

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**DEREK LANDY**



# Skulduggery Pleasant

DEAD OR ALIVE

TIME IS RUNNING OUT

DEREK LANDY



DEAD OR ALIVE



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*In years to come, it'd be nice if Covid-19 was an easily managed affliction,  
or even a distant memory.*

*But right now, as we're living through it, it's robbing us of time and loved  
ones.*

*So this is to all the good times we've spent with the people we love, and all  
the great times still to come, and the loved ones we've yet to meet. If this  
book has a message, it's that time heals, and love is forever, and laughter is*

—

*Hold on. No.*

*The message, I think, is that bad times pass, and good times are always ...  
no. That's not it, either.*

*Maybe something about punching? There's a lot of punching in this book.  
Some kicking, too. And jokes. Many jokes. Man, I'm funny. I find myself  
hilarious, I don't mind telling you. Absolutely ...*

*Wait, what was I talking about?*

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# 1

This was surely going to be the greatest day in the life of Rancid Fines, and it was a Tuesday. Not the most auspicious day of the week, he supposed, but he was aware of at least a few momentous things that had occurred on Tuesdays before now.

The stock market crash, back in 1929. That had been on a Tuesday.

The *Challenger*. That had exploded on a Tuesday in 1986. He'd been sad about that. He'd never particularly liked mortals, but had always admired astronauts. He liked the way they bounced on the moon.

Elvis had died on a Tuesday, as had Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and the Big Bopper.

D-Day. That had happened on a Tuesday and it had ruined everything, back when he'd been working with the Nazis. It had almost soured Tuesdays for him forever.

But he was about to take Tuesdays back. He was about to restore the most depressing day of the week to its former glory, if it had ever had any.

He checked his watch, and smiled: 4.48 in the morning would forever be known as the time the Faceless Ones returned to their rightful place as masters of the Earth.

He threw the switch. Very little happened.

"What's wrong?" asked Kiln.

"Nothing," Rancid said, hurrying over to the array and checking the connections. There were over a dozen power cables leading to and from the metal dish – any one of them could have come loose. It was an easy fix. It would be an easy fix. It had to be an easy fix.

"What are you doing?" Kiln asked.

Rancid resisted the urge to shout at him, to tell him to shut up and let him work. Now was not the time to lose his temper. This was a joyous occasion – or it would be, once it got going. Besides, Kiln was a good deal taller than him and a good deal stronger and a good deal scarier.

Rancid Fine was tall in the mind. He was strong in the heart. He was scary in the soul.

“It’s a loose cable,” he muttered. “It’s an easy fix.”

It was a nice night. Summer was a month away and the sky twinkled with stars. He was glad the Faceless Ones were going to return to good weather. He imagined that the dimension they’d been exiled to was cold and barren. He was looking forward to welcoming them back to the warmth.

“What’s wrong with it?” Kiln asked, coming over.

Rancid got to his feet, staring at the array. The Crystal of the Saints – yellow, as big as both of Rancid’s fists side by side, sat in its place in the centre of the dish. With the power cables connected – which they were – the crystal should have been glowing. All those sigils he’d painstakingly carved into the metal, they were supposed to be glowing, too. The whole thing should have been lighting up the entire mountainside.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Rancid said.

“Then why isn’t it working?”

“Give it time.”

Kiln frowned. “How much time?”

“As much as it needs.”

“Rancid, you said it would work immediately. You said all the adjustments you’d made to the array would mean an instant connection. You said it would light up – you said there’d be fireworks.”

“It just needs more—”

Kiln grabbed him by the collar of his coat and pulled him in. “I’ve spent every last cent I have on this project! Everything I own went into the equipment that you specified! That you designed!”

“It will work!” Rancid squealed.

“It will not work! It was never going to work! The array can’t pull power out of the Crystal of the Saints because there is no power! It’s a dud!”

“No!” Rancid screamed.

Kiln threw him down. “My whole life,” he said, horrified. “I bet my whole life on this.”

“It will bring the Faceless Ones back,” Rancid whimpered.

“I don’t care about them,” Kiln sneered. “I don’t give a damn about your gods! I was after the power you assured me was resting in that thing! With it, I could have had everything! I’d have been able to rebuild my fortune a hundred times over!”