

Skulduggery
Pleasant
DEATHBRINGER

Also by Derek Landy:

**Skulduggery
Pleasant**

**Skulduggery
Pleasant**
PLAYING WITH FIRE

**Skulduggery
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THE FACELESS ONES

**Skulduggery
Pleasant**
DARK DAYS

**Skulduggery
Pleasant**
MORTAL COIL

Skulduggery
Pleasant
DEATH:BRINGER

DEREK LANDY



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This book is dedicated to my nieces.

Girls, none of you were born when Skulduggery Pleasant first appeared. But since you've arrived, no one in our family wants to talk about the *writer* any more. Now all they want to talk about are the damn *babies*. All of a sudden, no one wants to cuddle *me*, and for that I blame *you*.

But, I suppose you have your good points. It's because of you that Valkyrie has a little sister, after all. You're all mildly cute, reasonably adorable, and you make me laugh when you fall over.


So this book is dedicated to you, Rebecca and Emily, Sophie and Clara and

(insert names of any more nieces *or* nephews that might sprout up between now and when they're old enough to read this).

I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I am your favourite uncle.
And you probably prefer me to your parents, too.

(I've met your parents. I don't blame you. They're rubbish.)

PROLOGUE



The closing door made the candlelight dance, waltzing and flickering over the girl strapped to the table. She turned her head to him. Her face, like every other part of her, was decorated with small, pale scars, symbols painstakingly carved into her flesh over the course of the last few months. Her name was Melancholia St Clair. She was his secret. His experiment. His last, desperate grasp for power.

“It hurts,” she said.

Vandameer Craven, Cleric First Class of the Necromancer Order, esteemed Scholar of Arcane Languages and feared opponent on the debating battlefield, nodded and patted her hand.

She had entered into this arrangement with the kind of zeal that only the truly greedy can muster, but recently her bouts of annoying self-pity were becoming more and more frequent. “I know, my dear, I know it does. But pain is nothing. Once our work is done, there will *be* no pain. You have suffered for all of us. You have suffered for all life in this world, in this *universe*.”

“Please,” she whimpered, “make it stop. I’ve changed my mind about this. Please. I don’t want it any more.”

“I understand,” he said sadly. “I do. You’re scared because you don’t think you’re strong enough. But I *know* you’re strong enough. That’s why I picked you, out of everyone. I believe in you, Melancholia. I have faith in your strength.”

“I want to go home.”

“You *are* home.”

“Please...”

“Now now, my dear girl, there’s no need for begging. The Surge is a beautiful, wondrous thing, and it should be cherished. You’ve taken your next step. You’ve become who you were always meant to be. We all go through it. Every sorcerer goes through it.”

She gritted her teeth as a spasm of pain arched her spine, and then she gasped, “But it’s not supposed to last so long. You said I’d be the most powerful sorcerer in the world. You didn’t say anything about *this*.”

Craven made the effort to look her in the eyes. He despised people who sweated, and the perspiration was rolling off her in heavy rivulets. It turned his stomach to look at her wet, dripping, scarred face. “With the power I promised you, you’ve just had to suffer a little more than the rest of us,” he explained. “But all the work we’ve been doing, preparing you, it’s going to be worth it. Trust me. The symbols I’ve etched into you are seizing the power of the Surge and they’re keeping it, they’re looping it around, letting it build, letting it grow stronger.”

“Let me out.”

“Just another day or so.”

“Let me out!” she screeched, and shadows curled round her, rising and thrashing like tentacles.

He stepped forward quickly, gave her a smile. “But of course, my dear. You’re absolutely right – the time has come.”

Her eyes widened, and the shadows retreated. He doubted she was even aware of them. Strapped and bound as she was, she shouldn’t have been able to wield any kind of power. For once, Craven’s smile was genuine. This was a good sign.

“It’s done?” she asked, her voice meek. “You’re going to let me go?”

“Let you go?” he echoed, and gave a little laugh as he undid her straps. “You make it sound like I’ve been keeping you *prisoner!* Melancholia, I am your friend. I am your guide. I am the one

person in the whole of the world that you can trust to always be honest with you.”

“I... I know that, Cleric Craven,” she said.

He took a handkerchief from his robes and used it to take hold of her wet, slippery arm in order to help her sit up. “We have to choose the right moment to tell the High Priest about you, but once we tell him what we’ve been doing down here for all this time, it’s all going to change. Word will get out that you are the Death Bringer, and there will be many people vying for your favour. Trust none of them.”

She nodded obediently.

“There will be some who won’t understand,” he continued, “even within the Necromancer Order itself. Whenever you feel unsure, or scared, or whenever you just want to talk – I’m here for you.”

“I’m scared now,” Melancholia said, her fingers closing around the skin of his wrist. It took all his self-control not to shiver with revulsion at her clammy touch.


He smiled reassuringly. “There’s nothing to fear, not while you’re with me. Rejoice, my dear. Very soon, you’re going to save the world.”

“Good and evil are so close as to be chained together in the soul.”

Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1941)

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KENNY

 **K**enny Dunne wasn't an expert on cars. He knew enough, to be fair to him. He knew what wheels were. He knew how to open and close the doors. He even knew where to put the nozzle thing when the car needed petrol. He knew the basics, enough to get by, and nothing more. But even to a man like Kenny, smoke billowing from beneath the bonnet while you're driving is generally seen as a Bad Thing.

The car spluttered and coughed and retched, and Kenny's grip tightened on the steering wheel. "No," he said. "Please." The car belched and juddered in response, smoke filling his windscreen. Images flashed into his mind of the car suddenly exploding into

a giant fireball, and he tore off his seatbelt and lunged out on to the sun-drenched street. Horns honked. Kenny jumped sideways to avoid a cursing cyclist who shot past him like a foul-tempered bullet. Dublin traffic on a Sunday morning wasn't that bad at all. Dublin traffic on a Sunday morning with a big game on was *terrible*.irate drivers with county flags stuck to their cars glared at him as they were forced to change lanes.

Kenny smiled apologetically, then looked back at his car. It was not exploding. He reached in, grabbed his bag and turned off the ignition. The car wheezed and slipped gratefully into an early death. Kenny left it there in the street and hailed a taxi.

He was late. He couldn't believe he was late. He couldn't believe that he hadn't learned his lesson, even after all these years of being late to things. How many interviews had he messed up because of his inability to arrive on time? Actors, rock stars, politicians, business people, citizens both rich and famous and poor and unknown – he had been late to meet all of them. It was not a good quality in a journalist, he had to admit, especially when every newspaper was cutting back on staff. Print was dead, they were saying. Not as dead as Kenny was going to be if he didn't get the piece finished by the end of the month.

This story was juicy. It was glorious and bizarre and unique – the kind of thing that stood a chance of being picked up by other papers around the world, maybe even a few magazines. Whenever

Kenny entertained that possibility, his mouth watered. A solid pay day. Food in the fridge, no worrying about rent for a while. Maybe even a half-decent car, if he got really lucky.

He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes late. He bit his lip and tapped his fingers on his bag, willing the road ahead to miraculously clear. He didn't know how long his source would stick around, and if Kenny missed this chance, he doubted he'd get another. Tracking down Paul Lynch in the first place had not been easy, but then finding one homeless person in a city like Dublin was never going to be straightforward. And it wasn't like Lynch had a *phone* or anything.

The taxi crawled along to another set of traffic lights and Kenny almost whimpered.

It was probably unhealthy to pin so much hope on one article that hadn't even been commissioned, but there was really very little choice. Kenny needed a lucky break. He'd started off well, worked up to some high-profile interviews and articles, but then it all started to slide away from him. He could see it happening, but couldn't do anything to stop it. Now he was freelance, thrown the occasional job, but his editors left it up to him to go out and find the stories himself. And that's what he'd done.

When he'd first heard the rumours, years ago, he'd dismissed them. Of course he had. They were crazy. He wrote a few articles, noting the trend in the modern urban legend, but he'd never read

more into it than that. But they persisted, these stories of strange people with strange powers doing strange things. Wonderful stuff, and not just the ravings of lunatics and paranoids and the disturbed. These stories were everywhere. They popped up occasionally on the Internet, then vanished just as fast. A few of the reports he'd followed up on had turned out to be hoaxes, with the person who reported the sighting now claiming to have no idea what he was talking about. He'd been close to forgetting the whole thing when he met Lynch. Lynch was Kenny's link. In all his years of casual investigation, Lynch was his one solid lead – as solid a lead as a muttering homeless man could be, anyway – and Kenny had a feeling he was ready to reveal everything he knew. Kenny had spoken to him three times already, and felt he was beginning to earn his trust.

Today was the day, he knew. If only he could get there in time.

The taxi stopped again and Kenny lost patience. He paid the driver, lurched out of the car, swung his bag over his shoulder and ran.

Twenty seconds of running and he was seriously regretting this move. He hadn't run in years. Good God, running was *hard*. And hot. Sweat formed on his brow. His lungs ached. He had shin splints.

He staggered to the next corner and hailed a taxi. It was the same taxi he'd just got out of.

“Didn’t go too well for you, did it?” asked the driver smugly.

Kenny just gasped and panted in the back seat.

They finally reached the park and Kenny paid the driver, again, and hurried across the grass. There were people everywhere, stretched out in the May sunshine, laughing and chatting, walking and eating ice cream. Small dogs scampered after their owners. Music played. The pond glinted.

Kenny saw Paul Lynch, sitting in the shade away from everyone, and a smile broke across his face like a wave of cool water. He wiped the sweat from his brow and walked over, taking it slower, holding up a hand in greeting. Lynch didn’t return the gesture. He just sat there, his back against the railing, shoulders slumped. He was probably in a bad mood.

If only he’d really *been* a psychic, then he’d have foreseen Kenny’s late arrival and there wouldn’t be a problem. Kenny’s smile turned to a grin.

“Sorry,” he said once he stepped into the shade. “The traffic, you know, and the car broke down, and I had to get a taxi.”

Lynch didn’t answer. He didn’t even raise his head.


Kenny stood there awkwardly, then shrugged and sat down. “Glorious morning, isn’t it? I swear, you can never tell how an Irish summer is going to turn out. Do you want an ice cream or something? I’d love an ice cream.”

Again, no response. Lynch’s eyes were closed.

“Paul?”

Kenny reached out and nudged his one solid lead. Nudged him again. Then he saw the blood that drenched Lynch’s shirt, and he grabbed him and shook him. Lynch’s head rolled back, revealing a throat with a long, smooth slit, like a red eye opening.

ME AND THE GIRL

enny sat in the interview room and tried not to fidget. He was mildly disappointed that there was no two-way mirror built into the wall, like he'd seen on cop shows. Maybe they only had two-way mirrors in America. In Ireland, the Guards probably didn't even have *one*-way mirrors.

The door to his right opened, and two people entered. The man was tall and thin, dressed in a dark blue suit of impeccable tailoring. He wore a hat like a 1940s private eye. He sat on the other side of the table and took the hat off. He had dark hair and high cheekbones. His eyes seemed to have trouble focusing. His skin looked waxy. He wore gloves.

His companion stood against the wall behind him. She was tall and pretty and dark-haired, but she couldn't have been more than sixteen years old. She was dressed in black trousers and a tight black jacket, zipped halfway up, made of some material Kenny didn't recognise. She didn't look at him.

"Hi." The man's smile was bright. He had good teeth.

"Hi," Kenny said.

The girl said nothing.

The man had a smooth voice, like velvet. "I'm Detective Inspector Me. Unusual name, I know. My family were incredibly narcissistic. I'm lucky I escaped with any degree of humility at all, to be honest, but then I've always managed to exceed expectations. You are Kenny Dunne, are you not?"

"I am."

"Just a few questions for you, Mr Dunne. Or Kenny. Can I call you Kenny? I feel we've become friends these past few seconds. Can I call you Kenny?"

"Sure," Kenny said, slightly baffled.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. It's important you feel comfortable around me, Kenny. It's important we build up a level of trust. That way I'll catch you completely unprepared when I suddenly accuse you of murder."

Kenny's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

“Oh dear,” said Inspector Me. “That wasn’t supposed to happen for another few minutes.”

“I didn’t kill Paul Lynch!”

“Could we go back to the nice feeling of trust we were building up?”

“Listen, I had arranged to meet him, I was going to interview him, but when I got there he was already dead.”

“You’d be surprised how often we hear the ‘he was already dead’ defence in our line of work. Or maybe you wouldn’t, I don’t know. The point is, Kenny, it’s not looking good for you. Maybe if you tell us everything you know, we can persuade our colleagues to go easy on you.”

Kenny stared at the man, then looked over at the girl. “Who are you?”

She returned his look, raised an eyebrow, but didn’t answer.

“She’s here on work experience,” said Inspector Me. “Don’t you worry about her, Kenny. You just worry about yourself. What was your relationship with the corpse?”

“Uh,” Kenny said, “I’m a journalist. He’s someone I’d interviewed a few times.”

“About what?”

“It’s... nothing. He is, or he *was*, a conspiracy nut, kind of.”

“Conspiracies? You mean like government cover-ups, that sort of thing?”

“No, not really. He was more...” Kenny sighed. “Listen, it’s a long story.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to be,” said Inspector Me, and glanced back at the girl. “Do you?”

“Yes, actually,” she said. “I have a christening to get to.”

“Oh,” said Me. “Of course.” He turned back to Kenny. “So maybe if you talk really fast, you can explain it to us.”

Kenny took a moment, deciding on the best way to avoid sounding like a lunatic. “Right,” he said. “For the past few years, I’ve been investigating some oddball stories. Nothing big, nothing major, but stories that get ignored because when you hear them, they sound insane. No newspaper is going to take this stuff seriously, so I can really only devote a small amount of time to them.

“It started when I did a piece on urban legends. You have all your usual stuff, modern myths and burgeoning folklore, some funny, some horrible, some creepy, everything you’d expect to hear. But I started hearing new ones.”

“Like what?”

“Just rumours, snippets of stories. Someone saw a gunfight where people threw fire. Someone saw a man leap over a building, or a woman just disappear.”

Inspector Me tilted his head. “So the modern urban legend is about superheroes?”

“That’s what I was thinking, but now I’m not so sure. I’ve been

hearing whispers about an entire subculture where this stuff goes on. Lynch said it's everywhere, if you know what to look for."

"I see. And did Lynch claim to be such a superhero?"

"Lynch? No. God, no. I mean, he wasn't well, obviously. He had visions, he said. That's what he called them, *visions*. He'd had them since he was a teenager. They scared the hell out of him. He was sent to psychiatrist after psychiatrist, given pill after pill, but nothing worked. He'd describe these visions to me and they seemed so vivid, so real. He couldn't hold down a job, couldn't maintain a relationship... He ended up homeless, drinking too much, muttering away to himself in doorways."

"And this," Inspector Me said, "was your source?"

"I know he sounds unreliable."

"Just a touch."

"But I stuck at it, listened to what he was saying. Eventually, I learned how to separate the ramblings from the... well, the facts, I suppose."

"What kinds of things did he see?" asked the girl.

Kenny frowned. He didn't really understand what gave a student on work experience the right to question him, but Inspector Me didn't object, so Kenny reluctantly answered. "He saw the apocalypse," he said. "He saw a few of them, to be honest. The first one concerned these Dark Gods, the Faceless Ones, whatever he called them. Someone banished them eons ago, nobody knows

who, and they've been trying to get back ever since. When he was seventeen, Lynch had a vision in which they returned. He saw millions dead. Cities levelled. He saw the world break apart. He kept having these visions, and every time it would be some new aspect, some new viewpoint from which to watch the world end. He was convinced we were all going to die one night, a little under three years ago. He said these things, these god-creatures, would emerge through a glowing yellow door between realities. Of course no one would listen to him. And then the night came when the world was going to end... and it didn't. And the visions stopped."

"I love stories with a happy ending," Inspector Me said.

"It wasn't over, not for Lynch. More visions came to him. He predicted the Insanity Virus, you know."

"The last I heard it wasn't a virus," said the girl. "It was a hallucinogen. They got the guys who did it."

Kenny laughed. "You actually believe that?"

Inspector Me looked at him weirdly. "You don't?"

"It's all a little convenient, isn't it? As a Christmas prank, a radical group of anarchists drop a drug into the water supplies around the country – and then months later they come forward and admit to it? Anarchists, taking responsibility for their actions? That defeats the whole point of being an anarchist, doesn't it? Do you know when the trial is? Do you know which prison they're locked up in until it happens? Because I don't."

Inspector Me sat back. “This sounds awfully like a conspiracy theory, Kenny. What do *you* think happened?”

“I don’t know, but Lynch said it wasn’t anarchists that did this. He said it was little slices of darkness, flying around and infecting people.”

To Kenny’s surprise, neither the Inspector nor the girl smirked.

“Do you know how many people reported seeing strange things over those few days?” Kenny continued. “I’ve read dozens of reports. There was a nightclub in North County Dublin that was apparently swarmed by the things, but it wasn’t even reported in the local paper.”

“Sounds like a bunch of people hallucinating to me,” said the girl.

“Lynch didn’t think so. He had a vision of those things spreading out, infecting the world, making everyone do crazy things, kill each other, drop bombs...”

“All right then,” said Me. “We have established that Lynch was psychologically disturbed, that he believed in a subculture of superheroes and evil gods. So why was he killed?”

Kenny blinked. “Uh, he was robbed, wasn’t he?”

“Was he?”

“Wasn’t he? That’s what the... that’s what the guy said, the Guard, the one who spoke to me. He said it looked like a mugging.”

“I see.”

Kenny frowned. “You think it’s got something to do with his visions, don’t you?”

“It’s a possibility,” said Me.

“Why were you meeting him this morning?” the girl asked.

“I’m sorry,” said Kenny, “I don’t mean to be rude, but why is she asking me questions? Why is she even here?”

“Work experience,” said Me.

“You accused me of *murder*. Do you make a habit of bringing schoolgirls into interview rooms with murder suspects?”

Me waved a hand. “Oh, I was only joking about that. I don’t *really* think you murdered anyone. Unless you did, in which case I reserve the right to say that I knew it all along. But she asks a good question, Kenny. Why were you meeting him?”

“For the past few months, he’d been having new visions, of shadows coming alive, of people dropping dead. His latest apocalypse.”

“What did he say about it?”

“Why is this important?”

“Everything is important.”

“But it’s not like he identified anyone. It’s not like he heard any names in his visions. He saw someone in a black robe, that’s it.”

“Male or female?”

“He couldn’t say.”

“Did he happen to mention the Passage at all?”

Kenny looked at him. There was something about the Inspector’s

face that wasn't quite right. As soon as Kenny noticed it, he looked away. His mother had taught him it was not polite to stare.

"He didn't use that word," Kenny said. "But I've heard it from others. How did you hear about it?"

"Who did you hear it from?" asked the girl.

"Others," Kenny said irritably. "Three or four people, who had overheard it in pubs or alleyways or whatever. It sounds like the Rapture, to be honest."

The girl frowned. "What's that?"

"The Rapture," Inspector Me said, "is a Christian belief in which God will collect the faithful and deliver them into Heaven. *'And the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be raptured together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.'* Those found unworthy will be left here on earth with the rest of the sinners."

"The Passage sounds like that sort of deal," Kenny said. "Mass salvation before the end of the world. Whether or not there's any kind of a god at work behind it, I don't know, but there usually is."

"Did Lynch give any kind of a time frame?" Me asked.

"His visions were getting stronger and more frequent," Kenny answered. "The way it worked in the past is that he'd have another six or seven days at this level of intensity, then the apocalypse wouldn't happen and he'd be able to relax again."

"Seven days," said Me.

“Or thereabouts, yeah. How did you hear about the Passage?”

“We’re detectives,” said Me. “We detect things.”

“She’s a detective as well, is she?”

“She’s a detective-in-training.”

“Look, this is all very, very weird. Why are you focusing on rumours and urban legends? You haven’t even asked me any normal questions.”

“Normal questions? Like what?”

“Like, I don’t know, like if Lynch had any enemies.”

“*Did* Lynch have any enemies?”

“Well, not that I know of, no.”

“Then there really was no point in me asking that, was there? Unless you wanted to distract me. You didn’t want to distract me, did you, Kenny?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Are you playing a game with me, Kenny?”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

Inspector Me leaned forward. “Did you kill him?”

“No!”

“It’d be OK if you did.”

Kenny recoiled, horrified. “How would *that* be OK?”

“Well,” Me said, “maybe not *OK*, but understandable. Perhaps he said something that annoyed you. We’ve all been there, haven’t we?” He looked back at the girl. “Haven’t we?”

“I’ve been there,” said the girl.

“We’ve all been there,” said Me, looking at Kenny again. “We know how it goes. He says something that annoys you, you get angry, all of a sudden he’s lying dead and you’re wondering where *did* the time go.”

“I didn’t kill him! I didn’t kill anyone!”

“Anyone? You mean there’s more?”

“What?”

Me sat back, tapped his chin with a gloved hand. “You know what, Kenny? I believe you. You have an honest face. You have honest ears. So who do *you* think killed him?”

“I *had* thought it was just a mugging.”

“And now?”

“Now... I don’t know. Do you think someone killed him because of the Passage? Are there people out there who really believe in this stuff?”

“People are strange,” said the girl, then started humming a few bars from the song.

“Did Lynch talk to anyone else about this?” Me asked. “Did he have any friends? Any family he still spoke to?”

“No, no one.”

“So he only talked about his visions to you?”

Kenny hesitated.

“He’s hesitating,” said the girl.

“I see that,” said Me.

“There’s an old woman,” Kenny said, “Bernadette something Maguire, I think. She helps out at one of the shelters. She used to be a teacher, or something. She’s retired now, lives in the country somewhere. He talked to her. She hasn’t been around that much lately. I think she’s just too old. The first time I’d seen her in months was a few weeks ago. She was talking to Lynch.”

“You think he told her about his visions?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“You think Bernadette Maguire killed him?”

“Uh... no. She’s, like I said, she’s old.”

“Old people can kill people too.”

“I know, but...”

“She could be a ninja.”

“She’s not a ninja, for God’s sake. She’s somebody’s great-grandmother.”

“I want you to think carefully about this, Kenny. Have you ever seen her with a sword?”

“What?”

“How about throwing stars?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Have you ever seen her *dressed up* as a ninja? That would have been my first clue.”

The girl sucked in her cheeks so she wouldn’t laugh out loud.

“What kind of cop are you?” Kenny asked, resolutely unamused.

“I am the kind that is determined to get to the bottom of this mystery,” said Me.

The door opened, and a boy with blond hair poked his head in. Kenny was so startled by the way the boy’s hair stood on end that he completely missed Inspector Me getting to his feet.

“Thank you for your co-operation,” Me said, quickly following the girl out the door. “My colleague will be in to see you shortly.” Out in the corridor, the girl held the boy’s arm and reached for Inspector Me as he closed the door. It clicked shut, and all was suddenly quiet for a very brief moment.

The door opened again. A middle-aged man walked in, carrying a notebook. Inspector Me and his two teenage students were gone.

“Mr Dunne?” said the man. “My name is Detective Inspector Harris. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kenny said, a little doubtfully. “The other Inspector kept me busy.”

Detective Inspector Harris smiled good-naturedly as he sat down. “Other Inspector?”

“The one who just left.”

“Hmm? Who was that, then?”

“Detective Inspector Me.”

“Detective Inspector You?”

“No, Me. That’s his... He said that’s his name. You just passed

him. He was with a girl on work experience and a boy with spiky hair.”

Harris blinked at him. “I didn’t pass anyone, Mr Dunne, and I’m the only Detective Inspector on duty right now.”

Kenny stared at him. “Then... then who the hell was I just speaking to?”