

“Funny and smart, twisty and surprising.” —Megan Miranda

FINLAY DONOVAN IS



KILLING IT

a mystery

FINLAY DONOVAN
IS **KILLING IT**

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MINOTAUR
BOOKS
NEW YORK

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*For Ashley and Megan,
because I'd bury a body with either of you*

CHAPTER 1

It's a widely known fact that most moms are ready to kill someone by eight thirty A.M. on any given morning. On the particular morning of Tuesday, October eighth, I was ready by seven forty-five. If you've never had to wrestle a two-year-old slathered in maple syrup into a diaper while your four-year-old decides to give herself a haircut in time for preschool, all while trying to track down the whereabouts of your missing nanny as you sop up coffee grounds from an overflowing pot because in your sleep-deprived fog you forgot to put in the filter, let me spell it out for you.

I was ready to kill someone. I didn't really care who.

I was late.

My agent was already on a train from Grand Central to Union Station, where I was supposed to meet her for a brunch reservation at a restaurant I couldn't afford so we could discuss exactly how overdue I was on my deadline for a book I had started three times and probably would never finish because ... Jesus, look around me. Reasons.

My two-story colonial in South Riding was just close enough to the city to make ten o'clock sound reasonable when I'd scheduled it. It was also just far enough outside the city to convince otherwise sane people to buy life-size inflatable dolls so they could slither into the HOV lane without getting a ticket, or without being subjected to a drive-by shooting by any of the rest of us who had not yet sold our souls to buy inflatable dolls of our own.

Don't get me wrong. I'd liked South Riding, before the divorce. Back before I'd known my husband was sleeping with our real estate agent, who also sat on the board of the homeowners association. Somehow, I'm guessing that's not what the saleslady had in mind when she'd described our suburban mecca as having a "small-town" feel. The brochure had featured photos of happy families hugging each other on quaint front

porches. It had used words like *idyllic* and *peaceful* to describe the neighborhood, because in the glossy pages of a real estate magazine, no one can see through the windows to the exhausted stabby mommy, or the naked sticky toddler, or the hair and blood and coffee on the floor.

“Mommy, fix it!” Delia stood in the kitchen rubbing her fingers over the patchy wet stubble where she’d scratched herself with the scissors. A thin bead of blood trailed over her forehead and I smeared it up with an old burp rag before it could drip in her eye.

“I can’t fix it, sweetie. We’ll take you to the hairdresser after school.” I pressed the cloth to the bald spot until the bleeding stopped. Then, with my cell phone tucked between my shoulder and my ear, I crawled under the table and scraped together the fallen strands of her hair, counting unanswered rings.

“I can’t go to school like this. Everyone will laugh at me!” Delia cried big snotty tears as Zachary rubbed toaster waffles in his hair and gawked at her from his high chair. “Daddy would know how to fix it.”

My head smacked the underside of the table, and my two-year-old erupted in a fit of wails. I got stiffly to my feet, brandishing a fistful of my daughter’s wispy locks. The rest of the trimmed bits were stuck in the syrup on the knee of my pants. Biting back a swear my two-year-old was certain to repeat for weeks in the grocery cart if I voiced it aloud, I tossed the hairy poultry shears into the sink.

Sometime around the forty-seventh ring, the call went to voice mail.

“Hi, Veronica? It’s Finlay. I hope everything’s okay,” I said sweetly, in case she’d been crushed to death in a car accident or burned alive in a house fire overnight. You never want to be the asshole that leaves a message promising to kill someone for being late, only to find out they’ve already been murdered. “I was expecting you at seven thirty so I could get to my meeting downtown. I guess you forgot?” My cheerful lilt at the end of the sentence suggested this was okay. That we were okay. But this was not okay. *I* was not okay. “If you get this message, give me a call back. Please,” I added before hanging up. Because my children were watching, and we always use our pleases and, “Thank you.” I disconnected, dialed my ex, and jammed the phone back under my ear as I washed all hope for salvaging the day from my hands.

“Is Vero coming?” Delia asked, picking at her handiwork and frowning at her sticky red fingers.

“I don’t know.” Vero would probably pull Delia into her lap and style

the whole mess into some trendy comb-over. Or conceal it under an intricate French braid. I was pretty sure any similar attempt on my part would only make matters worse.

“Can you call Aunt Amy?”

“You don’t have an Aunt Amy.”

“Yes, I do. She was Theresa’s sister in college. She can fix my hair. She studied cometology.”

“You mean cosmetology. And no, just because she was Theresa’s sorority sister does not make her your Aunt Amy.”

“Are you calling Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“He knows how to fix things.”

I pasted on a strained smile. Steven knew how to break things, too. Like dreams and wedding vows. But I didn’t say that. Instead, I gritted my teeth, because child psychologists say it’s not healthy to bash your ex in front of your children. And common sense says you shouldn’t do it while you’re waiting for him to pick up his cell phone so you can ask him to babysit them.

“He uses duck glue,” Delia insisted, following me around the kitchen as I scraped the breakfast scraps into the trash and dumped the plates in the sink along with my sanity.

“You mean duct tape. We can’t fix your hair with duct tape, sweetie.”

“Daddy could.”

“Hold on, Delia.” I shushed her when my ex finally picked up. “Steven?” He sounded hassled before he even said good morning. On second thought, I don’t think good morning was actually what he said. “I need a favor. Vero didn’t show up this morning, and I’m already late for a meeting with Sylvia downtown. I need to drop Zach with you for a few hours.” My son flashed me a syrupy grin from his high chair as I used the damp rag to mop the sticky spot from my slacks. They were the only decent pants I owned. I work in my pajamas. “Also, he might need a bath.”

“Yeah,” Steven said slowly. “About Vero...”

I stopped patting and dropped the burp rag in the open diaper bag at my feet. I knew that tone. It was the same one he’d used when he broke the news that he and Theresa had gotten engaged. It was also the same tone he’d used last month when he told me his landscaping business had taken off because of Theresa’s real estate contacts and he was flush with cash, and oh, by the way, he’d talked to a lawyer about filing for joint custody.

“I was meaning to call you yesterday, but Theresa and I had tickets to the game and the day just got away from me.”

“No.” I gripped the counter. *No, no, no.*

“You work from home, Finn. You don’t need a full-time sitter for Zach—”

“Don’t do this, Steven.” I pinched the blooming headache between my eyes while Delia tugged on my pant leg and whined about duct tape.

“So I let her go,” he said.

Bastard.

“I can’t afford to keep bailing you out—”

“Bailing me out? I’m the mother of your children! It’s called child support.”

“You’re late on your van payment—”

“Only until I get my advance for the book.”

“Finn.” Every time he said my name it sounded like an expletive.

“Steven.”

“It might be time to consider getting a real job.”

“Like hydro-seeding the neighborhood?” Yeah, I went there. “This *is* my real job, Steven.”

“Writing trashy books is not a real job.”

“They’re romantic suspense novels! And I’ve already been paid half up front. I’m under contract! I can’t just walk away from a contract. I’ll have to give it back.” Then, because I was feeling particularly stabby, I added, “Unless you want to bail me out of that, too?”

He grumbled to himself as I knelt to sop up the puddle of grounds on the floor. I could picture him at their spotless kitchen table in her immaculate designer town house over a mug of French-pressed coffee, pulling out what was left of his hair.

“Three months.” His patience sounded as thin as the hair on the crown of his head, but I kept that to myself because I needed a babysitter more than the satisfaction of whittling away at his fragile male ego. “You’re three months late on the mortgage, Finn.”

“You mean the rent. The rent I pay *you*. Cut me a break, Steven.”

“And the HOA is going to put a lien on the house if you don’t pay the special assessment bill they sent you in June.”

“And how would you know that?” I asked, even though I already knew the answer. He was banging our real estate agent, and his best friend was our loan officer. *That’s* how he knew.

“I think the kids should come live with me and Theresa. Permanently.”

I nearly dropped the phone. Abandoning the wad of paper towels, I stormed from the kitchen and lowered my voice to a harsh whisper. “Absolutely not! There is no way I’m sending my kids to live with that woman.”

“You’re hardly earning enough in royalties to pay for groceries.”

“Maybe I’d have time to finish a book if you hadn’t just laid off my babysitter!”

“You’re thirty-two years old, Finn—”

“I am not.” I was thirty-one. Steven was just bitter because I was three years younger than he was.

“You can’t spend your whole life shut up in that house, making up stories. We have real-life bills and real-life problems you need to deal with.”

“Jerk,” I muttered through a thin breath. Because the truth hurt. And Steven was the biggest, most painful truth of them all.

“Look,” he said, “I’m trying not to be a jerk about this. I asked Guy to hold off until the end of the year, to give you time to find something.” Guy. His frat-brother-turned-divorce-lawyer. The same Guy who’d done too many keg stands and puked in the back seat of my car back in college was now the attorney who golfed with the judge on Saturdays and had cost me my weekends with my kids. On top of it, Guy had conned the judge into taking half of my advance for my last book and giving it to Theresa, as recompense for the damage I’d done to her car.

Okay, fine.

I concede that getting drunk and stuffing a wad of Delia’s Play-Doh in the exhaust pipe of Theresa’s BMW may not have been the best way to handle the news when he’d told me they were getting engaged, but letting her walk away with half my advance *and* my husband felt like salt in the wound.

From the empty dining room, I watched Delia twirl what was left of her hair around a sticky red finger. Zach whined, fidgeting in his high chair. If I couldn’t earn a paycheck in the next three months, Guy would find a way to take my kids and give them to Theresa, too.

“I’m late. I can’t discuss this with you right now. Can I bring Zach to you or not?” *I will not cry. I will not—*

“Yeah,” he said wearily. Steven didn’t know the meaning of weary.

He had coffee and got eight uninterrupted hours of sleep every night.
“Finn, I’m sorry—”

I disconnected. It wasn’t as satisfying as a knee to his groin, and yes, it was probably childish and clichéd, but a small part of me felt better after hanging up on him. The very small part (if there was any) that wasn’t covered in syrup and late for my meeting.

Whatever. I was still not okay. Nothing was okay.

I felt another tug on my slacks. Delia looked up at me, tears brewing in her eyes, her hair sticking up in blood-matted spikes.

I blew out a heavy sigh. “Duct tape. I know.”

Musty autumn air rushed in when I opened the service door to the garage. I flicked on the light, but the cavernous space was still dim and depressing, empty except for the oil stain left behind by Steven’s F-150 on the concrete and my dust-coated Dodge Caravan. Someone had drawn a phallus in the grime on the back window, and Delia hadn’t let me clean it because she’d said it looked like a flower, and it all felt like a metaphor for my life right now. A workbench lined the back wall of the garage, topped by a giant pegboard for tools. Only there weren’t any tools. Just my ten-dollar big-box-store generic pink planting trowel—one of a handful of things Steven hadn’t taken when he’d cleaned out the garage. Everything else belonged to his landscaping business, he’d said. I dug around in the scraps left behind on the workbench—loose screws, a broken hammer, a near-empty bottle of upholstery cleaner—and found a roll of silver duct tape. It was as sticky and hairy as my children and I carried it inside.

Delia’s teary doe eyes were gone. She looked at the roll of tape with all the assurance of a girl who had yet to be let down by the most important man in her life.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked, holding a fistful of her tawny strands.

She nodded. I grabbed a knit hat off the coatrack in the foyer and turned back to the kitchen. Zach was watching us, a piece of waffle stuck to his head, pushing and pulling his sticky fingers together and apart with a wide-eyed expression that bordered on mystical. I’m pretty sure he was taking a dump.

Great. Steven could change him.

My scissors were buried under a pile of dirty breakfast dishes, so I drew a knife from the block on the counter instead. The tape peeled away from the roll with a loud shriek, and I held the strands of clipped hair

against the side of Delia's head while wrapping the tape around her like a hideous silver crown until the hair was (mostly) secured in place. The knife was dull, barely sharp enough to hack the tape from the roll.

Jesus.

I forced a smile as I pulled the knit cap over her head, just low enough to conceal the evidence. Delia grinned up at me, her tiny fingers raking the mop of Frankenstein-like strands from her eyes.

"Happy?" I asked, trying not to cringe and draw attention to the chunk of hair that had fallen loose and was now resting on her shoulder.

She nodded.

I stuffed the knife and tape in my shoulder bag along with my cell phone and plucked Zach from his high chair, holding him high enough to get a whiff of his droopy drawers. Satisfied, I slung him on my hip and slammed the door behind us.

I was okay, I told myself as I slapped the remote door opener on the wall of the garage. The motor lit up, a horrible grinding noise drowning out the children's chatter as it hauled the door open, flooding the garage with autumn-gray sunlight. I loaded us all into the minivan, setting Zach's sagging drawers gingerly in his car seat. It wasn't as satisfying as a kick to my ex's groin, but today, a sticky two-year-old in a shitty diaper felt like the best I could do.

"Where's Zach going?" Delia asked as I started the van and eased out of the garage.

"Zach's going to Daddy's house. You're going to school. And Mommy..." I pressed the remote button on my visor and waited for the door to close. Nothing happened.

I set the brake, ducking down to see into the garage. The light on the motor was off. So were the front stoop lights, and the light in Delia's bedroom window she always forgot to turn off. I pulled my phone from the diaper bag and checked the date.

Shit. The electric bill was thirty days past due.

I thunked my head against the steering wheel and rested it there. I'd have to ask Steven to pay it for me. He'd have to call the power company and beg them to turn it back on—again. I'd have to ask him to come over and manually close my garage. And Guy would probably hear all about it by the time I got home.

"Where are you going, Mommy?" Delia asked.

I lifted my head and stared at the stupid pink shovel on the pegboard.