

CHAPTER ONE

Ode to Joy

“Honey,” Joy says, shoving her crystal ball in my face, “you need to get laid.”

I make a face into the ball, making sure Joy can see the image of my scrunched-up nose ballooning and distorting through the glass. “You don’t know anything about my sex life. How do you know if I need anything?”

“I’m a clairvoyant, darling. I know these things much better than you ever will.”

“You mean, you’re a twenty-something failed witch who now plays therapist for the general civilian populace.”

“Same thing,” Joy answers, dismissively waving her hand—the same hand that happens to be holding the crystal ball. “Oh, woopsy daisy.”

I dive forward over the sable tablecloth, arm outstretched to catch the falling sphere. It glances off my straining fingers, toward the richly carpeted floor—then Joy’s

pale hand expertly scoops it up, leaving me stretched across the tabletop like a beached whale.

Joy laughs obnoxiously, the sound seeming impossibly loud coming from such a diminutive frame. “Gets you every time!” she crows, her wide grin exposing the gap between her two front teeth.

“Yeah yeah, laugh it up,” I mutter, pouting and dragging myself back across the table to my seat. Joy is still giggling as I struggle to adjust my crooked tie and tuck my shirt back into my slacks. I’m a little annoyed at her, but it’s a fond sort of annoyance; the kind you greet like an old friend. “But seriously, Joy, are you alright? You’re not looking so hot.”

“Excuse you,” Joy puffs, “I’m *always* hot.” But she fiddles with a split end in her firetruck red hair, frowning. My eyes stray to the disheveled piles of fraying fabric and half-empty bottles of nail polish cluttering the small, tapestried room. “I’m okay Harry, really. It’s just the usual. Bills, bills, more bills. I might have to take up that waitressing gig again.”

“Are you sure there’s nothing I can do? You know I have the mon—”

“No. We are *not* doing this again.” Her hazel eyes are glittering dangerously, as are the dazzling jewel tone patterns painted onto her fingernails. I get a good view of those as she jabs a finger right between my eyes. “I know you’re strapped for cash right now, which means you’d be paying with your inheritance.”

“I wouldn’t be paying with Johanna’s money, I’d be paying with mine—”

“Yes, and then you wouldn’t have anything left over to pay rent, so you’d end up having to sell something from the vault your dead mentor left you. That’s not a bad thing in and of itself, except you’d end up having a big-fat-fucking panic attack because you happen to have a major—and I mean *major*—guilt complex regarding the murder of your mother figure—”

“Okay okay, fine,” I say hastily, swatting her finger out of my face. “Lay off, will you? I thought other people had to pay for this kind of treatment. Mother figure, *Christ*. That’s a reach, even for you.”

“Oops. Yeah, sorry, I got a little carried away.”

Joy started out as a fortune teller, but since then her job description has shifted to something more akin to “supernaturally inclined amateur psychotherapist.” It’s not that she’s bad at divination; quite the opposite, actually. Turns out people who visit psychics don’t actually want to know the future. They’re more partial to reassurances, good tidings, or just a calm authority figure assuaging their fear of the unknown. Weird, huh?

It’s kind of a shame, really. Joy’s divination skills are nothing to be scoffed at. If she’d completed her training as a witch, who *knows* how powerful she could have become. But just about a month after my excommunication, Joy had the magical equivalent of an academic meltdown, packed her bags, and left the tutelage of her mentors with her head held low. We stumbled upon each other half a year later, both of us just starting to figure out what to do with our lives without the guidance of our respective teachers. We bonded quickly over mutual sorrows and regrets. Also, hanging

out with me made her realize she's really good at listening to people with deep-seated issues. Go figure.

I twist my bottom lip, a thought occurring to me. I pull out my wallet, and Joy groans out loud.

“Harry, I told you, I'm not taking your money.”

“I know, I know. This isn't charity, I'm paying for goods and services.” I hold out a crumpled fifty-dollar bill, wearing my most winning smile. “Tell my fortune?”

She stares at me, blinking, for a second. Then her wide-eyed look of surprise morphs into unadulterated delight, sending a pleasant flutter down my stomach. She snatches up the bill and flows upright.

“You are *such* a jackass,” she laughs, slipping nimbly out of the tight space between the table and the wall. I can't help noticing how the thick fabric of her sweats sags around her bony ankles and how her worn, oversized shirt completely engulfs her torso.

As Joy putters around, sifting through her various psychic paraphernalia, I occupy myself with the enormous tapestry against the wall behind Joy's seat. It swirls with all sorts of fascinating, fantastic colors, but if you focus enough, the shapes resolve into a gently foaming stream winding through a grove of lush fruit trees. The water shimmers red, blue, and purple with the reflections of the branches above, and within that water splashes a surreal tangle of willowy limbs and gossamer wings, twinkling eyes and smiles not quite human.

They're fairies, as Joy knew them—knows them. She's of the firm belief that she's a changeling, a human who was taken to the land of fae as a baby, brought back unharmed but still carrying the lingering touch of an alien world. She says she has hazy memories that come back to her as dreams, of colors with no human descriptor and the crooning love of a thousand fae lovelier and more terrifying than any human or demon. She's woven and embroidered that tapestry herself over the course of years, struggling to piece together the disjointed, flimsy material of her dreams and bring them to life with too-dull yarns and unrefined human fingers. There's some blank space around the edges of the image; she's still working on it.

“Here,” Joy says, returning to the table with a black velvet drawstring pouch and a translucent plastic box, both small enough to hold in one hand. The box is packed with twenty-sided dice, and when she opens the pouch, a few wooden Scrabble tiles slide out. I raise an eyebrow.

“Where's your tarot deck?”

“No clue, it's probably under a carpet or something. I could look for it if you want.”

I glance down at the bulky, many-layered carpeting under my feet.

“Nah,” I say, “Scrabble will do.”

Joy takes out a die, a bright yellow one that glitters in the light. She cups it in her hands for a moment and closes her eyes, the lines in her face smoothing out one by one. Then she drops it, carelessly, as though she's forgotten it was in her hands at all. It bounces three times and rolls, coming to a stop at the very center of the table.

“Eight,” Joy declares. She dips her hand into the Scrabble pouch and pulls out a handful of wooden tiles, and though she doesn’t count them I know there are eight in total. She scatters them effortlessly onto the tabletop, then drags them each into position with a fingertip, gradually spelling out a word.

G. O. L. D. F. I. S. H.

“Voila!” Joy says, smiling and presenting her results with a theatrical flourish.

I peer at the tiles. “Okay, so what does it mean?”

Joy makes a noncommittal noise and shrugs, making her huge shirt tent up over her knobby shoulders. I blink at her.

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“The word means *something*, I just don’t have the context to figure out what at the moment. Context is everything, you know.”

“So... by the time I understand what these tiles are predicting, the events in question might already be happening?”

“Yup!”

I huff, leaning back in my armchair. “Jeez, no wonder people stopped paying you for these.”

“No refunds,” Joy teases, grinning wickedly and holding up my fifty-dollar bill between an index and ring finger. She’s about to say something more when her eyes flicker up to a clock hanging on the wall behind my head. “Ah, crap!”

“What is it?”

“I have an appointment in eight minutes—gotta get changed—” She tears up the stairs to her loft bedroom, carpets and tapestries flapping in her wake.

I have to hand it to Joy, she really knows how to decorate a living space. The assumption would be that having a layer of dark, heavy fabric over everything would make any room seem smaller, but Joy has somehow managed the opposite impression. The light from the half-curtained windows doesn't reach the corners, and there the rich, dark tones seem to lengthen and deepen the shadows. The kitchenette and loft bedroom directly above have been closed off from her “work” space by means of a heavy curtain, cloaking the areas in an aura of arcane mystery. Really, they're just too normal to fit the aesthetic of the rest of the place.

“I'll let myself out, okay?” I call, standing up and retrieving the black coat draped over the back of my chair. I sling it over my shoulders, letting the familiar, comforting weight close around me. The bulge of multiple hidden pockets presses against my ribs.

“Alright!” comes Joy's reply from above. After a moment, the curtain around her bedroom parts with a scraping sound and she sticks her head over the railing, loose hair falling over her face. “I was serious about what I said before,” she says. “It doesn't take a psychic to tell you're worried about something, Harry. Find yourself a nice girl, get the stress out, maybe make a new connection. Then get back to the issue. Okay?”

I innocently stick both hands in my coat pockets. “Well, if that's really what the good psychic recommends, I *suppose* I could do it.”

She giggles—then gives a sharp intake of breath and freezes, staring right at a spot to the left of my head.

“Joy?” I ask, following her gaze. There’s nothing to see but an upholstered chair.

She blinks, slowly, a statue coming to life. “I thought—” She swallows, the movement showing up clearly against the fragile skin at her throat. “I thought I saw a fairy.”

“Really?” I look again, this time swiveling my gaze to the floor, the walls, even the table. The only fairies I see are the ones embroidered into Joy’s tapestry. But... is it possible? Like most of the mage population I’ve never seen a real fairy, only pixies, but if one has really come to Earth to find their lost changeling—

—Joy bursts into peals of laughter, startling me into looking back up at her. She’s holding her stomach like it’s going to fall out, shaking with the force of her glee.

“Gotcha!” she cackles, slapping her palm against the wooden railing with a loud *SMACK* and leaning so far over it that she’s dangerously close to toppling to the floor. I throw up my hands in frustration.

“Oh, come on!”

“Man, the look on your face—” Her words dissolve into laughter once again.

I huff loudly, but am unable to keep the tiniest hint of a smile from the corner of my mouth. I turn to leave, for real this time. “Good luck with your client, Joy. I’ll see you later, okay?”

She waves, still wheezing, and moves to disappear into the obscurity of her bedroom. But just before she does, I catch a glimpse of her eyes—there’s an edge to their usual glitter, dampening the brightness of her gap-toothed grin. It echoes in the way she

looked at that empty spot beside me, where the fairy supposedly was, and makes her laughter seem forced.

Before I can say anything about it, the curtains are drawn closed. Busy footsteps come from within. I leave the matter alone and exit the apartment.

On the subway ride back to my apartment in Hell's Kitchen, I mull over some of the things Joy said. She's definitely right about my being worried. As I remember the last week, I find myself subconsciously pressing a hand against my stomach, where I'm now sporting a very conspicuous, still-healing scar in the shape of a demon sigil. It's evidence of a deal I made with Lilith, a demon who's weirdly fascinated with me due to another one of my scars: a nasty burn across the right side of my neck and part of my shoulder, the result of a demon-blood-fueled resurrection attempt. Not a resurrection, a resurrection *attempt*; the distinction is important. It's complicated, alright? I accepted Lilith's help on a job, and I paid for that help by promising her sole ownership of my soul (*great* opportunity for a pun there)—but that promise only goes into effect if I get damned. It seemed like an innocuous enough contract at the time. But I haven't seen Lilith in six days now, and my cynical side is starting to kick in. What kind of devious, diabolical, demonic fine print did I miss?

Joy's assessment of my financial situation is also depressingly accurate. I came into some money about a week ago—a *lot* of money—except then I got drunk and pissed someone off, so it was all confiscated. Miriam still paid me my regular rates for the

people-hunting work I did for her, but she made it *exceedingly* clear that even that was an act of generosity, considering I'd nearly gotten her and a good chunk of her family killed. Ah well, fair's fair. I'd been planning to donate most of the money anyway; alligator mole tunnels aren't going to rebuild themselves.

Now that I've paid rent for another month and replaced my destroyed desk, I'm admittedly running low on living funds. I had actually gone to Joy today to see if she had any clients to refer to me. The people who come to Joy are usually suffering from civilian issues—messy divorce, job troubles, family disagreements—but every once in a while, she gets someone with an amateur misfortune curse aimed at them or a ghost trapped in their air conditioning unit. She sends the client my way, I do the hands-on work, and we split the profits. It's a win-win, one disgraced witch helping out another.

But today, Joy didn't have anything for me but that tile reading. *Goldfish*. What's that supposed to mean, anyway?

I'm still puzzling over the events of the day when the subway reaches my stop. My feet automatically carry me out of the station and to my apartment building while my mind continues to churn. By the time I open the door to my apartment the sun is sinking, spilling warm, orange light into my office-cum-living room.

The place is trashed.