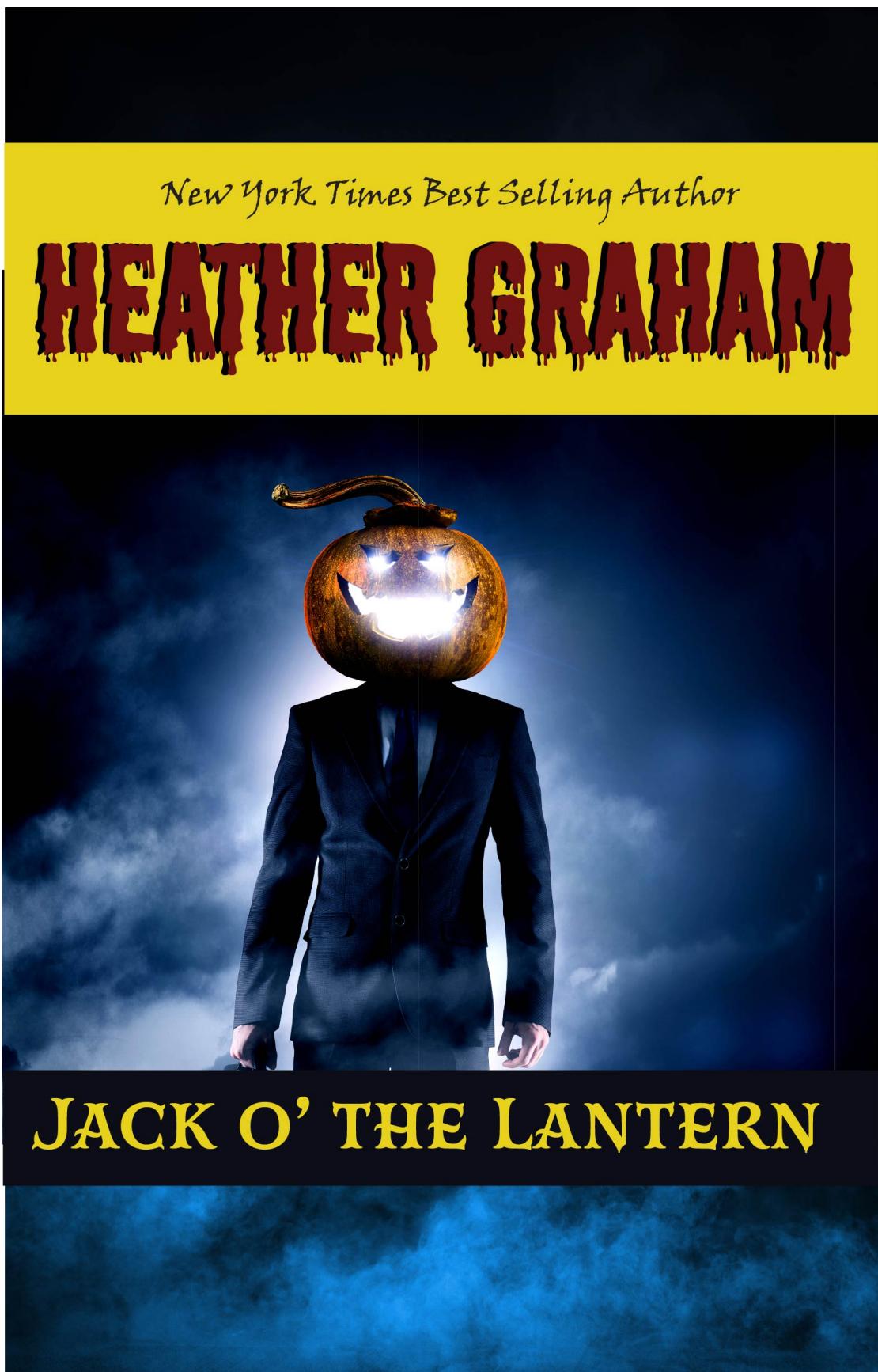


Jack O' the Lantern/Heather Graham



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(A short Krewe holiday story)

Jack O' the Lantern

Sienna Murray and Ryder Stapleton have moved to Virginia for Ryder to attend the FBI academy at Quantico so the one-time NOLA cop can become an agent with the Krewe of Hunters.

But New Orleans is home to them both, and for Halloween, they're taking a few days of vacation time to head down and see old friends and one of Sienna's relatives—Granny K. Of course, they'll be seeing Granny K. in "spirit," but she's as capable of being a "larger than life" personality in death as she was when among the living.

They arrive to find Granny K. telling an old tale that originated in Ireland and quickly extended across the British Isles, and then onward to the New World in a slightly different form.

But she's telling the tale for a reason that has a major impact on the here and now—and the living.

The vacation Sienna and Ryder had planned is about to become a strange and desperate struggle against the power of suggestion and the evils it can create in the mind, a race to see the devils alight on Halloween are put to rest, and the living—including Sienna herself—remain among the living!

Jack O' the Lantern

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Jack O' the Lantern

Prologue

"The time has come! It is due!"

The burning eyes within the devil-head stared at him and he knew. There was no choice. And he had to act, he knew how to act, when to act, and still . . .

"I don't . . . I don't . . . Please, no?" he begged softly.

"Ah, but there has been a passage of years, and it is time, for what is due must be paid, and I hunger, I hunger . . ."

He looked at the face, at the burning eyes, and the ferocity of the flame that seemed to burn within and . . .

Terror swept into him.

Yes, the devil had to be paid.

And the payment due was in blood.

Chapter 1

"Beware! For the time draws near, and with the veil broken, the dead may very well fear the living!"

Granny K was holding court in the cemetery.

"Now, mind you!" She continued. "Halloween has evolved from all kinds of holidays, and may I say, many of those evolved from me old homeland Scotland, and also from England, Ireland, and Wales. For there were pagan rites on such a date that the Romans cleverly combined with the coming of Christianity. But for many, the night of All Hallows Eve meant the thin veil between the living and the dead was lifted, and costumes and masks were worn to scare off evil spirits. It was a time when bonfires were lit . . . and yet in it all, the legend continues to this day is that of Stingy Jack—and that legend has become the creating of a Jack-o-lantern from a pumpkin in the United States. Ah, but at one time, the pumpkin—a New World delicacy—was a turnip! For what I'm about to tell you is the legend of Stingy Jack! Well, Jack was a confident man, a trickster, and one always ready to get ahead. So much so that the lad would bargain and deal with the devil himself! He tricked the devil into buying his drinks once, having the devil turn himself into a gold coin to pay for the drinks, and then Jack himself stealing the coin rather than paying for those drinks and keeping Satan a prisoner in that coin by wearing a gold cross around his neck and thus the devil could not take him for a year. Then! He trapped the devil up in a tree and carved a cross into the tree so the devil couldn't escape for a decade! Well, Jack had cornered the rascal up a tree; and he had such confidence and cunning, he'd not allow the devil to escape until the devil promised Stingy Jack he'd not have entry into hell! Come the day that Stingy Jack dies. And at the Pearly Gates, St. Peter shook his head and said Jack would not enter there. So, there was Jack—he could not enter Heaven or Hell! He wandered the dark wastelands of the in-between, his only light a

turnip with a bit of blazing coal inside to see him through the stygian horror of his eternity! Some say he carved a horrible mask into the turnip so he could scare away the terrors that might come. Jack's tale spread to my homeland Scotland, then to England and to Wales, and from there, to the New World. And thus we carve pumpkins today; and though we may not all know it, we carve them to keep evil at bay!"

Sienna smiled, watching her grandmother.

Leave it to Granny K. She sat atop a tomb in the beautiful old cemetery in New Orleans. It wasn't her final resting place—she just had friends in the cemetery and loved New Orleans. It was also where she came to see Sienna her granddaughter who had inherited her ability to see the dead while still among the living.

And Sienna was living in Virginia now while her fiancé, Ryder Stapleton, went through the academy, the two of them returned often. Sienna was still working as the manager and media head of the small city museum she loved so much. And as for Halloween, well they'd come back because they'd known they'd meet up with Granny K and because Halloween was a favorite holiday. It was wonderful in New Orleans where the city went all in.

Except, well . . .

Halloween. Ryder had told her once the holiday did bring out crazy situations and a few crazy people.

Sienna was leaning against a tomb, watching. While the cemetery was now over two-hundred years old, interments still took place in the family tombs. The Church kept up maintenance here, but the historic place still seemed to be permeated with atmosphere, old stone crumbling here and there, vines growing between the tombs and mausoleums, and funerary art touched by the ravages of time. But it had been created after a fever epidemic, and the first city cemetery had been moved to what had then been the outskirts of the city. It was also, for those who knew, home to several ghosts, those whose souls lingered for various reasons.

Granny K had paused because a young woman, a tour guide, was bringing a group through—a group totally oblivious to Granny K's performance and the spirits assembled around her to hear her tale. The pretty young woman was perhaps in her mid-twenties, wearing her tour guide badge, with long dark hair and a quick smile.

She spoke to her group as she led them through one of the avenues in the famous "city of the dead." She had no idea Granny K or her audience watched the group as they walked along, and the pretty guide gave her speech.

"The cemetery accepted its first interment in 1789. What you see to the left of the entrance and in much of the wall surrounding the cemetery are what we call 'wall' vaults or 'oven' vaults. They may contain more than one person, just as our beautiful family and society mausoleums may contain many, many more bodies than one might imagine. That is because we have the 'year and a day' plan for interments. In that time, remains are naturally cremated by the sun and heat of New Orleans. The remains are then swept back into a holding cell at the end of the tomb, and another family member or beloved friend may rest where one had lain before until their turn to be swept to the holding area. Now, follow me, and I shall take you to the mausoleum where it is believed our most famous voodoo queen—or perhaps her daughter—was laid to rest."

"I'll bet you practice some voodoo!" one of the men in the crowd murmured. He looked to be in his early thirties, a cute and casual guy with shaggy light brown hair and an easy smile.

An older woman in the crowd groaned and rolled her eyes, but she did so with good humor.

"Later! On with the tour!" the woman said.

The group laughed and the pretty tour guide moved them onward.

"We really do give new meaning to mingling with our ancestors here!" Granny K said, drawing a round of laughter from those around her.

"Back to Stingy Jack!" someone called.

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Granny K smiled and nodded. She really held them all in thrall. Her storytelling was dramatic, and she had garnered quite an audience.

"They say Jack is still out there, ever seeking entry again to the world of the living!" Granny K said. She frowned. "Beware, my darlins, and keep a wary eye on your loved ones, for some these days might take the legend and the evil, a wee bit too seriously. And as we know, the living can be quite terrifying! There are those here who can tell you Stingy Jack lives, he sits at a bar awaiting the hour, and the very mask of evil draws him on. Anyway, dear friends, that is my story for today, with All Hallows Eve just one night away!" Granny K announced. She hopped down from the tomb and waved to all.

Granny K was rewarded with applause. One of her friends murmured, "Almost makes a soul enjoy being among the dead!"

Granny K smiled and made her way over to Sienna.

"Bravo, Granny K," Sienna said seriously, "you told quite a tale. Legends! Ghost stories—to ghosts!"

"Ah, lass, I cannot be telling ghost stories to ghosts, since it would hard to scare a ghost with a ghost story! Nae, my little love, the most terrifying stories are those created by the living, never the dead! And here's the thing—I heard a tale I must be telling you about that has much to do with the living and the dead!"

Sienna frowned. While she still worked for the museum in Treme, it had been Granny K who had been influential in urging her to save others and thus become involved in a case that might have stolen the lives of many if she had not had her other-worldly help. Yes, they had come back to New Orleans for Halloween—but to enjoy the holiday—not to become involved with law enforcement. While Sienna remained with the museum, Ryder was at the academy. He had been a NOLA cop first, and thus with their strange special abilities, they had discovered they had much more than the case in common.

So . . .

Granny K knew something Sienna thought warily. And she and Ryder were about to become involved again, whether she wanted to be or not-

"Granny—"

"You must meet Steven," Granny K said somberly.

"Steven who?" Sienna asked her grandmother's spirit.

"Steven who was murdered by Stingy Jack."

Sienna frowned, wondering if her grandmother hadn't become a little too obsessed with old legends and Halloween.

"Granny K, you were telling a story about an old Irish legend that made its way to the Americas, becoming our infatuation with Jack-o-lanterns. Stingy Jack is not real, he's from centuries ago as nothing more than a legend—"

"Lass, stop! You know I don't go talking off the top of my head. Is Stingy Jack a legend, yes! A cautionary tale, perhaps. But Jack-o-lanterns are now real—just as evil and sick psychopaths are real. And if that's not the correct medical term, I'm sure there is a term for the *living* who kill as poor Steven was killed," Granny K said, angry that Sienna doubted her.

And maybe she had the right to be angry. She had proven her words to be true in the past.

"Granny—"

"Where is Ryder?" Granny K asked her.

"On his way. In fact, I see him, He's coming through the gate right now."

Sienna was relieved. When she had met Ryder, Granny K had been delighted to discover he was a cop. She'd feared Sienna might be in danger—something else that had proven to be true—and she had been almost giddy when Sienna and Ryder had admitted their love for one another.

"Thankfully, the police are here!" Granny K said.

"He's not with the force anymore, Granny K," Sienna said with a sigh. "He's in the academy—"

"To become a part of the Krewe, aye, I know all that! But he's the heart of an investigator, no matter what one may call the man! Ah, Ryder!" she said with pleasure.

Sienna watched as her fiancé approached them, having been allowed through the gates by the guard on duty. Vandalism had caused the Church to close the cemetery to those just wandering by, and only families with passes and tour groups with legal arrangements could bring the living through now. Ryder had a pass; he had a great-grandfather interred in one of the society tombs. And Sienna's work with the museum allowed her entry.

She smiled, remembering how she had resented Ryder. Well, it was half Granny's fault! Okay, not fault. Lives had been saved, but in saving lives, Sienna had come under suspicion of having something to do with the crime herself. And still . . . she wondered how she had taken so long to admit how she felt about him. He was an imposing man—truly tall, dark, and handsome—with gray eyes that seemed to penetrate the soul. But that wasn't what drew her to him. He was determined—dogged—one might say. He cared about those who were hurt; and while he rueled a crime, he moved quickly ahead trying to make sure no one else became a victim to any evil that had taken place.

He could also laugh; and they could lay together in silence sometimes, happy just to know they held one another.

"And there's Steven!" Granny K said.

The ghost of a young man was walking toward them. In life, Sienna thought, he had been about twenty-five, tall, leanly muscled, a good-looking fellow with curly dark hair and a handsome face.

He looked at Sienna curiously as he approached and beyond her at Ryder.

"They see me?" he muttered to Granny K.

"That they do, me luv!"

"How do you do," he said gravely, nodding as Ryder came to stand beside Sienna. "A great pleasure to meet the two of you. I had heard there were those among the living who didn't just shiver if we passed by but saw us . . . and heard us."

"Clearly," Ryder said, glancing curiously over at Granny K. "How do you do, Steven. And how is it that we can help you?"

"My name is Steven Jonas," he said. "And I was murdered. Murdered by 'Stingy Jack.' And I am afraid he is about to strike again. Let me tell you the circumstances. And I am afraid, so afraid, he has been watching Monette, and that . . . well, he will strike again. I saw her today. She never fails to stop by our family mausoleum . . . never fails to remember me. But I fear he has watched her. But whether it is Monette or another . . . the year has come. He will strike again!"

"A ghost? A legend?" Ryder asked, frowning as he glanced at Sienna.

"No. Trust me. This Stingy Jack is very much alive!" Steven said.

Chapter 2

They had left the cemetery; two more tour groups had come in, and they were distracting. One of Ryder's favorite hangouts was Coffee Science, and they headed there to take a charming table outside. Sienna and Ryder sat across from one another, allowing for Granny K and Steven Jonas to take the seats next to them. They could talk away—without it appearing in the least that they were doing anything other than chatting with one another over a nice strong brew.

Ryder had learned long ago that conversations with the dead were simply not accepted by the majority of humanity.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to need to understand what happened. Let's start with this. I was a NOLA cop for years, and while you might have been murdered before my time as a cop, I never heard anything about 'Stingy Jack' murders."

Steven shook his head. "You wouldn't. Everyone assumed it was a random killing. They happen on Halloween. It took them forever to find me. I'd been at a party with friends, and I was dressed as a zombie, horrible make-up, blood all over me—stage blood. Well, it was stage blood until Jack got his hands on me anyway. I left one group of friends at a place on Canal because I had agreed to meet up with others on Chartres Street. And I just thought he was an entertainer or drunk at first. He was walking along . . . dancing . . . kicking up his heels. And I think he had a cell phone playing what sounded like an old Irish jig. He was in an orange jumpsuit with a giant pumpkin on his head! I thought it was a mask at first, but then I realized it was a real pumpkin and he'd carved it to fit his face and go over his head. He danced up to me, and I heard two voices—two distinct voices! One was arguing it wasn't right. The other was saying the devil had to be paid his due. The decade had come and every ten years he must be paid! I was on the way from one party to the next, weaving my way in the French Quarter from Rampart down toward a bar by the river. And I stopped when I thought he wanted an audience. He danced again, kicking up his heels. Then he came at me with a knife and when I saw his eyes . . . I was

terrified but it was too late. He carved a face right into me, ripping into vital organs. It was Halloween and costumed characters were everywhere, but no one knew the man was murdering me. It all appeared to be an act. Through it all, he managed to press me back into a narrow alley and . . . no one found me forever! But don't you understand what I'm saying? He'll strike again because I was killed ten years ago!"

"What makes you think . . . it's now? That ten years matters?" Ryder asked.

"Something about the legend Granny K was talking about earlier. There are all kinds of takes on the stories, I assume, by this point in history. But I've heard the Jack tale told many times with him having made a deal with the devil not to bother him for a decade. And who knows—"

"Enough weird things happen on Halloween," Sienna murmured.

"Please," Granny K said seriously, "Ryder, I know you're in the academy now, but you must still have friends on the force. Of course, I know you can't explain a ghost came to you to tell you about his murder, but . . ."

"Anonymous tip," Ryder said, grimacing at Sienna. She smiled back at him, nodding.

"All right, then," Ryder murmured, but he studied Steven seriously. "There was nothing you saw about the man who killed you that would identify him in any way?"

"I can't tell you his real height—he was wearing a pumpkin on his head," Steven said dryly. "But I'm guessing maybe six-one or two. With the pumpkin, he was about six-five. And he wasn't heavy. Like I said, he was wearing an orange jumpsuit and a pumpkin. And he had something inside the pumpkin—a flashlight perhaps. The eyes and mouth glowed."

"Well, this shouldn't be too hard. We'll be on the lookout for a human pumpkin," Ryder said with a grimace. "And you believe it will be tomorrow night—"

"Tomorrow night," Steven said, nodding his determination. "And maybe you'll save a life and solve my murder. The police weren't negligent. They tried to solve my murder. But it was Halloween

night in New Orleans, long before the pandemic, and there were people everywhere in costumes. There were jugglers and dancers and magicians on the street . . . performers and just people in all manner of costume. The killer struck with a knife quickly over and over again. He left no DNA, nothing."

"Okay, I'll get to the local precinct right away," Ryder promised. "And I'll come up with a good excuse. Now, it shouldn't be too hard for us all to keep our eyes open for a walking Jack-O-Lantern."

"Here's to success!" Granny K said, lifting an imaginary cup of tea. "Oh, but I would love a good cup of hot sweet tea! Still, I can imagine the taste!" Her smile faded and she looked at Ryder seriously. "Please. It will save a life—and give Steven peace."

"I will do everything in my power," he promised.

"You go see Captain Troy," Sienna said to him. "I'm going to head back to the hotel, if that's okay. I'll unpack and get our costumes out for Halloween. I'm assuming we will be out on the streets."

Ryder hesitated. He knew he couldn't worry about Sienna all the time. He thought he'd gotten over it. She might never have trained as an agent or police officer; but she had recently taken self-defense courses, and she was smart and savvy.

And, of course, he'd be with her.

Not to mention the "Jack" victim he was speaking with was a male. It didn't sound as if the devil particularly demanded a certain sex for his blood sacrifice.

"Right. But New Orleans is a big city. People have all gone a little crazy. And masks will take on a whole new meaning this year."

"But even from a distance, we won't miss a giant Jack-O-Lantern," Sienna said, smiling. He nodded to her. It was incongruous now to think he had ever been suspicious of her in any way; but she had known about a case of arson before it had happened!

He loved her so much. In a short period of time, she had become his life.

"I believe you're right. We should be able to spot a giant Jack-O-Lantern walking around!" he agreed. "But wait," he added frowning. "Steven, you mentioned he might be thinking of a victim—someone you knew."

"Monette," Sienna said. "Who is Monette?"

"You saw her," Steven said quietly.

"Saw her?" Sienna asked.

"She was the tour guide in the cemetery today. We were young, in college, when I was killed. She was one of the friends I was supposed to meet. I was so crazy about her—still am. And she . . . she is a tour guide in the city today. But even before that, she came to the cemetery when she could. She came to see me. She brought flowers. She talked sometimes when she was alone. She talked about the fact . . . that maybe she was still in love with me because she just couldn't manage to meet a guy who made her feel the same way."

"What makes you think he'd want to strike Monette?" Sienna asked.

Steven shook his head. "Because I think he's seen her. I think . . . I think he's watched her, and he knows she comes to my grave."

"Have you seen someone watching her?" Ryder asked.

"Well, no, not that I could tell."

"Then . . . ?"

"Oh, by all the heavens and all the saints!" Granny K said impatiently. "Sixth sense, Ryder Stapleton, sixth sense! And you know we can have such talents—dead or alive!"

"All right!" Sienna said quickly. "Ryder, go see Captain Troy. Before I go back to the hotel, I'll figure out a way to meet Monette. Steven will tell me more about her. Go!"

"Okay, I will go forth and do my very best," Ryder said, standing. "And I promise you," he vowed seriously, "police will be on the lookout for a life-sized Jack-O-Lantern tomorrow night."

He left them and headed back. He'd forgotten they had one car between them. They had left the French Quarter behind to go to the café.

"You have the rental car," he told Sienna. "I'll grab an Uber and get someone to give me a lift back to the hotel later."

"Thanks!" she told him, looking at him, smiling.

He thought again of how much he loved her. Beautiful green eyes sparkling and yet serious, hair flowing about her shoulders. She was a stunning woman, and so much more. Bright. And most of all, passionate and caring.

He nodded, forced himself to turn around to carry out his mission. He didn't like leaving her.

Crazy. If the pumpkin struck as Steven feared, it would be tomorrow night.

And even as he knew they did need to do everything in their power to catch "Jack O' the Lantern" before he could strike again, Ryder wished they did not. He wished they had just come to the city they both loved so much for fun on Halloween and a visit with Granny K.

He dialed a car service and waited for his ride. It was the day—becoming the night—before Halloween. People were in costume. NOLA was a city that loved Halloween, even though the pandemic had been taken seriously. There were people out and about, milling on the streets. NOLA had mandates in place, and people apparently loved NOLA enough to follow them.

Zombies, princesses, superheroes, werewolves, and more were already crawling the streets for the many costume parties and contests that would take place all over the city. They moved singly, in two, threes, and crowds, looking to enjoy the fun of the holiday.

His ride came and the driver ably maneuvered through the crowds.

Friends greeted him as he entered the precinct, and he returned their greetings, trying to be casual, and assure them he missed them, too. And yes, the academy could be tough, but it was great. Finally, he made his way to Captain Troy's office.

"Ryder!" the captain said with pleasure. "Great to see you!"

He rose from behind his desk to greet Ryder with a warm handshake and quick hug.

Captain Ebenezer Troy was a good man—a damned good man. Fair with his officers, while demanding they do the job. He was in his mid-fifties, mixed race, solid, with a stance and demeanor that had drawn respect from his force, his superiors, and the entire city.

"I thought you might be here for Halloween. Knowing your lovely fiancée and her love for New Orleans," Troy said. "And I'd hoped you'd stop by to see us all here."

"Of course," Ryder said. "This will always be a home to me. And this job—you are the best at what you do. But I also have a strange request for you. And I'm not sure why, but I think this request has to be taken very seriously. For all that I ever did here . . ."

"Ryder, you don't usually ramble," Troy said.

Ryder winced. "Right. Okay. There was a murder here ten years ago on Halloween," he said.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but there has been more than one Halloween murder. Most people want some fun. But sometimes . . ."

"This is a defined threat," Ryder said.

"Someone threatened you?" Troy asked.

"No, but I got a strange call. I already looked it up, and I know a man named Steven Jonas was killed on Halloween exactly ten years ago." He wasn't lying; he had looked up information on Steven Jonas on the ride to the precinct.

Troy nodded. "I remember."

"You remember?"

"He was found in an alley—a very narrow one, but you know how that is. The officer who stumbled on him thought he was drunk and passed out at first. The man was dressed up as a zombie with stage blood dripping down his face and on his clothing. Then the officer realized all the blood

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wasn't stage blood and he wasn't drunk. He was dead, with multiple stab wounds to his gut. That was ten years ago, as you said—"

"Anonymous call. Someone warning that Steven had been killed by a Jack-O-Lantern and the 'Jack' was going to strike again."

"A Jack-O-Lantern?" Troy asked skeptically.

"Sir! A man was dressed up as a Jack-O-Lantern. Whoever it was, I believe, knew the killer. And there is most certainly something unhinged about the fellow. He believes the devil must be paid his due—in blood. This man uses a real carved pumpkin for his mask."

"All right, then. Well, at least it's not a superhero or zombie. There will be dozens upon dozens of them. Werewolves and vampires. Comic book characters, pretty people, grotesque people. But at least, a real pumpkin for a mask is not a common sight. I'll see to it the warning goes out."

"Thank you, Sir, thank you."

Troy nodded, pursing his lips. "Ryder, if you think it's a real threat, I know you. It's a real threat. We'll follow up. I promise you."

Ryder smiled and thanked him again.

It wasn't easy to leave the precinct office; Captain Troy made good on his promise while he was still there, and he found himself trying to explain what he knew about the legend of Jack-O-the-Lantern. But when he left, he was grateful.

He'd been believed.

And the city's finest would be on guard against—Jack-O-Lanterns.

When he left, darkness had fallen in earnest.

And he was anxious to be back with Sienna.

*

He wasn't sure what had attracted him to the woman in the cemetery; but he had seen her there just leaning against a tomb.

She had the most enigmatic green eyes. And an amazing smile. It was almost as if she listened to music unheard by others, or imagined that a tale was being told, or even seeped in the history and elegant decay of the cemetery.

"She would do fine. In fact, lad, she'd be great."

He wasn't even with Jack-O' the Lantern, but he heard the devil's voice in his head.

No. No, no, and yet . . .

To see those eyes on his as she knew he held her life in his hands and she would be his in such a strange way.

"There is the other!" he said aloud, and then he hoped no one heard him talking to himself.

Then, she wasn't alone. She was with a tall man, lean and well-muscled, the kind of man one didn't want to tangle with. And she loved him; he could see it in her eyes when she looked at him, when she touched him . . .

"She's the one I want, though I will take the other. A lovely package, tied up in a bow," the devil said in his mind.

The other one . . .

He followed the couple. Watched them drink coffee.

Watched the man leave.

She lingered over her coffee a few minutes, and then rose as well.

He followed her. It was not as easy as he intended as she headed for a car. He had to move quickly, and then maneuver traffic and the crowds thronging the streets. She was having the same

difficulty. But she found a place to leave the car off Canal; he did, too. And he followed again on foot, frowning as he realized where she was heading.

The tour offices.

He watched carefully from outside as she went in. Several of the guides were chatting, some about to go out, a few done for the day.

Monette . . .

"Both!" the devil cried in his head! "A double event, and there you go, my lad, a deal with the devil! A double event, and I shall have my beauties and my blood, and you will be free for two decades!"

No, no, I can't! he thought.

"Oh, but you will!" the devil assured him. "You will."

Chapter 3

Sienna had learned from Steven that the young woman's name was Monette Benoit, and she was now thirty-two years old. She had a small apartment in one of the old houses on Burgundy Street not far off Rampart. At the moment, though, she was standing in the tour offices chatting with a few friends.

No matter what, it was going to be an awkward meeting. Sienna hoped she and Ryder would come up with something that resembled the same story when they were talking to others.

She had to get moving!

Determined, Sienna approached the young woman.

"Miss Benoit?" she asked quietly.

Curiously, the woman turned to her. She smiled. "Yes. Hi, how can I help you? Wait! I saw you before. You were in the cemetery just a while ago."

"I was. My name is Sienna Murray. I lived here for years—I'm from Louisiana. I'm in Virginia now, but I'm here often. I work for the new little museum. Well, it's not that new, but . . . anyway. First, I want to compliment you. I enjoyed what I heard, and I think you manage a crowd extremely well!"

"Thank you," Monette said. "I appreciate that, and I've heard of you. I've been to the museum. I've seen your name, though we haven't met. Before."

Sienna smiled. Then she let her smile fade. "Are you—still working now."

"I'm just signing out."

"May I buy you coffee or a drink or . . . may I have a few minutes of your time? I have a strange story for you, and I'm hoping you'll believe me."

"Oh?" Monette asked warily.

"Please?" Sienna asked.

"Um, sure," the young woman said, turning back to the tour counter and waving to a man there.

"I'm off—see you tomorrow!"

"Thanks for working Halloween," the man she'd waved to said.

"No problem!" Monette said, muttering beneath her breath, "I hate Halloween!"

Sienna didn't respond. They were back in the French Quarter and close to Café du Monde. It seemed a natural choice for coffee; and since she was looking at it from the tour company window, Sienna suggested it.

"Only if you'll get me a beignet, too." Monette told her.

"It's a deal," Sienna said.

The iconic coffee and beignet spot was busy, but they were able to secure an outside table. Once they were seated, Monette got to the point.

"What on earth is going on?"

Sienna took a deep breath. "My fiancé is at the academy at Quantico—FBI. But before that he was a detective here in New Orleans."

Monette frowned. "I swear—I'm innocent."

Sienna smiled and then grew serious. "He received a strange phone call. Years ago, you were close to a man named Steven Jonas."

Monette's face blanched. Time had not eased the pain for her, so it appeared.

"I'm sorry," Sienna said quickly.

"They never found out who did it." Monette said. "Wait, did you--?"

Sienna shook her head. "No, but we received a strange call. Anonymous, of course." She was glad Granny K and Steven Jonas had chosen not to accompany her to meet with Monette. She could just imagine the two of them rolling their eyes. "Someone, we believe, did see the murder. And according to

the caller, Steven was killed by someone dressed up as a life-sized Jack-O-Lantern. Someone who believes he talks to the devil, and then the devil demands a sacrifice."

"What?" Monette said incredulously.

Sienna took a deep breath and explained the legend behind the carving of pumpkins. Monette stared at her, listening, and then shaking her head.

"The devil—talks to this man. Is his name Jack?"

"We don't know his name. But we believe he may see himself as Jack, and he believes he must obey the devil or spend eternity wandering in the dark—with nothing but a candle in a pumpkin or turnip—to light his way."

"That's crazy. But . . ." She paused. "Halloween. It is crazy. As you can see."

She swept out a hand. And she was right. The table next to them held a table of young women. Three were witches, two were mermaids, and one was wearing a Wonder Woman costume.

One table over, Count Dracula and Igor were munching beignets with Jack Skeleton and Sally from the Tim Burton movie.

Zombies roamed the streets.

Once upon a time, Sienna thought, she would have smiled and loved the costumes. In fact, they had come with costumes, ready to celebrate with a few of their old friends.

"I'm curious, though. I . . . yes, I cared deeply about Steven. But he has been dead ten years. I'm not sure how I could help you," Monette said.

"What do you do on Halloween?" Sienna asked her.

"Work. I hate the holiday. Well, working isn't much better. On Halloween, it's all ghost tours. But—why are you asking me? Oh! You want me to watch out for a man dressed as a pumpkin."

"Uh, yes," Sienna said. "And . . . well, we'd like to trail you."

"Because a pumpkin might follow me?" Monette asked, her tone suggesting she might be getting suspicious that Sienna was a wee bit crazy herself.

"This caller—the anonymous caller—suggested the killer might have been watching you already."

"What?" she asked again. Then she closed her eyes and shook her head. "This was an anonymous phone call? Had to have been a prank. Maybe someone didn't think they got their money's worth on tour, or . . . "

She let out a sigh, shaking her head.

"Thank you for the café au lait and the beignet. I need to get home. It will be a long day tomorrow."

"Of course. But may I drive you home?"

"How do I know you're not the 'anonymous' caller? That you didn't kill Steven?" Monette asked, and then she winced. "You're not that old, are you? You would have been in middle school when Steven was killed. Hey, wait. Kids have committed murders."

"Monette, please, believe me. I'm just trying . . . okay, this was a reliable source! You may be in danger! My fiancé is talking to his old captain now. We can arrange protection for you, but—"

"Reliable source?" Monette asked.

"Yes."

"How can you have a reliable anonymous source?" Monette asked.

Well, she had her on that one.

"Do you talk to ghosts?" she asked.

"What?" It was Sienna's turn to say the word.

Monette waved a hand in the air. "I'm sorry. Crazy, huh. So much is crazy. Every once in a while . . . well, I think Steven is near me. It's as if I feel a gentle brush against my cheek. And I think he whispers he's watching over me."

"Maybe he is watching over you," Sienna said. "Anyway—"

"All right. I believe you're not a crazy killer," Monette said. She let out a long sigh. "You can get me protection?"

Sienna nodded. "Let me give Ryder a call right now. He'll see to it."

She pulled out her phone and called Ryder. He told her he was just managing to leave the station. Sienna explained she was with Monette, and Monette believed she might be in danger.

"Tell her we'll have a man in uniform outside her place all night. I'll get Captain Troy to see to it right now," Ryder said. "And tomorrow . . . we'll be following her. And the streets will be crawling with police."

"But did you warn them—"

"I did."

"Okay, we should be good."

"Where are you?"

"Café du Monde. I'm going to drive Monette home."

"Meet you there."

Sienna ended the call. Monette was looking at her. "You know my address."

Sienna smiled and shrugged. "He was a detective and about to be FBI."

"Uh, right. Of course." Monette said. She stood and Sienna did the same.

"Right over there—the public lot," Sienna explained.

"Great, thank you. And you can pull into the courtyard at the side of my place," Monette told her.

Jack O' the Lantern/Heather Graham

"Perfect. Thanks."

It was tricky getting through the French Quarter, but Sienna knew the streets well. Despite the crowds, she easily maneuvered through the few blocks they needed to go. The fact it was slow going wasn't all bad—many of the shops and restaurants had gone all out with decorations. Some had imaginative window displays, graveyards, ghosts, witches, full moons, bats and cats.

A clothing shop was displaying some goods on "Best Dressed Skeletons!"

"Halloween," Monette murmured as Sienna pulled into her courtyard as indicated. "Strange. People go all out. A few years back, we had some real decorations."

"Oh?"

"Originally, the first cemetery here was just about under our feet. St. Peter's. Graves were not in 'cities of the dead' as they are now."

"I know," Sienna said. "They needed room for the living."

"The Catholic Church was horrified, but the Spanish were in control at the time. The Spanish were all Catholics; but like you said, they needed room for the living. Anyway, some graves were moved; but a few years back when digging for a pool, they found bones and there have been other digs. Archeologists believe we're walking on graves here all the time. Oh, wait—you know that. You work at the museum!"

"Love our history," Sienna said.

Monette was looking across the street. Her neighbors had decorated with giant blow-up skeletons, a few pumpkins, bats, and a witch that had red light-up eyes.

"Skeletons," she murmured. "I won't be able to look at anything without wondering if it's real!"

A police cruiser pulled up, sliding to park on the street directly in front of Monette's house.

Ryder hopped out of the car along with a young police officer in uniform.

"Miss Benoit!" Ryder called, introducing himself and Officer Ken Starling, who would be outside her door through the night.

Monette smiled.

"That's your detective?" she murmured to Sienna. "He's . . . all right."

"Yeah, I think so," Sienna murmured. "So."

She didn't get further. Ryder had reached them and smiling, he assured Monette they would be following her throughout the day.

"Reliable source." Monette said. "Wow. You'd think Steven had come to you himself."

Ryder looked at Sienna, his brow starting to furrow.

"Monette thinks she feels him near her sometimes. I think she may very well." Sienna said.

"Sure. Why not?" Ryder said.

They spoke a few more minutes and then Monette yawned, and they quickly said it was time to go.

Officer Starling nodded to Sienna and promised he'd be there until he was replaced in the morning, and Monette would not be left alone a minute.

Sienna handed her keys to Ryder. She was tired and he could make his way through the French Quarter to their hotel.

As they drove away, she saw the red glowing eyes of the witch decoration and the bones of the skeletons dangling in the night.

She knew the dead rested beneath Monette's home.

And she prayed they could keep the young woman alive and bring Jack-O-the-Lantern to justice.

Chapter 4

"An eventful day," Ryder murmured as he drew into their hotel's garage, and he turned off the car engine to await one of the attendants.

"A wee bit busy, yeah," Sienna agreed.

"Lovely flight into New Orleans, rental car, you take a walk to see your Granny K—and wow, so much for a few days of vacation."

"Hey!" Sienna protested. "I'm not the cop."

"I'm not a cop anymore."

"You're the one who was a cop and is about to be an FBI agent," she reminded him.

He nodded and smiled at her. "Yeah. I guess, the way life goes . . . it's just the way that it is and we're both just lucky."

"Or cursed," Sienna said. "Honestly, I mean, okay, we're a bit on the strange side. But I thought we'd be partying for the weekend without a care in the world. This is a bit different. And again, thanks to good ole Granny K!"

"Hey, she's an amazing woman. I wish I could have known her in life," Ryder said seriously.

"She was wonderful! One of the kindest, most giving, caring—and sassy—women I have ever known," Sienna said. "And she's carrying that through, so it seems." She laughed. "She told me she stayed behind to watch over me, but she keeps getting me into trouble! I mean, I'm super glad—most of the time. I love her to pieces."

Ryder shook his head seriously. "She is not going to get you in trouble here. We have cops everywhere, and we'll hit the party on the streets with others and keep our eyes open. But you aren't going near any Jack-O-Lanterns!"

"No desire to do so," Sienna assured. "I am the brain, and you are the brawn."

"Hey!"

She looked at him sincerely. "I'm really not big in the brawn department."

He rolled his eyes and said, "Good evening," to the attendant who came for the car. They entered the hotel near the elevators, but even on the side away from the bar and restaurant, the place was still lively. The hotel was historic and a favorite place for them with its wonderful food, music, and bar. They'd had homes in the city, but they'd let them go to make the move to Virginia so Ryder could attend the academy at Quantico. They could have stayed with friends here. And one day, they might buy a house together. But they loved the hotel. It was right in the French Quarter, just off near Canal and a block from Bourbon Street.

Things in the world weren't good—the pandemic was ongoing. But New Orleans was moving along with guests in restaurants, hotels, and more being asked for their vaccine cards. Masks were most often required. But despite the pandemic and the hurricane that had so recently ravaged the region, New Orleans was coming back.

Ryder thought it always would. The city was unique, wonderful—and had amazing stamina. Masks? In NOLA, no big deal.

Interesting with Halloween!

Masks became part of costumes, or just costumes themselves with many that covered most of the face and decorated with either cute bats and pumpkin designs, or terrifying ones.

They walked past the bar, then turned back to look in.

Nope.

No guests dressed as Jack-O-Lanterns there.

"What are we, by the way?" Ryder asked Sienna. He'd let her do the costume buying. The idea of dress-up was fun in her historical mind, and he assumed she'd pick a couple from history as her guide in choosing outfits. "Mark Anthony and Cleopatra? Henry VIII and a headless Anne Boleyn?"

"Yuck!"

"Um . . . famous couples from history. Adam and Eve. Napoleon and Josephine. Wait! I know, Bonnie and Clyde, Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy. Okay, this is it—Superman and Lois Lane!"

She looked at him, shaking her head and grinning oddly as they waited for the elevator to their room.

"We're not a famous couple?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Then?"

"I'm sorry, I just really liked the costumes. You're kind of like a . . . red Superman."

"Okay, who—or what—are we?"

She winced as they stepped into the elevator.

"Demons," she told him.

"Demons?" he asked. "This year—we're going to be demons?"

"We don't have to wear costumes at all, you know. I mean, if you don't like them—"

Ryder laughed. "Whatever you got, it's going to be fine!"

"I'll show you!"

They walked down to their room and once inside, Sienna dug into their luggage, producing something for him that did look like a red Superman costume.

"You got me tights?" he asked incredulously.

"No! Uh, they're just tight shiny pants. Seriously, look, I'll show you!"

She shimmied out of her jeans and slid her shirt over her head, sliding quickly into her 'devil' costume. It was something.

Something in red.

But as she swept the cape around her and donned the demon horns, he started to smile. It was perfect on her. She had the figure to fill it out. Her legs looked great in red tights and the skirt on the

dress flared shorter in the front than it did in the back, creating a great and evocative line. The material was slick and shiny. And when she donned the horns, he started to laugh.

"Wicked."

"Hey, you're going to be just as sexy."

"You are sexy," he told her. "But then, I think you're sexy—without or without the horns. Okay, so we're demons or devils chasing a Jack-O-Lantern. It's going to be great. But for now . . . "

"Feeling devilish?" she teased.

"Like a demon," he told her.

He pulled her into his arms. The costume was ridiculously sexy.

Tomorrow might really bring with it a taste of hell.

But they had the night. Sweet hours together when they could forget it was becoming a strangely twisted holiday.

Ryder kissed Sienna long and hard and met her eyes. "My lovely little devil. That was quite a taste of Heaven, so . . . "

She laughed and threw her arms around him.

And pieces of the costume went here, there, and everywhere.

*

Halloween. Morning. Time for the double deed.

And yet how?

The devil was awake and aware early, his eyes burning in the façade he used to appear.

"I've seen the warning is out. The police will be looking—" he began.

"Ah, then one must be clever, right?" The devil demanded. "You've been about the city. Think Treme, my lad. Yards near the walls to the cemetery are decked to eternity this year, as if people had to dive into decorations to stay sane. The old Rousseau homestead there . . . the owner had made a

graveyard of his front to rival anything real in the city. With witches riding atop his gravestones, pumpkin kings scattered throughout, and all manner of skeletons dotted about. His neighbor perhaps thought it was a competition, for his yard is filled with like decorations. Even in the French Quarter, my friend, you will see the entrances to the bars and restaurants are dressed to the T, all seeking the dollars that save the city, time and time again. Think, lad, think! You'll know how to manage the double deed."

"But we don't know where she . . . they will be—"

"Oh, but we do. You saw the lovely Monette was invited to the party at the Rousseau house, and I can almost guarantee she will go."

"She hates Halloween; she goes to work."

"And yet, she has an invite. If not, you know where she lives. And the other . . . you are a clever man. And I am the devil, sir. I will see that all is arranged. The time has drawn near! And I will receive my payment in blood!"

*

"All right, then, this gets weirder and weirder—even for New Orleans."

Captain Troy was seated at his desk, staring at Ryder and Sienna who had the two chairs in front of his desk at the precinct.

"How so?" Ryder asked.

"You two, for one!" Troy said. "You are, uh . . . well, you look like you should be in a show, to say the least. I mean, well, don't get me wrong; you're both kind of beautiful. No offense, Ryder. But wow, beautiful wicked, I guess. Scary. Sexy—not you, Ryder, Sienna."

"These were the costumes I brought. I'm sure we can find something somewhere in the city if you think—"

"Hell, no, I think you look great. You'll blend in with the fact it is New Orleans, and it is Halloween. Just, well, huh. Wow. Really. You look good. Even you, Ryder."

Ryder grinned and acknowledged the compliment, nodding his head.

"So, what's weird?" Ryder pressed.

"Last night, my guys prowled the streets, looking for Jack-O-Lanterns."

"And they didn't find any?" Sienna asked.

"No human Jack-O-Lanterns," Troy said. "But life-sized Jack-O-Lanterns? Well, there was a contest for creepiest yard among some of the neighbors in Treme—and most of them surrounding the graveyard. Homeowners had last night to create the spookiest yards they could manage. So . . . right by a real cemetery, we have a dozen yards turned into fake cemeteries, bat caves . . . you name it. There are other areas, too. Some in the Quarter, and a few more in the Irish Channel."

"And your men saw Jack-O-Lanterns in these yards?" Ryder asked.

"Three in the Irish Channel—four in Treme. A dozen scattered about the French Quarter," Troy told them. "I have men stationed at all the sites, but that might well be a waste of time. They are all aware this man may have waited until Halloween Day to strike, and therefore, might not have been a giant pumpkin yesterday. We're trolling the city. I have every precinct notified. I have the Parish notified. But I still have to tell you, looking for a killer pumpkin on Halloween is not an easy task. Oh! Not to mention, we have several venues—paid—for haunted houses, spooky circuses, vampire mansions . . . and a few parades! I'll get you the parade routes. I figure you two are headed off on your own—"

"We're going to follow Monette around during the day. She's leading several tours today."

Cemetery, ghost, and vampire," Sienna said.

"I will have an officer following her discreetly," Troy promised. He glanced at a note on his desk. "Officer Will Hardy—he's dressed as Al Capone—will be on until three this afternoon. At three, he'll be relieved by Officer Brian Hancock—dressed as a vampire. Come the witching hour—midnight—when the holiday is actually over but will be crazier than ever—Officers Talia Sands and Jeremy Fenton will be taking over until the night has truly ended."

"They're aware we'll be following as well?" Sienna asked.

Troy grimaced. "There is a reason I'm called *Captain Troy*."

"Sorry." Sienna said.

Troy laughed, and apologized, too. "Sorry, Sienna. And young lady, it's always best to question everything. Yes, everyone knows about everyone. Except I have to get the info to my officers they'll also be trailing a pair of devils."

Sienna smiled at him. Troy was a great officer—and a good man. And Sienna knew it. She had mentioned once it was too bad they couldn't get him up to the academy, too.

"All right, then, we're on our way to follow Monette," Ryder said, rising, and waiting for Sienna to do the same.

As they left the station, Sienna received a few appreciative cat calls, with some of Ryder's friends laughing and giving him whistles, too.

He parked outside Monette's place. They spoke to the officer parked just outside, next to her house, on the street; he was turning the watch over to them. The next officer—Will Hardy, aka Al Capone—would meet them at the tour company. They would all sign on for the first tour.

Monette was ready, opening the door to her place before they could tap on it. "Happy Halloween," she said dryly.

She was wearing a Dorothy costume from "The Wizard of Oz," complete with a basket and a stuffed Toto.

Sienna smiled at her. "Happy Halloween."

"And we're definitely not in Kansas," Monette said.

"Oh" Ryder teased, "it might be whacko-crazy in Kansas, too. It's Halloween."

"True. It's just that, well . . . this is NOLA." She glanced at her watch. "I need to get to work. I walk; it's easier than driving with so many of the streets blocked off. Is that okay? The whole day is walking, so—"

"We're fine. We've both walked these streets too many times to count," Sienna assured her.

Ryder followed slightly behind the two women, keeping watch on the streets. Of course, everything everywhere seemed to be decorated.

Tomorrow, the Christmas ornaments would probably go up.

But today, it was Halloween.

Monette's first tour that day was a ghost tour. And while Ryder and Sienna were both well versed in the city's many ghosts, they enjoyed listening to her versions of the tales. Of course, there were the tens of thousands who died in the various yellow fever epidemics that ravaged the city in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and tales of the "yellow-glowing" ghosts who might be seen at various places. The sultan who wasn't a sultan—murdered with several others. And the city's most famously cruel mistress Madam LaLaurie along with her husband who tortured their slaves, and were finally run out of the city when a cook set fire to a stove. Dr. LaLaurie's strange experiments and torture were exposed by the authorities who rushed in. While those who went in destroyed the inside of the house, the residence still stood and is privately owned. Once by the actor, Nicholas Cage—and rumor on the street was that he never slept a night in the place. Monette told good tales, stating what was known—and what was presumed and rumored.

There was a lunch break and Ryder enjoyed listening to Monette and Sienna talk about history, people, and more. They ate on Decatur, just a few blocks from the tour company, and he watched people as he did so, and thanked those who stopped to compliment their trio on their costumes.

Al Capone had found a lunch spot just a few blocks down.

Monette had a cemetery tour after lunch, and they headed back to Treme.

Ryder saw the decorations in the “contest” that was going on, and it was unnerving. The displays were on private property, and they were to be seen not touched. But after having a casual chat with “Al Capone,” Ryder headed off to the various yards. Thankfully, most were not large, and he could see the Jack-O-Lanterns—lit pumpkin heads atop skeleton bodies—were fabricated creations. Not people in costume.

Joining the others in the cemetery, Ryder saw the ghost of Steven Jonas was there watching anxiously over Monette.

Granny K was there, too.

She wasn’t telling stories. She was watching. And seeing Ryder, she gave him a thumbs-up sign, sliding over to him later to assure him she and Steven—and many others—were on the lookout for Jack of the Lantern.

“And have you seen one yet?” Ryder asked her.

She shook her head.

“But night is coming. He strikes by darkness. Then, we must beware, Ryder. Please! Please, keep believing in me and in Steven.”

He nodded to her.

“We will, Granny K,” he promised. “We will.”

He meant to keep his promise. He looked at the sky. The day was still bright.

But darkness would come, he knew only too well.

Chapter 5

When they left the cemetery, they were followed by a handsome vampire—Officer Brian Hancock. Sienna saw him casually acknowledge her and Ryder as they returned to the tour office where Monette met with her next group.

"Next tour!" Monette said. "Are you worn out yet?"

"You're a good story-teller," Sienna assured her. "I'm enjoying myself. Really."

"With all you know?"

"You can always learn something else." Sienna assured her.

"Okay, here we go again," Monette said quietly, smiling as she stepped forward to meet her next group.

Next up was a vampire tour which included a speech on the novels by Anne Rice that awakened the world to vampires and New Orleans. But the city's earliest vampire had been Jacque St. Germain, who arrived in the early 1900s and took up residence on Royal Street. He was charming, and a direct descendent of another St. Germain who had been friends with kings. He threw elaborate parties and was an accepted and high-ranking member of society. But he never seemed to eat at his parties; he was seen at night and not by day. Rumors began. Then a prostitute fell from a window and survived to tell the police that St. Germain had tried to bite her neck! With his place in society, the police politely told him he would just have to come in for questioning. St. Germain agreed and yet when morning came and he was to appear, he did not. He had vanished in the night. When the police went into his residence to search for him, they found the second floor was kept dark, very dark, and there were bottles here, there, and everywhere that contained wine—and blood.

St. Germain was never seen again, and . . . NOLA had its first vampire!

Through all the tales as they walked about the city, Sienna knew Ryder—and their new vampire police officer--kept looking, watching for anyone with an undue interest in their tour guide.

Jack O' the Lantern/Heather Graham

Naturally, others wanted to joke with Officer Brian Hancock, vampire, since they were on a vampire tour. And they liked to talk about each other's costumes as they walked from spot to spot.

Everyone on the tour was already in costume. Witches, more devils, princesses, mummies, werewolves, beautiful beings as well . . .

No Jack-O-Lanterns.

At night, it was a pub tour, and while they were on the pub tour, they were joined by two more police officers, Officers Talia Sands and Jeremy Fenton as Beauty and the Beast. Ryder whispered to Sienna he had worked with them at different times, and he was glad to see them. They were good cops.

It still wasn't midnight but getting a minute on the sidewalk alone with Talia, Sienna and Ryder learned they had decided something might happen just before or at midnight, and they should all be prepared. About the city, in the many neighborhoods, officers had questioned five Jack-O-Lanterns. All had seemed innocent enough.

Each was being followed.

"I truly hope I've not sent the police off on a wild good chase," Ryder murmured quietly.

"Wouldn't matter—it's Halloween. We're out in force," Talia said.

Sienna tried a smile. She didn't want anything bad to happen, but if something was planned . . . well, it was better to take a chance than to see bad things occur.

The pub tour ended at ten; their next tour was a walk into Treme where a small parade had been planned from Rampart, to the church, and around the cemetery.

Ryder frowned as they headed around the walls of the cemetery, and Sienna watched him anxiously. He was concerned, she knew.

And if it hadn't been that they were worried and wary . . .

Wow!

"I don't like this," Ryder murmured. "It's a contest, but the yards . . . there is darkness, except for the Halloween lights, not much else."

"It's a parade, and we are with a big group!" Sienna reminded him.

"I walked around here before," he told her. "It's been done well. Too well."

"Steven was attacked by a man not a fabricated decoration," Sienna reminded him.

"I know. I still don't like it."

The yards were phenomenal. Blow-up ghosts drifted in the air, full-sized fake tombs were in some of the yards, flying bats and witches reigned, and in several, there were life-sized Jack-O-Lanterns, a few made to resemble the starring Jack of the Tim Burton movie "The Nightmare Before Christmas," but several as leering faces on skeleton bodies that were truly eerie.

They tour group stopped, finding space on the sidewalk as the parade went by them. It had been arranged through one of the city's philanthropic groups, and the members had become highly engaged with what was going on. Floats—borrowed from Mardi Gras or a Second-Line company—came by along with majorettes dressed up like puppets, and all manner of monsters—including friendly and eerie monsters who walked by, stopping to tease, stare, or move along.

The parade was great, Sienna thought. Something to cheer people after the hard years the world had recently seen and still endured. She was smiling at the antics of a clown when she became aware of something else . . .

Jack-O-Lanterns.

Three of them, all different, but each evilly grinning, alight from within, even though they rode on human heads. Part of the parade, the people-creatures played with the audience, one of them giving particular attention to Monette.

They were at the end of the parade, jumping off after the floats. Monette's group and the crowd began to disperse, most heading down to cross back over Rampart and head back toward the river where more would go on into the wee hours of the morning.

"Different blocks!" Talia said.

"Three of them, three of us!" Jeremy Fenton said, looking at Ryder.

Ryder shook his head. "No. One of us stays with Sienna and Monette."

"I'll be here; I'm armed. No one will get close to them," Talia said.

Sienna knew Ryder didn't want to move, but she told him, "Talia's armed! Go!"

He did.

And it was suddenly eerie.

There had been so much activity. Laughter, light, people! Now, the parade had moved on and most of the onlookers were gone.

"This is really cool." Talia said, looking at the house. She wandered into the yard, heading up the steps.

"Talia?" Sienna murmured.

"It's cool. I'm just going to identify myself to the owner and make sure it's okay for us to sit on his steps. Those guys may be awhile," Talia said.

Sienna watched Talia start up the walk to the steps. As she did so, Monette was moving into the yard, getting a closer look at a Styrofoam crypt and a "flying" ghost.

At the door, Talia murmured, "What the . . ."

She turned to Sienna. "Stay there!" she said, and stepped in. It seemed she hadn't been able to knock.

The door to the house had been open just a hair, and there was darkness within.

"Monette!" Sienna said.

But Monette had moved further into the display that filled the yard. Sienna followed her quickly, then she paused, staring.

Monette was in front of her, silent, staring at her with pure terror in her eyes.

And it was easy to see why.

She was being held.

The Jack-O-Lantern in the yard was no longer a fabrication; the fake Jack-O-Lantern lay on the ground in pieces.

Someone very much alive was holding Monette against its form and held a razor-sharp knife at her throat.

Sienna wasn't sure she had ever seen anything so terrifying as the Jack-O-Lantern man herself—with or without a knife. It had to be a man, yes, but the eyes of the pumpkin head seemed to burn with a blood-red fire, the eerily grinning mouth was aglow, and the whole of it was truly like an image straight out of hell.

Hell. That was it. This man believed . . . maybe.

Or maybe he just liked to dress up and kill people.

"Let her go!" Sienna ordered.

"I . . . I need you both, you must understand, I don't like what I'm doing . . ."

The voice that came from the pumpkin-man was low and sounded truly sincere and frightened.

She remembered that she was a "devil" herself.

"Let her go. I'm ordering you," Sienna said.

"What?" the soft voice said.

"Do it!" Another voice came from the man. A voice that was rich and deep and filled with hate and fire and brimstone, or so it seemed. "I need my blood!"

"He's false!" Sienna cried. "He's false. Look at me! Can you see who I am?"

"No, no, the devil is a man," the soft voice said.

"And look at me!" Sienna said. She was fighting hard to keep her wits about her. The voices . . . they were so different! It was almost as if a demon or the devil himself lived within the man or the costume.

For a minute, that thought seized her.

Somehow, the devil himself had gotten into the man and his costume.

Fear! It was just her fear, because the impression was so good, the night was so dark—and the knife against Monette's throat was so real.

Where was Officer Talia?

"Kill! I will have blood!" the evil voice roared.

"It's that stupid pumpkin head!" she said.

"What?" the man demanded in the soft voice. "Pumpkin head . . . Jack. The devil will always have his due. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I have to give him his blood!"

No time, no chance. Except there was suddenly help in the yard. Sienna saw Steven and Granny K had arrived. And Steven made a flying leap toward the man with the pumpkin head.

He was a ghost. A soul within the air.

But the man felt something and his knife waivered.

It was the only chance Sienna would ever have.

She leapt forward, too, striking at the pumpkin head, knocking it to the ground. And as she did so, the man who had been wearing it jumped back screaming in terror. He lifted his knife as Sienna jumped down hard on the pumpkin, sending bits of pumpkin everywhere, breaking the little tea lights that had created the look of fire within in.

"No!" the man shrieked in fear. The knife was still in his hand. Monette had fallen to the ground.

Sienna realized she had seen the man in the Jack-O-Lantern before.

He had been on Monette's tour the day before; he had teased her politely.

And now . . .

She hadn't seen Ryder return; she didn't see him fly out from behind one of the tombs, tackling the man, bringing him to the ground, and sending the knife flying.

"No! No!" the man wailed. "No, no . . . oh, my God!"

He stared up at Ryder.

Ryder, in his devil costume.

"I can't, I couldn't, I can't . . ." the man blabbered.

"And you don't have to, do you hear me?" Ryder asked. "Never again. You don't have to hurt anyone, ever—ever—again!"

He lay on the ground crying. The sound of wailing sirens filled the night. Jeremy Fenton came running back, ready with cuffs for the man on the ground, and demanding to know where Talia had gone.

"Into the house! Someone had broken in," Sienna told him, trying to help Monette back to her feet.

"Watch it!" Granny K cried. "I think there's gas or something in there, something to knock the owner out, and then Talia!"

Sienna didn't have to repeat her grandmother's warning; Ryder did so, suggesting it was more than possible such a thing had been done. But he was Ryder. Covering his mouth and nose, he rushed into the house. He staggered out, dragging Talia.

And by then the night was alive. Police cars were everywhere; a crew with masks went into the house, but they quickly and luckily discovered the owner was out.

It seemed light was everywhere. Fabricated monsters and graves looked like . . . fabricated monsters and graves.

Monette was still shaking, and Sienna drew her from the yard to the sidewalk and leaned against one of the police cars with her.

"Steven!" Monette said softly. "I . . . I may sound crazy, but I feel . . . I really loved him. I try to move on. My mother gets angry. It's been ten years, but . . ."

Steven was there, standing in front of the two of them then.

Sienna looked at him as he spoke.

"Tell her that I loved her, too. But I know she is safe now. Tell her that . . . there's a light, and I mean to follow it. Tell her I know the time will come when we will love again, because there is a place where we can go, and when we're there, we find a love that encompasses all. But she must move on, it would mean so much to me if she could be happy—here, in this life!"

Steven had been a beautiful man, Sienna thought. A beautiful soul. And if there was light and beauty out there, he deserved it.

She winced, trying to repeat his words and paraphrasing awkwardly.

"I think he was here, too. And he loved you. I think he stayed, afraid for you, but he can leave now. If he can believe you'll look for happiness on earth. He will always love you, and you will always love him, but there is room for more love in your life."

She hadn't realized Ryder had joined them again until he said quietly, "Monette, I believe as you do. Those who love us may get to look out for us. And they want happiness for us. Steven needs you to be happy! He loved you so much. Now, he needs your happiness."

Monette cried softly. Steven eased aside her, sweeping his arms around. Ghostly tears slipped down his cheeks.

Monette blinked suddenly, staring at Sienna.

"He's here! He's here right now, isn't he?"

Sienna and Ryder looked at one another uneasily.

Sienna said, "Yes, I believe so."

"Thank you!" Monette said, and Sienna knew she wasn't talking to her. "Thank you, Steven. I will always love you. You saved my life, and I promise, while I will always love you, I will find others, and I know that one day . . . one day I will see you again!"

Jeremy Fenton came up to them. "They're getting our 'Jack' to the hospital ward—guy is as crazy as a loon, thinks the devil told him to kill—and *not* to kill—and anyway, we need you at the station, reports and a few questions and, well, hell, Ryder, you know the drill."

"I do, so . . . "

"Crawl in here; I can take this car. Talia is good, but she inhaled some knock-out drug; and she'll spend the night in the hospital."

They all stepped into the police car. Ryder took the front seat.

Sienna wondered if Monette knew they were a little squashed in the rear as Granny K and Steven stepped on in.

"Well, thank the Heavens above!" Granny K said.

Sienna glanced at her.

"Twelve-o-one! Halloween is over—til it comes again!"

*

Epilogue

Steven had asked if they would be with him the next day.

Sienna and Ryder went to the cemetery with Monette—she had the morning off—and they gathered there.

It was much as it had been when Granny K had been telling her tale to an audience in the cemetery the day before Halloween.

Many souls gathered.

Steven said goodbye to everyone. He hoped he was worthy of the light.

He thanked his friends.

And he especially thanked Granny K, Ryder, and Sienna.

And then, just before the first tour could enter the cemetery for the day, he stood and raised his arms and whispered, and there was a stunning streak of light, and Steven was gone.

Sienna was surprised to feel a tear on her cheek.

Ryder set his arm around her, waved to the souls around them, and started out of the cemetery.

“You okay?” he asked her.

“Yeah, of course. He was just such a wonderful man. And . . . I hope he knows nothing but peace and beauty.”

“Oh, I think that’s exactly what he’ll get. He was ready to move on,” Granny K said. She spun around and grinned at them. “Don’t you go worryin’ about me none, my luvs!” she said. “I’ll not be going anywhere! And there are so many more holidays to come! I’m off now. You children enjoy the rest of your time in the city!”

She spun away, heading back to the cemetery and her friends.

Ryder grinned at Sienna.

“You know, you’re pretty amazing,” he said.

"Me?"

"Breaking the pumpkin. You broke the hold it had on him. That poor fellow really believed the devil lived in the pumpkin. He's going to prison for murder, but . . . even Steven forgave him, said he needed help."

She smiled.

"You weren't bad yourself. He didn't believe that I—as woman—was really the devil. But I think he believed in you."

"Poor fellow doesn't know just what a demon you can be," Ryder teased. "However," he whispered, "I've been shown."

"And we're alone, and it may be day, but . . ."

"But I say we head to the hotel for some alone time," he said, nodding sagely. "I'd love a few hours with a particular demon, and then . . ."

"Then?"

"We can wander the city and shop a little. Halloween is over! I'm sure the Christmas sales will be starting!"

Sienna laughed. She wasn't sure about Christmas shopping.

But a little alone time . . .

After all that had occurred on their "vacation," that sounded darn good!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Graham



New York Times and USA Today bestselling author, Heather Graham, majored in theater arts at the University of South Florida. After a stint of several years in dinner theater, back-up vocals, and bartending, she stayed home after the birth of her third child and began to write. Her first book was with Dell, and since then, she has written over two hundred novels and novellas including category, suspense, historical romance, vampire fiction, time travel, occult, sci-fi, young adult, and Christmas family fare.

She is pleased to have been published in approximately twenty-five languages. She has written over 200 novels and has 60 million books in print. Heather has been honored with awards from booksellers and writers' organizations for excellence in her work, and she is the proud to be a recipient of the Silver Bullet from Thriller Writers and was awarded the prestigious Thriller Master Award in 2016. She is also a recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from RWA. Heather has had books selected for the Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild, and has been quoted, interviewed, or featured in such publications as The Nation, Redbook, Mystery Book Club, People and USA Today and appeared on many newscasts including Today, Entertainment Tonight and local television.

Heather loves travel and anything that has to do with the water, and is a certified scuba diver. She also loves ballroom dancing. Each year she hosts a Vampire Ball and Dinner theater raising money for the Pediatric Aids Society and in 2006 she hosted the first Writers for New Orleans Workshop to benefit the stricken Gulf Region. She is also the founder of "The Slush Pile Players," presenting something that's "almost like entertainment" for various conferences and benefits. Married since high school graduation and the mother of five, her greatest love in life remains her family, but she also believes her career has been an incredible gift, and she is grateful every day to be doing something that she loves so very much for a living.