



Undead and Unforgiven (Queen Betsy)

By MaryJanice Davidson

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***New York Times* bestselling author MaryJanice Davidson is back. So is Betsy Taylor, “everyone’s favorite vampire queen” (*Bitten by Books*) and this time Betsy’s going viral...**

If Betsy Taylor has learned anything about ruling Hell it’s: 1) She can’t do it alone, and 2) She doesn’t have to. She’s got the help of a devoted vampire king, a dateless zombie, an exhausted new mom, an unshowered cop, a bitchy ghost, a kindly dead priest, and her late stepmother (“Go Team Satan 2.0!”). But the latest major hurdle in her afterlife is so big she can’t even see it until it’s on YouTube.

Betsy’s father and half sister Laura (a former Antichrist with a grudge) have teamed up, for what sinister purpose Betsy can’t imagine. The former Antichrist didn’t take kindly to getting what she wished for, and has decided that’s entirely the fault of the vampire queen. What that means for Betsy is trouble (more than usual, even) and possible exposure to an unsuspecting world.

Meanwhile Hell is having a deleterious effect on Betsy’s friends (“I didn’t think it was possible, but the damned are getting meaner.”), the newly dead are confused about Hell’s new rules (“A buddy system? Really?”), and the vampire king is trying to poach on Betsy’s territory. Betsy loves her husband, but that’s not the same as trusting him. Before long the king and queen of the vampires aren’t speaking to each other, the mansion on Summit Avenue is a war zone, and Betsy’s getting calls from a werewolf, a mermaid, and worst of all, her mother (“What do you mean you can’t babysit?”). No one said life after death would be easy, but c’mon: this is ridiculous.

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Editorial Review

Review

“BE PREPARED TO FALL IN LOVE WITH THE UNDEAD ALL OVER AGAIN!”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

Praise for the Undead series and MaryJanice Davidson

“Delightful, wicked fun!”—Christine Feehan, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Viper Game*

“Sexy, steamy, and laugh-out-loud funny.”—*Booklist*

“If you’re [a fan] of Sookie Stackhouse and Anita Blake, don’t miss Betsy Taylor. She rocks.”—*The Best Reviews*

“[Davidson's] prose zings from wisecrack to wisecrack.”—*Detroit Free Press*

About the Author

MaryJanice Davidson is the *New York Times* bestselling author of several books, most recently *Undead and Unwary*, *Undead and Unsure*, *Undead and Unstable*, *Undead and Undermined*, *Undead and Unfinished*, *Undead and Unwelcome*, *Undead and Unworthy*, and *Dead Over Heels*. With her husband, Anthony Alongi, she also writes a series featuring a teen weredragon named Jennifer Scales. MaryJanice lives in Minneapolis with her husband and two children and is currently working on her next book

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PROLOGUE

DEATH, LIFE, RITZ CRACKERS

Dying is taking forever.

This shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. Everything in Tim Andersson's life had taken forever. He'd been born three weeks late. Went through the fourth grade twice, needed six years to get his fine arts degree. Took the driver's license exam four times. Had to ask the DMV three times to change his name from Anderson to Andersson. Ditto his social security card and passport, the latter proving a waste of time as the trip to Scotland fell through at the last minute because of his shingles flare-up.

The diagnosis—lung cancer at age forty-nine—had been met with dull, hurt surprise. "I don't smoke."

"Yes, that happens sometimes."

"I've never smoked."

"Yes, I understand. It would seem from your family history you're genetically predisposed to the condition.

That and your exposure to asbestos for several years, as well as secondhand smoke—”

“Yeah, I watched my parents and my grandpa die of lung cancer.” In an asbestos-ridden house, apparently. Shouldn’t have put off moving out of his folks’ place for so long. “Which is why *I’ve never smoked*.” His only addiction was to Ritz crackers, and always had been. Never saltines. Ritz, with spray cheese (cheddar and bacon flavored), chased with sweet iced tea. God, he could use some now. He’d gobble a whole sleeve of crackers right now and shoot the cheese straight into his mouth.

“I’m very sorry.”

Tim took a deep breath

(better enjoy doing that while you can)

and asked, “My options?”

“Few,” the doctor replied with calm, kind sympathy. “But that’s not to say there’s no hope. Unfortunately, it’s metastasized into your—”

Tim cut him off. He had nothing against the oncologist, who was only doing his job. Tim had gone to the ER two years before with a nagging cough and shortness of breath. He wouldn’t have gone at all, but a coworker saw what he coughed up into the bathroom sink and that was that. The ER doc, a nice young fellow with bright green eyes named

(odd that you remember him so clearly)

Dr. Spangler, told him what he suspected and had gotten him a referral on the spot. “There’s any one of a number of things it could be. Best to get a diagnosis and be sure, right? And sooner rather than later. Right?”

“Right,” Tim had lied, and then had promptly put it off for years. Right around then the offending cough had cleared up, the coworker had been soothed by Tim’s lie

(“Saw a doctor, he said I’m fine.”)

and that had been that.

Until now.

“Story of my life,” he muttered to the empty room. As if it knew its cover had been blown, the cancer had picked up speed the day he’d gotten the diagnosis. So now here he was, twenty-two months later, coughing out his last breaths at Fairview Ridges in Burnsville. Burnsville! (Nothing against the pleasant Minnesota suburb; it was just, for some reason he always thought he’d die in Apple Valley, another pleasant Minnesota suburb.)

No family, not anymore. A few friends from work, but mostly Tim kept to himself. Making and then cultivating friendships took too much time and energy, and there were Ritz triple-decker sandwiches to stack and devour. *Everything* took too long. Including this: his death. The doctors had assured him they would control the pain and had been as good as their word. He had refused chemo, refused everything. They were going to move him to a hospice by the end of the week, per the instructions of his HMO. “But until then,” his oncologist assured him, “we’ll take good care of you.”

“Eh. As it is, it’ll take too long.”

“What will?”

“Everything. The paperwork, the transfer. Dying. All of it. I’m slow at everything. Even this.”

And he was right! And as was often the case, there was zero comfort in being right. Still, he at least had the knowledge that—

Wait.

What?

The room was getting darker. And smaller, and quieter. Which was impossible; it was noon on a Saturday, visiting hours were in full swing, his roommate was in the bathroom humming “Irreplaceable” while shaving and getting ready to go home, and the sun was shining. Dammit, he was missing a beautiful late-winter day in Minnesota. *Good* late winter, the kind with the promise of blooming flowers and green grass, not the mud and unearthed-garbage kind of winter. So why was everything . . . ?

Oh.

Oh.

This was it! He was dying, *finally*, and it was exactly as the movies had portrayed: everything was going dark and quiet. It wasn’t even scary. Thinking about it had been scarier than experiencing it. He supposed he should be

* * *

grateful.

“Hi, I’m Betsy, welcome to Hell.”

He blinked and looked around. He knew this place. He’d been there before, reluctantly. It was—

“Did you say welcome to Hell?”

The girl—woman, he supposed, she was probably in her twenties, and they didn’t like that, being called girls—nodded. “Yep.”

Only death could be both surreal and familiar at the same time. “Hell is the Mall of America?”

“Yep. Sorry.” She shrugged at him. “It was all I could think of.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

He took a closer look at her. Tall, slender, fair skinned, bright blue-green eyes. Sounded like a Minnesota gal, but what were the odds of that? Long legs, knee-length black linen shorts, a red short-sleeved shirt, reddish blond hair pulled into a ponytail. She was wearing a silver men’s watch that was too big for her slender wrist, silver pointy-toed flats, and a *Hello My Name Is* badge over her left breast, which read *Satan 2.0*.

“So I’m dead?” He looked around. Yep, the Mall of America and no mistake. He and the strange girl—*woman*—were standing beside a large information kiosk. There were other people around, many of them in a hurry, and there was an overall feeling of tense bustling.

And it was some big costume party, too, because there was a gal dressed like Cleopatra and another one dressed like she was on her way to a ball in a green gown with a billowing skirt, and an awful lot of the men were wearing hats. And not many of them were proper baseball caps. Lots were old-fashioned hats like Lincoln wore. Women in hats, too, big fancy ones like they wore in the old days, or in London for a royal wedding. The people were all intent on *something*, because they paid him no attention at all. It took him a second to realize what they *were* paying attention to: her. His . . . guide, maybe? But no one was approaching, or even staring. They’d send skittering glances her way, like they were afraid she’d look back. Maybe not a guide. Maybe a supervisor?

He opened his mouth and was annoyed when nothing came out. Tried twice more while the gal waited patiently, and finally managed to croak out, “This is death?”

“No, this is Hell,” she corrected him. “And since it’s 12:08 p.m., that makes you—uh—Tom Anderson?”

Oh no! Death is just like life! “Tim Andersson, double s,” he said in Hell, as he had hundreds of times in life.

“Dammit, I *knew* that.” She stomped one of her feet, which was as startling as it was charming. “What I’d like is a clipboard with all the info on it I need for work today, all of it accurate and easy to find.” Then she just stood there with her hands out, like those statues of the Virgin Mary you saw all over, often on lawns with plastic pink flamingos. Sometimes it looked like the statue was feeding the flamingos, which he always got a kick out of.

Now she was holding a clipboard.

Tim blinked, wondering if it was a hallucination. It had been that sudden—she asked for a clipboard and *bink!* There it was.

“And an Orange Julius,” she added, and *bink!* Now she was slurping orange glop through a straw, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked like the drink was about to be yanked away. “I will never get used to this,” she mumbled at him between sips. Then she was looking down at the clipboard. “Yep, Tim Andersson, got you right here. Sorry, I’m *so* bad with names. Okay, well, like I said, welcome to Hell. I’m not seeing a religious affiliation here—”

“Lapsed Presbyterian,” he replied absently, still staring around.

“Uh-huh, so not a regular churchgoer?” At his head shake she added, “So why d’you think you’re in Hell?”

Of all the things she might have asked, this had to be the most surprising. “You’re Satan 2.0. Don’t *you* know?”

Her brow wrinkled as she frowned. She was quite pretty, which was agreeable, and had magical powers, which he hadn’t expected from a fellow Minnesotan. He was pretty sure. “You’re from Minnesota, right? You sure sound like it.”

“Yeah, I live in St. Paul.” He barely had time to wonder at her use of the present tense—Satan lived in the state capital?—when she added, “Why did you call me Satan—oh, dammit!” She’d looked down at her name tag and ripped it off, crumpling it in her fist. “Ignore that. One of my horrible roommates stuck that on

without me noticing.”

“How could you not notice when someone sticks a four-inch-by-four-inch sticker to your—”

“Hey, I’ve got a lot of responsibilities, okay? I don’t have the leisure to read my left boob every five minutes. And I *don’t* know why you’re here. There’s tons I don’t know, which is why I’m playing Welcome Wagon.”

“Playing?” Say one thing: death wasn’t dull. Then: “Welcome Wagon?”

She sighed, as if he was putting her to enormous trouble. “Before I died I was an office manager, but before that I was an admin assistant, and before that a receptionist. See?”

“Afraid not.”

“Before you can run the place, you have to know how it works on all the other levels. But I can’t work my way up here—I kind of agreed to the top job—so I’m doing a real-life version of Boss/Employee Exchange Work Day. A real-afterlife version, I mean.”

“Oh.”

“Tackling it any other way would be insane.”

“You bet.”

She beamed at him, probably mistaking his stunned agreement with actual comprehension. “And of course my roommates’ response to my incredibly sensible plan is to undermine me with stickers at every turn. So why do *you* think you’re in Hell?”

The subject change made him blink. Apparently he still had to do that. He was also still breathing. And . . . he slid his fingers over his wrist and picked up a pulse. Did he *have* to still do those things? Or was it just habit now?

“Mr. Andersson?”

“Sorry, sorry.” He thought about asking her, but she didn’t even know why he was in Hell. She might not know why he still blinked and breathed. “Got no idea. I’ve done some bad things—everybody has. Nothing to deserve an eternity of suffering in the Mall of America.” Now, if it had been *Home Depot* . . . “But it’s not like I, y’know, killed anybody or blew something up or did something really bad.”

“Did you just sort of assume you’d end up here?”

He shook his head. “Mostly I assumed Heaven, I guess. But I dunno. Heaven’s probably great for the first few decades, but I think it’d get boring after a while. Everything in my life was boring and/or took too long and . . . and here I am.” He was getting hungry while they talked, which made him happy. Which was not how he’d expected to feel in Hell. Toward the end, he hadn’t wanted anything. They’d kept IVs with fluids running into him so he wouldn’t dehydrate before the cancer could finish him off. For the first time in forever, he wanted a wax paper sleeve of Ritz crackers. Maybe a beer to wash them down. *Two* beers. With spray cheese on the side.

“I know I just got here and all, but I gotta tell ya, Hell’s not terrible.”

“Thanks, you should definitely put that on the comment card later.”

“Comment c—?”

“Listen, Tom, I’d like to put a check in some of these categories.” She showed him the clipboard, on which were a number of questions with multiple answers. “So, religion? You were raised to believe you’d end up here so here you are? You lost a bet? You feel like you’ve left something big unfinished? I know, I know,” she added when he opened his mouth to reply. “Then you’d be a ghost, right? Makes sense? Except sometimes the soul ends up here instead. We’re all trying to work on figuring out why.”

“You’re not a ghost, though.”

She shook her head, making her ponytail whip around. “Nope.”

“But you’re dead?”

“Yep.”

“But you live in St. Paul.”

“So?”

He shook his head. “Nothing unfinished. Except maybe the hospital bill.”

“Says here no immediate family. Alive, I mean. So the good news is, you’ll never have to cough up the dough for that gigantic bill.”

“I was mostly bored. And if I troubled myself to do something, it was boring, or it took too long, or both.” He looked around the mall again. “I guess I just want something to happen. Something interesting.”

She grinned at him and he couldn’t help smiling back. She was just the cutest thing, so studious about her clipboard while occasionally peeking down to admire her shiny shoes. “Oh, interesting we can provide. No problem. We can do interesting.”

“Yeah?”

“You bet. So come with me, and I’ll show you around, and we’ll figure out your damnation or new job or family reunion or rebirth or whatever.”

“Okay.” He was amenable, because the last two minutes had already been more interesting than the last five years (doctor’s visits notwithstanding). This place sure didn’t seem like Hell . . . though it explained everyone wearing different clothes from different eras, and how they were scared to look at Satan 2.0.

“Listen, ah—” He paused, mentally groped for her name, found it. “Listen, Betsy, is there somewhere around here I can get some Ritz crackers?”

She looked at the clipboard again, then up at him. “Oh. Jeez. Look, not to be a hard-ass, but the only crackers we have for you are saltines.”

He nodded, resigned. Definitely Hell, then.

“And all cheese except spray cheese,” she said, reading from the clipboard.

Dammit.

CHAPTER

ONE

“Elizabeth!”

I was doing my best to ignore the dead priest, and it wasn’t going well. Had I thought he was persistent in life? Pshaw. In death he was indefatigable. That’s the word, right? Indefatigable? Never gets tired? Always nagging? Huge downer on my downtime?

“We’ve rescheduled the meeting three times.” He skidded to a halt in front of me, panting lightly.

Yeah, well, it’s about to be four times.

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t debate Smoothiegate even one more time. You guys are just gonna have to accept that blackberries are gross and suck it up with raspberries instead.”

I got an exasperated blink. (That man can say more with his eyelids than most can with their mouths.) “Not that meeting. The, uh . . .” He trailed off, then made himself say it. “The Ten Commandments Redux.”

Heh. It was a great idea, if tedious in execution, and for no other reason than Father Markus really, *really* hated the name. “It’s Remix, and you know it.”

“Regardless. We have to get started.”

“I know.” (I did know.) “And while I was researching—”

“You researched?” he said, sounding shocked. Then he instantly corrected his tone. “Of course you did. Good for you.”

“Well, I had an idea for what to do with some of the souls that have been here for a while.”

“Which is?”

“I have to keep working on it.” I had no idea how my plan would go over: probably like an anvil. It meant big change. It meant changing the very nature of Hell. Father Markus was a good enough guy, but he was also a traditionalist. Baby steps. That was key. “I’ll tell you more about it. Later.”

He made a *ttkkt!* noise of disapproval. “Procrastination is another word for cowardice.”

“It’s really not.”

He’d switched from Reminder Mode to Cajoling Mode. “Now, Betsy.” Ohhh, I knew that tone. “You know the hardest part is just sitting down and getting started.”

“Mmm.” (No, the hardest part was keeping out of his way so I could avoid his eight zillion meetings. My own fault for being in Hell’s food court again!)

Father Markus, though he’d ended up in Hell after he died, still thought of himself as a priest. You could look like anything you wanted here, but most people stuck with what they were familiar with: how they looked in life. In Father Markus’s case, that meant the traditional priest garb: all in black except for the collar. He had a little bit of hair left, all white, which went around his head in a fringe, leaving the top bald

and shiny. Like, really shiny. The king of the vampires once checked his reflection in it. His hands and feet were small and sleek; he was in comfortable black shoes, dull leather Dockers. He'd lived his whole life in Minnesota and had the same flat Midwestern accent I did.

But I liked his eyes the best: small and brown, intent and expressive. They scrunched into smiling slits when he was happy, and focused like lasers when he wasn't. In life he'd been in charge of a pack of teenage vampire hunters, and since most vampires were murderous assholes, I couldn't entirely blame him for assuming *all* vampires were murderous assholes. I broke up the decapitation-happy team and Father Markus went his own way until he died. Now he was stuck working with me, in case he didn't already know he was in Hell. To his credit, he decided it was an honor, and never indicated what a pain in his ass I was. (Out loud, anyway.)

"The first meeting," he was rambling, "is always . . ."

The dullest. The lamest. The boringest. Wait. Boringest?

". . . the hardest."

"Yeah, y— Wait." I realized he'd put a hand on my elbow, and while we talked, he was gently nudging me toward the Lego store, where we held most of our meetings. "Are you steering me, you sly, nagging s.o.b.?"

"No, no. Escorting."

"Just because you're dead doesn't mean I can't kill you again." As threats went, it was about a 4.2 on the Lame-O-Meter.

"Just take a deep breath," he suggested with a small smile. "It'll be over soon."

"Totally pointless; I don't have to breathe. *You* don't have to breathe."

"It'll all be over soon, then," he said again. "I'll stick with that one."

"Every time I think that, something new and terrible happens. I get fired. I get run over. I die. Someone I live with dies. I die *again*. I become a queen. I get tricked into running Hell. I'm forced to wear humiliating name tags. I—"

"I miss the blowout sale for summer sandals. I get shriller and shriller rather than learning from my mistakes. I go all dictator-ey and banish blackberries from smoothies."

"That doesn't affect you one bit, Cathie! (A) You hated smoothies in life—"

"How has the smoothie industry tricked you into thinking pulverized fruit and yogurt and old ice cubes from the back of the freezer is a terrific plan?"

"And (2) you're always in Hell."

"Truer words," my "friend" Cathie replied. She was already building another conference room out of Lego bricks. (The one she built yesterday had too good a view of the amusement park, or, as we called it, the Vomitorium. If you hated amusement parks or were prone to severe motion sickness, and subconsciously decided you needed punishment after you died, guess where you ended up? With a permanent season ticket?)

"Almost done," she added, like I had an enduring interest in her temporary architecture. She could whip

rooms up in no time. It helped that each Lego (or would that be LEGO®?) block was the size of a stereo speaker. One of the ancient ones, two feet high and a foot wide. Not one of the new ones you can't actually see. "You'll be bitching about the things you constantly bitch about in no time."

"Drop dead," I replied, which was redundant at best, lame at worst. Her evil snicker proved it was on the lame end of the meter. Cathie had faced down the serial killer who'd killed her; as a ghost, she wasn't scared by bitchy vampires even a little.

I'd never known her in life, but in death she was pretty great. When she first appeared (manifested? intruded? trespassed? stalked?) she was mega-pissed over being murdered. So employing the "unlikely partners" trope, we'd teamed up. The end result: a dead serial killer, a vengeful ghost's revenge, and the Antichrist's temper tantrum, which resulted in a dead serial killer and a vengeful ghost's revenge.

(I'll go into the whole estranged-from-the-Antichrist thing in a bit. Really can't stand even thinking about her right now. Long story short: she's as dead to me as my dead father, who isn't dead.)

Unlike a lot of new spirits, Cathie had no problem looking different from how she looked on the day she died. As she explained, "I got foully snuffed on laundry day; I am *not* plodding through eternity in granny panties and a sweatshirt. Besides, my clothes aren't real. Probably I'm not real. So why not embrace it?" Excellent advice, and today she was in boyfriend jeans, a blue T-shirt with *If you don't sin, Jesus died for nothing* in white letters, hair in an elaborate French braid ("Finally! The trick to mastering French braids is not having a body, or hair that grows on the body!"), and battered blue loafers, *sans* socks. Why she refused to manifest nice shoes would be an eternal mystery.

"Gang's all here?" she asked, still messing with Lego pieces. She'd made the room, I slunk inside, and she was now working on the table.

"Mostly." I sighed. "We'll have enough to get through the meeting."

"Which you're seeing as a disaster for some reason."

"Kind of."

"Suck it up, buttercup."

"Y'know, you could pretend to be intimidated by me. Or even acknowledge that I'm your boss and am chock-full of sinister powers."

"Nope."

Well, good, I guess. Throughout history, most dictators became douches because they were surrounded by yes-men or, in my case, yes-roommates/ghosts/vampires/zombies. Having people around who aren't afraid of you is crucial if you want them to tell you what they really think, instead of what they think you want to hear. Though on days like this (nights? what time was it? Hell was like Vegas: no clocks), a *little* nervous deference wouldn't be the worst thing in the world . . .

I'd known running Hell wouldn't be easy, but hadn't planned on it being boring. It had everything I hated about my old office job (meetings, organization, meetings) and none of the stuff I liked about my old office job (paid vacation, holidays, all the Post-it notes I could steal).

But meetings, like the IRS and the DMV, were a necessary evil. It was a whole new ball game since I'd killed the devil, banished the Antichrist, yelled at my father for faking his death (badly), banished my not-

dead father and the Antichrist, and taken over the care and feeding of Hell.

Luckily, I had something the devil never had, not in her five million years of punishing the damned and being pissed at God: friends willing to pitch in and help.

Thus: meetings. But there were smoothies, too, so it wasn't all bad.

CHAPTER

TWO

"Do we have the minutes of the meeting?"

I bit down on a groan and rested my forehead on the table (also made of Lego pieces). Then, remembering that the last time I'd done that, I'd walked around in Hell with Lego dots on my forehead *and no one told me*, I jerked upright.

"Do we even have those? Are we really trying to improve Hell by introducing more paperwork?"

"I don't know if 'improve' is the right—"

"Plus, we're not even all here yet," I pointed out. Not "I complained." Not "I bitched." No matter what Marc wanted to call it. And speaking of my personal physician/zombie . . . "Where's Marc?"

"Here," my personal zombie/physician replied, ambling into the room. He was in (un)death as he was in life: slouchy and comfortable in a pale gray scrub shirt (it used to be green but after a zillion washings was faded and almost velvety to the touch), faded boyfriend jeans ("Ironical," he'd sigh, "since I haven't had a date in . . . when did I die again?"), dark hair in a George Clooney cut ("He's really locked into one style, isn't he?"), pale skin (not because of his zombification; he died in winter in Minnesota, when sunlight is more rumor than anything else), and smiling green eyes.

"What have I told you about wandering around Hell without an escort?" I hadn't been running the place for even a few weeks. My "run it by committee" idea was only a week old. I was still figuring out my godlike powers of the damned. And I wanted to bite the shit out of somebody—anybody, really. When had I last drunk? Argh. Worrying about Marc on top of all that? It did nothing for my temper, which these days wasn't great. "Well?"

"Nothing."

"Oh." Right. I'd been thinking he shouldn't wander, but didn't actually tell him. "Well, it's a bad idea."

"What can they do to me?" he asked, reasonably enough.

"It's Hell! Who knows? Why would you ever want to find out?"

"Because I'm bored?"

Oh. Well, good point. If anyone needed to stay stimulated, it was Marc.

"And," he continued, "Hell is really depressing."

“Well, yeah,” Cathie replied.

“Lord Byron is so *boring*.”

Not good. Boring was bad. Marc being bored was the part of the horror movie where they establish the characters, the dumb stuff you have to sit through while waiting for the blood to spill. And it always spilled. Inevitable like the tides, or *Transformers* sequels being terrible.

“Oh?” I asked with perfect fake composure, even as Cathie started to give him the side-eye.

“Byron’s one of the greatest poets ever, maybe *the* greatest English poet—”

Oh, good. Now I wouldn’t have to ask, Who’s Lord Brian? The name was familiar. Kind of. Poets weren’t my thing.

“—and just a complete downer. First off, not gay. Bi, definitely bi.”

“Which is a problem why?” Cathie asked.

“Oh, bi artists are a dime a dozen.” Marc waved a hand, dismissing every bisexual artist in the history of human events. “All my life I’ve been reading about his complex sexuality, but there’s nothing complex about being able to pass for straight—he fathered a couple of kids. It’s not nearly the struggle it is to be in the closet, not into the opposite sex, but faking well enough to make babies while trying to fit into society without losing your mind, except a lot of them did lose their minds.”

“Those bisexuals,” Cathie said dryly, “with their uncomplicated natures and many, many banging options.”

“Oh, shut up,” he snapped. “I get it: where do I get off—”

Don’t giggle at “get off.” Whew! Thanks, inner voice.

“—marginalizing anyone’s sexuality, blah-blah. But it wasn’t just that. The guy’s supposed to be the first celebrity—I mean, how we understand the term today. Hordes of screaming fans; Byronmania kind of paved the way for Beatlemania. Sounds pretty interesting, right? He’s probably got great stories, right?”

“I’m guessing no,” I said, “on account of how annoyed you sound.”

“You know what the number one thing on his mind is? Art, poetry through the ages, reminiscing about commanding a rebel army despite having no military experience, feeding your muse from Hell, maybe moving on from Hell, looking up his descendants . . . anything like that? No. The fever that killed him. That’s what’s on his mind *all* the time. He died over two hundred years ago and he’s still bitching because Advil and NyQuil weren’t invented in time to save his whiney ass.” Marc slumped into his red Lego chair, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. “Never meet your heroes. Or people you read about once and thought would be really cool to meet in real life.” He raised his head and looked around at the ghost and the vampire queen surrounded by Lego furniture. “This *is* real life, right?”

“Nonsense,” came a voice that managed to be soft, brisk, and polite all at once. Tina (real name: Christina Caresse Chavelle, which was *hilarious*) had popped up out of nowhere (she was like a census taker that way), representing herself and the vampire king.

You’d think the vampire queen (*moi*) could do that, but trust me: it’s better for everyone that Tina handle these things. She’s been doing it for decades; she’d known Sinclair since he was a li’l farmer kid with grubby

knees, and had been a friend of his family for generations. She was descended from a not-witch I'd saved from being burned during the Salem witch trials in sixteen hundred whatever, because time travel.¹

So anyway, she was used to repping my husband at meetings, smoothie oriented and otherwise. She was also used to incredibly long boring meetings. Plus, to be honest, I trusted her to be in Hell a lot more than my husband, a man I loved dearly but knew to be sneaky, manipulative, controlling, and murderous. (God, he was so dreamy!)

Since we were all new to the business side of running Hell, and thus equally clueless, Tina was using fashion to soothe us, dressing the part of Demure Majordomo in Charge of Meetings N'Stuff: a virgin wool Armani skirt suit in deepest midnight blue, with a two-button long-sleeved jacket, matching camisole underneath, black panty hose, and kitten heels the same shade of blue as the suit.

The deep, dark colors set off her pale (vampire) skin and enormous dark eyes to perfection, the dark hose made her look taller (a good trick, since she was almost a foot shorter than I was), and she had scraped her long, Southern-belle-ringleted blond hair into a severe bun. She was right out of the "Hot for Teacher" video and it was glorious. If she had to fight, or jog, the suit was a disastrous choice. If she had to look like she knew exactly what she was doing in a business capacity, it was brilliant.

I need a suit like that. But in red. No, black. No, red. Purple? Purple could be great . . . except I'd look like an eggplant wearing pumps. Does Sinclair think eggplants are sexy? Must research . . .

"If you want to meet some extraordinary men and women," she was telling Marc, who had instantly cheered up at the sight of her (they were pals bordering on besties), "I can introduce you to several, assuming they're here."

"Guess it depends which side they fought on," Cathie said, and since Tina had lived through the Civil War, that was a fair point.

"General Sherman?" Father Markus asked with a disapproving air. I jumped; he'd gone so long without speaking I'd forgotten he was there, even though he'd brought me to the meeting. "Jefferson Davis?"

"You knew the president of the Confederacy?" Cathie asked, sounding impressed, which was a rare and wonderful thing.

"No, that's the other Jefferson Davis; this one murdered his commanding officer and never saw a trial, much less prison." Hmm, who knew Father Markus was a Civil War buff? (It's worth noting that Tina wasn't, since that'd be like saying, "I live in Minnesota, so I am a Minnesota buff.")

"Robert Smalls? Wait, there's no way he'd be in Hell. Right?" It was a fair question, since people who had done good things all their lives were in Hell. One of many things to be discussed in (argh) today's meeting (argh-argh).

"Ooh, I got this one," Cathie enthused, warming to her subject. "This is the guy who stole a military transport, steered it past a bunch of Confederate forts, gave the ship *and* the signal codes to the Union, then went on to find and get rid of land mines he himself had been forced to plant. And he did all this while he was a slave!"

"Robert Smalls!" I cried. At last, I could contribute something to a historical conversation that didn't sound asinine. "I saw that episode of *Drunk History*!"

“Actually I was thinking of notables from the Revolutionary War,” Tina corrected gently. She gave us a moment to chew that one over

(she looks so young and hot but is ancient! weird! we know this, but keep forgetting! weird!)

before adding, “Nancy Hart, for instance. Half a dozen British soldiers accused her of protecting a Whig leader (she was), and didn’t believe her when she said she hadn’t seen him (she was lying). At the end of the night, all those men were dead. They found the bodies—”

“Thanks, but I don’t actually have to seek out sociopaths, I hang out with plenty on my own.”

“Or Mary Ball Washington.”

“Who?”

“Washington’s wife.” Duh. I managed to keep the sneer off my face, if not out of my tone.

“Washington’s mother,” Father Markus and Tina corrected; he colored a little and ducked his head while she kept the sneer off her face *and* out of her tone. I should learn that trick.

Tina somehow sensed my rising boredom (the way I groaned and cradled my head in my hands may have tipped her off), because she said to Marc, “You come along with me later, darling. I’ll introduce you to lots of interesting people.”

Marc perked right up. He’d been getting steadily more morose (moroser?) since Future Me had made him a zombie after he’d committed suicide to avoid being turned into a vampire (also by Future Me). Given that in life he’d been prone to depression, it was a concern.

I loved Marc, but unfortunately it was one concern on a laundry list of a bazillion concerns. Tina, thank God, had been spending lots of time with him lately. He had a blanket nest for her in the trunk of his car (complete with reading lights, water bottles, a cell phone, an iPad, and chargers) and often took her out (in the daytime!) for what I called errands and they called missions. Sure. A mission to Cub Foods for raspberries and yogurt. A mission to the liquor store for Cinnamon Churros vodka.

“Sorry I’m late,” one of the many banes of my existence said, booting an errant Lego brick out of her path.

Father Markus warned me, “Behold, evil is going forth from nation to nation,” because that was how he liked to preface nagging me about the last meeting (or the next meeting), and he was probably talking about me, but I thought of my stepmother, Antonia Taylor, known to one and all (well, me) as the Ant.

In life, we’d been deadly enemies. But in death, she had found a grudging

“You look haggard. Is plastic surgery a thing for vampires? You might want to inquire.”

a very, very grudging respect for me

“Why would anyone want hair the color *and* texture of pineapple?” I batted back. “I don’t know what’s worse, your outfit or the fact that you’re freely choosing to look like that.”

as I had for her.

“And with that,” Cathie said after trying, and failing, to disguise a snigger as a cough, “let’s get started.”

CHAPTER

THREE

“Monday’s minutes,” Cathie announced. “Betsy moved that meetings were dumb, but no one seconded it so it didn’t pass.”

I glared at Marc. I’d counted on him, dammit! “I’ll never forgive you for letting me swing on that one,” I hissed, and I got an eye roll for my trouble.

“She then remembered she’s supposed to be in charge and lead the way of reform, and we settled in to get some work done, when she moved that Hell no longer be eternal punishment from which there is no escape. But rather—and this is a direct quote—it’d be more like jail. Or detention! You can get out, but you have to be sorry for what you did and behave for a really long time, and when you’re out, we’re still gonna keep an eye on you so don’t go being an asshat or anything. Unquote.”

Father Markus groaned, and not for the first time. Who knew a representative of the Catholic Church would be so resistant to change?

“I stand by my brilliant idea,” I said modestly. “Look, I always thought that was the dumbest thing. I can remember having huge problems with this in Sunday school. Presbyterian,” I added before anyone could ask. I had liked Sunday school, but mostly because we got Peeps for correct answers. So . . . much . . . marshmallow . . . “We’re supposed to be good so we don’t go to Hell, right? So you make one mistake—depending on what religion you were raised with—and the rule is you spend a million years in Hell because you cussed out your mom while taking the Lord’s name in vain as you stole your neighbor’s wife and made her tell you how pretty you were?”

“Um,” Marc began.

“How many broken commandments is that?”

“Four.” In unison around the table.

“I think Hell should be where you learn what you screwed up, where you went wrong screwing it up, and, if you’re willing, how to make amends or just be a better person. Like, if you killed someone, and you were both here in Hell, you’d have to do nice things for your murder victim until they forgave you. It could take ten years or five hundred. And then you . . . you . . .” I was gratified, and horrified, to see I had their full attention. “Well, I don’t know. Get born again? Leave Hell but be a ghost? Go to Heaven?” Again, part of my idea that would change the face of Hell (assuming Hell had a face), if I could pull it off. If everyone here could help me pull it off. “That’s the other thing—”

“Also from the minutes,” Cathie interrupted. “Quote, So, like, are the people leaving Hell controlling where they go or are they just vanishing or is it something Satan used to do but now I have to do even though I don’t know how? Oh my God, I must have been out of my mind to agree to this shit, unquote.”

“None of that sounds like me,” I grumbled. “Those minutes are counterfeit, I bet.”

Tina kept the smile off her face, but was unable to prevent her eyes from crinkling at me. “Every last word of it sounds quite like you, dread Majesty.” Sigh. No matter how often I said she could drop the “O Dread Queen” stuff anytime, she persisted. Who knew someone from the antebellum South could be so stubborn?

“One thing at a time,” Father Markus said. “Else we’ll get bogged down in all the problems to surmount and

not how to surmount them.”

I liked how he said “we.” It was why I’d made the damned committee in the first place. I nodded and he continued.

“Setting aside the idea of parole from Hell—”

“Not for long, though,” Marc said quickly. “I think it’s a really great idea.” At the surprised looks, he added, “What? I’m a gay atheist who knows how to perform abortions and is now a zombie. Hell being permanent does not work for me.”

“Oh, *now* you’re backing me up. When it’s political and stuff.”

“Well, *now* you’re making sense,” the Ant cut in and Marc, who had never liked her, grinned anyway.

“The seven deadly sins,” Markus said loudly, cutting off my whine. “That’s where we’ll start. I’ve been interviewing quite a few souls down here—sorry, not *down* here, of course—not anywhere, is my understanding . . .”

I couldn’t blame him. The Hell tropes were hard to shake. We weren’t *down* anywhere; Hell wasn’t a physical place you could go to, like Duluth. It was an entirely different dimension with its own rules, and hardly anyone was burning alive in a lake of fire. Okay, a few hard-core Christians were burning alive in a lake of fire, and they ignored all my attempts to rescue them, shouting over the crackling flames that they’d earned their punishment. What could I do? They seemed fine. Well. Not *fine*. But not inclined to move, either. That was the stuff that made this job seem so overwhelming. You’d focus on one person or one punishment area and get totally overwhelmed. To think I found the vampire queen gig daunting!

Users Review

From reader reviews:

David Butler:

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