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Skulduggery Pleasant

Playing with Fire

by

Derek Landy

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This book is dedicated to my family – because otherwise I'd never hear the end of it...

Nadine: warm, kind and considerate. I am all of these things.

Audrey: the greatest thrill of your life is probably the fact that I'm your brother.

Ivan: meaningless words such as "brilliant", "amazing" and "inspirational" have been used to describe me, but not nearly enough.

If any of you thought that there'd be anything sincere or heartfelt in your dedications, allow me a moment to quietly laugh at you...

Because the heartfelt sincerity is reserved for my nana.

Chic, this book is also dedicated to you, for all the love and support you've shown me over the years. I love you much more than any of your other grandchildren do, I swear.

1

HANGING AROUND



Valkyrie Cain hit the parapet and tumbled, unable to stop herself, and with a panicked gasp she disappeared off the edge.

The church tower stood high and proud, looking out over Dublin City. The night breeze was brisk and carried snatches of laughter from the street below. It was a long way down.

A man in a tattered coat walked up to the edge and peered over. He smirked.

"This is insulting," he said. "Don't they know how dangerous I am? I am very, very dangerous. I'm a killer. I'm

a trained killing *machine*. And still, they send *you*. A *child*."

Valkyrie felt her grip on the ledge loosen. She ignored the goading of the man standing above her, and looked around for something else to grab on to. She looked everywhere but down. Down was where the street was, where the long drop and the sudden stop was. She didn't want to look down. She didn't want anything to do with *down* right now.

"What age are you?" the man continued. "Thirteen? What kind of responsible adult sends a thirteen-year-old child to stop me? What kind of thinking is that?"

Valkyrie swung herself gently towards the tower, planting her feet against a small buttress. The fear started to work through her and she felt herself freeze up. She closed her eyes against the oncoming wave of paralysis.

The man was Vaurien Scapegrace, currently wanted in five countries for various counts of attempted murder. He hunkered down at the edge and smiled happily.

"I am turning murder into an art form. When I – when I *kill*, I'm actually painting a big, big picture, using blood and, and... messiness. You know?"

Below Valkyrie, the city twinkled.

"I'm an artist," Scapegrace continued. "Some people don't appreciate that. Some people don't recognise true talent

when they see it. And that's fine. I'm not bitter. My time will come."

"Serpine tried to bring the Faceless Ones back," Valkyrie managed to say. Her fingers were burning and the muscles in her legs were screaming at her. "We stopped him. We'll stop you, too."

He laughed. "What, you think I want the old gods to walk the earth once again? Is that it? You think Nefarian Serpine was my leader? I'm not one of those nutbag disciples, all right? I'm my own man."

Valkyrie had one chance, but she needed to be calm to take advantage of it. Her powers, limited though they were, were Elemental – the manipulation of earth, air, fire and water. But at this stage of her training they didn't work when she was panicking.

"So if you don't want the Faceless Ones to return," she said, "what *do* you want? Why are you doing this?"

He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand. It's grown-up stuff. I just want a little appreciation for who I am, that's all. That's not much to ask, is it? But of course, you wouldn't know. You're just a kid." He shrugged. "Oh, well. Time to die." He reached down to shove her.

"Have you killed anyone?" she asked quickly.

"What? Did you miss what I said, about turning murder into an art form?"

"But you haven't actually *killed* anyone yet, have you? I read your file."

He glowered. "Technically, yeah, all right, maybe I haven't, but tonight's the night. You're going to be my first."

She readied herself, controlled her breathing. "Find the space where everything connects," she murmured.

Scapegrace frowned. "What?"

Valkyrie kicked upwards, taking her right hand from the outcrop and feeling the air against her palm. She pushed at it like she'd been taught, and it shimmered and hit Scapegrace, throwing him off his feet. Valkyrie clutched at the edge of the parapet, her legs swinging in open air. She grunted and pulled herself up, then flung her left arm across the edge and hauled herself the rest of the way. She got to her feet, her arms and legs trembling with the strain, and moved away from the edge. The wind whipped her dark hair across her face.

Scapegrace was already getting up and Valkyrie saw anger mottle his face. She clicked her fingers, generating a spark that she caught in her hand. She tried to focus, tried to build it into a flame, but Scapegrace was coming at her like a freight train.

Valkyrie jumped and thrust out both feet. Her boots

slammed into his chest and he hit the ground again and went sprawling. He turned to her just as she lashed a kick into his jaw. His body twisted and he tumbled back, came up to his feet then lost his balance, fell again. He spat blood and glared.

"You little brat," he snarled. "You uppity, sneaky little *brat*. You don't know who you're messing with, do you? I am going to be the greatest killer the world has ever known." He stood up slowly, wiping his sleeve across his burst lip. "When I'm finished with you I'm going to deliver your mutilated, bloody corpse to your masters, as a warning. They sent you up against me, alone. Next time they're going to have to send a battalion."

Valkyrie smiled, and Scapegrace's anger flared. "*What the hell is so funny*?"

"First of all," she said, her confidence growing, "they're not my *masters*. I don't have a *master*. Second, they don't need a battalion to take you down. And third – and this really is the most important point – whoever said I came alone?"

Scapegrace frowned, turned, saw someone walking up behind him, a skeleton in a black suit, and he tried to attack, but a gloved fist hit his face, a foot hit his shin and an elbow slammed into his chest. He fell in an awkward heap.

Skulduggery Pleasant turned to Valkyrie. "You all right?"

"I'll kill you both!" Scapegrace howled.

"Hush," Skulduggery said.

Scapegrace launched himself forward and Skulduggery moved into him, grabbed his outstretched arm and spun him around, then abruptly cut him off by slamming a forearm into his throat. Scapegrace flipped in midair, landed painfully. Skulduggery turned to Valkyrie again.

"I'm OK," she said. "Really."

Scapegrace had his hands to his face. "I think you broke my nose!" They ignored him.

"He talks a lot," Valkyrie said, "but I don't think he knows what all the words mean."

Scapegrace leaped up. "I am the Killer Supreme! I make murder into an art form!"

Skulduggery hit him again and Scapegrace did a little twirl before falling.

"Vaurien Scapegrace," he said, "by the power endowed unto me under the Sanctuary Rule of Justice, I am placing you under arrest for the attempted murder of Alexander Remit and Sofia Toil in Oregon, Cothurnus Ode and Armiger Fop in Sydney, Gregory Castallan and Bartholomew—"

Scapegrace tried one last desperate attack that Skulduggery cut short by punching him very hard on the nose. The Killer Supreme wobbled, collapsed and started crying.

2

KILLER ON THE LOOSE



he car was a 1954 Bentley R-Type Continental. It sliced through the quiet Dublin night like a black shark, gleaming and powerful. It was a beautiful car. Valkyrie had grown to love it almost as much as Skulduggery did.

They turned on to O'Connell Street, passed the Spire and the Pearse Monument. Scapegrace sat in the back and complained that the shackles were too tight. It was four in the morning. Valkyrie fought a yawn.

This time last year she would have been in bed, snuggled up

and dreaming about... well, whatever it was she dreamed about back then. Things were a lot different now, and she was lucky if she could get a few hours sleep a night. If she wasn't going up against crazies like Scapegrace, she was practising magic, and if she wasn't practising magic, she was training to fight with either Skulduggery or Tanith Low. These days, her life was a lot more exciting, a lot more fun, and a lot more dangerous. In fact, one of the major downsides to her new life was that she rarely had sweet dreams any more. When she slept, it was the nightmares that came to her. They waited patiently, and they were always eager to play.

But that was the cost, she reasoned. The cost of living a life of adventure and excitement.

The owners of the Waxworks Museum had closed it down after the events of the previous year, and set up a new and improved version of the Sanctuary of the Elders in another part of the city. The new building stood quietly beside its neighbours, humble and drab, its front doors closed and locked and sealed. But Valkyrie and Skulduggery had never used the front doors anyway.

They parked in the loading area at the back and took Scapegrace in through the rear door. The corridors were dimly lit, and they walked past the lonely historical figures and

cinematic icons that had been left to collect dust. Valkyrie traced her hand along the wall to find the switch, and the door slid open beside her. She led the way through and down the steps, her mind flashing back to the summer of the previous year, when she had stepped into the Sanctuary's foyer to find it littered with dead bodies...

Today, however, there were no corpses in sight. Two Cleavers stood guard against the far wall, dressed all in grey, their scythes strapped to their backs, visored helmets pointing straight ahead. The Cleavers acted as the Sanctuary's law enforcers and its army. Silent and lethal, they still gave Valkyrie the creeps.

The double doors to their left opened and the new Grand Mage, Thurid Guild, came out to them. He looked to be in his sixties, with thinning grey hair, a lined face and cold eyes.

"You found him then," Guild said. "Before or after he managed to kill someone?"

"Before," Skulduggery said. Guild grunted and gestured to the Cleavers. They stepped forward and Scapegrace shrank away from them. They took him firmly by the arms and he didn't resist. He even stopped whining about his broken nose as they led him away.

Valkyrie looked back at Guild. He wasn't a friendly man by any means, but he seemed especially uncomfortable around her, like he wasn't yet sure if he should take her seriously. He tended to speak directly to Skulduggery, and only glanced at Valkyrie when she asked a question.

"A situation has arisen which requires your attention," said Guild. "This way."

Skulduggery fell into step beside the Grand Mage, but Valkyrie stayed two paces behind. Guild had taken over as head of the Council of Elders, but he still had to select the two sorcerers who would rule with him. It was a long and arduous process apparently, but Valkyrie suspected she knew who would be Guild's first choice. He was a man who respected power, after all, and there were few more powerful in this world than Mr Bliss.

They walked into a room with a long table, and Mr Bliss rose – bald, tall and broad shouldered, his eyes a piercing blue.

"I have received some disturbing news," Bliss said, getting straight to the point as usual. "It seems that Baron Vengeous has been freed from the confinement facility in Russia."

Skulduggery was silent for a moment. When he spoke, he spoke slowly. "How did he get out?"

"Violently, from the reports we've been getting," Guild said.

"Nine Cleavers were killed, along with approximately one third of the prisoners. His cell, like all the cells, was securely bound. Nobody should have been able to use magic in any of them."

Valkyrie raised an eyebrow and Skulduggery answered her unspoken question. "Baron Vengeous was one of Mevolent's infamous Three Generals. Dangerously fanatical, extremely intelligent, and very, very powerful. I saw him *look* at a colleague of mine and my colleague... ruptured."

"Ruptured?"

Skulduggery nodded. "All over the place." He turned to Guild. "Do we know who freed him?"

The Grand Mage shook his head. "According to the Russians, one wall of his cell was cracked. Still solid, but cracked, like something had hit it. That's the only clue we have at the moment."

"The prison's location is a closely guarded secret," Bliss said. "It is well hidden and well protected. Whoever is behind this had inside knowledge."

Guild made a face. "That's the Russians' problem, not ours. The only thing we have to concern ourselves with is stopping Vengeous."

"You think he'll come here then?" Valkyrie asked.

Guild looked at her and she saw his fist clench. He probably didn't even realise he was doing it, but it signalled to Valkyrie loud and clear that he still didn't like her.

"Vengeous will come home, yes. He has a history here." He looked at Skulduggery. "We have already sent our people to airports and docks around the country, in the hope of preventing him from entering. But you know better than anyone how difficult the Baron is to... contain."

"Indeed," Skulduggery murmured.

"I think we can assume," Guild continued, "that if Baron Vengeous is not already here, then he will be arriving shortly. You arrested him eighty years ago. I'm relying on you to do it again."

"I'll do my best."

"Do better, Detective."

Skulduggery observed Guild for a moment before answering. "Of course, Grand Mage."

Guild dismissed them with a curt nod, and as they were walking back through the corridors, Valkyrie spoke.

"Guild doesn't like me."

"That's true."

"He doesn't like you either."

"That *is* mystifying."

"So what about Vengeous? Is he bad news?"

"The worst. I don't think he's ever forgotten the time I threw a bundle of dynamite at him. It didn't kill him obviously, but it definitely ruined his day."

"Is he all scarred now?"

"Magic gets rid of most *physical* scars, but I like to think that I scarred him emotionally."

"How about on the Evil Villain Scale? Ten being Serpine, one being Scapegrace?"

"The Baron, unfortunately, turns it all the way up to eleven."

"Seriously? Because, you know, that's one more evil."

"It is indeed."

"So we're in trouble then."

"Oh, yes," said Skulduggery darkly.