

Seventh Grave and No Body

A Novel



DARYNDA
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New York Times Bestselling Author

Seventh Grave
and No
Body



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For Dana

You are a font of positive energy.

You are effervescent, exuberant,
brilliant, and dazzling.

Where would I be without you?

Yep, “resting” in an institution, most likely.

Thank you for everything, radiant one.

Your kung fu is strong.

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Also by Darynda Jones
About the Author
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*I often question my sanity.
Occasionally, it replies.*

—T-SHIRT

If the woman howling from the backseat of Agent Carson's black SUV weren't already dead, I would've strangled her. Gladly. And with much exuberance. But, alas, my ex-BFF Jessica was indeed dead, and ranting on and on about how her death was entirely my fault. Which was so not true. It was only partly my fault. I wasn't the one who'd kicked her off a seven-story grain elevator. Though I was beginning to wish I had. At least then I would've had a reason to listen to her harp ad nauseam. Life was too short for this crap.

After rolling my eyes so far back into my head I almost dislodged them from their sockets, I glanced over at my driver and the owner of said SUV, Agent Carson. Actually, it was FBI Special Agent Carson, but that was way too many syllables, in my book. I'd tried to get her to change her name to SAC—or even FBISAC, since we could've called her Phoebe for short—but she'd have none of it. Her loss. No telling how much time she could save if she didn't have all those syllables to deal with.

Fortunately for SAC, she couldn't hear Jessica, but the other supernatural entity in the car—or Mr. Reyes Alexander Farrow, the hot hunk of corporeal manliness sitting in the middle seat of the long SUV—most definitely could. It was his own fault, however. He was the one who'd insisted on playing bodyguard ever since we found out a group of hellhounds had escaped from molten gates down under and were on their way to this plane to dismember me.

As a diversionary tactic—since I had the innate ability to visualize my own dismemberment to a alarming degree—I was working on some of the cold cases SAC had asked me to look into, to see if anything caught my eye. And the folder containing an unsolved ten-year-old multiple murder definitely caught my eye.

Well, okay, they all caught my eye, but this one seemed to pull at me. To lure me. It begged to be solved. Five people—two adults and three teens—had been killed one night while preparing to open a summer camp for special-needs kids. They were each stabbed multiple times and found in a sea of blood by another camp supervisor the next morning. Another young girl, the only daughter of the two adults, was never found.

The only real suspect they'd had was a homeless man who scavenged the campsites in the area, stealing food from campers when they went on hikes or slept. But the forensics unit found no evidence

linking him to the crime scene. Not a fingerprint. Not a drop of blood. Not a single strand of the suspect's hair.

And so the case went unsolved. Until now. The FBI had finally wised up and put Charley Davidson on the task of bringing a killer to justice. Because that's what Charley did. Brought killers to justice. She also found lost dogs, exposed cheating spouses, and tracked down the occasional skip. And she rarely referred to herself in the third person.

I had a few other specialties as well. Mostly because I'd been born the grim reaper. I could see dead people, for one, a fact that helped me solve many a case. Odd how easy it was to solve cases when one could ask the victim whodunit. Not that I could always rely on that natural advantage. Some people didn't know who'd killed them. That was rare, but it happened. A traumatized brain was a complicated brain. Still, I got good intel most of the time.

In this case, however, the chances of finding the departed just hanging out at the crime scene when they'd died ten years earlier were slim. It was worth a shot either way, which was why I'd agreed to let SAC pick me up at the ungodly hour of 6 A.M. to show me the crime scene firsthand. Along with me, however, came a bit of baggage, and it was sitting in the two backseats. Jessica, my ex-BFF, blamed me for her death. Ad nauseam. Reyes, my affianced, blamed me for his sour mood. I chose to ignore them both.

"The view is gorgeous," I said as we wound up the Jemez Mountains. The sun was barely clearing the treetops, casting an orange glow over us. The pine and juniper glistened with the early morning dew, their shadows sliding across the window as we drove deeper into the pass. We didn't see a lot of green in Albuquerque, so the fact that all this lay just an hour away boggled my mind. I loved the Jemez.

"Isn't it?" SAC agreed.

"My dad used to bring us up here on his motorcycle. But isn't all this reservation land?" I asked. "How did the FBI get jurisdiction?"

"Tribal law is complicated," she said, her brown bob swaying as she glanced in her rearview for the hundredth time that morning. But she wasn't checking for traffic. She was checking on the surly man behind her. "In a case like this, we actually would've had jurisdiction, because the campsite isn't on Pueblo land. Either way, it only makes sense to bring in outside authorities. One of the teens was Native American, which is a whole other issue, but the tribal council was more than happy to have us do the investigation."

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, her gaze darting again to the rearview. I couldn't blame her. Reyes was certainly something to look at. Since I could feel emotions radiate off people like others could feel the weather, I felt every infusion of warmth that rushed through her with his nearness. He affected her like hot tea on a winter's day, but she hid it well. I had to give her kudos for that. She was curious about him but guarded. Since Reyes, dark and dangerous, was an enigma even to me, SAC was smart to be guarded. But there was no denying the raw magnetism, the sensuous allure he unconsciously sent out in sweet, pulsating waves.

Either that or I was ovulating.

No, wait. No chance of that. It was him. A side effect of being created by the most beautiful angel ever to fall from the heavens, forged in the fires of sin and degradation. All the stuff one's mother warns one about.

I struggled to keep from taking a peek every few seconds myself. But just for good measure, I decided to risk a quick look-see. I took out my phone, flipped the camera for a selfie, and focused it on the man riding in the middle seat. He leaned into one corner, sitting spread-eagle across the seat, one arm thrown over the back of it, watching me from underneath his lashes. Studying me.

I raised my chin a notch, refusing to be affected by his shadowy, brooding gaze. I was just as mad at him as he was at me. For two weeks now, he'd insisted on escorting me everywhere, forgoing his responsibilities at that bar and grill he owned to be my babysitter.

Of course, I was now carrying his baby, and she was kind of a big deal. Destined to save the world and all. So I couldn't be too angry. And he was damned nice to look at, even when he scowled. In fact, if I were totally honest, that scowl only added to the allure that was Reyes Farrow. Damn it. When he scowled, I looked constipated. Leave it to the son of Satan to turn a scowl into the stuff of fantasies.

It wasn't like he had a reason to be mad at me, though. Not *that* mad, anyway. I'd tried to sneak out of the apartment without him, to go on this case with Agent Carson alone and get some one-on-one girl time. I soon found out that was the wrong thing to do. He told me so repeatedly before she arrived outside my apartment building entrance, reminding me that the Twelve, aka the aforementioned hellhounds, were hot on my heels. But even if they made it through the void of oblivion that resided between hell and this plane, and even if they did manage to escape into the next dimension, they would still have to find me. And demons, even hellhounds, had their limitations on this plane.

So, after a ten-minute lecture that involved Reyes reiterating—repeatedly—and me tapping my foot in impatience, Agent Carson pulled up in her SUV. We'd thrown her when we both climbed into her official vehicle, but I quickly explained that Reyes, my affianced, had separation anxiety.

She took it well. She was supercool like that. Most of the time. There was one exception, when she'd threatened to have me arrested and promised I'd spend the rest of my life in prison if I didn't *cooperate fully*. Like I wouldn't have cooperated without her threats. Besides that one tiny incident—and maybe two more where I'd thought she was going to either shoot me in the face or drop-kick me to China—she was full of marshmallowy goodness. And Reyes seemed to be the campfire that melted her creamy center. She was warm. Really warm. And her warmth was making me warm. Like a lot. It couldn't be 100 percent, but I was pretty sure we were in the midst of a ménage.

“As if”—Jessica the departed banshee said from the backseat—“that weren't bad enough, I will never get married. Never! Do you know what that feels like?” Her long red hair shook almost as bad as my hands. Caffeine withdrawal sucked, as evidenced by the quivering of my limbs. But she was vibrating with anger. A vindictive, spiteful kind of rage that turned her hazel irises to a bright shade of green.

Jessica and I had been besties in high school until I made the mistake of telling her not only what I could do—see dead people—but also what I was—the grim reaper. I'd learned that last bit myself only when a robed figure, an incorporeal being I used to call the Big Bad, approached me in the girls' restroom and told me. That robed figure turned out to be Reyes, I found out a decade later. I had yet to confront him on that. What was he doing in the girls' restroom in the first place? The perv.

Jessica didn't handle my admission well. I'd thought her made of kindness and strength before the day she turned on me. Fear transformed her into something I didn't recognize. Her vehemence, her wrath and betrayal, stole my breath. I cried for days—not in front of her, of course; never in front of her—and sank into a deep depression that took me months to recover from.

When she started showing up at Reyes's bar and grill, I hadn't seen her since high school. Lots of women started showing up at the bar and grill when Reyes bought it from my dad. Sadly, Jessica hadn't changed. She still hated me and took every opportunity to be spiteful and manipulative in front of her friends. When a notorious crime lord mistook her for a close friend of mine and abducted her, holding her hostage to force me to do a job for him, events had not ended well. And I thought she hated me before!

So, in a vehicle with four people, three of us were angry. I felt like breaking into a chorus of "One of These Things (Is Not Like the Other)," but I doubted anyone but me would get it, especially since Agent Carson didn't know the truth about me. And she had no idea there was a departed crazy woman hitching a ride with us before her inevitable trip to hell. Surely she was going to hell. Jessica had never been a nice person. There must be a special, less volcanic portion of hell that was partitioned off and set aside for people who weren't all bad, just a little vindictive. They could call it the drama queen ward. It would be a huge hit.

Listening to Jessica's rant about how she was going to be a spinster forever—did people still use that word?—I decided to text my sulking affianced:

Can you do something about this?

He dug his phone out of his pocket, an act that was so bizarrely sexy, it mesmerized me for a solid three seconds, then read my missive. His face remained impassive as he typed.

A second later, my phone chimed.

Why would I do that? It's getting you hot.

What? I turned and stabbed him with an appalled expression, then typed back, my fingers flying over the keyboard:

Wrong kind of hot, mister. This kind of hot leaves bodies in its wake. It takes no prisoners. It's very ... testy.

"The minute you try to get married," Jessica continued, her rant a never-ending drone of threa

and complaints, kind of like I imagined the life of an IRS agent might be, “I will rip your dress shreds the night before your wedding day and, and—”

Reyes was apparently getting hot as well. He offered me a quick wink, his ridiculously long lashes making his mocha eyes sparkle in the early morning sun, then tossed a deadly glare over his shoulder. Jessica’s eyes widened at his unprecedented attention, and the yapping stopped immediately. Deciding to pout in silence, she let her fiery red hair fall over her shoulders as she crossed her arms at her chest and stared out the window.

With a satisfied smile, I typed,

I owe you.

I know.

Do you take payments?

I have several installment plans. We can hammer out the details when we get home.

My insides jumped in delight. Gawd, it was hard to stay mad at him.

Deal.

“So, where are you from?” Agent Carson asked Reyes. “Originally?”

I whirled around to face him again, this time pinning him with a warning glare. Carson was an FBI agent, but I was all about stealth. Surely she wouldn’t pick up on my silent threat.

He studied my mouth, not the least bit worried about my warning glare, then said at last, “Here and there.”

I relaxed against the seatback. He didn’t say *hell*. Thank God he didn’t say hell. It was always hard to explain to friends how, exactly, one’s fiancé was born and raised in the eternal flames of damnation. How his father was, in fact, public enemy number one. And how he’d escaped from hell and was born on earth as a human to be with his true love. As romantic as it all sounded, it was difficult to articulate without garnering a visit from men with butterfly nets.

“You been in Albuquerque long?” she asked him.

Now she was fishing. She knew who he was. Everyone knew who he was. He’d been something of a local celebrity when the state released him from prison for killing the man who’d raised him—*raising* being an insanely generous term. They’d really had no choice when said man showed up alive and well-ish. Reyes did have to sever his spine, but he was still living and breathing. Through a tube! That was the best part. Still, all the news reports about Reyes’s wrongful conviction were making him pretty popular. Not quite so popular as Heisenberg and Pinkman, but one could hope.

“As long as I can remember,” he said in answer to her question.

“He bought Dad’s bar and grill,” I told her, changing the subject.

“I heard that,” she said. She’d done her homework. She probably knew his shoe size and how long it took his coffee.

Coffee.

I started drooling at the thought. It had been several hours since I last had a cup. I'd read a couple of days ago that caffeine was bad for little budding babies and had to psych myself up to quit. I was not going to make it. No way. Nohow. It just would not happen.

"So, you're adjusting?" she asked Reyes, referring to his life on the outside.

"How about AC?" I asked her, changing the subject again. I'd felt Reyes tense with her prying questions, but she was honestly just curious. Surely he felt that as clearly as I did. Then again, we hadn't had the greatest morning. Probably best not to push.

"What?" she asked.

"Your name. Special Agent Carson is rather impersonal, considering all that we've been through. Don't you think? And you've repeatedly thwarted my attempts to change your name to SAC."

"You're lucky I caught you. It's a crime to change someone else's name without their consent."

"Details." I waved a dismissive hand. "What I'm getting at—"

"Kit," she said, interrupting me.

"Kit?" I asked, rather stunned.

"That's my first name."

"Your name is Kit Carson?"

She bit down, her jaw working hard, and said through gritted teeth, "Yes. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No. Not at all." I rolled it over on my tongue. "I like it. Kit Carson. Why does that sound so familiar?"

"I can't imagine."

"So, I can call you Kit?"

"Only if you want to be arrested."

"Oh."

Her mouth softened. "Just kidding. Of course you can call me Kit. You can call me George if you want to. Anything as long as you stop calling me SAC."

"I like George, too," I said, "but I've already named Reyes's shower George. I'm afraid it would get confusing if I ever asked Reyes something like, 'Did you clean George's knobs?'" I raised my brows at her. "You see where I'm going with that."

A light blush crept over her face. "How about we stick with Kit."

"Works for me."

"Are you okay?" she asked, and I followed her line-of-sight to my hands.

I knew it. I looked like I was coming off crack. "Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I just quit caffeine."

She blinked in surprise several times before recovering. "Ah, well, that would explain the lack of coffee. It's weird seeing you without a cup in your hand."

"It feels weird."

"So?"

I questioned her with a quirk of my brow.

“Are you going to explain? Why did you, of all people, quit caffeine?”

After a quick glance over my shoulder, I said, “We’re pregnant.”

Kit had a knee-jerk reaction to that bit of news. Like literally. Her knee jerked and hit the steering wheel, sending us careening into oncoming traffic. Or it would have if there’d been any traffic at the moment.

She corrected the wheel, took a deep breath, then said, “No way. For real? You? A mom?”

I gaped at her. “What the hell? I can be a mom. I’m going to make a great mom.”

“Oh,” she said, trying not to look so shocked. “No, you’re right. You’ll make a great mom. You’re going to take classes, though, yes? Learn what it takes?”

“Puh-lease. I so have this. I’m going to buy a goldfish. Try that on for a while. You know, start off small and work my way up to a kid.”

“You’re comparing raising a goldfish to raising a kid?”

“No.” I was getting defensive, even though her gut reaction had been spot on. I could think of no one less qualified to be a mother than *moi*. “I’m just saying, if I can keep a goldfish alive, surely I can keep a kid alive.”

She stifled a giggle behind a fake cough. That was original. “You do realize there’s more to raising a kid than just keeping it alive?”

“I do indeed,” I said, sounding way more confident than I felt. “Believe you me, I got this.”

“And once you work your way up to a kid, where’re you gonna get the kid? You know, to practice on?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I was focusing on the goldfish.”

“Ah. Good idea.” She said it, but she didn’t mean it. I could tell.

I turned to look at the trees as Jessica chimed in from the backseat. “That poor child. Having you as a mother? Talk about cruel and unusual.”

Reyes must have shot her another glare, because she shut up. Not sure why he bothered. Jessica was right. And though Agent Carson had been teasing, she still nailed it: I knew nothing about being a mother. The only example I’d ever had was that of a witch in wolf’s clothing, a stepmother who thought more of her begonias than she did of me.

Who was I kidding? This kid was in so much trouble.

A heaviness pressed into me. The same heaviness that had been pressing into me since I first learned of our little bun in the oven. The pregnancy was an accident, of course. We hadn’t been practicing safe sex by a long shot, but who’d have thought Reyes could get me pregnant? He was the son of Satan, for goodness’ sake. I’d just figured it an impossibility.

So, Satan was our daughter’s grandfather. Her father was literally created in hell. And her mother worked part-time as the grim reaper. We were the very definition of *dysfunctional*, and that was one good day. I usually saw the gun clip half full, but this was just not a pristine situation. Nothing about her environment would be safe. I caused more trouble than gonorrhoea.

My phone chimed. I glanced down at Reyes's text.

Look at me.

I didn't want to. He had to feel what I was feeling, and he probably felt sorry for me. Possibly even defensive. But both Kit and Jessica were right.

He sat waiting patiently for me to turn around. I swallowed back my self-doubt and turned to look over my shoulder.

To my surprise, his expression had hardened. He studied me with a crackling storm glittering in the depths of his irises. "Stop," he said, his voice soft, dangerously soft—so soft, I had to strain to hear him. He reached out and ran a thumb across my lower lip. "*Je bent de meest krachtige magere heerooit en je zou je door meningen van anderen aan het wankelen laten brengen?*"

Translation: "You are the most powerful grim reaper ever to exist, and you would let the opinions of others give you pause?"

Response: Apparently.

I raised my chin and tucked a brown lock behind my ear. He'd told me that a dozen times—the most powerful reaper bit—but none of them, not a single reaper who came before me, had ever gotten me knocked up. We were breaking new ground here, and he would just have to deal with my insecurities. Normally, no, I would not let the opinions of others give me pause, but I was, after all, still human. At least in part. And being a mother was serious business.

The fact that he was speaking Dutch was not lost on me. It was what he called me: Dutch. Which he'd called me from the day I was born. But I'd never heard him speak it, and the beautiful foreign language expressed in his deep, smooth voice felt like warm butterscotch in my mouth.

He lowered his lids and gazed at me, my reaction stirring him. He reached out with his heat, liquid tendrils of liquid fire, and it washed over me. Pooled in my abdomen. Settled between my legs. They parted involuntarily, as though to give him permission to enter. But now was certainly not the time.

"Stop," I whispered back, echoing his command.

A dimple appeared at one corner of his mouth. "*Maak mij.*"

"Make me," he'd said, the challenge glittering from between his lashes almost my undoing.

"This is it," Kit said, either oblivious to our flirtations or choosing to ignore them.

Just as she pulled the car onto a dirt entrance to the campgrounds, my phone rang. It was Cookie.

I drew in a deep ration of cooling air as I answered, pretending my affianced was not trying to seduce me. I couldn't take him anywhere. "Hey, Cook."

Cookie Kowalski was not only my very best friend on planet Earth, but she was also my receptionist slash research assistant who was darned near becoming a fantastic skiptracer. And she was my neighbor to boot, who cooked a mean enchilada. Like, really mean. Like so hot under its corn tortilla collar that my taste buds tingled for days after eating them—aka, perfect.

"Hey, boss. How's it going?" she asked.

Normally we had coffee every morning and discussed the day's business, but I'd left so early,

didn't get to explain that I couldn't have coffee with her anymore. And I'd never get to have coffee with her again. The thought sent me into a deep, dark depression, the one where I curled into a ball and sang show tunes to myself. Then I remembered it was only for another eight months or so. Maybe I'd get lucky and the little bun in the oven would pop out a couple weeks early. I'd have to do jumping jacks and run a couple of triathlons when I reached the beached-whale stage. Hurry her along.

"I'm investigating a cold case with Agent Carson. What's up?"

"Oh, sorry to bother, but your uncle called. He has a case for you."

Kit pulled up to the main gate, turned off the SUV, and started riffling through her briefcase.

"No bother, but Uncle Bob can bite me. I'm not talking to him." I was a tad irked at the moment with my uncle, a detective on the Albuquerque police force.

"Okay, but he has a case for you," she said again, her voice singsong.

"Don't care."

"It's right up your alley. There's been a rash of suicide notes."

"That's not right up my alley. That's, like, two blocks over from my alley."

"It is when the people who supposedly wrote those notes are missing."

I straightened. "Missing? Where'd they go?"

"Exactly," she said, a satisfied smirk in her voice. "Right up your alley."

Damn. She had me. I felt rather than saw Reyes smile from the backseat. "We'll be back in a couple. Fill me in then."

"You got it."

We hung up as I took in the area. The sign that used to announce a visitor's arrival to the Fort Winds Summer Camp was now covered with boards that simply said CLOSED with a few NO TRESPASSING signs posted here and there for good measure.

I glanced at Kit. "I'm surprised they've kept the camp closed all this time."

She shrugged. "Would you send your kid to a camp where a mass murder took place?"

"Good point."

"And I guess it's partly out of respect as well," Kit continued. She gestured toward the metal gate. "We'll have to hike it from here. The gate is padlocked and I don't have a key."

From our vantage, I still couldn't see the outbuildings or lake, but I felt a gentle tug from just over the hill. There was certainly something there.

This was going to be tricky. Kit didn't know anything about my *abilities*, for lack of a better term. And after my high school fiasco with Jessica, only several of my closests knew. Even with them, I kept it to myself as long as I possibly could. So, investigating a crime scene with her so near and nothing else to really distract her could prove sticky, as I tended to talk to dead people.

Hopefully, however, my plan would work. If Reyes was going to tag along, the least he could do would be a distraction. We got out of the SUV and I nodded toward him. He nodded back, albeit reluctantly, and we were officially on a *Mission: Impossible* episode. I so wanted to dart around humming the theme song, but I didn't want to add to Kit's already low opinion of me.

I closed my door and started the hike up the trail to the grounds. Reyes seemed to magically appear beside me, but he didn't press the issue of my—gasp!—walking away without him. He was just going to have to deal. I needed him to direct Kit's attention elsewhere if we came upon any departed. I could always use my cell phone, pretend to talk into it when I was actually speaking to a departed, but that got me only so far. Sometimes the situation demanded a more assertive approach. For example, I once had to put this guy who died in a convenience store robbery in a headlock. It was really awkward since there had been several cops standing nearby. I barely escaped a padded cell with that one, but the guy told me what I needed to know, so it was totally worth it.

But for some reason, I didn't want Kit to see anything like that. She was good people. I didn't want her to think of me as a raving lunatic. It tended to put a damper on relationships.

We hiked through thick foliage and across overgrown brush to get to a clearing sprinkled with outbuildings and a small lake. The grounds before us, once a thriving summer camp for kids, were now a series of crumbling cabins and neglected vegetation.

"This didn't happen on Friday the thirteenth, did it?" I asked, noticing a small wooden rowboat in the middle of the lake, completely empty. It rocked gently to and fro. This was way creepier than I thought it would be.

"No," Kit said, walking up behind me.

I strolled to the sunlit clearing, stepping carefully around a patch of prickly pear, and watched children, all girls, skipped rope, played hopscotch in the dirt, created Jacob's ladders out of threadbare pieces of string, and fell back in the grass, giggling until their bellies hurt.

The scene reminded me of my childhood. Long before Jessica came around, I'd had a best friend like that. Her name was Ramona. She had skin the color of dark coffee and wore her frizzy hair in two braids that started behind her ears and ended before they touched her shoulders. They stuck straight out to the sides more often than not, and that is one of my most cherished memories. I thought the sun shone just for her. Her laughter warmed me to the deepest depths of my soul.

She was hit by a car while riding her bike to my house when we were seven, but we played together for years afterwards, until she figured I'd be okay if she left. When she crossed through me, I saw the true meaning of love, and I've never forgotten it. It wasn't until I met my current BFF, Cook Kowalski, that I realized that that kind of love could exist more than once in a lifetime. *Philia*. A deep, selfless friendship. A loyalty of epic proportions, in which one is willing to sacrifice anything for the other.

And looking at these girls, who'd surely died under tragic circumstances, I saw that kind of love, that kind of closeness, no matter the horrid circumstances that brought them together. They played and skipped and laughed as though their lives were filled with cupcakes and cotton candy.

"It's sad," Agent Carson said, taking in the view before us. "Seeing it abandoned like this. Run down. So utterly lifeless."

"Explain to me again how many people were killed that night," I said.

Reyes leaned against a tree and was watching the serene tableau with a gentle smile on his face. I

forgotten how much he liked kids. Thought they were cool. He would make a fantastic dad. Maybe his longcomings could make up for my short ones once we entered into the sacred realm of parenthood.

“Five,” Kit said. “And one girl disappeared that night. We’ve never found her.”

I nodded. “Any suspects named Jason?”

She scoffed softly. “No, but there was a Mrs. Voorhees on our persons-of-interest list. She had seemed troubled.” Kit gazed at me a long moment as I watched a little girl, quite a bit younger than the rest, take a cautious step closer to us. She had startlingly white hair with a pixie cut that matched her doll-like face, and she wore a dress that fairly exploded in a cascade of powder blue ruffles. Not exactly the attire one wore to summer camp. But one of her most adorable qualities was her ears: They stuck out and curved up a little, and if I believed in elves, I’d swear she was one. Or perhaps she was a tree sprite.

“What?” Agent Carson asked at last, doubt and curiosity in her tone. “Why did you want to know how many were killed when you’ve been over that file with a fine-toothed comb?”

I knelt down, pretending to take a closer look at the ground, as though I were some kind of tracker. I coaxed the elfling closer with a smile. “Just double-checking,” I said, opening a hand out of Kit’s line of sight. Many more had died here than just those five victims. I scanned the grounds again as the elfling made up her mind. At least eight girls played in the field around us. Possibly nine.

The elfling gazed at me, her attention rapt as she took in the bright light that forever surrounded me. Only the departed and a few other supernatural beings could see it. I could not, however, but it was apparently nothing short of amazing.

Reyes knelt beside me, and the elfling took a wary step back. When I looked over at him, I nodded toward the tree line, where another little girl stood in the shadows, hidden almost completely behind a pine. If not for her pale striped shirt and turquoise shorts, I would not have spotted her.

I gestured toward Kit, and he agreed with another nod.

“Can I see the file again?” I asked her.

She handed it to me as Reyes stood. With space between them, the elfling relaxed visibly. She raised a hand in the air and laughed softly at something I couldn’t make out. Her grin was infectious. Reyes and I each wore one quite similar.

“Would you like to see the crime scene?” Kit asked me, beginning to wonder what I was doing.

It was the perfect segue. “Sure. Can you show it to Reyes first? I’ll be there in a sec.”

Kit looked from me to Reyes and then back, not sure what to think. Then, with a shrug, she led him off to the cabins.

The main one, probably the meeting lodge, was the only one with slight remnants of police tape on it. The tattered strips swayed loosely in the soft breeze, stirring the dirt and debris below them. Most of the windows had been broken, and the roof sat slightly askew. Neglect had a way of aging a place.

Free to talk privately, I sobered and winked at the little girl in front of me, who was so utterly fascinated with my light. Before I could get down to business, Jessica materialized beside me. She looked out over the girls. They had stopped what they were doing and were now watching us. Most

were merely curious. A couple seemed to withdraw. Those would probably disappear before I could ask them anything.

“What happened?” Jessica asked, astonished.

“We aren’t sure,” I said. “But we’re working on it.”

Another girl, perhaps nine or ten and wearing a seersucker jumpsuit, joined the elfling as she danced and played. Looking as though they were running through sprinklers on a summer afternoon, they laughed and tried to catch particles of my light in their hands, clasp them together momentarily, then bringing them close to their eyes and peeking inside. Then they would burst into a fit of giggles. While I couldn’t help but laugh with them, Jessica stood confused. Mortified.

“I don’t understand,” she said, her brows drawn in concern. “What happened to them?”

“I don’t know, Jessica.” I thumbed through the file until I came to a news article that included a picture of the homeless man who had frequented the area. The police were taking him in for questioning and someone had snapped a shot. “We’re trying to find that out.” I held the file open for the girls. “Can you answer a few questions for me?” I asked them.

The older one crept forward first. The elfling followed suit.

After pointing out the suspect, I asked, “Is this the man who brought you here? Did he kill you?” It was a horrible thing to say, to *have* to say, but there was simply no delicate way of putting it. One thing I’d found to be a truth 99 percent of the time was that the departed handled their deaths better than the living did.

The older one leaned in, squinted, then shook her head. But the elfling nodded vigorously.

“That’s not him,” the older one said.

“Is so. Look.” The elfling pointed, but when she did, her finger traced over the news column until it came to a figure in the background. It was a cop or a deputy of some sort, and he was standing off to the side and talking to a woman, possibly a reporter. The photographer had snapped the shot just as the man looked over his shoulder toward the camera.

“Oh,” the older one said. “That *is* him. He came to my house after school before my mom got home. He said she was in an accident and I had to go with him to the hospital, but we didn’t go to the hospital.”

The elfling bowed her head. “I was at a party and tried to walk home by myself because Cindy Crane threw up. Then I didn’t feel good, so I left. But I got lost. He said he would help me find my mom.” When she glanced up at me with those huge green eyes, my heart constricted. “He was so nice at first.”

I slammed my lids shut. I just didn’t get it. Why was there so much evil in the world? What had any of these precious girls done to deserve such a horrifying fate? I couldn’t help but think of my own daughter, of what she would have to deal with. To face. It was not a pleasant thought.

Forcing myself to keep calm, I took in a deep breath, then continued. “Do you know about the people who were killed here? They were setting up for a summer camp when they were attacked.”

The elfling pointed toward the cabin. “There. They were killed there.”

“Do you know by whom?” I asked.

She pointed to the picture again. To the deputy.

“He brought Vanessa out here,” the older one said. “They saw him.”

Ah, they’d caught him burying one of his victims, so he killed them all. “Do you know where you are buried?”

“Of course,” the elfling said. She pointed to the tree line surrounding the retreat. “We’re over there by that big rock.”

At least I could tell Kit where to look. She would, of course, question everything I told her, but she knew enough about me to follow through anyway. Each one of these girls deserved a proper burial and their families deserved closure.

“Except for Lydia,” the older one said.

I thumbed through the file again. “Lydia Weeks?” I asked, scanning the notes. “The girl from the camp? They never found her.” I looked up at them.

“Yeah, he took her off somewhere else. She’s not with us. She sticks to the trees mostly.”

That time, they pointed in the opposite direction, at the girl in the turquoise shorts.

“That’s her?” I asked, standing.

“That’s her.”

I bent to the girls. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

They nodded before trying to catch particles of light again, like dust motes in the sun.

Though Jessica seemed totally distraught, I asked her for a favor. “Would you mind watching them until I get back?”

“What? Me?” She acted as though I’d asked her to shave her head. “I— I can’t— I mean, I don’t know anything about children.”

I winked at her. “Join the club.”

Before heading toward Lydia, I glanced at the cabins. Kit was explaining something to Reyes in front of the main lodge, her back to me. Accepting that as my cue, I took off in a dead sprint, barely catching the glare on Reyes’s face as I put even more distance between us.

Lydia sank farther into the shadows as I neared. At eleven, she was actually a bit older than the other girls in the area. Her brows formed a hard line. She looked part Asian with dark, almond-shaped eyes and straight black hair that hung past her shoulders.

I slowed and eased up to her, afraid she would disappear before I could ask her anything. “Hi, Lydia,” I said. Fighting my already burning lungs and racing heart, I pasted on my best smile and tiptoed closer. “I’m Charley.”

Without uttering a word, she took off in the opposite direction.

“Wonderful,” I said, ducking past a branch and hurrying after her. “I suck at tag. I was always It.” My breaths came in quick, shallow bursts as I tripped on a leaf or something. “I contemplated changing my name to It when I was a kid to make playing tag more ironic.”

She zigzagged past a log for my benefit, then cleared a fallen tree in one graceful leap. I, however,

did not. After scraping my shins on the thick bark, I scaled the obstacle instead, huffing and puffing as I jumped over the other side. Before I could rant much more, I caught up to Lydia. She'd stopped running and was staring at the ground. I struggled to get oxygen to my red blood cells as I stumbled forward. When I got closer, I realized there was a distinct impression in the dirt. Leaves and debris had accrued, but on the edge of what looked like a shallow grave were the remains of a small, skeletal hand.

"I'm so sorry, Lydia," I said between gasps.

"I wanted you to see."

I knelt down and wrapped my fingers around the bones of hers before looking back at her. "I'll make sure they find you."

She nodded, tears threatening to spill over her lashes.

I wanted to tell her she could cross through me, she could be with her parents who'd died that night—but a growl, low and guttural, caught my attention. Alarm raced up my spine and over my skin as my gaze darted from one shadow to the next. "Is that a bear?" I asked. "I hope that's not a bear."

Lydia's expression had changed. She looked at me worriedly. "I shouldn't have brought you here. I'm sorry. I just wanted you to see."

I stood. "I know, honey. It's okay."

"No, it's not. It was selfish of me." She lowered her head.

"Not at all," I said, my voice stern.

Her mouth forming a lovely pout, she whispered, "You should know, they were summoned."

I put a hand on her arm and leaned closer. "Who, sweetheart? Who was summoned?"

She cast a worried glance over her shoulder. "The monsters." The growl grew louder as she spoke. "They were summoned. All twelve of them."

I stilled, my thoughts snagging on the word *twelve*. I straightened and whirled around, looking for the hellhounds, the beasts who'd escaped eternal damnation to frolic on earth. And to rip me limb from limb.

Before I could ask any more questions, she whispered to me once again. Her words curled around me like dark, ethereal smoke as she said, "You should run."

2

We are all searching for someone whose demons play well with ours.

—BUMPER STICKER

I raced back to the campgrounds so fast, tree limbs and pine needles whipped across my face with cruel intent. I didn't care. I flew over the fallen log and zigzagged past the trees, the landscape blurring in my periphery as I focused on sound. Not just any sound. A specific sound. A growl. But I had yet to hear it again.

I felt Reyes near me, incorporeal. His heat encircled me, but I didn't have time to explain. I burst from the forest and sprinted back to the cabins, shouting, "Time to go! Chop, chop!"

Snapping at a very confused Kit, I scooped up the file I'd laid on the ground and raced toward her SUV. She didn't argue. She followed behind me, grabbing her keys as she ran.

"Is there a bear?" she asked as we hustled into her SUV.

"Something like that," I said, eyeing Reyes.

He bit down and examined the area as Kit maneuvered the SUV through a perfect three-point turn, stirring up dirt and clouds of dust.

I felt bad about leaving the girls behind without so much as a by-your-leave. I'd have to go back for them when this Twelve business was all said and done.

"Okay," I said once we were on the road, "there are at least eight girls buried near that big boulder to the east of the cabins, just past the tree line."

"What?" she asked.

"And Lydia Weeks is buried at the opposite end of the camp, in a shallow grave. There is a fallen tree nearby."

Kit pulled to the side of the road. Our pause in forward momentum had me nervous again. Had the Twelve seen me? Would they hunt me down? Drag me out of the car for my dismemberment?

"We should keep going," I said to her, my hands slick with perspiration. From physical exertion or from nerves, I had no idea.

"What are you talking about? What girls?"

"Oh." I pulled out the file and opened it to the news article. "And this is your killer. He was using the area as a dumpsite. The campers got there on the wrong night. But we really should keep going."

She took the file without looking at it. "How do you know all of this?"

I sighed in helplessness, unable to answer to her satisfaction. "It's what I do, Kit. You just have to trust me. Say that we were investigating the area and we found a body. I can draw you a map of where

to find her.”

“You can show me.” She started to make a U-turn.

I stopped her with a hand on her arm. “No, I can’t.”

We were idling in the middle of the road when a car approached. The driver slowed upon seeing us, unsure of what we were up to.

After a moment, Kit depressed the gas pedal and continued down the mountain. “I want a map,” she said.

“You’ll have it.” I pointed to the deputy in the photo again. “Do you recognize this man?”

She finally took a look. “No. Why?”

“Was he ever a suspect?”

“No, but one of the agents on-scene described a confrontation he’d had with a sheriff’s deputy from Los Alamos. Said he was asking all kinds of questions, which is natural, but he just remembered the guy as being dodgy. He’d wanted to know everything that was going on, even though it was well out of his jurisdiction.”

“He’s your killer.”

She blinked at me in surprise, then refocused on the road. After navigating a few tight turns, she said, “One of these days, you’re going to have to tell me how you do that.”

“One of these days,” I said, relieved beyond measure to be alive. And fully limbed.

Giving up all pretense of normalcy, I turned to Reyes in the backseat. “Are we safe?”

“For the moment. But we need a plan.”

“Like what kind of plan? I mean, they’re—” I gave one last fleeting glance toward Kit. She would never look at me the same again. Come to think of it, she might never look at me again, period. “They’re hellhounds,” I said, resigned to the fact that I might lose SAC. “What can we possibly do about them?”

“First off, I don’t think they’re as sensitive to light as the first ones that escaped onto this planet, but they still can’t go into direct sunlight. Nothing from hell can without insulation.”

“You mean, without having the advantage of a human host?”

“Exactly. And I don’t think they can actually possess people.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“Not really. I never dealt much with the hounds. But I know who has.”

It only took me a moment to guess: “The Dealer.”

The Dealer was our newest acquaintance, a slave who, like Reyes, had escaped from hell and now lived on earth as a human. He was centuries old yet barely looked nineteen.

“Yes. He was Daeva. He was a slave, and part of their job was to take care of other slaves, like the hellhounds.”

“You know, someday you’re going to have to explain to me in great detail exactly what hell is.”

Kit’s grip was so tight on the steering wheel, her knuckles shone white. I couldn’t help that now.

“I understand what you meant earlier,” Reyes said.

I still wanted to know more about hell and the hounds raised there. “Changing the subject will not help your— Wait, what do you mean?”

“This world,” he said, his jaw working as he gazed out the window at the last of the pine and juniper as we emerged from the mountains and onto flatter land. “Bringing a child into it. What happened to those girls.”

I wrapped my arms over my chest. “I guess it doesn’t matter now, but still, it kind of breaks my heart. Especially knowing what our daughter is going to face.”

Without looking at me, he said, “It breaks mine, too.”

Hoping Kit couldn’t give me a ticket for not wearing my seat belt, I unbuckled it and crawled into the backseat with my affianced. He took my hand in his, lacing our fingers together, his heat soft and stirring.

As we got closer to town, I called Cook to fill her in, as promised.

“How’d it go?” she asked in lieu of a salutation.

“Well,” I told her, “we not only figured out who committed the murders ten years ago but also identified a serial killer.”

“Another one? We seem to have a lot of those around here.”

“We do, don’t we?” I’d never thought of it that way, but we really did seem to attract our share of crazies. I explained about the little girls. I shouldn’t have. Cookie sank into that same deep, dark depression I’d been experiencing, but her depression was much more noble. Mine was just kind of whiny.

After a moment where Reyes studied the hand he was still holding, running his fingertips along my lifeline, Cookie asked, “What would you attempt to do if you knew you couldn’t fail?”

“Calculus, proolly. Why?”

“Just curious. What if you could create the perfect murder? Like literally? Who would you kill?”

“Well, if I could create the perfect murder—of which there are none—I could probably time travel too. I’d go back in time and kill Hitler.”

“Interesting,” she said.

“Why?” I asked. “Whom would you kill?” This was so not a conversation to be having in the back of an FBI agent’s SUV.

“My ex,” she said.

“Probably best not to mention that to your lawyer.”

Her ex, whom I had yet to meet in the three years I’d known Cookie, was giving her a hard time about putting their daughter in danger. Apparently, he’d found out about an attack in my apartment one Amber had witnessed, only she’d been too sleepy to realize what was happening at the time. Amber must have put two and two together and mentioned the incident to her dad. She would never have said anything if she knew what kind of strife it would cause her mother. Amber didn’t know her dad as well as Cookie did.

“But if you’re shopping, I know a guy who knows a guy.”

“Nah,” she said, dropping the idea, which was probably for the best. “But thanks. Still, if I could get away with murder, I’d hunt down serial killers and take them out one by one. I’d be a serial killer. Like *Dexter*, only with curves.”

“I get that. Hey, I could be your assistant! I’d be an Assistant Serial Killer Serial Killer. I’d be a ASS. Or do I need the *Ks* in there? Because that wouldn’t sound nearly as cool.”

She chuckled. “So, what’s with this note you left on my desk?”

“It’s a list of words.”

“Yes, which is why I’m confused. Are these words significant in some way?”

“Are they ever? It struck me recently that if you put an *A* in front of a word, it negates that word. Like *amoral* or *asymmetrical*.”

“Yes—”

“I mean, I knew that, naturally. I just don’t think we’re taking full advantage of the precedent.”

“Right. I got the list. But I don’t think *a-smart* is a real word.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. It *should* be a real word. And it’s nicer than saying dumb.”

“Did you call your uncle Bob?”

“Not yet. But I could use a paycheck since, you know, I have to pay you. Eventually.”

“That’d be awesome. I could eat this month.”

“Well, now, I didn’t say I was going to pay you enough to eat the whole month long. You might want to ration your food. And get rid of that kid. She eats entirely too much, now that she’s turned thirteen.” The part I was leaving out, of course: Amber was roughly the size of a twig in winter.

“Right? I don’t know what to do with her.”

“Don’t get me started,” I said, pulling my hand out of Reyes’s grasp to wave it around dramatically before he took hold of it again. “She’s so demanding. Food. Water. Next thing you know, she’s going to ask to be unchained every time she has to go to the bathroom.”

Cookie scoffed. “Like that will happen. So, Robert is at the courthouse this afternoon, but he asked that you call him later.”

“This whole suicide-note thing sounds suspicious. I think this is a ploy to get me to call him.”

She laughed softly. “Honey, you need to talk to him.”

“You’re just saying that because you’re dating the guy. You have to be on his side now.”

“I’m not on anyone’s side.”

“Oh yeah? Two weeks ago, you would’ve had me kicking him to the curb.”

“No, I wouldn’t have. And you know it.”

I let out a deep, annoyed sigh. “Whatever. I’ll just go by the courthouse and talk to him face-to-face. Make him squirm like the rabid dog he is.”

“Oh,” she said, hesitating. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Interest level: 10. “Intriguing response. And why is that?”

“He’s observing the trial of one of his cases.”

“And?”

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