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a
demon trappers
novel

soul
thief

JANA OLIVER

AUTHOR OF *THE DEMON TRAPPER'S DAUGHTER*

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Atlanta, Georgia

The Grounds Zero Coffee Shop made the most amazing hot chocolate in Atlanta, maybe even the whole world. It appeared Riley Blackthorne would have to wade through Armageddon to get it.

“The end is near!” a man called out to passersby. He stood at the shop’s entrance holding a homemade cardboard sign that proclaimed the same thing. Instead of having a scraggly beard and wearing a black robe like some biblical prophet, he was wearing chinos and a red shirt.

“You’ve got to prepare, missy,” he said and shoved a pamphlet toward Riley with considerable zeal. The tract looked remarkably like the one she had in her jacket pocket. Like the one the angel had given her right before she’d agreed to work for Heaven to save her boyfriend’s life.

“The end is near!” the man shouted again.

“Is there still time for hot chocolate?” Riley asked.

The End Times guy blinked. “Ah, maybe; I don’t know.”

“Oh, good,” she said. “I’d hate to take on Hell without fueling up.”

That earned her a confused frown. Rather than explain she jammed the tract in her pocket and pushed open the door to the coffee shop as the man went back to exhorting his audience to prepare for the worst.

The Grounds Zero didn't look any different from how it did the last time she'd been here. The smell of roasted beans hung in the air like a heady perfume, and the espresso machine growled low and deep. Customers tapped on laptops as they enjoyed expensive coffee and talked about whatever was important in their lives. Just like every day. Except . . .

Everything is weird now.

Even buying hot chocolate. That used to be easy: Place order, pay for order, receive hot beverage. No hassles. That didn't appear to be the case today.

The barista kept staring at her even as he made the drink, which wasn't a good thing, because he nearly scalded himself. Maybe it was the multiple burn holes in her denim jacket, or the ragged slice down one sleeve that revealed the T-shirt underneath. Or the fact that her long brown hair had a frizzled, been-too-close-to-a-flame look, despite two shampoo sessions and a lot of conditioner. At least she'd changed her jeans, or the guy would be staring at all the dried blood. Blood that wasn't hers.

"I saw you on TV. You're one of them, aren't you?" he asked in a shaky voice, brown eyes so wide they seemed to cover most of his face.

On TV? Riley had no choice but to own up. "Yeah, I'm a demon trapper." *One of the few lucky enough to survive last night's slaughter.*

The guy dropped the ceramic cup on the counter, sloshing some of the brown goodness over the side and onto the saucer. He backed away like Riley had horns coming out of her skull.

"Whipped cream?" she asked, frowning now. Even if the world was ending, hot chocolate had to have that glorious white stuff on top or what was the point? He reluctantly added the topping, keeping his eyes on her rather than the cup. Some of it actually went inside. "Chocolate shavings?" she nudged.

"Ah . . . we're out," he said.

It's just one creepo guy. No big.

But it wasn't just him. Other customers stared as she made her way to an empty booth. One by one they looked up at the television screen high on the wall, then back to her, comparing images.

Ab, crap.

There, courtesy of CNN, was last night's disaster in glorious color: flames pouring out of the roof of the Tabernacle as demons ran everywhere. And there she was, illuminated by the raging fire, kneeling on the pavement near her injured boyfriend. She was crying, holding Simon in her arms. It was the moment she knew he was dying.

Oh, God. I can't handle this.

The saucer in Riley's hand began to quake, dislodging more of the hot chocolate. It'd been bad enough to live through that horror, but now it was all over the television in full and unflinching detail.

She paused near a booth as a picture of Simon appeared on the screen. It must have been his high school graduation photo, since his white-blond hair was shorter and his expression stone serious. He was usually that way except when they were hanging together; then he'd let his guard down, especially when they were kissing.

Riley closed her eyes recalling the time they'd spent together before the meeting. They'd kissed, and he'd admitted how much he cared for her. Then a demon had tried to kill him.

Riley sank into the booth and inhaled the rich scent of the hot chocolate, using it to push the bad memories away. The effort failed, though it never had in the past. Instead, her mind dutifully conjured up the image of her boyfriend in his hospital bed, tubes everywhere, his face as white as the sheets.

Simon meant so much to her. He'd been a quiet, comforting presence after her father's death. Losing him so soon after her dad was unthinkable and Heaven had known that. What else could she do but agree to their terms: Simon's life in trade for Riley owing Heaven a favor. A Really Big Favor. Like stopping Armageddon in its tracks.

“Why me?” Riley muttered. “Why not someone else? Why not Simon?”

He was religious, followed all the rules. He’d be the perfect guy to keep the world from ending. They could have made the deal with him when he was injured.

Instead they chose me.

To Riley’s annoyance, the hot chocolate had cooled beyond what was acceptable drinking temperature, but she sipped it anyway. She kept her eyes riveted on the cup’s contents, away from the television screen. Someone scraped a chair across the floor to sit at a table, and Riley jumped at the sound, half expecting a horde of demons to pour through the front door at any moment.

The cup trembled in her hands, reminding her how close she skated near the edge. Too much had hit her in a short period of time. Too much more and she wouldn’t cope.

I have to find my dad. That she could do. Maybe. Still, it was something she could focus on. It was unlikely his body was buried under the rubble at the Tabernacle, not when a necromancer went to all the effort to summon him from his grave. That’s what necros did: they reanimated corpses and sold them to rich people as unpaid servants. By now someone would be lining up to buy Master Trapper Paul Blackthorne, if he hadn’t been sold already.

What is it like to be dead and walking around like you’re still alive? Besides the creep factor, it had to be truly weird. Did her dad remember dying? Did he remember the funeral and being buried? Spiky cold zipped down Riley’s spine. She had to get her head in the game.

I’ll find him. I’ll get him back in the ground, and that’ll be the end of it.

Her eyes wandered back to the television. A different reporter was doing a play-by-play of last night’s horror. He had it mostly right—the local Trappers Guild had held a meeting at the Tabernacle in downtown Atlanta, just like they always did. In the middle of the meeting the demons had arrived. Then it got bad.

“Eyewitnesses say that at least two different kinds of Hellspawn were involved in the attack and that the trappers were quickly overwhelmed,” the reporter said.

Three different kinds, but who’s counting?

Riley frowned. The trappers hadn’t been overwhelmed. Well, not completely. They’d even managed to kill a few of the things.

When she went to pick up the cup of hot chocolate, her hands were still shaking. They’d been that way since last night and nothing she did made them stop. She downed the liquid in small sips, knowing people were watching her, talking among themselves. Someone took a picture of her with his cell phone.

Ah, jeez.

In the background, she could still hear the reporter on CNN. “A number of the trappers escaped the inferno and were immediately set upon by a higher-level fiend.”

The higher-level fiend had been a Grade Five demon who’d opened up deep holes in the ground, spun off mini tornadoes, and caused the earth to shake. All in an effort to take out one trapper.

Me.

If it hadn’t been for Ori, a freelance demon hunter, the Five would have killed her just like it had her dad.

“We have interviewed eyewitnesses who claim they saw angels last night,” the reporter continued. “We’ve had Doctor Osbourne, a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, review the videos. He’s with us here today, via satellite.” A solemn gray-haired man appeared on the screen. “What’s your take on this amazing event, Doctor?”

“I’ve watched the videos, and all that is visible is a circle of incredibly bright light that surrounds the demon trappers. I have colleagues in Atlanta who’ve claimed to see angels in your city. They appeared throughout the Bible to Abraham, to Jacob. Sodom and Gomorrah rated two of them. In this case, they were actively protecting the trappers from Hellspawn. I’d say that’s biblically significant.”

Tell me about it.

Riley dug in her messenger bag, retrieved a pen, and began a list on a crisp white napkin.

Find Dad

Bust Holy Water Scam

Save the World

Buy Groceries

Do Laundry

As she saw it, if number three on the list didn't work out, the last two weren't going to be an issue.



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