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Opening extract from

The Demon Trappers: Forbidden

Written by

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Jana Oliver's imagination has always had the upper hand despite her attempts to house-train it. When she's not on the road tromping around old cemeteries, she can be found in Atlanta, Georgia, with her husband and far too many books.

Also by Jana Oliver

The Demon Trappers: Forsaken



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MACMILLAN



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To
Michelle Roper
who taught me to find humour
in the small things

For they both were solitary,
She on earth and he in heaven.
And he wooed her with caresses,
Wooed her with his smile of sunshine

– *Song of Hiawatha*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Chapter One



2018
Atlanta, Georgia

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

'The End is Nigh!' a man called out. He stood near the shop's entrance holding a home-made 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 towards 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 Nigh!' the man shouted again.

'Is there still time for hot chocolate?' Riley asked.

The-End-is-Nigh guy blinked. 'Ah, maybe, I don't know.'

'Oh, good,' she said. 'I'd hate to take on Hell without fuelling 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 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 as 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 blood-soaked jeans or the guy would be staring at that. 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 chocolatey goodness over the side and on to the saucer.

It's just one creepo guy. No big.

But it wasn't just him. Other customers stared at Riley 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.

Ah, crap.

There, courtesy of CNN, was last night's disaster in glorious technicolor: 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. Most people would think Simon was like that all the time, but when they

were hanging together 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 favour. A Really *Big* Favour. 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. Heaven 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. Some-

one scraped a chair across the floor as they sat 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 to the edge. Too much had hit her in a short period of time. Any more and she wouldn't be able to 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.

Once he was 'owned' by someone it'd be nearly impossible to get him back. She could take his new owner to court to prove the summoning hadn't been legal, but rich people had expensive lawyers and she was barely making the rent. By the time the case reached a judge her father would be back in the ground anyway. Deaders weren't good for much more than a year, even with the best of care.

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 their cellphone.

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 Dr Osbourne, a professor of religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, review the videos. He's with us here today, via satellite.' A solemn grey-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, which surrounds the Demon Trappers. I have colleagues in Atlanta who've claimed to see angels in your city. They have 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.

Chapter Two



Feeling a tickle in his throat, Denver Beck coughed deeply in an attempt to expel the stale smoke from his lungs. It did little good. In the distance, firefighters moved across the Tabernacle's rubble, working on the hot spots and searching for charred bodies in the mounds of broken bricks and burnt wood.

I should have died last night. In the past it wouldn't have mattered. Now it did. It was his fear for Riley that had driven him out of the smoke and flames.

To his right, Master Trapper Angus Stewart leaned heavily on his cane in the late afternoon sun. His usually ruddy face was nearly the colour of his white hair, pale against the bloodstained bandage tucked under his hairline. They stood near one of the many holes in the Tabernacle's parking lot, the stench of melted asphalt hanging heavy in the air. Beck bent over and stared into the crater's maw, which was laced with tangled wires and debris. It was a good ten feet wide and three times as deep, and a thin column of steam rose from its centre.

'How does a demon do this kind of damage?' he asked in a soft Southern drawl.

'The Geo-Fiend just waved its hands and the abyss appeared. They have some strange power over the earth and the weather,' Stewart said in his rich Scottish accent. It was still noticeable, though blunted by a decade in Atlanta.

As Beck straightened up, the demon wound in his thigh cramped in protest. The dressing was leaking and the fluid had soaked into his blue jeans. He needed more aspirin – his temperature was up and every now and then his teeth would chatter. Like a mild case of the flu with claw marks as a bonus.

Everythin' has changed now. He knew angels were for real; he'd seen them around Atlanta. Most were the ministering kind, the most prolific of Heaven's folk, who came and went doing whatever God wanted them to do. He'd never seen any from the higher realm, the ones with the flaming swords. He had last night.

Beck shook his head again, unable to deal with how eerie the things had been. At least seven feet tall, clothed in eye-blinding white with shimmering alabaster wings edged in grey, their fiery swords had roared like summer thunder and filled the night air with the crisp tang of ozone.

'I've never heard tell of Heaven steppin' in to protect trappers,' Beck said in a lowered voice, mindful of a television news crew on the other side of the parking lot. They were all over the city now, trying to get a handle on one of the biggest stories to hit Atlanta since the 1996

Olympics. 'Why're the demons workin' together now? It feels like a war's brewin'.'

'So it does.' Stewart cleared his throat. 'Seein' the angels make ya a believer?'

Beck blinked at the question. *Had it?* He'd never really thought much about God and he figured the feeling was mutual. 'Maybe,' he admitted.

Stewart huffed in agreement. 'The city will be wantin' action.'

'Master Harper will take care of that, won't he?' Harper was the most senior trapper in Atlanta and Riley's master. From what Beck could tell, he was a serious piece of work, but a good trapper when he wasn't drinking.

'Nay, not with his ribs bein' the way they are,' Stewart said. 'I'll have ta take the lead. With Ethan dead, I'll need yer help.'

Ethan had been one of the master's apprentices, but he'd not made it out of the Tabernacle alive. 'What about your other apprentice? Rollins. Where's he?'

'He quit. Canna handle this sorta thing. I respect that.' Stewart paused a moment, then added, 'I'm pleased ta hear young Simon's gonna make it. That's good news for Riley.'

'Yeah,' Beck replied, unsure of where the old master was heading with that last comment.

'She and Simon have taken a fancy ta each other, did ya know? They were holdin' hands and kissin' before the meetin'. They didn't know I saw them.'

'Kissin'?' Beck felt something heavy form in his chest, like a stone weighing on his heart. Had to be because of the demon wound – they always made you feel sick. It wouldn't do him any good to think of Riley as more than just Paul's little girl.

'Ya didn't know?' the master asked, all innocence.

Beck shook his head. He'd known Riley and Simon were spending time together – they were both apprenticed to Harper and saw each other every day. But he hadn't realized their relationship had gone that far. She was only seventeen, and now that both her parents were dead he felt responsible for her. Sort of like a big brother. Sort of something more.

'Yer frownin', lad,' Stewart observed.

Beck tensed, uncomfortable under the old trapper's scrutiny. 'Simon's better than some she could date,' he acknowledged, 'but he's not what she should be thinkin' about right now. I'll have a talk with him once he's better.' *Let him know if he goes too far with her I'll rip his damned head off.*

The master gave him a fatherly smile. 'Let *them* sort it out, lad. Ya canna keep her in a bubble the rest of her life.'

Wanna bet? It's what Paul would have wanted and, if he was honest, the only way Beck could sleep at night. As he stared at the broken landscape and the savaged building, his mind filled with images from the night before. Of demons and the trappers battling for survival. Of Riley in

the middle of the flames and how close he'd come to losing her. Beck shuddered, ice shearing through his veins.

Stewart laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, startling him. 'I know ya stayed inside that furnace until the very last. That takes stones, and I'm damned proud of ya.'

Beck couldn't meet the master's eyes, troubled by the praise.

The Scotsman's hand retreated. 'Ya can't carry it all on yer shoulders, broad as they are.'

He sounded just like Paul: that made sense – Master Stewart had trained Riley's father, who in turn had mentored Beck. From what Paul had said, the Stewarts were some of the best demon trappers in the world.

This man thought he'd done all right last night.

He's just bein' nice.

As if knowing a change of topic was needed, Stewart asked, 'Any idea who pulled Paul from his grave?'

That was the other thing hanging over them. Though he'd been dead for two weeks, Riley's father had appeared at the trapper's meeting, summoned from his eternal rest by a necromancer. He was a reanimated corpse now, money on the hoof, providing he'd made it out of the Tabernacle in one piece.

'Riley did everythin' she could to keep him in the ground,' Beck complained. 'She sat vigil every damned night, made sure there was a consecrated circle round his grave. Then some bastard steals him the one time she isn't there. It just sucks.'

'She have any notion who did it?' Stewart nudged.

'I didn't get a chance to ask her.' Which wasn't quite the truth. Beck could have. They'd huddled together in her family's mausoleum in Oakland Cemetery until dawn, on hallowed ground in case the demons came after them. She'd been so upset about Simon and the others that she'd cried herself to sleep. At the time it didn't seem important to know who'd resurrected Paul, so he'd just held her close, kept her safe, thanking God she'd survived. Trying to work through his feelings for the girl. When he'd left her this morning, she'd still been asleep, dried tears on her cheeks. He hadn't had the heart to wake her.

Stewart shifted position again: he was hurting more than he let on. 'I canna help but believe there's a connection between the demons' attack and Paul's reanimation,' the old trapper mused.

'How could there be?'

'Think it through. Wouldn't he have gone off with the necro who summoned him rather than droppin' in for a wee visit with his old mates?'

'I don't know,' Beck said, swiping a hand through his blond hair in agitation. 'But I'll know soon enough. I'll find the summoner who did it and we'll come to an understandin' – Paul goes in the ground or the necro does.'

Stewart stiffened. 'Be careful on that account. The summoners have wicked magic and they'll not appreciate ya gettin' in their business.'

Beck didn't respond. It didn't matter what happened to him; Paul Blackthorne was going back in his grave and that was that. He hadn't been able to keep him alive, but he could honour his friend's memory in other ways. He'd do it for Paul's daughter, if nothing more than to give her peace of mind.

'I hear that Five went after Riley, in particular,' the master stated. 'I wonder why.'

Beck had no answer to that. Grade Five Geo-Fiends were the big boys of Hell who generated earthquakes and spawned mini storms as easily as he took a breath. A Five had killed Paul and he was willing to bet it was the same one who'd gone after his daughter during the battle.

Beck *was* sure of one thing – the demons were taking too much of an interest in Riley, calling her out by her name. Hellspawn didn't do that as a rule. *Maybe I should tell Stewart. Maybe he would know what's goin' on.*

But if he did it'd only add to Riley's long list of troubles. Before Beck could make a decision, the master's phone began to buzz inside a coat pocket.

He pulled it out, frowned and opened it up. 'Stewart.'

Beck turned his attention to the hole in front of him. One of the trappers told him that the Geo-Fiend had thrown Riley into this very pit. That same trapper hadn't known how she'd managed to escape, said there'd been too much smoke to see what had really happened.

Why didn't the Five kill ya, girl? There was one possibility, but he didn't want to think about that. No way Riley

would have sold her soul to Hell to stay alive.

What if she'd fallen into that hole and never come out again?

Before Beck could admit to himself what that loss would mean to him, Stewart ended the call.

'That was Harper. The Guild's representatives are ta meet with the mayor in two hours. We need ta be there.'

'We?' Beck said, caught off guard. 'Me too?'

'Certainly. Ya gotta problem with that?'

Hearing the challenge, Beck shook his head. 'Can't the city at least wait till we bury our dead?'

Stewart huffed. 'Of course not. Politicians wait for no man when they can lay the blame on some other poor bastard.'