DEREK LANDY



SEASONS OF WAR

HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by
HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2020
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is
www.harpercollins.co.uk
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Skulduggery Pleasant logo™ HarperCollins*Publishers*
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LIMITED EDITION ISBN 978–0–00–839069–3
HB ISBN 978–0–00–838623–8
TPB ISBN 978–0–00–838624–5
PB ISBN 978–0–00–838628–3

Derek Landy asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of the work.
A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Typeset in Baskerville MT 11/13.5 pt by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Red candles, maybe a dozen of them. Brick walls. Lot of rafters, lot of shadows, lots of big, empty patches of darkness. Wooden floor. She was in a cellar, a big one, upright against something metal. She could feel the struts digging into her back. Her arms were over her head, wrists bound with rope. Ankles tied, too.

Her tongue tasted sour. They'd drugged her. Her mouth was dry. She licked her lips. Her head was dull. She shot a little magic through her system and her mind cleared instantly.

She wondered if her make-up had been smudged. She hoped it hadn't. It had taken ages to put on. Her shoes were gone. Good. They were awful. She was still in the dress, though, the one that was too small and too tight and not very practical. It did have one thing going for it, however – the amulet of dark metal, in the shape of a skull, that fitted against her hip like some cool-looking clasp.

She raised her head slightly, gave her surroundings a closer inspection through the hair that hung over her face. Pedestals displayed occult paraphernalia in glass cases like this was someone's idea of a black magic museum, and good quality – though obviously plastic – skeletons, dressed in rags, hung from shackles along the walls. The ground was sticky against her bare feet. She was positioned in the exact centre of a pentagram painted on the floorboards. She was pretty sure the dark stains had been made by copious splashes of blood.

"She's awake," someone said in the darkness ahead of her. "Hey, she's awake. Get the others."

The sound of feet on wooden steps, and then yellow light flooded in from above. A large shadow flowed across the light and then the cellar door closed and she was left with the flickering red candles and whoever had spoken.

He came forward, out of the darkness. Dressed in a red robe with the hood up.

"What's your name?" he asked. His voice was gentle. American. Warm.

"Valkyrie," she said.

"Valerie?"

"Valkyrie. With a K."

"That's a nice name. Unusual. Is it Irish?"

"Norwegian."

"Oh. My friend said you were from Ireland."

"I am. My name isn't."

"Ah." He stepped a bit closer. She could see the lower half of his face, his square jaw and his even white teeth.

"You're probably freaking out right now. I get that. I do. You wake up, you're in a dark cellar, you see satanic stuff all around, you probably think you're going to be horribly butchered in some ridiculous human-sacrifice ritual, yeah?" He pulled his hood down and his smile broadened. "Well, that's exactly what's going to happen."

"I know you," said Valkyrie.

"Do you?"

"You're that actor," she said. "From that movie. You're Jason Randal."

"You want an autograph?"

"How about a selfie? If you could just hand me my phone..."

He laughed. "Oh, I like you. Usually the girls we sacrifice are full of panicked questions at this stage, like they think they can

make sense of what's happening, like they can't bring themselves to believe that they're about to be murdered."

"What was that movie you were in, with the guy from *The Big Lebowski*?"

Jason tilted his head slightly. "I haven't been in a film with—"

"No, you know the one. You both play dead cops who are still, like, solving crimes and stuff? You're not zombie cops, or ghost cops, but... what's it called? I want to say *RIP*, but..."

Jason's smile faded. "*RIPD*," he said.

"Yes," Valkyrie said. "That was a terrible movie. Why did you make that?"

He scratched his jaw. "That was Ryan Reynolds. You're thinking of Ryan Reynolds."

"That wasn't you?"

"No."

Valkyrie frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I think I know what films I've been in."

"I could have sworn it was you."

"Well, it wasn't."

"It's a terrible movie."

"I wouldn't know. I haven't seen it and I wasn't in it."

"It's bad."

"Then how about we stop talking about it?"

"Are you ashamed of it because it's so bad?"

"I wasn't *in it*."

Valkyrie looked at him. "Maybe if you had a better agent you'd get better movies."

Yellow light flooded the cellar and shadows moved, cast by the three people coming down the steps, all dressed in red robes.

"Is the Master here?" Jason Randal asked them, annoyance pinching his words.

"He's on his way," the woman in front said. Her name escaped Valkyrie, but these days she was always being cast as the girlfriend or the wife of the hero. A few years ago, however, she'd headlined

a few movies herself. Not bad movies, either. The guy behind her, one of the stars of a dreadful sitcom Valkyrie had pretended to like, was the one who'd bought her the spiked drink in the crowded bar. She recognised the last person – an actor in a TV show she'd never watched who had a ridiculous name that she couldn't remember.

The woman had an amazing smile and incredible bone structure and wonderful hair. It shone in the candlelight. "I take it Jason has explained what's going to happen," she said.

"Don't bother with this one," Jason said, somewhat grumpily. "She's not that bright."

Valkyrie ignored him. "I'm a huge fan," she said to the woman. Victoria, that was her name. Victoria Leigh.

"Aw, thank you."

"That film, where you were out for revenge on the men who'd killed your husband? That was brilliant."

"That's really sweet of you. I did a lot of my own stunts for that one."

"The fight scenes were excellent."

Victoria smiled at the others. "Do we have to kill her? She has such great taste!"

The others chuckled – all except Jason. He didn't chuckle even a little bit.

"We should do it now," he said.

Victoria frowned at him. "Before the Master gets here?"

"It's almost midnight. We'll have to do it anyway, with or without him."

"The Master will not be pleased," said the sitcom star.

"Then the Master should be on time for the human sacrifice," Jason snapped back. "The rest of us are all here, aren't we? And *we* have careers. I have to be on set in two hours, and don't you have an early call tomorrow?"

"I *do* have an early call," murmured the sitcom star.

Victoria checked the slender gold watch on her slender pale

wrist. "OK, fine, get everything ready to go. We'll wait till the last second. If the Master arrives in time, excellent. If he doesn't, we'll do it ourselves on the stroke of midnight."

The others nodded and went off to fetch whatever they needed to fetch. Victoria stepped closer, though, brushing Valkyrie's hair back off her face.

"You're a pretty one," she said. "Not leading-lady beautiful, perhaps, but definitely girl-next-door pretty. And those shoulders! Good lord! Linebacker shoulders, that's what we call them. I can see why Tadd picked you." Her voice softened. "Was he respectful? I've warned him about this in the past."

"Pretty sure he was."

"Good. I've seen far too many girls being disrespected in my business and I'd hate to be a part of something that perpetuates this behaviour."

"Aren't you lot going to murder me in a few minutes?"

A little laugh. "I am aware of the contradiction."

"Good," said Valkyrie. "Because I was worrying."

"I have to say... What's your name?"

"Valkyrie."

"Ah, from Norse mythology. Very nice. I have to say, Valkyrie, you're surprisingly calm about this whole thing."

Valkyrie shrugged as much as she was able. "I don't want to brag or anything, but I've been in worse situations."

"You have?"

"It's all worked out in the end."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I don't think that's going to happen tonight."

"We'll see."

"Indeed we will, Valkyrie. That's a great attitude to have. We will indeed see. So tell me, what brings you out to LA? Aspiring actress?"

"Actually, I'm thinking of getting into stuntwork. I like being physical, you know? Throwing people around, crashing through windows, falling off rooftops... That's my kind of thing."

"Oh, I admire stunt people so much, I really do. I know this great little team down in Glendale. Such a shame you're dying tonight – someone as athletic as you, you'd have fit in perfectly."

"Can I ask you something? This Master guy you're waiting on – who is he?"

"You sure you want to know? Well, why the hell not – you won't be telling anyone, right? He's a sorcerer. He's *magic*."

"Like one of those street magicians?"

Victoria's laugh was as pretty as her eyes. "No, no, not like those street magicians. I mean he's actually, really, *genuinely* magic. He can move things just by waving his hands. He clicks his fingers and he's holding a ball of fire in his palm."

"No kidding?"

"I swear it's true."

"And why does he make you sacrifice people?"

"Well, he gets his power from Satan, you see. He's Satan's emissary here on earth. All of us in our little group, we're the ones who sacrifice the girls and, as a reward, Satan grants the Master the power to fulfil our wildest dreams."

"Golly," said Valkyrie.

"I know."

"And does it work? Do your wildest dreams come true?"

Victoria made a seesawing motion with her hand. "It's not an exact science. We get a lot of callbacks during pilot season, a lot of interest from casting agents and directors... but really, Satan just opens the door. It's up to us to walk through."

"Right, right," said Valkyrie. "So Satan is real, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"Wow. And that's all he asks for? Human sacrifice?"

"Yes. And a commission."

"A commission?"

"That goes to the Master. For living expenses, you know."

"So the Master gets a cut of whatever you make? How big of a cut?"

Victoria hesitated. “Forty per cent.”

“Seriously?”

“But it’s worth it. Tadd wouldn’t have got that sitcom if it wasn’t for the Master, and I’m on a shortlist for the role of a wartime correspondent. It’s based on a true story and the script has a *lot* of buzz around it right now.”

“Good luck with that one. I hope you get it.”

“Thank you.”

The others came back. Tadd held a candelabrum of seven long-stemmed, unlit black candles, and the other one, the actor whose ridiculous name Valkyrie couldn’t remember, carried a box of polished oak. Jason Randal opened the box, and took out a long, curved dagger. The corners of his mouth lifted when he looked at Valkyrie.

“We still have two minutes,” Victoria said.

“She needs to be dead at midnight,” Jason responded.

“I know the rules.”

“We should do it now, to be sure she dies.”

“We’ll do it at eleven fifty-nine. So long as you stab her in the heart, she’ll be dead in seconds. Light the ceremonial candles.”

The ridiculously named actor put the box down and came hurrying over, digging through his robes. He produced a silver Zippo. He flicked it open and ran the flint-wheel along his thigh. It sparked to a flame, and he put the flame to the seven black candles. Tadd held the candelabrum aloft.

“The candles,” he said, “are lit.”

“The dagger,” Jason intoned, “is sharp.”

“The time,” Victoria said, eyes on her watch, “is now.”