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Opening extract from

Skulduggery Pleasant

Written by

Derek Landy

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LITTLE GIRL, ALL ALONE

hat afternoon Stephanie and her mother took the fifteen-minute drive from Haggard to Gordon's estate. Her mum opened the front door and stepped back.

"Owner of the house goes first," she said with a little smile and a bow, and Stephanie stepped inside. She wasn't thinking of this house as her property – the idea was too big, too silly. Even if her parents were, technically, the custodians until she turned eighteen, how could she own a house? How many other twelve-year-old kids owned houses?

No, it was too silly an idea. Too far-fetched. Too crazy. Exactly the kind of thing that Gordon would have thought made perfect sense.

The house was big and quiet and empty as they walked through it. Everything seemed new to her now, and Stephanie found herself reacting differently to the furniture and carpets and paintings. Did she like it? Did she agree with this colour or that fabric? One thing that had to be said for Gordon, he had a good eye. Stephanie's mother said there was very little she would change if she had to. Some of the paintings were a little too unnerving for her taste maybe, but on the whole the furnishings were elegant and understated, exuding an air of distinction that befitted a house of this stature.

They hadn't decided what they were going to do with the house. Any decision was left up to Stephanie, but her parents still had the villa to consider. Owning three houses between them seemed a bit much. Her father had suggested selling the villa but her mother hated the thought of letting go of a place so idyllic.

They had also talked about Stephanie's education, and she knew *that* conversation was far from over. The moment they had left Mr Fedgewick's office they warned her not to let all this go to her head. Recent events, they had said, should not mean she could stop studying, stop planning for college. She needed to be

independent, they said, she needed to make it on her own.

Stephanie had let them talk, and nodded occasionally and muttered an agreement where an agreement was appropriate. She didn't bother to explain that she needed college, she needed to find her own way in the world because she knew that if she didn't, she'd never escape Haggard. She wasn't about to throw her future away simply because she had come into some money.

She and her mother spent so long looking around the ground floor that by the time they got to the bottom of the stairs, it was already five o'clock. With their exploring done for the day, they locked up and walked to the car. The first few drops of rain splattered against the windscreen as they got in. Stephanie clicked her seatbelt closed and her mother turned the key in the ignition.

The car spluttered a bit, groaned a little and then shut up altogether. Stephanie's mother looked at her.

"Uh oh." They both got out and opened the bonnet.

"Well," her mother said, looking at the engine, "at least that's still there."

"Do you know *anything* about engines?" Stephanie asked.

"That's why I have a husband, so I don't have to. Engines and shelves, that's why man was invented." Stephanie made a mental note to learn about engines before she turned eighteen.

She wasn't too fussed about the shelves.

Her mum dug her mobile phone out of her bag and called Stephanie's dad, but he was busy on site and there was no way he could get to them before nightfall. They went back inside the house and her mother called a mechanic, and they spent three quarters of an hour waiting for him to arrive.

The sky was grey and angry and the rain was falling hard by the time the truck appeared around the corner. It splashed through puddles on its way up the long drive, and Stephanie's mum pulled her jacket over her head and ran out to meet it. Stephanie could see a great big dog in the cab of the truck, looking on as the mechanic got out to examine their car. After a few minutes, her mother ran back inside, thoroughly drenched.

"He can't fix it here," she said, wringing out her jacket on the porch, "so he's going to tow it to the garage. It shouldn't take too long to fix."

"Will there be room for both of us in the truck?"

"You can sit on my knee."

"Mum!"

"Or I can sit on your knee, whatever works."

"Can I stay here?"

Her mother looked at her. "On your own?"

"Please? You just said it won't take long, and I'd like to have

another look around, just on my own."

"I don't know, Steph..."

"Please? I've stayed on my own before. I won't break anything, I swear."

Her mother laughed. "OK fine. I shouldn't be any more than an hour, all right? An hour and a half at the most." Her mother gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Call me if you need anything."

She ran back outside and jumped in the cab next to the dog, who proceeded to slobber all over her face. Stephanie watched their car being towed off into the distance and then it vanished from sight.

She did a little more exploring, now that she was on her own. She climbed the stairs and went straight to Gordon's study.

His publisher, Seamus T. Steepe of Arc Light Books, had phoned them earlier that day, passing on his condolences and enquiring about the state of Gordon's last book. Her mother had told him that they'd find out if Gordon had completed it, and if he had, they'd send it on. Mr Steepe was very keen to get the book on the shelves, certain that it would crash on to the bestseller list and stay there for a long time. "Dead writers sell," he had said, like he approved of Gordon's clever marketing ploy.

Stephanie opened the desk drawer and found the

manuscript in a neat stack. She pulled it out carefully and laid it on the desktop, careful not to smudge the paper. The first page held the title, nothing more, in bold lettering:

And The Darkness Rained Upon Them.

The manuscript was thick and heavy, like all of Gordon's books. She'd read most of them, and the odd splash of pretension aside, had quite enjoyed his work. His stories tended to be about people who could do astonishing and wonderful things, and the strange and terrible events that invariably led up to their bizarre and horrible deaths. She noticed the way he would set up a strong and noble hero, and over the course of the book systematically subject this hero to brutal punishment in a bid to strip away all his arrogance and certainty so that by the end he was humbled and had learned a great lesson. And then Gordon killed him off, usually in the most undignified way possible. Stephanie could almost hear Gordon laughing with mischievous glee as she'd read.

She lifted the title page and carefully laid it face down on the desk beside the manuscript. She started reading. She didn't mean to spend long at it, but soon she was devouring every word, oblivious to the creaking old house and the rain outside.

Her mobile phone rang, making her jump. She had been reading for two hours. She pressed the answer button and held it to her ear.

"Hi, sweetie," came her mother's voice, "everything OK?"

"Yes," Stephanie answered. "Just reading."

"You're not reading one of Gordon's books, are you? Steph, he writes about horrible monsters and scary stuff and bad people doing worse things. It'll give you nightmares."

"No, Mum, I'm... I'm reading the dictionary."

Even the brief silence from the other end of the phone was sceptical. "The dictionary?" her mother said. "Really?"

"Yeah," Stephanie said. "Did you know that *popple* is a word?"

"You are stranger than your father, you know that?"

"I suspected as much... So is the car fixed yet?"

"No, and that's why I'm calling. They can't get it going and the road up to you is flooded. I'm going to get a taxi up as far as it'll go and then I'll see if I can find some way around on foot. It's going to be another two hours at least."

Stephanie sensed an opportunity. Ever since she was a child she had much preferred her own company to the company of others, and it occurred to her that she had never spent a whole night without her parents nearby. A small

taste of freedom and it almost tingled on her tongue.

"Mum, it's fine, you don't have to. I'm OK here."

"There's no way I'm leaving you in a strange house by yourself."

"It's not a strange house; it's Gordon's and it's fine. There's no point in you trying to get here tonight – it's lashing rain."

"Sweetie, it won't take me long."

"It'll take you ages. Where's it flooded?"

Her mother paused. "At the bridge."

"The bridge? And you want to walk from the bridge to here?"

"If I speed-walk—"

"Mum, don't be silly. Get Dad to pick you up."

"Sweetheart, are you sure?"

"I like it here, really. OK?"

"Well, OK," her mother said reluctantly. "I'll be over first thing in the morning to pick you up, all right? And I saw some food in the cupboards, so if you're hungry you can make yourself something."

"OK. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Call us if you need anything or if you just want some company."

"I will. Night Mum."

"I love you."

"I know."

Stephanie hung up and grinned. She slipped the phone back into her jacket and put her feet up on the desk, relaxing back into the chair, and went back to reading.

When she looked up again she was surprised to find that it was almost midnight and the rain had stopped. If she were home right now, she'd be in bed. She blinked, her eyes sore, stood up from the desk and went downstairs to the kitchen. For all his wealth and success and extravagant tastes, she was thankful that when it came to food, Gordon was a pretty standard guy. The bread was stale and the fruit was a bit too ripe, but there were biscuits and there was cereal, and the milk in the fridge was still good for one more day. Stephanie made herself a snack and wandered to the living room, where she flicked on the TV. She sat on the couch and was just getting comfy when the house phone rang.

She looked at it, resting there on the table at her elbow. Who would be calling? Anyone who knew Gordon had died wouldn't be calling because they'd know he had died, and she didn't really want to be the one to tell anyone who didn't know. It could be her parents, but then why didn't they just call her mobile?

Figuring that as the new owner of the house, it was her

responsibility to answer her own phone, Stephanie picked it up and held it to her ear. "Hello?"

Silence.

"Hello?" Stephanie repeated.

"Who is this?" came a man's voice.

"I'm sorry," Stephanie said, "who do you want to speak to?"

"Who is this?" responded the voice, more irritably this time.

"If you're looking for Gordon Edgley," Stephanie said, "I'm afraid that he's—"

"I know Edgley's dead," snapped the man. "Who are you? Your name?"

Stephanie hesitated. "Why do you want to know?" she asked.

"What are you doing in that house? Why are you in his house?"

"If you want to call back tomorrow—"

"I *don't* want to, all right? Listen to me, girlie, if you mess up my master's plans, he will be *very* displeased and he is *not* a man you want to displease, you got that? Now tell me who you are!"

Stephanie realised her hands were shaking. She forced herself to calm down and quickly found anger replacing her nervousness. "My name is none of your business," she said. "If

you want to talk to someone, call back tomorrow at a reasonable hour."

"You don't talk to me like that," the man hissed.

"Goodnight," Stephanie said firmly.

"You do *not* talk to me like—"

But Stephanie was already putting the phone down. Suddenly the idea of spending the whole night here wasn't as appealing as it had first sounded. She considered calling her parents, then scolded herself for being so childish. *No need to worry them*, she thought to herself. *No need to worry them about something so—*

Someone pounded on the front door.

"Open up!" came the man's voice between the pounding. Stephanie got to her feet, staring through to the hall beyond the living room. She could see a dark shape behind the frosted glass around the front door. "Open the damn door!"

Stephanie backed up to the fireplace, her heart pounding in her chest. He knew she was in here, there was no use pretending that she wasn't, but maybe if she stayed really quiet he'd give up and go away. She heard him cursing, and the pounding grew so heavy that the front door rattled under the blows.

"Leave me alone!" Stephanie shouted.

"Open the door!"

"No!" she shouted back. She liked shouting – it disguised her fear. "I'm calling the police! I'm calling the police right now!"

The pounding stopped immediately and Stephanie saw the shape move away from the door. Was that it? Had she scared him away? She thought of the back door – was it locked? Of course it was locked… It had to be locked. But she wasn't sure, she wasn't certain. She grabbed a poker from the fireplace and was reaching for the phone when she heard a knock on the window beside her.

She cried out and jumped back. The curtains were open, and outside the window was pitch-black. She couldn't see a thing.

"Are you alone in there?" came the voice. It was teasing now, playing with her.

"Go away," she said loudly, holding up the poker so he could see it. She heard the man laugh.

"What are you going to do with that?" he asked.

"I'll break your head open with it!" Stephanie screamed at him, fear and fury bubbling inside her. She heard him laugh again.

"I just want to come in," he said. "Open the door for me, girlie. Let me come in."

"The police are on their way," she said.

"You're a liar."

Still she could see nothing beyond the glass and he could see everything. She moved to the phone, snatching it from its cradle.

"Don't do that," came the voice.

"I'm calling the police."

"The road's closed, girlie. You call them, I'll break down that door and kill you hours before they get here."

Fear became terror and Stephanie froze. She was going to cry. She could feel it, the tears welling up inside her. She hadn't cried in years. "What do you want?" she said to the darkness. "Why do you want to come in?"

"It's got nothing to do with *me*, girlie. I've just been sent to pick something up. Let me in. I'll look around, get what I came here for and leave. I won't harm a pretty little hair on your pretty little head, I *promise*. Now you just open that door right this second."

Stephanie gripped the poker in both hands and shook her head. She was crying now, tears rolling down her cheeks. "No," she said.

She screamed as a fist smashed through the window, showering the carpet with glass. She stumbled back as the man started climbing in, glaring at her with blazing eyes, unmindful of the glass that cut into him. The moment one foot touched the

floor inside the house Stephanie was bolting out of the room, over to the front door, fumbling at the lock.

Strong hands grabbed her from behind. She screamed again as she was lifted off her feet and carried back. She kicked out, slamming a heel into his shin. The man grunted and let go and Stephanie twisted, trying to swing the poker into his face but he caught it and pulled it from her grasp. One hand went to her throat and Stephanie gagged, unable to breathe as the man forced her back into the living room.

He pushed her into an armchair and leaned over her and no matter how hard she tried she could not break his grip.

"Now then," the man said, his mouth contorting into a sneer, "why don't you just give me the key, little girlie?"

And that's when the front door was flung off its hinges and Skulduggery Pleasant burst into the house.

The man cursed and released Stephanie and swung the poker, but Skulduggery moved straight to him and hit him so hard Stephanie thought the man's head might come off. He hit the ground and tumbled backwards, but rolled to his feet as Skulduggery moved in again.

The man launched himself forward. They both collided and went backwards over the couch and Skulduggery lost his hat. Stephanie saw a flash of white above the scarf.

They got to their feet, grappling, and the man swung a punch that knocked Skulduggery's sunglasses to the other side of the room. Skulduggery responded by moving in low, grabbing the man around the waist and twisting his hip into him. The man was flipped to the floor, hard.

He cursed a little more, then remembered Stephanie and made for her. Stephanie leaped out of the chair, but before he could reach her, Skulduggery was there, kicking the man's legs out from under him. The man hit a small coffee table with his chin and howled in pain.

"*You think you can stop me*?" he screamed as he tried to stand. His knees seemed shaky. "*Do you know who I am*?"

"Haven't the foggiest," Skulduggery said.

The man spat blood and grinned defiantly. "Well, I know about *you*," he said. "My master told me all about *you*, detective, and you're going to have to do a lot more than that to stop me."

Skulduggery shrugged and Stephanie watched in amazement as a ball of fire flared up in his hand and he hurled it and the man was suddenly covered in flame. But instead of screaming, the man tilted his head back and roared with laughter. The fire may have engulfed him, but it wasn't burning him.

"More!" he laughed. "Give me more!"

"If you insist."

And then Skulduggery took an old-fashioned revolver from his jacket and fired, the gun bucking slightly with the recoil. The bullet hit the man in the shoulder and he screamed, then tried to run and tripped. He scrambled for the doorway, ducking and dodging lest he get shot again, the flames obstructing his vision so much that he hit a wall on his way out.

And then he was gone.

Stephanie stared at the door, trying to make sense of the impossible.

"Well," Skulduggery said, "that's something you don't see every day."

She turned. When his hat came off, his hair had come off too. In the confusion all she had seen was a chalk-white scalp, so she turned expecting to see a bald albino maybe. But no. With his sunglasses gone and his scarf hanging down, there was no denying the fact that he had no flesh, he had no skin, he had no eyes and he had no face.

All he had was a skull for a head.