile. It was secret, joyful, open, reckless. It was somehow all these things, all these Hogan things, all the parts of him I wanted to hold. All the parts of him I wanted to keep.

"That grin is so much trouble," I said.

He chuckled and gave a passing effort at innocent eyes. "I like your hair all orange and purple." He drew his fingers through the long wet strands of it.

"Flatterer. You better clean up the dishes and don't forget to hit a save point before you switch over to river travel."

He didn't need me to tell him any of that. But I hoped he heard the things I had tried to wedge in between my words.

That I liked him. A lot. That I wanted him to stay in my life. Maybe for a long time.

I'm not a shy person. I never have any problem telling someone my opinion or giving them advice. I laugh things off, poke at the rules until they dent and bend, and generally act like life is not to be taken too seriously.

Being the forever-baby sister of the town's infamous Reed sister trio has its perks. We are police officers like our dad was. Delaney, my eldest sister is the bridge for god powers. She is the one and only way gods can step into town, put their powers in storage, and vacation like mortals.

My middle sister, Myra, is serious about her book studies. Most of those studies involve the wisdom and arcane knowledge in the ancient texts Dad left in her safekeeping, just as his dad left them to him. She has a knack for always being in the right place at the right time.

And me? Well, I have the family gift of knowing when something really bad is going to happen. A month ago, that feeling was the only thing that gave me a split-second warning before a car had come barreling toward me.

I could have died instead of just been banged up a little.

So it's a good talent to possess, but it isn't as important as the things my sisters do and the gifts they possess.

Also, my gift isn't without cost. Not that I've ever told anyone that.

"Jean." Hogan rubbed his hands down my arms. Long, strong fingers caught to weave between mine. "What's wrong?"

Nothing. That was the truth I wanted to believe. So I held onto it with both hands and

all my heart.

"I'm late because some sexy son-of-a-bun is holding my hands like he's going to ask me to go steady." I grinned at him and batted my eyes.

He shook his head, but there was nothing but smile in him. Sunshine and warmth. Like a hearth fire. Like home.

Was I that for him too? Despite my bravado, I couldn't work up the nerve to ask.

"I'll see you soon." He gave my hand one more squeeze, then flopped back down on the couch.

And just like that, the moment to ask him if he wanted the same thing I wanted: for our five months of dating to turn into something more, for us to agree that we needed each other for more than a week, a month, a year, had passed.

I could hear the clang of the rock knight cutting his way through the cardboard cliffs before I'd even gotten halfway across my living room to the door.

Chapter Two



Ordinary's police station was a small one-story building tucked off the main coastal road: Highway 101. It had a screen of trees to one side, wetland at the back, and a parking lot on the other side.

Myra's perfectly clean cruiser and Delaney's old Jeep were both parked by the station. I parked my truck facing the wetlands instead because I loved how the trees and brush had gone brown and orange.

Autumn. My favorite time of year. Fall came early on the Oregon coast, trees shedding down to their bare bones only to be wrapped in heavy fog and draped in gowns of grey and rain. The wet had settled in for the long winter months, storms rising and falling between wedges of pale yellow sun breaks. Showers, drizzle, rain, downpours, would all take their turn rolling through from now until spring.

The air was filled with the smells of fires on the beach, rain in the pines, moss, green, dirt, and salt. And between all that floated the sweetness of coffee roasters, bakeries, and pumpkin spice.

Pumpkin spice everything.

I could see how some people couldn't wait for Thanksgiving, for that warm, cozy comfort of family and food and familiar faces. I liked Thanksgiving just fine too.

But my holiday, the one I checked off the days on my calendar for, the one that I intended to start decorating for tomorrow, was Halloween.

I loved it as a kid. I loved seeing the monsters in town dress up as things they really weren't, and loved it even better when they came out as their real selves. Loved it when they went all-out giving candy, running haunted houses, and hosting pumpkin carving contests. I loved it even more when the gods in town got into it. One year Frigg threw a costume ball so crazy and fun, I had never found the bra I'd been wearing.

I loved the witches, hexes, ghosts and ghouls. I loved the Halloween movies and cartoons that played non-stop from October first to October thirty-first. I loved the old silent horror movies, and the newer, much more screamier, bloody ones. I was a sucker for pumpkin patch hay mazes and apple bobbing and just...everything.

Halloween was my jam, and I celebrated it every single day through October.

I got out of the truck, ignored the drizzle, and made my way into the station. As soon as I stepped through the door, I knew I was in trouble.

Every person in the room had their finger on their nose.

"You all look ridiculous." I took off my coat and tried not to let my panic show.

Something was going on. It must be a bad thing since every person on the force was acting like a three-year-old.

"Hey, baby sister," Delaney said in her not-boss voice. "We have a little job for you."

I waved my hand at all of them. "You can stop grinning and pointing at your noses. I get it. I'm pulling crap duty. Bring it on."

"No argument?" Myra raised one of her sculpted brows. She was always so put together, and she totally owned the rock-a-billy look.

I snuck an extra glance at Delaney. She'd been shot with a vampire-killing bullet about a month ago. Even though she had tried to pass it off as no big thing, that had been the second bullet she'd been on the wrong end of this year.

Her recovery had taken time. Ryder Bailey, her boyfriend who was standing in the corner of the room looking all rugged and handsome as our reserve officer, had moved her in with him. As far as I could tell things were going good for them.

Really good.

That made me happy in a way nothing had for a long time. I mean, I'd been waiting forever for them to finally catch a frickin' clue and see how good they were together.

Ryder and Delaney had known each other nearly all their lives. In second grade, I'd caught Ryder making a wish on a dandelion fluff. He'd been really quiet when he'd done it, his voice just a whisper. But he didn't know I'd been there, right around the corner, digging a hole I was going to fill with water so I could make mud monsters.

His wish? He wanted Delaney to love him like he loved her.

And I'd heard it.

Everybody knew if you heard a wish someone else made, that wish wouldn't come true.

Which, yeah, maybe that wasn't how it worked. Wishes were tricky magic, and I certainly wasn't someone who knew all the ins and outs of that.

But when I'd been seven, I'd known three things: Ryder loved my sister. I'd heard him wish for her to fall in love with him, which meant it couldn't come true. Therefore, I had to do everything I could to make sure his wish came true.

And I had. Of course Ryder had waffled between throwing longing looks her way and ignoring her completely all through high school. Delaney had done the same with him. And no matter what I tried, they never seemed to both be in the longing stage at the same time.

Then Ryder had gone out of state for six years of college, and I figured all those years of me finagling to get them together were wasted.

But he'd come home almost two years ago now.

And look at them: in love.

Hatter snapped his fingers. "Jean?" he said in that Texas accent that I thought he just put on so people would buy his long-and-lanky, easy-going cowboy vibe. "I think we broke her."

"Please." I rolled my eyes. "Like anything about this job can break me. What is it,

what do I have to do?"

"You do know what day today is?" Hatter asked.

"September thirtieth?"

Shoe snorted a laugh, which was all the laugh that man could make. Shoe had been Hatter's partner when they'd been on the force up in Tillamook before we'd stolen them for the force here. He was Hatter's opposite in just about every way. Short, wide, reticent, suspicious, and seemingly humorless. Seemingly, but not actually without humor. Get a few drinks into that man, and he was a hoot.

"Try again," Hatter suggested. He wagged his eyebrows and bit down on a juicy grin.

"It's the first," Delaney said, totally squashing his fun. "October first, Jean. Tonight, when the sun goes down in three hours, you'll need to be ready."

I heard her, but the only words that registered were the date. October first. Already? Yes, of course, already. I'd just been admiring the autumn leaves and reminiscing about Halloween.

How had I forgotten the horror we had to deal with every October?

"Jean?" Delaney said.

Hatter snapped his fingers again.

I glanced up at him. At her. At all of them. Felt the fear crawl over my skin with prickly feet. "The gnomes."

It came out as a rough whisper.

Shoe snorted again.

"We hear it's a problem," Hatter drawled. "You folks have to deal with them every October? That right?"

I tried to talk, but my throat was too dry. So I swallowed and tried again. "It's more than that."

"It will be fine," Delaney said. "I did it the year before last. No big deal."

"If you call that slimy disaster no big deal," I said.

"You're being dramatic."

"We were scrubbing pixie puke off the highway for weeks."

"Pixie puke?" Ryder asked.

Yes, he'd lived in Ordinary all his life, but he'd only recently found out about the secrets it held. He always jumped in and asked questions whenever we mentioned a new kind of creature that he didn't know lived here.

Delaney had made us swear not to clue him in to any of the supernaturals because she liked to make him figure it out on his own.

Frankly, I thought she used that knowledge in exchange for kinky sex or something.

"The papers said it was a hag fish spill," Myra supplied.

Ryder frowned. "So pixies look like snot eels?"

"Not at all," Delaney said. "But when gnomes make an entire swarm of pixies puke, it gets pretty slimy. All over the highway. All over half a dozen unfortunate cars. Smells like rotten fish. And takes days to clean up." At the look on his face, she smiled. "Aren't you glad you know that little factoid, Mr. Bailey?"

"Uh, not really."

"Like I said," I said, "disaster. And before you say anything," I jabbed a finger toward Myra, "I have two words for the job you did with this last year: chocolate toilets."

Myra had the good grace to wince. "We took care of it."

Was she blushing? I hoped she was blushing.

"We replaced every public toilet in Ordinary, including the heads in half the boats docked in the bay. If I never see another stanky wax ring, flange, or flapper in my life, it will be too soon."

"Good band name," Hatter noted.

"Flange and Flapper?"

"Stanky Wax Ring."

I grinned at him. There was a reason he and I got along like sinner and sinnest.

"Are you done?" Now that was Delaney's boss voice.

"With?"

"Stalling to try to get out of this? I'm sending Hatter out with you."

"I can do it alone."

"You won't because I said you won't. I expect you to update me as soon as you make contact."

"Contact?" Hatter pulled a stick of gum out of his pocket and tossed it in his mouth, breath-freshening like an interviewee in suck-up mode.

"The head gnome," I grumbled. I stormed over to the little table in the hall that held the coffee pot and usually a few snacks. Nothing but dregs and crumbs. "I expect a fresh pot of this when I get back." I lifted the coffee pot. Shook it.

Four sets of fingers zeroed in on noses.

"Oh, for real?"

Delaney chuckled. "I'll make coffee before I end my shift. Call as soon as you find the leader."

And because she was my big sister, and because she sounded genuinely concerned, and because I knew just how dangerous this assignment could be, I nodded.

"Where have we last seen headless Abner?" I asked.

"Myra?" Delaney asked.

Myra shook her head and sat at her desk. She tapped a screen there. "Last we saw him, he was on the corner of Ebb and 4th."

"By the old fire hall?" I asked.

"That was last March. I drove by yesterday and didn't see him."

Of course she had. Myra was thorough like that. Responsible. Got things done in the proper order of doing them. Despite the milk chocolate toilet debacle.

"We'll start there." I grabbed my coat.

"What do they look like?" Ryder asked all casual, like he wasn't chomping at the bit to find out a little more about Ordinary's more unusual citizens.

"Gnomes? They look like gnomes," I said.

"So....red hats?" he ventured.

"You've seen gnomes, Ryder."

"All right," he said in a go-on tone.

I just grinned. "Maybe if you do something kinky for Delaney, she'll tell you all about it."

Delaney sighed and covered her face with one hand. Ryder let out a surprised laugh, but that look in his eyes as he watched her reaction was all lust and love.

"Maybe I will," he said quietly.

I gave him two thumbs up.

What could I say? I was a romantic at heart.

Chapter Three



Hatter and I drove past the old fire hall, which was a box of a building barely big enough to hold two parked cars and a can opener. The parking lot of a restaurant with mural of a disappointed crab stretched out east of the little fire hall. Short brown grass cut a small swath on the west side by the fire hydrant.

The building wore an indifferent coat of yellow paint, and the glass garage doors took up the whole face of it. There was a sign on the door saying the meeting had been moved to the community center. The sign was faded. I didn't think this old place had been used in years.

A perfect spot for headless Abner.

"You gonna let me in on this?" Hatter asked like he was wondering if I wanted to split an order of fries. And if he'd actually asked that I would have told him no, because, hello: fries are not for sharing. But this was about gnomes and gnomes were an all-hands-on-deck problem.

"I sometimes forget that you don't know everything about Ordinary."

"Does anyone?"

I shrugged and decided to drive around the block one more time just to make sure I had covered the hall from all angles. Gnomes were tricky.

Hatter fiddled with the vent. "I've done a fair share of pitching in when your father asked, but it wasn't all that often. He liked to play things pretty close to the vest about this town."

"He had a protective streak a mile wide. Delaney inherited it."

"Pretty sure all his daughters inherited it."

"Fair."

"So, gnomes?"

I sighed. "I don't know how it happened. Some people say it was a drunk witch. Others say it was a curse-happy harpy. I've even heard whispers that the local Jinn did it as a revenge-wish fulfillment. But whoever or whatever did it, we have to spend every day of October mopping up after that mess."

"Still don't know what mess we should be mopping. Gonna stop talking in circles any time soon, or should I pay for an extra ride?"

I gave him a short smile. "That wish, hex, spell, whatever, fell on all the gnomes in

the town."

He frowned.

"The garden gnomes. The statues people put out in their yards and think are cute? Those gnomes."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "I thought we were talking living breathing sorts of people."

"We are. For the thirty-one days of October, the garden gnomes come alive. They are living, they are breathing, and they are pissed off little buggers."

He laughed. It was a squeaky, hissy sound that I liked. Hatter was fun to be around. He had a way of making things seem like they weren't as bad as one might think, and that there was room for a little fun shoved between all the responsibilities of this job.

"So we should be looking for something on the move?"

"Not until sunset."

"They only come alive at night? That's not creepy."

"Some of them are okay, I guess, or at least not creepy, really. But angry? Oh, yeah."

"What do they have to be angry about?"

"Spending eleven months out of the year frozen as stone? Hating that they have to wear the same dumb hats every day of their lives? Or, oh, here's a good one. That time they found out a gnome statue got the job for that travel commercial. A gnome statue that wasn't from Ordinary."

"Didn't go over well?"

"Ca-frickin'-lamity. We had to round them up into one of the storage units, and then red hat our way in to calm them down."

"Red hat?"

"It's a gnome thing. If you put on a red hat, preferably pointed, they'll think you're one of them."

"Even though I would, presumably, be taller than a garden gnome?"

"Yep."

"And human, and alive, and a cop?"

"It's like bats seeing with their ears. If a gnome sees a red hat, you're a gnome."

He grinned and snapped his gum. "I do not know why I didn't ask to be transferred to this town years ago. You have all the fun."

I gave him my evil laugh. "Oh, we'll see if you still think that when you're done with gnome duty, buddy."

"Bring it on, Jee-jee."

I flipped him a finger and scowled at the nickname even though I sort of liked it.

"We need to go on foot." I pulled into the parking lot next to the old fire hall.

"Statue, right?"

"Yep."

"Is there a reason you call him headless Abner?"

"He has no head, Hatter."

"Doesn't that make it difficult during negotiations?"

"He's good at charades."

"You're serious."

"As a...." I patted my chest and made my fingers into claws.

"Serious as an angry monkey? Mad monkey? Monkey Jean? Monkey in jeans?"

"Monkey? How did you get monkey out of this?" I repeated the motions. "Heart attack. It's heart attack. I'm as serious as a heart attack. You suck at charades. You are not allowed to handle the negotiations with Abner."

"All right then. I'll..." he pointed at his eyes, then tipped his fingers down and made scissoring motions, "follow your lead."

We started off toward the hall. As the dark of evening thickened into night, the chill of winter pinched goose bumps from my skin. I zipped my jacket and scanned the tall grass. It was possible someone had finally gotten rid of headless Abner. It was possible he'd been taken to the dump. I shuddered a little. Most gnomes that were thrown away stayed inert during October. But there were...rumors. Reports we'd never been able to verify.

"Your face," Hatter said, as we rounded the corner to the back of the hall. "What are you thinking about?"

"Zombie gnomes."

He stilled, then his smile swept up wide. "Just adding 'zombie' on the front of a thing doesn't make it more frightening, you know. Watch: Zombie potato. Zombie turtles. Zombie accordion."

"Sure, you talk big now. See how hard you're laughing when a zombie gnome is eating your brains."

"Will it even know I'm edible if I'm not wearing a red hat?"

"Ha. Ha."

We'd finished the perimeter of the building and I paused, hands on my hips, scanning the damp grassy stretches farther down the road. It was getting too dark to see much without flashlights.

"Should I secure zombie-killing bullets? Or is this a hammer-and-chisel-to-the-heart kind of operation?"

"Look, smartass. We don't even know that there are zombie gnomes. I've never seen it, and neither has Myra or Delaney."

"So what you're saying is there is no danger."

"What I'm saying is, if there are zombie gnomes, and we have heard rumors that say it's possible, then we have no idea how to restrain or kill them. So laugh about that, why don't you."

And the jerk did.

Chapter Four



Turned out headless Abner was a no-show. He wasn't in any of his typical haunts. He used to belong to a rental on Ebb Street, but it looked like the new rental agency had finally done away with him.

"So what's the next move?" Hatter asked.

It was super dark now, and we were parked on the corner of Anchor. Mr. Denver lived there along with his wife. Mr. Denver was a retired music teacher with hearing damage, and Mrs. Denver slept with a jet engine she insisted was a white noise machine. She also collected yard art. A lot of yard art.

Including a boatload of gnomes.

The little buggers were hiding in the bushes, stacked up the edges of the front steps, hanging on swings from the porch rafters.

A quick count gave me thirty of various sizes and accouterments. Some with shovels, some with buckets, some with lanterns, flowers, bunnies, mushrooms, and one with a gun.

I was keeping an eye on the one with the gun.

"We wait for them to wake up."

"Sun's down," he noted.

"Yep." I took a drink of my soda, didn't look away from the yard. "Any minute now."

"There some kind of strategy to this?"

I saw a branch rustle, grass wave. This was it. "Think like a gnome."

I pushed out of the truck and strode to the yard knowing there was no way Mr. and Mrs. Denver would hear us.

It was important to pick out the leader of the group. Not easy since they all looked pretty much the same. All the boy gnomes had beards, all the girl gnomes had braids.

"We going to see anything else come alive?" Hatter whispered as we came up on one side of the big rhododendron bush at the edge of the property. "Flamingos? That bear statue over there?" He waved toward the garage.

"Just gnomes."

I didn't know if there was a time-release on the spell, hex, whatever it was, but one minute they were statues, maybe a random shift or blink here or there, and then they were all alive.

I stepped out from behind the bush. "Is headless Abner still one of you?"

Three dozen gnomey heads turned. Three dozen sets of gnomey eyes looked up at me, lingered on my badge, then looked away.

Well, they all looked away except for one gnome. She was vintage, chubby, with happy round features and two long blonde braids falling from beneath her hat. She wore a long dress and a scowl.

"Gnice to see you, Officer Reed." She said in passable English, though there was a bit of an accent—nothing I'd heard from any creature except a gnome. I didn't know what it was, but it always caught at my ear, as if there was a silent letter in there somewhere I should be noticing. "Who's the gnaw partner?"

"This is Officer Hatter. He'll be your secondary contact for the month."

She was still scowling, but wasn't looking at us anymore. Gnomes had short attention spans. Sometimes that worked to our advantage.

"Why are my apples purple?" She shook the basket hanging from the crook of her arm as if that would do something useful. The little stone apples clacked like a fistful of marbles. "Why are all my apples purple?"

This was bad. Gnomes were creatures of habit. If one found out someone had updated their paint colors with a little bit of whimsy, it did not go over well.

"They're plums," I said.

She glanced up at me, then back at her basket. "Plums?"

"Plums."

"Oh," she said with a quick smile. "How invigorating. Plums." She stood a little taller, tipped the knob of her chin upward. "I wouldn't suppose any of the other gnomes have plums in their baskets, do they?"

I had no idea.

"Absolutely not," I said. "You're quite the trendsetter. So, about headless Abner. Have you seen him?"

"Why would you think I had?"

"You're in the most heavily populated gnome yard in town. I just thought someone would have brought him this way."

"He's gnot at the hall?"

"No."

She turned around, a shuffling, rocking motion as if her legs were made out of flat-bottomed ice cream cones.

She made a show of looking at the gnomes who had all crowded up to stand behind her.

"He's gnot here," she said, as if just noticing.

"Right. Do you know where he is?"

"Gno?"

I waited.

She shuffle-rocked back around to face me. "He's gone."

"Gone, gone, gone," the gnomes whisper-chanted behind her.

Great. They'd gone from unalive to culty in ten seconds flat.

"We are without a leader."

"Leader, leader, leader."

"A gnew leader must be chosen!"

"Gnew, Gnew, Gnew!"

"Only the most worthy shall lead us. The most trendsetting." She reached into her basket and grasped a plum, then held it up over her head as if it were a torch. "She who holds the plums of prophecy!"

Hatter shifted, his hand lingering at his hip. "On a scale of one to get-the-grenades, how crazy is this?"

"Hatter, it's always get-the-grenades in this town."

Both his eyebrows rose slowly. "Want me to call for reinforcements?"

"Naw. We can handle this. Behold my power." I held out my hand, palm flat forward. "Red light."

Just like in the kid's game, Red Light/Green Light, every gnome went dead still and looked up at me. I had no idea why a kid's game worked on them, but I was glad it did.

If I'd never dealt with these little statue people before, it might be unsettling, those eyes of stone with a frightening kind of longing filling them. It might be a tad bit terrifying to realize that those eyes hungered for a life less fleeting than their own.

Gnomes weren't exactly stable. But we dealt with dangerous creatures every day.

We'd recently had a demon blackmail his way into town via stealing Delaney's soul. Also, he seemed to be way too interested in Myra. Whenever he and Myra were in the same room, they were arguing.

It would have been entertaining to watch Myra get all riled up—okay, who am I kidding? It was entertaining—but there was a lot about demons I didn't know and didn't understand.

There was no chance he was harmless. And I didn't care what Delaney said. He enjoyed getting Myra worked up a little too much for it to be passed off as just a 'demon thing'.

Because, seriously? I wasn't down with a demon who held one of my sisters' soul hostage, while he was making moves on my other sister.

Even if he was handsome, had a wicked disregard of the rules and had, shockingly, saved a couple lives in town.

For a price.

I wasn't into the bad-boy type. But there was no denying he had this...smolder, plus flashing eyes and muscles for miles.

Bathin was hard to miss, but he was not hard on the eyes.

I could see why Myra might not want to resist all that.

But before she made a move, before he made a move, I needed to know more about him.

What would hold a demon down? Chains? Spells? The Home Shopping Channel played backward to summon a portal into a dimension of unknown horror?

That was totally a thing. Do not try it at home, kids.

There had to be a way to find out what his intentions with Myra really were. Lock him

in a cell in the middle of the night when Delaney and Myra were off shift? Handcuffs, zip ties, holy trinkets and chains? Oh, yeah. That would do it. I could make him talk.

Because I was good at that. Good at being everyone's friend. Good at being the one who was easy to talk to, the one who didn't ever let the world get to me. I laughed a lot, played a lot, and was never shy about giving my opinion.

I could be a hardass when I needed to be.

That was a side of me I didn't let out very often. A side of me I certainly hadn't let Hogan see yet.

Something like fear knotted my stomach, and I checked to see if this was a bad-feeling omen courtesy of my family gift.

Nope. It didn't have that edge to it that hit me like a javelin to the brain, then kept on digging until I felt like I was going to toss my cookies.

This was just regular old dread. Worry over the just-for-fun relationship with Hogan that was starting to feel like something just-a-lot more to me.

Something deeper. Something honest.

Being the youngest Reed meant I had two other siblings who were quick to take on any and every responsibility. Though I'd never asked for it, Delaney and Myra had always tried to shelter me from the harsher aspects of life.

I didn't want to be sheltered. The only way I'd convinced them of that was not letting them see how much my bad omen ability really affected me. So I smiled. I laughed. I joked. I didn't show them that I woke up with nightmares so real sometimes, it took me hours to stop shaking. I didn't tell them that once I knew something bad was going to happen, I carried it in me, the sounds, sights, smells, and touch of it as if it were happening to me, over and over.

I'd been determined to follow right in Dad's footsteps despite my family gift. And in my sisters' footsteps too. I'd become a police officer and, as a Reed, I'd become a guardian of Ordinary and Ordinary's secrets.

Somewhere along the way I'd decided it was my job as the youngest to make sure my sisters fell in love and lived happily ever after.

Even if that meant interrogating a demon behind my sisters' backs. Even if that meant scheming for years to get Ryder and Delaney to finally look at each other and see what they could be.

But my love life? That I had always been determined to play easy-breezy.

Did it matter that Hogan and I were coming up on our six-month anniversary of dating?

Did I want it to matter? Yes, yes, I did.

"Ordinary to Officer Reed," Hatter said. "You are cleared for landing. Copy that?"

I blinked a couple times to focus. Gnomes all looking up at me with beady eyes. Hatter standing closer than he had been just a...however many minutes ago.

Still night. Still dark. Still a little drizzly. Still no headless Abner.

"You at full capacity, Reed, or should I call this in?"

"I just got a little derailed for a second there." I so didn't want him calling my sisters on me.

"You should install a brake on that brain of yours."

"What, and give up all the random scheming? You'd miss it."

"All right. Say I would. How about you scheme our way out of the thundergnome that's about to go down here."

I chuckled. "All alive gnomes of Ordinary," I started in an authoritative tone I'd heard Delaney use since I was six years old and she'd decided she was the boss of me, my stuffed animals, and our cat that, according to her, didn't like rides in the clothes dryer.

How did she know what the cat liked? She couldn't speak cat.

"You will not forget that, while you are alive, there are rules you must follow to remain in this town. You may not harm any human, creature, or god or else you will be exiled."

There was a collective gnomey gasp, and a whispered "gno!" though I couldn't tell who said it.

"You are a creation of Ordinary. A gift."

Ha! A curse, more like, or spell. But from their perspective, I had to assume they considered life a gift.

"Outside of this town, you will no longer be alive. You will be stone statues every day and night of the year. So I suggest you choose your new leader peacefully. Understand?"

They still stood there, staring at me. Oh, right. I had to say the magic words. One of them sort of "meep"ed.

"Green light."

And that's when the gnomes attacked.

Okay. Attacked might be a little dramatic. They were small. And shuffley and had flat teeth. But they were also armed with hoes and pick axes and purple apples and a gun, for chrissake.

For being such little things, they could carry a hell of a punch if they got in punching range.

When they all closed in as quickly as their little flat-cone legs could take them, they were a force to be reckoned with.

"Red light," I commanded.

Yeah, we were way past that. They just kept shuffling. At least they hadn't gotten to chanting yet.

"Whose gnight? Gnomes's gnight!" A brown-bearded fellow with a wheelbarrow said.

And yep. Here came the chant.

"Whose gnight? Gnomes's gnight! Whose gnight? Gnomes's gnight!"

"So I'm gonna go ahead and call for backup," Hatter said.

"Naw, we'll just round them up."

He looked down at the pointy hatted mob. "Don't think I have cuffs that small."

"These are gnomes, Hatter. Cuffs don't work." I reached into my jacket pocket, and pulled out two thin paper packets. I tossed one to Hatter.

He caught it, turned it between his fingers. Read the front. "Radish seeds."

I ripped the top off of my packet of carrot seeds. "Sprinkle like your life depends on it," I said with a chuckle.

Hatter took me at my word. He tore open the packet and sprinkled, casting out far past our shuffling hoard, while I did the same.

The tiny, and I do mean tiny, radish and carrot seeds tumbled into the damp grass.

As soon as they hit the ground the gnomes all cheered, "Seeds!"

And then: "Gno!"

As if a switch had been flipped, they suddenly started moving more smoothly and efficiently. They worked the wet, grassy soil with whatever tool they might have, or with their bare hands, tending the tiny seeds.

Hatter stood beside me watching the industrious little crew. Even the gnome with the gun was shooting tiny holes into the dirt, though I wasn't sure what good that would do.

"Huh. So this is a thing. You couldn't have given me a head's up?"

"It doesn't work every time, honestly." The annoyed look he gave me was awesome.

"Stop scowling. Most of these garden gnomes are actually garden gnomes. Their first instinct is to garden. They're going to track down, sort out, and replant every one of these seeds into neat little rows. Mr. and Mrs. Denver might have a nice little veggie garden if the seeds make it through winter. This should keep the gnomes busy until sunrise."

"And by then they'll be stone again."

"Not only stone, but by then, they will have forgotten all about this. Very short attention spans. They only remember one day at a time, though they have some kind of long-term memory that allows them to remember they're only alive in October, and during that time they have to live under the rules of Ordinary and follow what their leader says."

I strolled toward the truck.

"Now that Abner is gone, they don't have a leader," he said.

"I know." I got into the truck. Time to cruise the neighborhoods where other gnomes might be wandering. "That's why we need to find out who killed Abner."

Chapter Five



Delaney rolled into the station before sunrise. I was at my desk, having already written up my reports. Hatter had left about an hour ago to get some sleep.

Hogan and I had been trading dirty texts since 4:00 am. Owning a bakery made Hogan an early riser. I hadn't been willing to give up the night shift for a couple reasons. One was that it gave me time to deal with my nightmares if they popped up. Another was that I liked Ordinary at night. Most of the time it was quiet as a cotton ball.

Every once in a while the nocturnal members of our town would be out and about causing trouble. I loved to see what the vamps, weres, ghouls, and other people got up to at night.

I'd been known to join in if it was a bit of fun.

I'd been known to tell them to knock it off, if it was illegal, too.

This morning I'd been trying to talk Hogan into bringing me donuts. It was the middle of the morning rush and he couldn't get away since it was only him and Billy manning the place now that all the barely legal high school labor had gone back to school.

"Morning." Delaney hung up her coat and headed straight for the coffee pot. "Anything I should know?"

"Headless Abner is missing. Dead or disposed of. The gnomes in Mr. and Mrs. Denver's yard tried to riot, and the Higgins's cow got out, ate a box of apples, and got stuck in their neighbor's pool."

She glanced at me.

"Empty pool."

She nodded. "So, just a normal night."

I threw the pencil I had been drumming on the desk edge at her. It missed because she knew how to dodge.

"The gnomes have no leader. It's a problem. No, wait, I got this." I spread my hands like I was envisioning a marquee in lights. "Missing Headless Abner Leaves Gnomes Head Less."

"Boo."

"You like it."

"Maybe it's time for the gnomes to get a new leader. You'll need to gather them up and walk them through the process."

"Right. Sure. Happy to. Except I don't know what the process is because there is no process."

She grinned at me and took a sip of coffee. "Like that's going to stop you."

I groaned and let my head fall back between my shoulders, eyes locked on the ceiling. "Why? Why me? Myra would be better at this. You would be better at this. I'm the worst choice for this job."

"Oh?"

I held up my hands and ticked off points on my fingers even though I didn't look away from the ceiling. "I'm impatient. Impulsive. Easily distracted. Blunt. Not the kind of person you want to guide a tiny terra cotta culture through a big political adjustment."

"You forgot something," she said gently.

I tipped my head down and met her sparkling gaze. She pointed at her own finger. "Dramatic."

"You suck and I don't like you anymore."

She laughed and leaned against my desk. "I'll let Myra know you need some suggestions on how to get a new leader in place. You'll need to get it done soon."

I covered my eyes, imagining the horrors of Halloween rolling out with a bunch of murderous gnomes roaming the streets.

"We could round them up. Lock them up, just for the month. It's not like they would remember what was happening from one day to the next." I knew, as soon as it was out of my mouth, that it was a bad idea. We didn't lock up a person, creature, or god simply because they were an inconvenience. There were laws in Ordinary. Rules.

And we Reeds followed them.

"What's going on?" Delaney asked. I was glad she didn't call me out on the gnome incarceration idea. But I wasn't sure where this was headed.

"With?"

"You. This." She waved her finger at me, sort of taking in my slouch, my messy desk, my pile of tiny ripped up pieces of paper standing like a mountain, a snowstorm, an avalanche between my Snape and Dr. Orpheus dolls.

"Nothing's going on." She'd buy that, right? Because it wasn't like I was feeling the dread, the horrible something-is-going-wrong-really-soon thing.

As a matter of fact, it was sort of the lack of that feeling that was making me itchy.

Hogan and I had been dating for months. Months. I couldn't remember the time I'd dated a boy for more than a few weeks. By Halloween, Hogan and I would have been dating for half a year. That was not like me. I was the fun one, the young one, the sister who wasn't looking for a full-time mister.

And yet Hogan had shown up in my life (okay, I'd totally hit on him until he sent me fancy donuts to get me off his back) and he just hadn't...left.

That's not how things worked for me. All my past boyfriends, and yeah, that one girl I'd messed around with in middle school, had left as soon as the fun ran out, as soon as the laughs ran out.

I did not blame them. Who wanted to date a doomsayer?

No one.

No one wanted to be a doomsayer either. But I didn't get a choice in that.

Delaney snapped her fingers in my face. "Testing, testing. Do you copy, Rubber Duck?"

"Annoying." I pushed her hand away, but smiled. She was funny. Sometimes.

"Talk." Delaney rolled a chair over and sat. I watched to see if any of her injuries were bothering her today. She wasn't favoring her side at all, which was good. It still made me furious that she'd been shot.

This was a small town. We didn't solve our problems with guns, no matter what the big city folk would like to believe.

Okay. We didn't do it very often.

"I don't want to be on gnome duty."

"Liar. Next."

"There is no next."

"Jean."

"Delaney."

She just stared at me with those big sister eyes.

I blew out a breath. "Fine. It's almost been six months since I've been seeing Hogan."

"And?" she asked when I didn't say anything else.

"Six months is a long time."

She sighed. "I thought that's what you wanted? A long-term relationship? Something more than just friends? Or are you getting bored with him?"

My phone chimed with a message from Hogan.

SexyMuffin: All out of frosting. Rolled through a metric ton of pumpkin-spice cinnamon buns in a half hour flat. Who's a baking god? Worship at the altar, baby.

I grinned, then texted back quick.

Hotcop: No! You didn't save one for me? *crack goes my heart* You're a terrible god.

SexyMuffin: If only I'd saved some frosting, I'd patch that heart right up for you.

Hotcop: Ha! Gonna take more than frosting to fix this, buddy.

SexyMuffin: Name it. Anything. (Except frosting, natch)

Hotcop: How are those mint brownies holding up?

SexyMuffin: Six left.

Hotcop: What? What kind of god can't sell a plate of brownies?

SexyMuffin: Who said they're for sale? Boxed 'em up for you, baby. *god mode: winning*

Hotcop: God-smud. I don't see them in my mouth.

SexyMuffin: Three...two...

I tipped my head, wondering what he was up to.

"...one."

I knew that voice, and couldn't stop the squeal of delight that shot out of my mouth. "SexyMuffin!"

"Hey there, Hotcop."

Delaney groaned like she had just had enough of us already.

"How's your morning going, Officer Reed?" Hogan strolled into the station like he

owned the air, the ground, and every single one of my heartbeats that inexplicably synched up to the rhythm of his steps.

He was built lean, with wide muscular shoulders, tight, flat stomach, and a bubble ass I couldn't keep my eyes off of. His skin was darker than mine, inherited from his Jamaican mother, his hair long black braids that he kept tied at the base of his neck.

That face I couldn't get enough of was angled, but softened around all the edges so it always seemed like he was about to break into a smile, his eyes a startling blue he'd gotten from the dad he never talked about.

The man was summer and sunshine and happiness. And love. Anyone could see that from a mile away. Anyone would be amazed to be around him, to be with him.

Just like I was amazed. Happy. Giddy, even.

Except...except when I thought about how long we'd been together. And that if he and I revealed all our secrets of who we really were to each other, maybe we'd both give up on this.

"Hey," he said, stopping on the lobby side of the counter like everyone in Ordinary should. Like he should, even though I hadn't thought of him as just another person who lived in town for months now. "Did someone here say they couldn't wait to get my brownies in their mouth?"

Delaney snorted, but didn't move away from my desk. She was watching Hogan, probably using her cop eyes to take in his body language: relaxed, his voice: sexy, his eyes: happy. Happy to see me. Not a mask, not a flicker of fear or lies.

I held back a sigh.

I sucked at this relationship thing. Which was weird, right? Because I could tell Delaney what she needed to do to make her relationship with Ryder work. I could tell Myra to stop not-flirting (totally flirting) with Bathin. Because, c'mon: demon.

I could poke at Hatter when he used those cheesy pick-up lines in the bar that worked for him, but only because he laid on the fake Southern accent so thick and followed it up with those puppy dog eyes.

I could even give out advice in all my gaming groups, both online and in person.

I was good at this. Good at helping people be their best selves, their honest selves so they could be with someone else. Build a best togetherness.

Like, if cupid was a job and not an actual person (who currently wasn't living in Ordinary) I'd so be shooting heart arrows at anyone who so much as made eye contact with me.

But when it came to my heart, my own honest self, I wanted to duck and cover big time.

Delaney slid her gaze to me. I wasn't sure what she saw, but yeah, Hogan wasn't the problem in this relationship. That was all on me.

She raised one eyebrow. I didn't know if it was the what-the-hell-is-wrong-with-you eyebrow or the aren't-you-going-to-answer-that-flirty-man eyebrow.

Maybe both. I squinted at her and resisted sticking out my tongue. Then I swiveled my chair toward Hogan.

"How about I come over there and you give your brownies to me for free, baby?" I

asked.

Delaney shook her head. She got up and took her coffee and judgey-Mcjudgement back over to her own desk where she could mind her own business.

I swanked on over to my man.

My man. I'd been thinking about him that way for a while. For weeks, if I were honest. At first it was just for fun, a silly way to tease him but now...now it felt solid. Real. Right.

What did that even mean? Was this temporary thing becoming more than that? And if it was, did Hogan feel the same?

And if this was just a casual temporary thing for Hogan, how did that make me feel?

My chest tightened and my stomach clenched. It made me feel not good. Not good at all.

"Whoa. What's going through your head, Jeans?" Hogan asked gently, reaching out with one hand while he placed the pink box of what I assumed were six mint chocolate brownies he'd held aside just for me on the counter.

I so didn't want to answer his question. "Thought you couldn't leave the shop." I leaned on the counter and he leaned too, his wide, long-fingered hands reaching across to me. Warm, strong fingers wove between my colder thinner ones. He pressed until our palms were flat together, until his warmth seeped down into me.

"Billy's got it covered."

"On her own?" Billy rocked and I knew that. She'd run the local motorcycle gang years ago. She was in her nineties now, with traffic cone orange hair and a smoking habit she couldn't quit, even though she never lit the ever-present cigarette in her mouth when she worked the bakery coffee counter.

"Don't think there's anything Billy can't handle on her own."

"Sure, yeah. She's something. That Billy. So this is nice." I peeled back the little puffin sticker that held the lid of the box shut. I couldn't meet his eyes. Why was it so hard to look at that smile?

"It's breakfast, baby, not an obligation." He squeezed our fingers tighter together. "I should have sent Billy over instead, yeah?"

"What are you even talking about? I'm super happy you're here." My voice didn't sound super happy. It sounded super confused.

"Super liar," he said. Like he could read my mind or something.

I looked up into the sunshine of him. "Just have a lot of things on my mind."

"Like?"

"Gnomes."

It was out before I could think better of it. He nodded like that made perfect sense. "Sure. They're a thing."

"They're a thing in October. And this year I have to deal with them."

"How's that going?"

"Not great." I popped the lid on the box and peered inside. "Aw...you brought me a cinnamon roll too!"

"Think I'd leave you hanging with a crack in your heart? Please."

And how sweet was he?

Maybe I was reading too much into this. Worrying about what we might be instead of enjoying what we were.

"Never doubted you for a moment, baking god," I said.

He laughed, a deep warm chuckle that rolled over me like a caress. A sexy caress.

I lifted up on my toes and leaned across the counter, which put me on just the right level to kiss him.

"What do I owe you for the goodies?"

"I think you can start with a kiss." His gaze was full of something that made me want to make him as happy as he made me.

So I kissed him and made a wish that we could do this, find a way to stay happy together no matter how long 'together' might be.

Chapter Six



Bertie, our town's one and only Valkyrie, gave me a hard look followed by a fake smile that showed how white and sharp her teeth were, even though she appeared to be at least in her eighties and should, by all rights, be wearing dentures.

"You called?" I asked.

"I did. Have a seat, Jean."

Bertie pretty much ran the community center of Ordinary from this pleasant refurbished brick school building which also offered space for local artists. She single-handedly managed to pull off all of Ordinary's festivals, including the Rhubarb Rally, the Cake and Skate, something that involved knitters smothering Main Street in weird socks and ugly tree sweaters, and currently, the Haunted Harbor and Harvest Festival.

Basically, the streets along the bay were transformed into all-Halloween, all-the-time. Decorations ranged from homemade and quaint, to the level of Hollywood set designers, including an entire block that was nothing but haunted houses, each with a specific theme.

It was a huge thing for a little town to pull off, and it ran for the last two weeks of October. We were almost at the end of the month and so far, so good. Which wasn't a surprise. If anyone could not only make this festival go, but also make it grow, it was Bertie.

Because no one said no to Bertie.

"It has come to my attention that you are the contact for our autumn animated."

I blinked. "Is that a new film festival?"

She tapped her painted gold nails on the top of her desk. She had gone all out with her holiday decorations and I totally approved. There was a vulture in each corner of the ceiling, all peering down so that their hard gazes came to rest right where I was sitting.

Her desk was draped in a beautiful orange shawl of some kind. Intricate and obviously handmade lacework teased out knots of spiders, swirls of tentacles, and the detailed spread of owl feathers over the curl of ocean waves and crescent moons.

"Gorgeous," I said, pointing my Tootsie Pop toward her desk. I'd pretty much been eating a steady diet of Halloween candy for the last three weeks. Halloween was officially only two days away.

No, I hadn't figured out how to get the gnomes to elect a new leader, even with Myra's help.

Also no, they hadn't remembered they were leader-less long enough for it to be much of a problem. Like I said, short attention spans sometimes worked to our advantage.

"Thank you. It was a gift."

Was that a blush? Did Bertie have someone who was sweet on her? I grinned. "What a nice gift. Why it must have taken days and days to make. Someone must like you an awful lot, Bertie, to give you something so pretty."

She pressed her lips into a line and her eyebrows arched. "We are not here to discuss my...friendships."

Yes, I'd caught that slight hesitation. "You're blushing."

She pulled herself up straighter, which still didn't make her taller than me, and blinked rapidly like a startled bird.

I just grinned. The last time I'd seen Bertie flustered was...never. Like, seriously, she was the calmest, coolest cucumber in the whole crisper drawer. This was so great, I wanted to pull out my phone and take a picture for posterity.

But I didn't. Because I'm a professional, thank you.

Professional or not, I couldn't keep my gleeful chuckle inside. "You don't have to look so shocked," I said. "It's okay if you have a friend that likes-you likes-you."

She sniffed and just like that her blush disappeared. Flustered Bertie was replaced by the all-business, no-messing-around, community coordinator and battlefield soul-plucker I knew and loved.

"This is what I called you for." She placed a square brown box big enough to hold a coffee mug between us, closer to me than to her. It had a shipping label, but there was no return address. Bertie's office address was written by hand, large and clumsily, as if the author were writing with a blindfold on.

The address trailed off the front of the box, wrapped around the side, and appeared to come up the other side as well. I didn't think the post office would deliver a package addressed like that.

Maybe it hadn't gone through the post office.

A bad feeling crawled down my spine and curled up in my stomach. My gift kind of bad feeling. It wasn't a big one, wasn't a full-out doom twinge, but the sense of dread was big enough to make me take this box very seriously.

"I'm not opening that until you tell me what's in it."

Bertie must have sensed the shift in my mood. She couldn't read my mind, but if she could, she'd know I was wondering if I needed to call in back up. Or a bomb squad.

Not that Ordinary had a bomb squad. We'd have to pull in someone from Salem.

"It's not dangerous," Bertie said. "But it is a problem I do not have time to solve."

"Uh-huh. You know what's in there?"

"I opened it. Of course I know what's in there."

"So?"

"So?"

"So tell me what's in it."

"A gnome."

Oh. Well, that wasn't as bad as I'd expected. Since it was only eleven o'clock in the morning, I knew it had to be a statue at the moment.

"Aw...it's got to be a tiny wee one to fit in there." I pulled open the lid of the box and peeked in. "Holy shit!"

"Language, Officer Reed."

"That's not a gnome!"

Bertie dragged the box toward her with one sharpened fingernail. Tipped the box so she could see the contents.

"Red hat, bushy beard, round face, statue. Looks like a gnome to me." She let the box fall back and dusted her fingertips across her thumb.

"It's a head. It's just a head."

"If you must be technical, yes. But it's still a gnome."

I glared at her. Was that a small curve at the corners of her mouth? Was she enjoying this? Had the jump scare been her idea of fun?

I grinned. "Okay, that was pretty good." I looked in the box again. Now that I wasn't so spooked by my bad feeling, and surprised by the faded, chipped, one-eye-missing and nose-be-gone gnome decapitation in a box, I noted what I should have from the beginning.

"It's headless Abner's head, isn't it?"

"Yes," Bertie agreed. "It is."

"When did you find it?"

"It was...delivered to me this morning."

"By whom?"

"Let's say friends."

"Let's say the friends' names."

"That is wholly beside the point. The point is that Abner has been missing. I know that because I pay attention to what is going on around me, and not because I have a gnome spy."

"You have a gnome spy don't you?"

She took a drink out of a delicate pink tea cup with gold scrollwork and tiny black flowers. There was also an etching of a human skull nestled in all that pink and the words, BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEA scrawled across the bottom.

"The gnomes are your responsibility this year, am I correct?"

"Nice pivot. You should get into politics." I stuck the lollypop back in my mouth and crunched on it a bit. I'd almost broken through to the chocolate middle. "What do you want me to do with the head? Have you any idea where the body is?"

"No. Although there was this note inside the box."

I made an exasperated sound while she pulled a dirty scrap of paper out from her desk drawer.

"You couldn't have led with this?"

She was enjoying herself. Really. Like the drama over the Halloween Harbor Festival wasn't enough to keep her busy?

I tipped the paper until I could make out the writing.

The penguin is next.

"Huh," I said. "Not what I expected."

"Do you understand the consequences?" Bertie asked.

"I'm guessing who ever shipped or delivered headless Abner's noggin to you just threatened Mrs. Yate's penguin."

"I knew there was a reason you went into law enforcement, Jean. Such a bright mind."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you know anything else about this?"

"Such as?"

"Such as why someone would deliver this threat to you?"

"I can't imagine what you're implying."

"Why does this," I held up the scrap of paper pinched between my fingertips, "threat come to you? Don't you think this should have been aimed at Mrs. Yates?"

"That," she said with a flash of her sharp, white teeth, "is certainly a mystery. I'm sure we'll never know the answer."

"Are you telling me not to look into it?"

"Me?" Bertie took another sip of her tea. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

Chapter Seven



I drove by to check on the penguin in Mrs. Yates's yard. The thing had become a sort of celebrity in our town ever since someone, or multiple someones, had started stealing it, then leaving it to be found in ridiculous situations.

It'd been tied to the top of a church steeple, stuffed in a cannon, dressed up and dangled over a busy intersection. It had been left floating on a buoy, hidden in the dinosaur bone museum, and once, duct-taped face-first to the camera the TV station in Portland used to check the weather along the coast.

Its blog, *THE ORDINARY PENGUIN*, had over a million subscribers.

If anything happened to the penguin—say, like a beheading—the entire town would go into mourning. There might even be a vigil. Or a manhunt. Could go either way.

So the little penguin was one more problem we had to keep an eye on.

Mrs. Yates's yard was looking beautiful in the misty cool October evening. The Japanese lantern plants lining her path had gone from drops of bright lantern-shaped orange flowers to skeletal-lace teardrops on spiny sticks with a single red berry inside each lantern. Hearty bushes were trimmed into neat round shapes, and a lovely ornamental maple's trunk and limbs twisted and curled like smoke frozen in place.

She had decorated for the season: corn stalks behind bright fat pumpkins stacked along her porch, more out amongst her wide flower beds, and what appeared to be a handmade scarecrow propped up in one corner.

Her yard was pretty enough to be displayed on the cover of a magazine. And right there in the center, where the eye of the average passer-by naturally paused, stood the penguin wearing a witch's hat.

The penguin very much still had a head. So that was one worry off my plate for now, at least.

I drove the neighborhood, noting the position and number of gnomes. They all seemed to be where they should be. None of them seemed equipped to pull off a beheading.

But I'd learned the hard way to never underestimate gnomes.

I passed one of our beach accesses and noticed a man sitting on the top of the fence. Since the fence was rickety enough, and the rocks and sand below were far enough, I decided he might need to be told to get off the fence before he fell.

I pulled the truck all the way to the end of the access, which was empty of vehicles since it was nearly the end of October. It was wet and the winds were picking up. A few tourists still visited, but usually only on weekends and mostly they stuck to the hotels and shops.

There was something familiar about the man. Even from the back. Something that made me pause before stepping out of the truck. Something that made me put a call in to Delaney to tell her where I was and what I was doing.

"I'll be right there," she said. "Do not approach him until I get there."

"If he moves, I move."

"If he moves, you wait."

I didn't answer and Delaney bulled on. "That's an order, Officer Reed."

"Yes, Chief," I grunted.

She was really getting overprotective since that car had hit me.

Yeah, I guess that made sense. I was worried about her a lot more lately too, since she'd been shot. So I could understand where she was coming from.

But then the man turned his shoulders and looked back at me.

I'd know that hard-angled face and piercing gaze anywhere.

Death.

As in the god of. Thanatos, himself. Last I'd seen him, he was kicking some ass and forfeiting his vacation time for a year so that he could deliver death to an undead vampire.

I'd missed him. On the outside, he was sort of stilted and stuffy. But on the inside, when he wasn't carrying the power of death, Thanatos was kind of like a little kid who hadn't gotten nearly enough time on the playground.

He liked being mortal. Liked experiencing mundane things like flying kites and peeling sunburns. But he did it all with a droll sort of detachment that didn't for a single second hide how much he loved being in Ordinary.

Being around Delaney and us other Reeds too.

I'd been sad when he'd had to leave town to pick up his power again and had hoped he'd show back up when the required one year absence had been paid.

Yet here he was, back in town, ten months early.

A chill washed over me as I realized why that might be. He was death, after all.

I sighed and got out of the truck. If death were here for me, I was pretty sure I'd know it, but since he wasn't, I might as well find out who was so special that he'd come all this way to collect them personally.

The wind was cold and pushy as I strolled over to him. Death watched me, still as a stone, that icy gaze unwavering.

"Afternoon," I called out all cheery and police officer-like. "Did you read the sign? No sitting on the fence."

And then a truly weird thing happened.

Death almost smiled.

Okay, it wasn't like he actually curved his lips. But there was a change in him, a charged sort of vibe he gave off, like he wanted to burst out laughing at a joke that

hadn't yet been told.

"Am I breaking a law, Daughter of Reed, being here, on this fence, on the edge of your town?"

His voice was how I remembered it, cool and suave and deep enough to give me chills even while all of me went sweaty. But there was more behind it now. There was power. A power of endings. The power of a great cold empty.

This was the god, Death. This was not the vacationing deity who had opened a kite shop in our town.

"Do you see something on the sign that says 'Stay off the fence, except for you, Death?'" I asked him.

"Perhaps I am not here for the fence."

"I'd guess you're not." Despite my heart which was racing with fear, because, hello: Death, I moved closer to him.

He shifted so that his long legs swung over to the side where I was standing, his black shiny shoes touching down into the rocks and tough old sea grass that went instantly brown from his touch.

He wore a hooded cloak, but the hood was pushed back, his dark hair slicked and perfect, his eyes absolutely riveting. Beneath it, he appeared to be wearing an old-fashioned tuxedo, black on black on black.

The only color on him at all was his skin. White. Pale. Bloodless as a shadow.

The wind stirred his cloak. It was bitter and biting, but not to him. To him, it appeared to caress, to surround, to worship.

"Are you looking for Delaney?" I asked.

"You would assume so."

"I would and do. She's the only Reed who can bridge you to your mortal self. The only Reed who can help you put down your power so you can stay here. Vacation here."

"Perhaps I am not here to vacation, Daughter of Reed."

"All right. Then perhaps you want to tell me what you are here for."

Those eyes, which had seemed cool and distant ticked down to meet my gaze. It was everything I could do not to look away.

"I wish to be invited to the Halloween event."

Okay, that got me. I laughed. "Seriously?"

He arched one eyebrow.

Right. Seriously.

"We...the party that the gods usually throw? That's not happening this year."

"There is an event. It is planned near the harbor."

A chill washed over me again and it had nothing to do with the wind. "There are going to be kids there. A lot of little kids."

"Yes," he said. "I am aware."

"You can't..." I stopped because yes, yes he could. He could come to the celebration. He could take the life of anyone there. Because he was death. The big "D" death. And it was his job, his power, to end life.

"Ah," he said almost gently, though still too cold. So cold. "You see that I can,

indeed."

And while it was making me a little panicky, along with angry and frustrated and horrified to know he only wanted to come to the festival to kill someone, I wasn't getting that sickening end-of-the-world feeling that told me we were in for a truly awful thing.

The sound of a Jeep arriving in the parking area and pulling up right next to my truck gave me hope.

"Delaney's here," I said.

"It would appear so."

"She won't let you kill someone. She'll tell you you can't."

"And why so ever would I listen to her?"

I flashed him a big grin. "Because she's your favorite and you like her."

He blinked, both eyebrow slipped up. Yeah, he could act surprised, but I knew how he looked at her. She'd even told me he'd all but admitted he liked her. Liked being here. Liked being mortal.

But this was not the powerless, mortal Than leaning against the fence on the edge of the world. This was Death.

A door shut. Boots crunched on gravel and then sand. "Thanatos," Delaney said. "You can't be here for ten more months."

Delaney stopped right next to me, shoulder-to-shoulder, facing off against the god of death.

I could see the slight shift in him. The relaxing of his shoulders, the sharpening of his eyes. He was happy to see her. Perhaps even delighted.

Something in my chest unwound a little. This would work out. This would all work out.

"You can not tell me where I walk, Reed Daughter."

And Delaney did that thing. It was the same thing Dad used to do. She went from looking like a police chief who had everything under control to something more.

She took a single step forward and somehow looked taller, stronger, a lighting-struck figure cracking with a power that pulsed up from deep within the ground beneath her feet, as if all of Ordinary, all the world, stood at her back, facing him. Facing the storm.

This was her power. Her ability to stand in front of any god and tell them to take a hike.

It was now, just like it had always been, pretty amazing to see.

It made me so proud of our family. It made me so proud of her.

"You are not going to walk this town, my town, as a mortal, Thanatos." Her voice was even and hard as hammer on steel. "And if you're here as a god, then I need to know why. You've never shown up like this before. There must be a reason."

"You know what my power is, Reed Daughter. I am here for just that. My business is my own."

"No," I breathed, and I could see Delaney's shoulder hitch a little from my reaction. "You don't get to stroll in here and kill someone," I went on, ignoring the fact that he could do exactly that because that was the one thing he actually did. "You're not going to take some little kid. You're not going to take someone I love. You're not going to take one of my friends."

Death's gaze slipped from the challenge in Delaney to the worry in me. He exhaled, once. It was as much of a gesture of yielding as I'd ever seen from him.

"Bring me the head."

"The...head?" Delaney asked.

"You aren't going to kill him are you?"

"Who?" Delaney turned toward me, the first time she'd looked straight at me since she'd arrived. Her eyes were blue, but sparked with that aqua and gold of the Reed power that rolled through her.

"Headless Abner."

"The gnome? You found him?"

"Someone found him. Or released him. A part of him. What do you want with the gnome?" I asked Death.

He raised one eyebrow. "Bring him, and I will show you."

When neither of us moved, he pursed his lips, and then said, "I will not harm him. Yet."

Another second, two, five clicked by. Finally, Delaney nodded. "Where is he?"

"In the truck. Hold on."

I wasn't worried about leaving Delaney with Death. If he'd wanted to hurt her, he'd have done it the moment she'd arrived.

Plus, a part of me wondered if he'd come back now, so soon after having to leave, because he'd missed her. Missed our little town that he'd only spent a couple of months getting to know.

The box was in the front seat. I picked it up and was standing beside my sister in a few seconds.

She glanced at my hands. "Let me see."

I opened the box.

Her eyebrows notched together and the wind whipped the stray strands of her long brown hair out of her face. "Abner."

"Abner," I agreed.

"Where'd you find him?"

"Bertie had him."

"Did she do this to him?"

"No. He was brought to her this way."

Delaney's gaze met mine. Yeah, there was something weird about the town Valkyrie ending up with a long-lost gnome head. Especially since she hadn't wanted to reveal her delivery source to me. Delaney's gaze told me I'd need to do some follow up.

My gaze told her I'd do it but only if she bought me extra candy.

She told me to stop acting like a kid.

I told her to stop acting like my mother.

"Daughter of Reed. The gnome head."

I handed him the box.

He reached inside and withdrew the head, holding it propped on just the tips of his long, boney fingers.

"Wake, gnome. And speak."

I felt the frigid push of his power. Delaney shivered, and I knew whatever I'd felt, she'd felt magnified by a hundred.

"Gnobody puts Abner in a box!" Abner's voice was creaky and sharp. His face, while still full of cracks and divots, was fully life-like. He was down to one eye, half a nose, and a lopsided beard, but he didn't seem to notice nor was he bothered by the remodel.

"This," Death said with grave patience. "Is a very dangerous creature."

Delaney and I waited. I bit my lip to keep from laughing in his face. One tiny giggle got away from me.

She elbowed me, and I coughed to try to cover it up.

Death sighed.

That did it. I laughed. "It's a gnome," I said. "All the gnomes in Ordinary come to life in October."

This," Death jiggled the head, and Abner gave a little yodel, "is not alive, nor is it dead. It is a zombie. I am here on business. To kill it..."

"Gnooooo!" Abner squalled.

"...but it has already infected others," Death finished.

"What?" Delaney asked. "How?"

We all stared at the head.

"It's gnot what you're thinking," Abner insisted. "I was just an innocent head. Out for a midnight roll. And who did I find myself clunking into but my buddy Johan? And then, well, one thing led to another and..."

"And?" I demanded after he'd been quiet for too long.

"I bit him."

"What?" Delaney said.

"Just a g nibble."

"You ate your buddy?" I asked.

"He just...smelled so good. His foot was right there. Right there in front of my face. Then his foot was in my mouth, and it was candy. Sweet rock candy."

Delaney groaned. "Zombie gnomes? Of course we have zombie gnomes. How do we deal with them?"

"There are options," Death said.

"I've been out checking on the gnomes every night," I said. "Making sure they're all where they belong. They seem the same to me."

"They are not."

Was he lying? He had done it before, as it was the only way to take down an asshole vampire that nearly killed my sister. So while I'm generally against lying, I was fine with his duplicity in that one case.

But why would he lie about this? About gnomes?

"How did Abner go zombie in the first place? Another curse?" Delaney asked.

"A beheading, a burying, a bite." Death listed it off like a boring oatmeal recipe everyone knew how to make. "But unless the power that originally created this false life—"

“—false!” Abner squawked.

“—is found, they will rise on Halloween night undead. Permanently undead. Zombies for all time, day and night, shambling through these streets for as long as the earth circles the sun.”

Which meant we’d be on gnome duty for life. “That sounds—”

“Gneat!” Abner cheered.

“I was going to go with annoying,” I said. Pulling gnome duty for a month of nights was bad enough. If we didn’t stop this zombie threat in its tracks, we’d be chasing down these little buggers forever.

So. Not. Happening on my watch.

“We have to find whoever, whatever made them,” Delaney clarified. “And make them break the curse? Is that the only way to opt out of the dawn-day-and-dusk of the dead?”

“There is one other way to end this.” Death’s dark eyes glittered.

This was what he really wanted. This was what he had come to Ordinary for. I braced for it.

“You shall invite me to the Halloween celebration. If the power that brought the gnomes to life has not been found by then, I will bring the unliving to a peaceful end.”

“You’ll turn them back into statues?” Delaney asked.

“We’re statues?” Abner demanded.

“I would indeed,” Death said.

“And you can’t do that right now because?” I asked.

“The veil between worlds is the thinnest on Halloween. On that day, the power that grants them life will be within my reach to affect.”

“Also you want an invitation to the party,” Delaney said.

“Only as a matter of business, of course.”

Out of all the deaths in all the worlds, this zombie gnome situation was the one that needed Thanatos’s personal attention.

“Bullshit,” I coughed.

Death gave me a look. He couldn’t fool me. He wanted to party here in Ordinary on the spookiest day of the year, ‘cause he was sort of adorable like that.

I winked at him. His expression turned droll.

“You know it’s a costume party,” I wheedled.

“Oh?” So much feigned disinterest.

“You’ll have to come in costume.”

“If I must.” He sniffed.

Yep. He wanted to come to the party and had found a way to work around Ordinary’s rules. Clever.

“You have to give your word that you are not the one who turned the gnomes into zombies and started this mess in the first place.”

Delaney gave me the side-eye. That’s right. I knew how to cop.

“I assure you,” Death said, and I felt the weight of truth in his words. The wind stopped blowing, the air got heavier, and it was hard to breathe. “I have nothing to do with the unliving state of these Ordinary gnomes.”

Okay then.

"Who you callin' ordinary?" Abner squeaked.

"You know who did this, don't you?" Delaney asked.

"Did what, Reed Daughter?"

"You know who put the curse or whatever this is on the gnomes."

I didn't think Death was going to answer. But she crossed her arms over her chest and there was that presence around her. As if every Reed in history were standing with her, behind her, lending their strength. As if all of Ordinary from the mountains to the sea were standing with her staring him down.

"Perhaps."

"Who?" she demanded. "Who gave these gnomes life?"

"A jinni. A very powerful one. Many, many years ago."

"And does this jinni live in Ordinary?"

"Currently? No."

"Does this jinni have a name?"

"Many."

"No name," she said, "no party invitation."

"Are you blackmailing me, Reed Daughter?"

"Not yet. What was the jinni's name?"

"Faris."

"Okay," Delaney said. "That's something we can work with. Thank you." She held her hand out. Death extended his arm and dropped Abner's head into her palm.

Abner went instantly still. He was a statue once again until sunset when he'd rise and try to accidentally eat some other friend's foot.

"Consider yourself invited to the Haunted Harbor and Harvest Festival. We'll see you in a couple days?" Delaney asked.

"Yes," Death said. "You will."

Just like that, he was gone.

The air temperature rose several degrees all at once and I shivered. I hadn't realized how cold it had gotten.

"Not my fault," I started.

"I know. We need to track down anything we can get on this Faris. I'll have Myra look through the books."

Delaney turned, handed me the head, which was cold, heavy, and rough as if it were nothing more than inert concrete.

Poor Abner. He'd certainly had better days.

"And what do you want me to do, boss?"

"I need you to keep Abner out of trouble. Do another patrol on the gnomes. Make sure none of them have their toes bitten off."

"What about Death?"

She stuck her hands in her coat pockets as she started back to the Jeep. "We'll deal with him when he shows back up."

"So you're going to let him into town?"

She shrugged. "The gods can come into town if they want. They just can't put down their powers and stay unless I say so." She opened the Jeep door. "Stop worrying, Jean. We're good. We've got this."

Chapter Eight



We did not get this.

I found three gnomes with missing toes that night. Abner, who I'd propped on the dash of my truck so he could confirm his previous nights' munchie victims, went through the five stages of zombie grief: denial, acceptance, hunger, more hunger, and knock-knock jokes.

Seriously.

"Gnock-gnock."

"Nope."

"Gnock-gnock."

"Shut up, Abner."

"Gnock-gnock."

The three other zombie gnomes I'd had to tag and bag were stowed on the passenger side floor of the truck. They chanted, "Gnock-gnock, gnock-gnock! Gnock-gnock!"

"No."

"Gnock-gnock," Abner asked again.

Fine. "Who's there?"

"Police."

Why did this feel like a trap?

"Police who?"

"Police let me bite somebody again."

Oh, the peanut gallery squirming in the duffle on the floorboards thought that was hilarious.

"Okay, that's it. You're getting the box."

I picked him up, careful to keep my fingers away from his mouth, stuffed him in the box, then set him down on the floor with the others.

Silence. Finally. I still had a few more houses with yard decorations to zombie proof before I went back to the station. So far it didn't seem like the zombie gnomes had spread the bite-and-switch very quickly or very far.

Lack of knees really slowed down total zombie domination.

Maybe we'd caught the zombie situation in time before it became something too annoying for words.

"Gnock-gnock," four voices called out at once.

Or maybe not. I swallowed a groan and turned the radio up louder.

Chapter Nine



I filed reports, made Hatter give me back Abner, who he'd kept on the corner of his desk while he handled his own paperwork.

Hatter, the traitor, actually liked knock-knock jokes.

I hated him a little.

Dawn came late in October, so Abner was still animated by the time my shift was over.

"Want me to keep him?" Hatter asked.

"No. He's my problem and basically patient zero. I'm keeping an eye on him."

"We could lock him up in evidence with the duffle-bag gnomes. There's a safe back there."

"You're not supposed to know about the safe."

"Wouldn't be much of a police officer if I'd missed a big obvious locked safe."

"Hidden in the wall where no one should be looking."

"Even more reason to find it." He frowned a little. "What's really bothering you, Jee-Jee?"

"Zombie gnomes aren't enough?"

He waited.

Here's the thing. Hatter was pretty new to town. He knew about the monsters and gods and all the other craziness of the place. But I didn't know if I should tell him that Death was coming to town tomorrow night.

Because no matter how Death tried to charm Delaney, I had a sinking feeling he was here for more than just haunted houses and apple bobbing. I had a sinking feeling he was here to do his job. To actually collect someone who was about to die.

I searched my sense-of-wrongness. Didn't get a hard ping like I should. But then, most of my doom twinges only happened right before the terrible possibility was about to become a terrible reality.

So I could be right about death, or totally wrong.

It was stupid, this power of mine.

It was quiet in the station, most of the town still asleep. Only the crunch of Hatter feeding Abner baby carrots filled the room. Not that Abner was swallowing the carrots, but the crunchy vegetables kept him occupied, and better yet, had ended the constant

knock-knock jokes.

Hatter cleared his throat. "Tell me. The more transparent these things are, the better we can all make good decisions if things go to crap."

I blew out a breath. "Death was here today."

"I read the report."

"He's coming back."

"For the Halloween celebration, and to deal with our little zombie problem, right?"

"Yes. That's what he says."

"You don't believe him?"

"I just...I'm worried that there's more to it. Things seem to go sideways when he gets involved. That whole thing with the vampire and Delaney...getting hurt."

"Well, we'll all be there. We'll keep an eye on him. Make sure he follows the rules," Hatter said. "I'm sure Ryder would be happy to dog him. If Death steps out of line, Ryder and that god of rules who owns him will zap him right back into place."

"I'm not sure it works that way," I mumbled.

"Then let's find out. Before the party, eh?"

"I'll talk to Ryder." I yawned, loudly. I glanced at the pile of candy wrappers on my desk, patted them, hoping I'd left something behind, but no. I swept the wrappers into the wastebasket by my desk and stood to stretch.

"Your shift was up three hours ago, Jean. Go home."

"Fine. Hand me the head."

He picked Abner up, then set him back in the box, which was looking a little worse for wear.

"Get some sleep." Hatter swiveled in his chair and held the box out for me as I passed his desk. "Cat?" He asked.

He'd been trying to guess what costume I was going to wear for the last three weeks.

"Nope. Cowboy?" I was trying to guess his costume too.

"Yep." Hatter had said 'yes' to everything I'd guessed.

"If you're really going to be a sexy maid alien banana dinosaur cheese sandwich pirate traffic cone cowboy, you're going to give off some pretty mixed signals."

"What can I say? I'm a complicated man."

I chuckled and gave him a wave. "Later."

"Take it easy, hear?"

"No problem."

I shrugged into my coat and got all the way to the door before I heard: "Gnock-gnock."

"If there's a zombie gnome head knocking at this door, he better stay quiet, or we'll find out how long a zombie gnome head can hold his breath when held under water."

There was a startled meep, and then nothing.

Silence. Blessed silence. I got in my truck, turned on the engine and eased out into the dark morning. Home wasn't far away. I could hear my bed calling from here.

Chapter Ten



I stayed up until dawn. Not because I wanted to see the sunlight, but because I didn't want to take my eyes off Abner. While there wasn't any way to actually force the leader of the gnomes to shut up, I found a double layer of duct tape did wonders for muffling him.

Once the sun had finally crested over the edge of the hills, I flopped back in my messy bed and rubbed my eyes. Abner shouldn't be reanimated until tonight.

Of course, it was going to be Halloween tonight.

Death was coming.

Myra had had zero luck tracking down the jinni who had cursed the gnomes. Or maybe he'd granted a wish, not issued a curse. I didn't know the details, because it had happened a long time ago, and no one knew the details.

I rolled over onto my stomach, smushed the pillow into my face where I liked it, and wished Hogan were here in my bed, his long, warm body curled up around mine.

I jerked awake as something heavy pressed down on the foot of the bed.

"If you're here to kill me, please do it quietly, I'm trying to sleep."

"Mmm," Hogan murmured, snuggling up behind me big-spoon style. "And what if I'm not here to murder you?"

"Then I like you a lot."

"And what if I brought you a real, hot meal, since I know your last three meals were various forms of sugar?"

My stomach growled at the thought, and Hogan chuckled, his breath a puff of warmth against the back of my neck.

"Then I like you even more."

"And what if I did this?" He placed a kiss, soft and damp against my skin. A second, a third.

I wriggled around until I was facing him, nose to nose, our ankles tangled, his head propped on his bent arm. He was wearing a red-violet slouchy beanie, his dark braids sticking out from where they were tied back behind his neck.

"I might do more than like you for that. Nice beanie."

"Billy made it for me. She's a K.I.N.K.."

"Yeah, I can see her being part of the knitting club."

He smiled and tipped my chin down with his thumb so he could kiss my forehead. He smelled of sugar and flour, of pumpkin and soft lemon, with a spicy note that was all him. I inhaled extra deep just to fill my body with the unique scent of him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his lips moving to my temple, my cheek.

"Who said anything was wrong?"

He pulled back and gave me a solid stare. "It is Halloween, I'm home early, and you're moping in bed."

"Sleeping, thank you."

"Still in your jeans." He tugged on my belt loop.

He was right. And I hadn't even noticed, I'd been so distracted by the gnome. Speaking of which....

I turned and glanced at Abner. He was a statue now that it was daylight, and a pretty rough looking one with all his chipped up missing bits and duct tape wrapped all the way around his head.

"So, that's weird." Hogan rubbed his hand down my arm. "Are you headhunting old garden statues now?"

"No. It's a thing."

"Uh-huh."

"A case."

"Uh-huh."

"I can't really share the details with a civilian. You understand."

"Right. Because that gnome head is evidence and therefore needs to be kept on your night stand instead of the evidence locker."

Crap. He was starting to get the hang of the procedures I shouldn't be breaking.

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"It's not—"

My phone rang from under my pillow and I pulled it out, answering without even glancing at the screen. "Officer Jean Reed."

"There's been a kidnapping," Bertie said far too calmly for someone reporting a kidnapping.

"Who? Have you called the station? Myra's on duty. Does she know? Does Delaney know?"

"They don't know because I don't care to involve them in this situation."

I scowled at the ceiling while Hogan's hand rubbed a slow circle on my stomach. "Bertie, everyone in town follows the law. Report it to the officer on duty. Now. This is someone's life you're putting at risk."

"Not someone. Something. Or rather, some fowl."

"I'm hanging up. Call the station. I'll be there soon."

"It's the penguin."

I waited while my brain zagged from emergency mode to annoyed. "What?"

"Mrs. Yates's penguin has been kidnapped."

I sighed and dropped my hand over my eyes. "Still something you should call the station about."

"No, I don't think it is. This isn't a...normal hijacking."

"That penguin gets stolen at least twice a month. It's pretty normal."

"Not this time."

I didn't want to ask, because I really was off duty, and there really were other police officers who could track down our famous roaming penguin. "Why is it different this time?"

There was a hushing sound, almost as if Bertie had cupped her hand over her phone. "If I tell you this, it must be off the record. I will deny saying any word of it."

Okay, this just got interesting. "All right. Noted. Off the record. We're just a couple citizens of Ordinary, shooting the breeze. But be careful, Bertie. If this is serious, if this puts someone's life in danger, then all bets are off."

"I understand. It is possible I have some knowledge of previous penguin kidnappings."

I moved my hand away from my eyes and stared at Hogan who was frowning at me. I mouthed oh, my, god.

He mouthed, what?

"Are you telling me you have something to do with all those penguin thefts, Bertie?"

Hogan's smile was wide and his eyes sparkled. Yeah, it was amazing to think that the rule-following, event ball-busting Bertie was involved in what we'd suspected was just high school shenanigans.

"The penguin is wonderful advertisement for Ordinary. Someone needed to contact the...person or persons involved in creatively relocating the statue. To assure that the penguin, which is private property, not be damaged or degraded."

"Bertie, you little minx! You're running a penguin kidnapping ring."

"I refuse to implicate myself in those accusations."

Basically: yes. "If you know who is involved in, what did you call it? 'creatively relocating' the penguin, why don't you just contact them and tell them to bring it back?"

"Because this kidnapping was not done through approved channels."

"So you have some competition? One of your little minions gone rogue?"

She sighed and I heard the tapping of her sharp nails on the edge of her desk. "This wasn't any of the usual suspects. The penguin has been truly kidnapped. It may have been taken out of town, or it may be that the gnomes are behind it."

"Do you have any proof of any of that?"

"The note that was included with Abner's head was written by a gnome."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"No. But I believe it is true."

Well, hell.

"I'll look into it."

I ended the call and groaned, both my hands over my face to muffle the noise.

"What's wrong, pumpkin pie? Bad news?"

"Don't."

He pulled my hands away from my face. Frowned at my expression. "Okay," he agreed. "Something's really wrong. What's happening?"

There were things in this town I hadn't told him about. I mean, yes, he knew there

were creatures who lived here, mortals with powers, and gods who vacationed, but other than shrugging and saying, yeah, that made sense to him, we didn't really talk about it.

He was happy to just be a baker, I was happy to just be a cop, and we were happy to just be together.

So this...this impending doom of gnomes, along with everything else, wasn't anything I wanted to burden him with.

It was a part of my life that he couldn't really be involved in. A part of me he would never know.

He sat up, and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He was still facing me, but the line of his shoulders, the set of his jaw, the narrowing of his eyes all told me he was angry.

"It's work stuff," I said.

"You're off duty."

"I'm never off duty." I pushed up and pressed my back against the headboard. "You know there are things I can't talk to you about."

"Crimes?"

"Yes."

"Was this a crime?"

"Technically? Yes."

"Someone kidnapped the penguin that gets kidnapped almost daily, the penguin that has its own blog fueled only by pictures of it being kidnapped, the penguin that tourists come to this town to see if they can take a picture with and then post those pictures all over the world—that's a crime you have to keep a secret from me?"

Okay, he was frustrated. But so was I. He couldn't expect me to tell him everything about my job. Everything about this town. Everything about me. We hadn't been together that long. This, whatever this was between us, might be a temporary thing. Fleeting.

As soon as he got a real look at me, at the town, at this crazy thing that was my life, he'd go back to his bakery, and that would be that.

"You don't understand," I said.

"About what?"

We had a missing penguin, tonight was Halloween, zombie gnomes were on the rise, and death was coming to visit. This town was going a little crazy right now.

I chose the easiest answer. "This town."

His eyes narrowed, but he didn't move. "What about the town?"

"Just. Halloween is crazy, okay?" I got out of bed, intending to take a shower. I'd only gotten a couple hours of sleep, but I knew I needed to go back to work. Help track down the penguin. Find out if Myra had dug up anything that would help us find that jinni, Faris.

"No," Hogan said, quietly.

I was glaring at Abner's stupid head. "No what?"

"Blaming this on Halloween. This isn't a problem with Halloween. This is a problem with you not wanting to tell me things."

"I—"

"Don't," he said. "Don't tell me that's not true, Jean. I'm not blind. I see things. I see

you."

I turned and rested my hip on the dresser. I crossed my arms over my chest, not out of anger, but out of feeling suddenly vulnerable. "Halloween is a problem. We...there's a guy we need to track down. He's implicated in some...stuff we need to put an end to. Fast."

"What kind of stuff?"

I shook my head.

"Does he have a name? I see things. I hear things. A lot of people go through my bakery."

"I can't tell you. You wouldn't...you just can't be a part of this, Hogan."

"Part of this?" He waved a finger between us.

My stomach fell to my knees. He was thinking about ending this? Ending us. How could it have happened so quickly? I wasn't ready for him to leave. For him to be even less a part of my life.

Panic set my heartbeat pounding at my temples.

"No," I swallowed, trying to get moisture back in my mouth. "This town. Part of the stuff that happens in this town."

"I know about the creatures, Jean. And the gods. You were the one who told me about them, remember?"

"There are things about this town I can't tell you."

"What?" He shifted so he was facing me, legs crossed. "Bertie is a Valkyrie. Chris Lagon is a gillman. That kid who gives lighthouse tours is half kelpie. The blonde at the popcorn shop is a siren. We have three Furies on the roller derby team. And Crow, who I haven't seen in months, is a trickster god."

I was utterly, utterly stunned. I had no idea he knew those things.

"Who told you all that?"

"No one. I know it."

"How?"

"I told you. I see things. Those kinds of things. The things that make people what and who they are."

"Since...when?" My voice was a little thready.

"Always."

"And me?"

"I've always seen you, Jean."

"As...what?"

"A woman. My world. My home."

I exhaled hard, those words landing a direct hit to my heart. "Okay," I said trying to get my emotional footing. I couldn't address that. What he'd just said. I couldn't take it straight on. It was too much. It meant too much. It meant we were more than six months and I wanted that so much, I didn't want to ruin it, jinx it.

So I addressed the easier stuff.

"Um. Okay. We're looking for a man. Not a man exactly. We're looking for a jinni. His name is Faris."

Hogan scrambled off the bed and stood so fast, I thought his foot was going to get tangled in the blankets. He pressed his back against the door to the hall.

"Why are you looking for him? What did he do?"

Hogan's eyes were too wide, his breathing too shallow.

"Hey, hey," I said. "It's okay. Do you know him? Know who he is?"

Hogan swallowed hard and nodded. "He's my dad."

Chapter Eleven



So finding out my boyfriend was half Jinn was a surprise. So was the little tidbit of info about how he could see what everyone in Ordinary really was beneath their masks of humanity.

He didn't know if he'd gotten the vision from his dad, the jinni, or from his mom who had some mild magical talent of her own, but he said he'd learned to be quiet about it since he was a kid. People who wore masks got twitchy when someone pointed out who they really were beneath them.

He'd adopted a live-and-let-live attitude about the people in Ordinary, and had never brought it up.

"You have no other powers?" Delaney asked. She and Myra had come over when I'd called, and we were all sitting in my living room. Hogan and I were curled into each other on the love seat.

I hadn't known what to do other than to call in my sisters. I was too close to this situation, my heart too close to Hogan, to make any kind of call that dealt with his absentee father, of all people.

"Not that I know of," he said. "Baking, which I think is talent more than power. The ability to know what someone really is. That's about it."

"Have you ever tried to make a wish come true?" Myra asked.

"I've made a lot of wishes. Most of them haven't come true."

"Someone else's wish, though?" she asked.

"Back when I was a kid, I used to wish my dad would stay away forever. For my mom. She...she didn't handle him leaving very well."

"Have you seen him since?" Myra asked.

"No."

"Have you tried to make any other of your mom's wishes come true?"

"Honestly, no. I never really thought about it. I was a pretty happy kid. We were happy."

Delaney put her coffee cup down on the side table, then leaned back and stared at the ceiling, thinking.

"Okay," she said. "Let me see if we're all on the same page here. We don't have the jinni who originally animated the gnomes, but we have his son, who is half Jinn, but

hasn't tested or tried to invoke his powers, if he has said powers.

"We also have a rise of the zombies tonight, that if not stopped will land us with a permanent zombie gnome population.

"On top of that, the penguin has been stolen, possibly by the zombie gnomes who possibly want to destroy it. We have a couple thousand people wandering the streets—most of them children small enough to be bitten by zombie gnomes. Everyone in town will be wearing disguises, costumes and masks, and Death himself is prowling through our harbor for what he says is a benevolent visit. Do I have it covered?"

"You people know how to keep it fun," Hogan said.

Myra speared me with a sharp look. "You still aren't willing to tell us who alerted you to the penguin being missing?"

Okay, so maybe I wasn't playing exactly by the rules here. There wasn't a hard-and-fast reason why I was keeping Bertie's involvement with the penguin kidnappings on the down-low. But the truth was...she was right. That penguin had netted us a lot of good press. It drew people to the town who were generally looking for a bit of quirky, family-friendly fun.

The kidnapped penguin was good for the town. Good for Mrs. Yates, too, who loved showing off her quasi-famous yard. Good for the kids—or whoever—in town to put their own spin on decorating the little concrete statue, and set it up in funny situations that were blog-worthy once it was found.

Knowing that Bertie had stepped in like some sort of well-organized mob boss to coordinate the penguin's liberations insured that the little statue wouldn't be damaged.

I had a feeling anyone who wanted to steal the penguin had to run the kidnapping, photoshoot, and outcome past Bertie first. Probably had to fill out forms in triplicate.

By pushing her way into the whole penguin thing, Bertie had effectively taken one responsibility off us. We no longer had to worry about the penguin being in danger, or being handled in a way that would put others in danger.

I kind of dug the secret underground Fight Club aspect of the whole thing. Might even volunteer to be one of the people involved in the penguin snatching.

If Myra and Delaney were really worried about it, they'd push a lot harder to get a name out of me.

"Still not willing to rat the source out," I finally answered. "But trust me, my source knows exactly what's been going on with the penguin and by whom. My source wouldn't panic if there wasn't a reason for it."

Delaney picked up her coffee cup, tipped it before realizing it was empty, then frowned at it.

"So how are we going to handle this, boss?" I asked her.

"We're going to prioritize," she said. When she made up her mind, there was never any hint of doubt in her. I liked that about her.

"First, we find out if Hogan has any power over the gnomes. Are you okay with that, Hogan?"

"Totally cool. What do you want me to try to do?"

And yeah, there was a flare of pride in my heart for my man. He had never talked

about his father, had never tried to tap into his family heritage. But when it mattered, when a scourge of zombie gnomes could be filling our streets, the man stepped right up.

"Can you break the...wish or curse or spell on them?"

He glanced at the duct taped head sitting on the coffee table, then unwound his arm from behind me. "I'm not sure I can really see what makes them what you say they are."

"Zombies?" Delaney asked.

"Animated. To me, right now, that just looks like a head carved out of rock."

"Do you think you'll see it differently once it animates?" Myra asked.

"Maybe?"

"Okay," Delaney said. "Then we'll wait. I'll go make us all some more coffee."

Timing was going to be a bit of a problem. Trick-or-treaters would be out in force before the sunset, and the Haunted Harbor would be open as soon as it got dark.

Myra stood and stretched. She checked her phone, swiped her thumb across it, and walked to my front door. "Be right back." She stepped outside to take the call, but not before I heard her say, "How did you get my number, Bathin?"

"That demon still bothering her?" Hogan asked.

"That demon still bothers us all." Delaney dropped back onto the couch. "Myra's looking for ways to get my soul back." She shrugged like it was no big deal. But I knew she didn't like it. Didn't like that so far, we hadn't found a way to get rid of the guy.

Sure, Bathin was good looking, but I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him. And since he weighed approximately as much as the Cascade Mountain Range, I couldn't throw him an inch.

"I think he's interesting," Hogan said.

Delaney and I both gave him the same look.

"Interesting how?" I asked.

He rocked his head side-to-side. "I don't know. Interesting."

"What do you see when you look at him?" I suddenly wanted to know how Hogan saw the world. How he saw everyone, including the demon.

"I see Bathin. How do you see him?" he asked.

"Not helping."

His smile spread like slow honey. The reddish-violet of the beanie he still wore set off a rosy tone in his dark skin. I liked him in a hat. Of course, I liked him in everything he wore.

Liked him even better when he wore nothing at all.

"I don't really have a lot to compare to how I see people. To me, he's Bathin. A demon, but..." he shrugged. "Not evil, I guess."

"Demons are kind of the embodiment of evil." I was baiting him. Because I knew better than to pigeonhole people, whether they were mortal, monster, or god.

"A lot of history says Jinn are evil spirits." Hogan scratched at the stubble on the side of his jaw. "I try to keep an open mind. Let people show me who they are before I make judgments."

"He took my sister's soul."

"I traded it," Delaney said. "You know that, Jean. And if I had to do it again, I would."

At my look, she held up one hand. "Yes, I would have done some things differently, like tell you and Myra about the trade before I did it, though I don't know how I would have. But Bathin did save Ben. That's worth a lot to me. And he hasn't damaged my soul. I'll get it back."

Here she grinned. "That demon doesn't have a chance against us Reeds."

I rolled my eyes, but smiled too. If anyone could figure out how to get Delaney's soul back, it was Myra. And I knew she'd been working on that problem non-stop.

"Mmm-mmm-hmmph!"

Ah, the head was awake.

"Wow," Hogan sat forward, his long arms propped on his knees. "Look at the little guy."

Abner mumbled a reply. It was hard to tell through the duct tape, but he looked really excited.

"Go ahead and take the tape off," Delaney suggested.

"You so don't want me to do that," I said.

"Jean."

"Fine." I pulled off the tape and Abner smacked his mouth.

"Why do I feel so funny?" he asked. "Wait...I'm a zombie, aren't I? Gno!"

"Denial," I said. "First stage of zombie gnome grief."

"Well, it could be worse. Zombies are such popular critters right now."

"Acceptance."

"Boy, I could use a bite to eat."

"Hunger."

"Like, a lot to eat. I could chew my way through a concrete truck."

"More hunger."

"Got anything to eat?" he asked no one in particular.

"No," I said. "And the last stage...."

"Gnock-gnock."

Hogan laughed.

Delaney shook her head. "I thought you made up the knock-knock part of this."

"Nope. So what do you think?" I asked Hogan.

"He's...hey, your name's Abner, right?" Hogan asked.

My front door opened and Myra walked in. "Do you have candy? There are kids on the block and they're headed this way, fast."

"In the kitchen in the worm bowl."

Her gaze flicked to Abner, then Delaney and Hogan, then she walked off to the kitchen.

"I am Abner Dobooodoo, the head of all Ordinary gnomes."

"Nice," Hogan said. "I'm Hogan. I bake things. Can you remember the jinni who brought you to life?"

"There was a jinni?"

I sat forward and patted Hogan's thigh. "Gnomes have really short memories. He won't remember how this all happened to him."

"Did you take the penguin?" Delaney asked.

"There was a penguin!" Abner blinked his good eye and looked completely confused. "Anyone got someone I could eat? A statue, a relief, maybe some sweet yard art? Abner sure could use some candy."

Hogan laughed. "Dude. You are so metal."

"Can you tell what's making him animate?" Delaney asked.

"Can you tell what's making him a zombie?" I asked.

Hogan tipped his head a little and scratched under his hat. "A beheading, a burial, a bite."

I shivered. It was exactly what Death had said. "That is so cool."

My doorbell rang with a buzz followed by a scream because it was Halloween, and I didn't do anything by halves.

"I'll get it," Myra said.

"It looks, kind of...colorful?" Hogan asked, like he was talking to himself. "Yeah, colorful. Like fire and smoke. It's kind of orangey."

"What is?" I asked.

"The wish that was granted. It was something for a...child, I think. A gift. That's...well, that's not what I expected."

I could imagine he hadn't expected his absent father to have done anything as nice or maybe mundane, if one considered that he was a jinni, as granting a kid's wish for a statue to come to life.

"Trick or treat!" a chorus of kid voices called out.

"Wow, you look so scary," Myra said from the door. "Are you a vampire or a shark?"

"Both!" a little kid crowed.

Aw...I was missing out on the kid costumes. That was one of my favorite parts of Halloween.

"Abner's old." Hogan waved his hand. "But I think...I think he belonged to a kid once. A long, long time ago. A little girl?"

"Poppy," Abner said with a wistful note. "Sweet, bright Poppy."

"You remember her?" I asked.

Abner's already clouded eyes got cloudier. "We used to play tea party. Every night in October. She'd open her bedroom window and bring me inside. We ate candy corn."

"What happened to Poppy?" Delaney asked.

"It was the strangest thing," Abner reminisced. "She kept getting bigger. Until she wasn't little. Until she was like you. And then she drove away."

"She didn't take you?" Hogan asked.

"I fell out of her hands when she was packing me in the trailer. Head broke right off. She leaked water out of her face and buried my head. Left my body standing above it."

So that's how Abner lost his head. I couldn't imagine how many years ago that had happened. Fifty? A hundred?

And all this time we'd been dealing with his body as the leader of the gnomes, not knowing his head was buried beneath it. I wondered if someone had decided it was time to bury the body too. Or throw it away in the land fill.

That, then—both parts of Abner being buried, and him also being beheaded—must have triggered the zombie plague.

I felt sorry for the old guy.

“Gnock-gnock.”

Scratch that. I didn’t feel sorry for him at all.

“Who’s there?” Abner answered himself.

“Oh, gods, no,” I said. “You do not get to do both parts of this joke.”

“Banana,” Abner said.

“Do not say banana who,” I ordered.

“Banana who?” Abner said. Then: “Gnock-gnock.”

I groaned. “Make him stop. Hogan, whatever you do, make him stop.”

“Who’s there?” Abner asked. “Banana!”

“I don’t think,” Hogan frowned. “There’s...I don’t see any way to stop this. Not...it’s not like the wish comes with instructions.”

“Banana who?” Abner shouted. “Gnock-gnock!”

“Do something,” I said. “Anything at this point would be good. A yip. A yop. Anything.”

Hogan puffed out a laugh. “A yop? What does that even mean?”

“It means stop laughing at your girlfriend and do some jinni stuff to fix the gnome.”

“Who’s there?” Abner stage whispered, his eyes going shiftily back and forth.

The doorbell rang. The scream screamed.

“Trick or treat!” Maybe it was my imagination, but that was a very low voice.

“And what are you supposed to be?” Myra asked in a tone that sounded like she was trying to hold back a laugh.

“You must give me the candy, or I shall trick you.”

My gaze snapped up and met Delaney’s. That was Death. A breeze much chillier than the temperature outside pushed in through the door and dropped the air in the living room by several degrees.

“He’s here to kill Abner,” Delaney said.

“Banana,” Abner whispered loudly.

I suddenly wondered why we were fighting this. Maybe letting Abner go to the great—wherever gnomes went when they were dead, revived, then dead again—was his destiny. His fate.

I could probably even ask Fate about that.

“Maybe we’re thinking about this the wrong way,” I said.

“That’s not how trick or treat works,” Myra said. “First, I get to guess your costume. Then maybe you get candy. Let’s see, are you a butterfly?”

“No.”

I couldn’t tell if he was delighted or disgusted with this game.

“Are you an angel?”

“Well, yes. Of death. But no. That is not my costume.”

“Something with wings. Let me think.” Myra was stalling. Or maybe she was just really into having Death on the doorstep begging for a three-dollar candy bar.

Like I said. I did not do Halloween by halves.

"All the gnomes have been living in Ordinary for years," Delaney said, reminding me that we had a problem right here in the living room. "Maybe they're only alive for one month a year, but they are citizens here. We don't discriminate against our citizens. We protect them, uphold their rights, make sure that their needs are met, no matter if they have been here for a day, or if they've been mostly dead all of their weird little lives."

"Fine," I said. "We'll try to keep Abner alive. So, Hogan, can you break the zombie spell?"

He shifted a bit. "I'm not sure. Hey, Abner."

The gnome glanced at him, then away.

Hogan said, "Knock knock."

Abner focused on Hogan like there was nothing else in the world. If he'd had lungs, if he'd had a breath that he could wait with bated, he'd be doing that too. "Who's there?"

"Head gnome."

Abner's smile got wider and wider. Frankly, it was a little creepy. But Hogan grinned right back at him. "Head gnome who?"

"Head gnome me."

I admit it, I gasped a little. For one thing, it was a dumb joke. Like, it wasn't even funny. But for another, everything in the room sort of shifted.

I wouldn't say that the orangey-ness of it changed, but really? The orangey-ness of it changed.

"Oh. Seriously," Hogan said. "Wow. So, I'm the gnew leader gnove."

And just like that, Abner looked a lot more alive. Both his eyes were now bright and blinking, his beard a nice white triangle beneath his chin, his ears evenly curled under his bright red pointed hat.

"Our leader," Abner said. "You are here."

"What?" I asked.

"Hold on," Delaney said. "Hogan, what did you just do?"

"You are abhorrent at guessing a simple disguise," Death said from the front door. "I would have expected more from a police detective."

Myra made a tsking sound. "Someone's sassing their way out of the jumbo Snickers bar."

"What did you do?" I asked Hogan. Since he wasn't paying any attention to me, I grabbed his shoulders and shook him a little. "What did you just do?"

"It's cool. Like. Good. Real good. I'm like, the leader of these little dudes now, and I make the rules. Hey, Abner," he said. "You aren't a zombie anymore."

"I'm gnot?"

"You're gnot." There was that feeling again. The slight shift in a color I hadn't even sensed in the room until it changed. "And that means gnone of the other gnomes are zombies anymore."

"They're gnot?"

Another slight shift.

"They are gnot. You still hungry?"

Abner frowned, his hat shifting forward as his eyebrows knit together. "Candy corn?"

"You got it." Hogan reached over to the jar next to the love seat, shook out a handful of candy corn, then poured them next to the head.

Abner smiled and bit into a candy corn with a lot more finesse than I'd have expected out of a bodiless gnome.

My boyfriend was the head of the garden gnomes. What did that even mean?

"What does this even mean?" I asked him.

He dropped his arm back around me. "It's not a big deal. I'm gonna look after them. They'll listen to me. I'll have a bunch of little buddies every October. It's going to be fun."

"You can do that?"

"I can now."

"A duck," Myra guessed.

"Would that be frightening?" Death asked.

"On you? Probably."

"Perhaps you will invite me in." Death wasn't a vampire. He didn't need an invitation to enter a place. So I wasn't surprised to hear their footsteps coming our way.

"Are we good?" I asked Delaney.

She stood, putting herself between Death and the gnome head.

I stood too. So did Hogan. Now that Abner was alive and done with the zombie thing and the knock-knock jokes, there was no reason for Death to kill him.

Two cops, a baker, and the head of a gnome stared down Death.

"I see that my services are no longer needed," he said.

"Hogan took care of the zombie gnomes," Delaney said. "Unless you have some other business here you should tell me about?"

"Death is a shadow, Reed Daughter. Death does not share his To-Do list."

I snorted a laugh.

"Well, you can't stay here on vacation," Delaney said. "But this is the night when the veil is the thinnest. There is precedence to all manner of gods and monsters having some fun in the mortal world. If you decide to stay, I won't tell you to leave."

"I don't believe I was here to ask for your permission, Reed Daughter."

"Moth?" I asked. Because I couldn't figure out what he was supposed to be either.

He wore a black suit that appeared to be stiff and dusted with ashes. Tattered gray wings drooped on his back, and he was holding a huge ceramic mug of coffee in one hand that was very clearly illustrated by a hand holding up a defiant middle finger.

Death sighed. "It is my understanding that Halloween is intended to be frightening."

"Yes?" I asked.

"Therefore I chose a frightening costume."

"But what are you supposed to be?" I asked.

"Monday."

Hogan started laughing first. We were all right behind him. I kept a close eye on Death's face. He didn't smile, but there was a twinkle in his eye and one eyebrow raised.

"I also understand that some mortals laugh when they are terrified," he said. "Therefore, I will not punish you for your reactions."

Wow, that was almost a joke.

"That's good," Delaney said. "And as long as you follow Ordinary's rules during this very small window of time while you are here, I hope you enjoy the event."

"Are you not attending?"

He took a moment to glance at each of us. Probably noticed for the first time that none of us were wearing costumes, which was a crying shame. I mean, even Myra usually put on a pair of kitty ears.

"We have a kidnapped penguin to find," Delaney said. "And some gnomes to check in on."

"Ah," Death said. "Perhaps this will help." One minute he was just standing there. The next he was standing there with a very familiar penguin statue at his side.

"You kidnapped the penguin?" I asked.

"I merely assured it would come to no harm."

"And the little red devil horns it's wearing?" Delaney asked.

"In following the rules of Ordinary, I understand one can not kidnap the penguin unless one is willing to decorate it in such a manner as is blog-worthy."

I grinned and reached for my phone. "Yeah, we have got to get a picture of this."

And we did. The aloof, ashen angel of Monday, and the sweet little penguin with devil horns.

I could already tell it was going to be my new favorite picture on the blog.

"Shall we?" Death asked.

"Shall we what?" Delaney asked.

"Shall we attend the celebration?"

"We don't even have costumes," I said.

Delaney and Myra both reached into their pockets and pulled out head bands. Myra's gave her kitty ears. Delaney's gave her a unicorn horn.

Delaney unzipped her coat to reveal the "Sparkle Hard, Baby" T-shirt she wore. Myra did her one better by having not only a leopard-print shirt, but by also having a kitty nose and whiskers to wear, and a cute little pink bell on a choker.

"For real?" Because my sisters outdoing me on Halloween would simply not do.

"At least you're not in costume," I said to Hogan.

"Got it right here." He pulled a white beard out of his pocket, attached it over his ears, then picked up Abner's head. "I'm the gnome-whisperer. Want to see my amazing talking head?"

Oh gods.

"Say something, head," Hogan said.

"Something head," Abner mimicked.

Hogan laughed, and I rolled my eyes. I'd almost rather they went back to the knock-knock jokes.

"Fine," I said. "Give me a second. I'll out-costume you all."

Because there was no way Jean Reed was going to do Halloween by half.

Chapter Twelve



We were officially on duty for the night. Halloween meant we had to keep track of petty mischief, but Ordinary didn't have a lot of serious crime on this night. I chalked it up to half the town being full of monsters or people with powers who could put a stop to mailboxes being knocked over and trees being T.P.'d pretty quick.

So while we each had to patrol some part of town, we each had at least part of the night off to do something fun too.

And I wanted to do the Haunted Harbor.

Lucky for me, Hogan wanted to do it too. I agreed to meet him at eleven so we could cruise through all the haunted houses before midnight.

He was waiting for me in front of the first haunted house, a red rose in one hand and a gnome head in the other. Even the bushy white beard couldn't hide how fine that man was. Couldn't hide the look in his eyes when he saw me coming.

"Hey there, beautiful," he said as I made my way around a gaggle of ten-year-olds hyped up on so much sugar, I could practically taste it in the air around them.

"Hey, yourself." I stopped in front of him and smiled. "How's your night going, Gnome Daddy?"

He snorted. "We're gonna have to come up with a sexier name than that."

"I'm not calling you master."

"Not in that costume, you're not."

"Like it?" I held my arms out to the side and did a little pose.

"You're wearing a laundry basket."

"And wadded up socks. And some underwear." I flicked at the clothing stuffed around me, and the hat I'd made out of a box of detergent. "Like Death said, Halloween is about being something people dread."

"You're dirty laundry?"

"Oh, yeah, baby. I'm all kinds of dirty."

He laughed and slipped the rose behind my ear. "Do you know what day it is?" He took my hand, pulled me close until my soft plastic basket buckled between us.

"Halloween?"

"Yes. Also, it's our six-month anniversary."

"Oh," I said. "It is." I knew that. I'd been thinking about it for weeks. Was this a milestone for him? For us? And if it was a milestone, was it an important one, or just a little one?

Maybe this was the point where we reassessed what we were doing, who we were together, what we wanted.

Maybe this was the point where we said good-bye.

"You know what I want to do to celebrate our first six months together?" He smiled, and shifted his hand so that it cupped my face, his thumb running gently across the curve of my bottom lip.

"What?" I asked, lost in his eyes.

"To do it again. And again. And again."

"That's a lot of six months, Hogan."

"It is, isn't it? I'm liking the sound of that. How about you?"

A year with him? Two years? Three?

"Yeah," I said, a little too softly to be heard over the shrieks of fright around us. "Yes," I said a little louder. "I'd like that too."

I searched his eyes. And I thought I saw words unsaid in their warm blue depth. I thought I saw love.

I hoped he saw it in my eyes too. Because that's what was in my heart. Solid as a rock, sweet as candy.

"Can I tell you something?" I asked.

"Go."

"I wished for something."

"Oh?"

"Just now."

"And what was it?"

"Everyone knows that if you tell someone what you wish for it won't ever come true."

"So I have to guess?"

"Or use your jinni powers to figure it out."

He didn't hesitate. "I already know what it is."

"Do you?"

"It's written right here." He brushed his thumb across my bottom lip again. He tipped his head down and gently nudged my face to the angle he wanted.

Then he kissed me, with all his warmth, his heart, his joy. And I kissed him right back. No secrets between us.

Yeah. Yes. This was exactly what I had wished for, exactly what my heart hoped for. Him. Us. Together. A promise. A wish. And all the time in the world to discover just how many ways we could make our dreams come true.

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Lastly, but never leastly, I want to thank you, dear reader, for giving this story a try. I hope you enjoyed this taste of Ordinary and that you will come back again soon to catch up with the creatures and gods and people in Oregon's quirky little beach town.

For those wondering: yes, I have gnomes in my yard. They may or may not be headless.

About the Author

Devon Monk is a national best selling writer of urban fantasy. Her series include: ORDINARY MAGIC, HOUSE IMMORTAL, ALLIE BECKSTROM, BROKEN MAGIC, and SHAME AND TERRIC. She also writes the AGE OF STEAM steampunk series, and the occasional short story which can be found in her collection: A CUP OF NORMAL and in various anthologies.

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