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THE BLACK SUN'S DAUGHTER

M. L. N.

HANOVER

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BOOK FOUR OF
THE BLACK SUN'S DAUGHTER

M. L. N. HANOVER

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—Single Titles

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“You won’t find the same old supernatural capers in *Unclean Spirits*. It builds its own mythology, its own shadowy, intriguing world.”

—*New York Times* bestselling author Carrie Vaughn

Also by M. L. N. Hanover

UNCLEAN SPIRITS
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t="1em" wiight="2em" align="center">*To Lankester Merrin and Damien Karras*

killling rites

AS ALWAYS, my first gratitude belongs to Jayné Franck for the loan of her name. Also, to my editor, Jennifer Heddle, and my agents, Shawna McCarthy and Danny Baror, without whom I would never have come this far. This book in particular exists because of the kindness and understanding of my family, and Ty Franck and Carrie Vaughn, who have made this series better than it would have been.

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prologue



chapter one

Now that she was alone with him, Marisol wished she'd paid more attention the first time Carl scared her.

The winter stars of northern New Mexico spilled out across the sky. There wasn't any moon, and this far out of town, there weren't any lights except the distant ant-trail of white and red on the highway. The patches of snow on the ground didn't have more than starlight to reflect. There were supposed to be meteors, but there weren't, and the codeine in the cough syrup Carl stole from the hospital didn't feel right. She lay in the scarred steel bed of the truck, shivering and watching the darkness. Carl wasn't even pretending anymore. He was sitting up, smoking one of those fucked-up filterless cigarettes he bought down in Española, and poking at her with his feet. The cherry kept going bright and then dim and then bright again. In the starlight, she couldn't tell where he was looking, but she figured it was at her. Not that she could see. She just felt like his eyes were on her.

He'd seemed all right when they were back at the bar. A little rough around the edges, but shit, who wasn't, right? A little angry, maybe. One time, when he got really drunk, he'd said some things that scared her, calling the other girls names and talking about how much he wanted to punch them out. But he was drunk then, and he was okay all the other times. She'd told herself that was her being stupid. When he asked if she wanted to go out, watch the stars fall, it had sounded kind of fun.

She hadn't known it was just going to be the two of them. Or that he wasn't going to look up.

"I'm cold," she said. "There's nothing going on."

"Just wait," he said. "You've gotta be fucking patient. Shit."

His toe poked her in the ribs again. Instinct told her not to react. He wanted her to, and she didn't know why. If her head wasn't all fucked-up from that codeine, she thought she'd be able to figure a way out of here. A way to laugh it all off and get him to drive her back into Taos, back to the bar. No hard feelings, laugh about it, be friends like before. If she could just think better.

She had her cell phone, but it was in her purse, in the cab of the truck. And out here, who knew if she'd even get reception. She could walk back to the highway. They'd been driving for maybe twenty minutes after he pulled off onto the side road. The roads were bad. They probably never broke twenty miles an hour. She could walk back to the road in maybe an hour, maybe more than that. Was that right?

He poked her again. She tried to move away from him without seeming like she was.

“You know what I hate? You know what I really fucking hate?” he asked. The cherry flared, and for a second, she could see his face by the light: dark eyes, bent nose, the lines etched into his cheeks. “I hate all those cock-teasing bitches at the bar. Don’t you?”

The shift from not being sure to knowing was like someone reaching into her chest and turning a light switch. Up until then, she’d been able to tell herself that she was wrong, maybe. That Carl was just a little weird. That she was stoned and paranoid. That she could talk herself out of this one. But now she knew it.

He was going to rape her.

“I said don’t you hate all those cockitches at the bar?” Carl said. He poked her again. Hard this time.

“Yeah,” she said. The word came out soft and small, like she couldn’t catch her breath. “Hate ’em.”

“Thought you would,” he said. “ ’Cause you don’t think you’re like them, do you?”

“I’m on my period,” she said.

The pause told her she shouldn’t have.

“Why the fuck would you say something like that?” Carl said. There was a buzz in his voice, angry and deep. “What are you ... I mean, *fuck*.”

In the dark bowl of stars, a light streaked and was gone again. *Look, a falling star*, she wanted to say. *Just like you said there would be*. The truck shifted. His hand was around her arm, squeezing hard.

“Stop it!” she said, knowing that he wouldn’t. That this bad night was just getting started.

And then he was gone. Something muffled and violent happened in the gravel by the side of the truck. Someone—maybe Carl—grunted. Something snapped, a deep, sudden sound, like a wet two-by-four giving way. Carl screamed once, and Marisol screamed too. The world went quiet. Carl was out of the truck, on the ground. She heard him panting. Her heart was like a canary beating itself to death against its birdcage. Carl moaned. Footsteps came to the edge of the pickup. They weren’t Carl’s. In the starlight, it was only a deeper darkness by the side of the truck. Her back was pressed against the side of the truck bed hard enough to hurt. Somewhere, Carl moaned and started to weep. Marisol heard herself squeak.

“*Cálmate, cálmate, hija. Estás bien,*” the shadow said. His voice was like a gravel road. “*No te preocupes ...*”

“Who the fuck are you?” she said. She was crying. She hated that she was crying.

The shadow chuckled. The driver’s-side door opened. From where she was, she couldn’t see well, but she had the impression of dark skin, a white shirt with wide suspenders like her grandpa used to have. The stranger leaned into the cab, then stood back up. The door shut, and after the light, the dark was worse. She couldn’t see anything.

“I’m guessing you’ve never had a colonoscopy, right?” the shadow said. When he spoke English, he sounded like something was funny. An object landed on the steel beside her with a clank. After a moment, she put out her hand. It was the rounded plastic bottle of cough syrup. “I haven’t either, matter of fact. Doesn’t apply to my situation. But that shit? That’s what they give you before they snake a Roto-Rooter up your ass.”

“Codeine?” she said.

His laughter was wet, and it clicked unpleasantly.

“That’s not codeine,” he said.

She touched the bottle. Carl was still on the ground, somewhere behind the shadow. She could hear his breath, his little gasps of pain.

“It’s roofies, isn’t it?” she said.

“No. Midazolam. Same class of drugs, but this one keeps you awake. Just dopey. You can still put up a fight, just not a good one, which is the way Carl here likes it. And it screws up your memory, so come tomorrow, you won’t know what happened except for the bruises. This rat fucker’s been using it on girls for the past six months. There was one of them even called him to apologize afterward. Thought she’d gotten drunk and tried to beat *him* up.”

“Are you a cop?”

“Kiddo, I’m not even the good guys.”

She heard a soft clinking of metal on metal. She was starting to make the shape out again, her eyes readjusting to the darkness.

“I know this is a pain in the ass, but I’m taking the keys. If I don’t, you’re gonna try and drive this, and really, you’re more messed up than it seems like. Better if you don’t have the option.”

“But—

“You can sleep it off here. Inside the cab’ll be warm enough. There’s a blanket in there. Walk to the highway come morning, you’ll be all right. Cops find that bottle, ask a few questions around Taos and Arroyo Seco, and they’ll connect the dots pretty quick. They’ll look for him but no one’s going to give you any shit about this. You won’t take the blame.”

“The blame?”

“Well, if there’s any blame to be taken. That’s the good thing about guys like Carl. No one misses ’em.”

Carl said something obscene, spitting the words out. Gravel crunched, and the impact drove the shadow forward, slamming it up against the truck. Marisol heard Carl grunting, straining. She’d been around enough fights to recognize the sound of violence. She moved forward, the plastic cough syrup bottle in her hand as if she could use it as a weapon.

The roar was deep, ragged, and inhuman. It rose up like something out of the earth, the sound towering over the desert night. Marisol had heard mountain lions call before. She’d heard the howling of a wolf pack. This was worse. It wasn’t even animal. And it was huge.

The shadow moved once, twice. Carl screamed, his voice almost lost in the overwhelming demonic wail. Marisol dropped to her knees. Even when she’d been alone in the truck with Carl, knowing what was going to happen, even when the shadow man had ripped Carl away, she hadn’t thought to pray. It was that sound. That sound had her hands in front of her, clasped to her chest, and the Our Father pouring from her lips before she knew she was doing it. *Santificado sea su nombre. Venga su reino. Hágase to voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo ...*

It seemed to go on forever. The thunderous voice rose and deepened, washed away the world. When it was gone, all that was left was a wet sound, like someone sucking