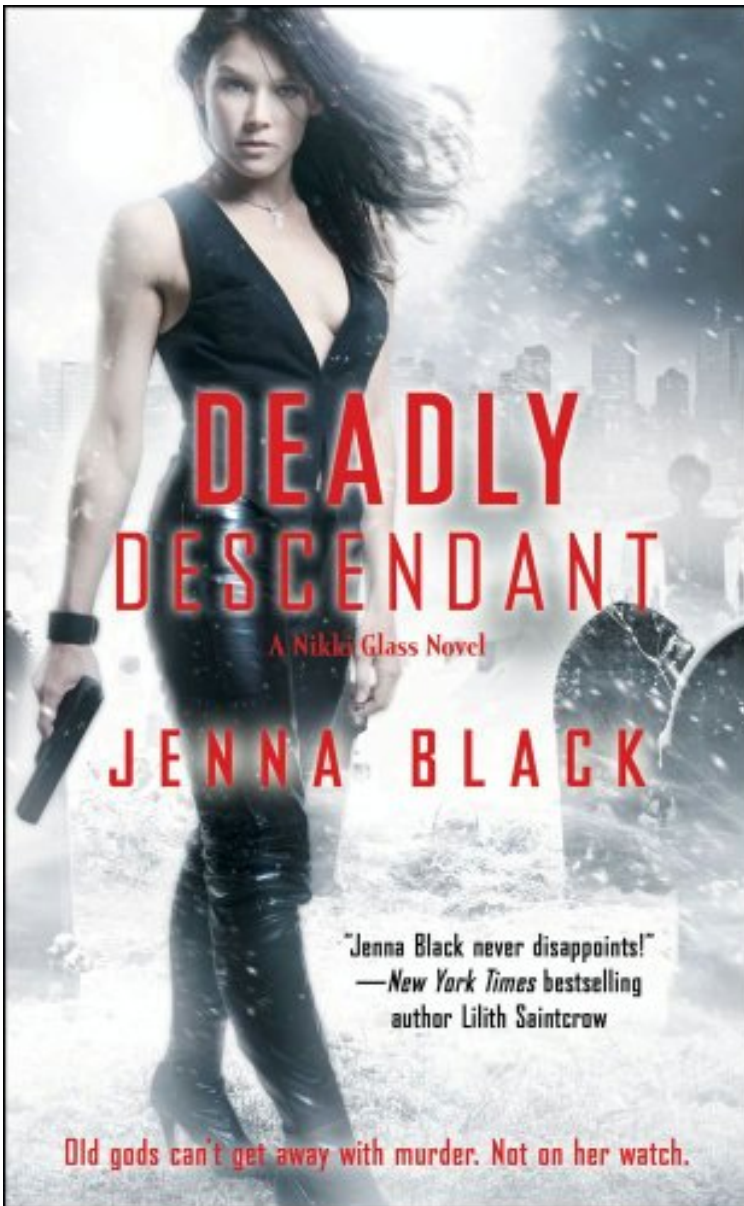


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Deadly Descendant



Par Jenna Black
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurAn ancient evil is unleashed in the modern world unless one fearless P.I. can hunt it down. . . . Nikki Glass, Immortal Huntress, returns in this new novel in the acclaimed series by Jenna Black. As a living descendant of Artemis the Huntress, private investigator Nikki Glass knows how to track someone down. But when an Oracle shows up, warning the Descendants about wild dog attacks in Washington, D.C., Nikki is afraid it might be a trap. The Olympians believe the dogs are really jackals, controlled by a blood-crazed descendant of the Egyptian death-god Anubis. Whatever. . . . If Nikki hopes to muzzle Dogboy, shes got to catch him in the act. But when she stakes out a local cemetery, she ends up face-

to-snout with a snarling pack of shadow-jackals whose bite is worse than their bark. These hellhounds are deadly even for an immortal like Nikki. Dog spelled backward may be god, but that won't stop Nikki from teaching these old gods some new tricks. Like playing dead.

Early January is not the best time to enjoy the outdoors in Arlington, but Anderson and his bitchy wife, Emma, were having a screaming argument in the house, and outside seemed the best place to be to avoid hearing it. I closed the front door behind me, and the shouting voices were muffled down to a low buzz. The winter air bit at my cheeks, and I stuffed my hands into the pockets of my jacket to keep them warm. Definitely not my favorite kind of weather, but the silence was sweet and soothing. Figuring that I could handle the cold for a while, I sat on the picturesque porch swing and tried to pretend my life was my own. The illusion was hard to uphold when I lived in the mansion and spent my days working for Anderson, examining the covers he had built for the Liberi he had hidden. He'd actually done a surprisingly good job, in large part thanks to Leo, our resident descendant of Hermes, who had become a computer genius in order to better keep his finger on the pulse of the financial world. I hadn't found too many blatant holes in the covers so far, though I'd patched many small ones and still had a long way to go before I was finished. My feet had gone numb, and I was beginning to think it was time to go in, when I noticed an unfamiliar car navigating the long driveway. I shivered in the freezing air as I watched the car approach, wondering who it could be. We didn't exactly get a lot of visitors at the mansion. That was sort of the point of the place. Whoever this was, someone was expecting them, since they had to be buzzed through the front gate. I heard the door open behind me and turned to find Anderson stepping out to join me on the porch. Back inside, Nikki, he said, jerking his thumb at the house. We're meeting in the formal living room. I swallowed to contain my instinctive retort. I wasn't fond of being ordered around. A few weeks ago, when I'd thought Anderson was just a Liberi, I probably would have told him so. I wasn't a timid person, but I found I couldn't look at Anderson anymore without picturing him as the pillar of white fire he had turned into when he'd shed his disguise, and that image was more than enough to discourage my smart mouth. I stifled my urge to protest and ducked back inside the mansion as Anderson waited on the porch for our mysterious visitors. The warm air flushed my cheeks, and they were probably red enough to look sunburned. Guess I'd been outside longer than I'd realized. I made my way to the formal living room. I think the last time I'd set foot in there had been when Maggie gave me the grand tour of the house the night I'd moved in. It really was a formal living room, and Anderson's Liberi were a decidedly informal bunch. The sofa and many of the chairs were already filled with other members of Anderson's household, with the notable exception of Emma. I guessed that meant her fight with Anderson was over or at least on temporary hiatus. It was well nigh impossible to win a fight with Anderson, and Emma didn't take well to losing. Often, she flounced off in a huff afterward; other times, she'd go completely nonresponsive, staring off into space. She'd been Konstantin's prisoner for about a decade, until I'd found her and rescued her (with Anderson's help). When we'd first brought her back to the mansion, she'd been the next best thing to catatonic, and sometimes I harbored the guilty thought that I'd liked her better that way. The woman was disturbed, no doubt about it, and there was only so much slack I was willing to cut her for the trauma she'd been through. I couldn't help wondering if some of her episodes were faked, meant to guilt Anderson into being more agreeable. Sometimes it seemed to work. Other times, not so much. I sat on a chair that, judging by the hardness of its seat and the carved knobs that dug into my back, was meant to be more ornamental than functional and leaned over toward Maggie. She was the closest thing I had to a friend among the Liberi. Any idea what's up? I asked her. She shrugged. We have visitors, and I'm guessing it's Olympians, because Anderson gave us his my house, my rules speech. I made what I was sure was an ugly face. Anderson trotted out that phrase whenever he made an unpopular decision like, for instance, when he invited me to live in the mansion. I was pretty sure that if it came down to a vote, I would be out on my ear. They were a close-knit bunch, Anderson's Liberi, and I was very much on the outside looking in. Sorry I missed it, I muttered, and Maggie laughed. She was a descendant of Zeus through Heracles, and she had the super strength to prove it. She was also by far the nicest of any of the Liberi I'd met. Why would an Olympian be coming here? I asked. I wouldn't quite say we were at war with the Olympians, but it was close. I suspected I knew what Anderson and Emma had been fighting about: their hatred for Konstantin and the Olympians was truly epic. I'm guessing we're about to find out, she said, jerking her chin toward the front, where Anderson was leading three people: two men flanking one woman into the living room. The woman was petite and fine-boned, like me, but that was where the resemblance ended. Her ash-blond hair was cut in a stylish bob, and though she wasn't classically beautiful, she was striking. I'd guess her age at around thirty if she weren't Liberi, which meant she could be a thousand years old for all I knew. Her posture was regally

straight, with an aristocratic tilt to her chin that said she thought she was better than everyone around her.

But then, she was an Olympian, and feeling superior to all non-Olympians was one of the membership requirements. The navy-blue skirt suit she wore looked like it cost about as much as your average compact car. Beside the woman was a guy, maybe early twenties, with coarse-looking black curls and olive skin. He wasn't movie-star handsome, but he was roguishly cute, with a hint of dimples. He didn't have the woman's haughty demeanor, and he was dressed casually in jeans, a button-down shirt, and a slightly weathered sportcoat. The other man had the look of hired muscle. Broad-shouldered, with buzz-cut hair and a square face, he was obviously wary of everyone in the room. The iridescent glyph on the side of his neck proclaimed him to be more than strictly human, but if I had to guess, I'd say he was a mortal Descendant, not a Liberi himself. At least, not yet. Anderson invited the woman to sit in an armchair. When she crossed her legs, she made sure to flash the red soles of her Louboutins. Apparently, she wanted everyone to know that she was rich, because acting superior wasn't obnoxious enough. There weren't enough chairs for everyone, so our other two guests stood, the Liberi beside the woman's chair, the Descendant behind, looking menacing. As a Descendant, he could do what no one else could: kill a Liberi, thereby stealing his or her immortality and becoming Liberi himself. Well, no one else but Anderson, but that was far from common knowledge. His eyes suggested he was sizing us all up. Across from me, Blake leaned forward and glared at the woman. He was a descendant of Eros and had once been a reluctant Olympian himself, until Anderson had offered him an alternative. You wouldn't be here if Anderson hadn't given you safe passage, he said. Bringing your goon with you is an insult. There was a glimmer of amusement in the woman's eyes. I doubted the insult had been unintentional, and Blake was giving her exactly the reaction she wanted. The goon didn't seem to mind being talked about that way, and the other guy deepened his dimples by smiling. How do you know the goon isn't mine? he asked. His voice was pleasantly deep and mellow. You could be taking Phoebe to task for something that is entirely my fault. Blake looked back and forth between the two men and shook his head. He's not your type, Cyrus. There was noticeably less hostility in his voice when he addressed Cyrus. Cyrus laughed, looking over his shoulder and giving the goon a visual once-over. Too true, he said, turning back to Blake. He leaned a hip against Phoebe's chair and propped his elbow on the top of it, his casual demeanor a striking contrast to the goon's menace and Phoebe's stiffness. This is supposed to be a peaceful meeting, Blake, Anderson chided. Don't start a fight. He gave Blake a quelling look. Blake crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his seat. Anderson turned his attention back to the two Liberi. I believe you know everyone here except Nikki, he said, gesturing to me. Nikki, this is Cyrus, Konstantin's son. I might have blinked a bit in surprise, though now that I knew he was Konstantin's son, I could see the faint resemblance. Cyrus was much better-looking and didn't immediately set my nerves on edge as Konstantin had the one time I'd met him. His smile looked genuinely friendly, but looks can be deceiving. And this is Phoebe, Anderson continued. Also known as the Oracle, Blake said, and my eyes widened. Blake had told me about the Oracle once before. She was a descendant of Apollo, and she had visions of the future. According to Blake, her visions were usually impossible to interpret until after the fact. It was thanks to some vision of hers that the Olympians had found out about me in the first place, and that automatically made her not one of my favorite people. Phoebe looked me up and down, her lip faintly curled with disdain. Apparently, she wasn't impressed by what she saw. I can be sensitive about my looks sometimes, but I'd been looked down on by better snobs than Phoebe, and her disdain didn't bother me. Phoebe dismissed me with a little sniff, turning her attention back to Anderson. Let's not pretend a courtesy we don't feel, she said. You don't like us, we don't like you, but at the moment, that's beside the point. Speak for yourself! Cyrus said. I like everybody. His visual once-over had been just as assessing as Phoebe's had been, but far less unpleasant. I was certain he wasn't a nice guy otherwise, he wouldn't be an Olympian but he put up a better front than any other Olympian I had met. Phoebe gave him an annoyed glance. We're here on business, remember? I see no reason that should prevent us from being civil. Either they were doing a good cop/bad cop routine, or Phoebe and Cyrus didn't much like each other. I put my money on the latter. The animosity between them seemed genuine. Why don't you tell us why you're here? Anderson asked. I was sure he already knew, or he wouldn't have let the Olympians set foot in his territory. Phoebe uncrossed her legs. I wondered if she'd crossed them in the first place just so she'd have the excuse to flash her Louboutins and get down to business. I had a vision. I'm shocked, shocked to hear that, Blake stage-whispered. Phoebe spared him a curl of her lip, then pretended to ignore him. Cyrus sucked in his cheeks as if he was trying not to laugh. One that concerns both the Olympians and you people. There was a wealth of derision in the way she said that last part, and more than one of Anderson's Liberi stiffened at the insult. A quelling look from Anderson forestalled any interruption, and Phoebe continued. If

you've been reading the papers, you may have noticed that there have been a string of rather bizarre deaths in the area over the past three weeks. Once upon a time, I'd been pretty good at keeping up with the news. Being up-to-date on current events struck me as a job requirement for a private investigator, but I'd been so distracted by my new life that I'd been slack about it lately. You're talking about the wild dog attacks, right?" asked Jack. He was a descendant of Loki, and making trouble was his religion. I wouldn't have expected him to be up on current affairs that smacked almost of responsibility, a concept he usually disdained. Phoebe inclined her head without speaking. Perhaps she didn't want to answer questions from us people. Jack let out an exaggerated sigh and rolled his eyes heavenward. "You've found me out!" he cried, jumping to his feet. "My evil plan is foiled!" The air around him shimmered, and moments later, he disappeared, replaced by a massive black dog that looked like a cross between an Irish wolfhound and a pit bull. It barked loudly enough to rattle my teeth, then let out a fierce growl and bit the air. It seemed I was the only one taken aback by Jack's little stunt. I'd had no idea he could do that. I made a mental note to look up Loki on the Internet when this meeting was over. Honestly, I should have spent some time researching everyone's divine ancestors by now, but I was still trying to adjust to my new reality. I had enough trouble worrying about my own ancestor and abilities without looking into others, at least for now. Maybe that was self-centered of me, but it helped protect my sanity. Anderson shook his head in long-suffering patience. "Jack, sit. Stay. And shut up, while you're at it." Jack gave him a doggie grin, complete with lolling tongue, then jumped back onto his chair, changing back into his human form in midair. I must have been staring at him in open amazement, because he turned to me and winked. I looked away quickly. Phoebe was sneering again, and Cyrus' eyes twinkled with humor. He seemed to think pretty much everything was funny rather like Jack, come to think of it. It made him seem less dangerous, and I realized that was the point. With his dimpled cheeks, Cyrus wouldn't be that good at overt menace, so camouflaging it to lull everyone into a false sense of security was probably a calculated strategy. I put my speculation aside for the moment and looked at Phoebe. "What do wild dog attacks have to do with the Liberi?" "They're not really wild dog attacks, she said, her every word dripping with condescension. Evidently, she didn't have a very high opinion of my intelligence. "Yeah, I figured you wouldn't be here talking to us if they were," I said. I was just trying to move this conversation along. Phoebe glanced sidelong at Anderson, as if expecting him to chastise me for speaking out of turn. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence, and then Phoebe continued. "In my vision, I saw a man with a jackal's head being dragged through an institutional-looking hallway under armed military escort. I believe that means there's a Liberi behind these attacks and that he's descended from Anubis. The sum total of my knowledge about Anubis was that he was an Egyptian god with a jackal's head. Despite everything I'd seen and been through already, I always felt a little shock of incredulity when hearing about someone being descended from a god. A mental 'Yeah, right' was still my natural reaction, although I'd feel stupid about it two seconds later. If I'm right, Phoebe continued, we have to stop him before the mortals track him down. If the government gets its hands on a Liberi Well, it would be bad. For all of us. Blake snorted. "Notice how the fact that there's a Liberi out there killing people is completely irrelevant to this discussion. If the Olympians weren't worried about their own hides, they'd just sit back and enjoy the show. I don't see any sign that you're out there hunting the killer already," she retorted. "Oh, we were supposed to know already that these wild dog attacks are actually the work of a Liberi?" He raised his eyebrows at her in a mockery of polite inquiry. "You know now," Cyrus interjected, surprising me by taking the heat off of Phoebe. "Not that I thought she appreciated it. We don't have to have great and noble intentions, do we? Maybe you ought to try it sometime," Blake said. The words were antagonistic, and yet there wasn't the same rancor in his voice when he spoke to Cyrus as there was when he spoke to Phoebe. Cyrus shrugged. "I don't think it would suit me. To tell you the truth, I'm not sure it suits you all that well, either. It wasn't Blake's fault he'd been an Olympian before Anderson came along, the choice was join the Olympians or die, but I'd often thought his moral compass was a little short of due north. With his casual words, Cyrus seemed to have finally hit a nerve, and Blake clenched his jaw so hard I could see his bones outlined against his cheeks. "So, Anderson put in before tensions could escalate, do you have any idea what this Liberi's powers are? How is he killing these people? And why is he doing it, especially here, of all places? Here in the Liberi capital of the world, he meant. Because the Olympians were headquartered here, the D.C. area had the highest number of Liberi per capita of anywhere in the world, by a wide margin. It was like the killer was just daring the Olympians to come after him and harvest his immortality. We're not sure how he's doing it," Phoebe answered. "Our best guess is that he can control anything canine and that when he wants to kill, he just summons all the stray dogs in the area and commands them to maul his victim. As for why? She shook her head. "Either he doesn't know the

kind of danger hes putting himself in, or hes just plain crazy. Serial killers dont necessarily need reasons at least, not reasons that make sense to ordinary folk. Phoebe turned to fix her eyes on me. We will, of course, do our best to help find this Liberi and stop him. However, now that you have a descendant of Artemis in your fold, you probably are better equipped for the hunt than we are. Although she was looking straight at me, she was obviously talking to Anderson. That didnt stop me from answering. You left out one strong possibility for why Dogboy would be wreaking havoc in D.C., I said. Like he knows perfectly well that this is the Olympian headquarters, and he has a major grudge against Olympians. I mean, I cant imagine why, since you guys are all sweetness and light and everything, but I think the possibility bears examining. The look Phoebe gave me was positively chilling. I seem to have a talent for pissing off Olympians. I cant imagine why someone who has a grudge against us would attack a bunch of mortals, she said. That would be more likely to hurt you than us. She flashed Anderson a sly smile. Perhaps its someone who has a grudge against you? You have been around a while, and Im sure youve made some enemies in your day. Id seen ample proof that Anderson had a temper, and a scary one at that, but he showed no sign that Phoebes insinuations had gotten under his skin. Im not aware of any descendant of Anubis who might wish me ill, he said mildly, though I suppose its possible. I have, as you said, been around for a while. But then, so has Konstantin. She conceded the point with a shrug. I dont think it much matters why the killer is in D.C. He has to be stopped, before the mortals get their hands on him and our existence is exposed. The overwhelming concern for human life was touching, to say the least. But despite her selfish motivations, she was right, and this guy had to be stopped. Assuming anything shed told us was the truth, though I couldnt imagine what shed have to gain by making this up. Cyrus suddenly stood up straight for the first time, his gaze focused somewhere behind my left shoulder. I couldnt resist glancing behind me to see what he was looking at. Emma stood in the hallway, just outside the living room. Her glossy black hair hung loose around her shoulders, making her skin look even paler and more delicate than usual. The ruby-red lipstick heightened the effect even more, though I already knew she wasnt as delicate as she looked. Cyrus had stopped smiling, his expression turning solemn as he met Emmas gaze. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Anderson stiffen ever so slightly, and I knew why. Konstantin and Alexis, his then right-hand man, had raped Emma while she was their prisoner. Anderson couldnt help wondering if any of the other Olympians had participated. Emma, apparently, refused to talk about it. I think Cyrus saw and understood the speculation in Andersons eyes, too, and he gave Emma a courtly half bow. What my father did to you was unnecessarily cruel, he said, and he sounded sincere enough. Hell never apologize for it himself, so Ill do it on his behalf. Phoebe made a sound of annoyance. Oh, stop posturing, Cyrus. I never heard you complaining during the years she was our guest. Emma stood silent and motionless in the hall; then she shivered and crossed her arms over her chest. I couldnt imagine the hell shed gone through, and for the moment, I forgot her frequent bitchy spells and just felt sorry for her. Id have complained if Id thought it would make a difference, Cyrus said. His words seemed directed to Emma rather than Phoebe. Because youre such an all-around nice guy? Blake needled. His tone made the barb sound almost friendly, like there was no real rancor behind it. If I had to guess, Id say Blake actually liked Cyrus, despite the antagonistic potshots hed been taking. Cyrus finally pried his gaze away from Emma and glanced at Blake, his expression solemn. Because Im not my father. Phoebe rolled her eyes and rose to her feet. I think were done here. I agree, Anderson said tightly. This talk of Emmas ordeal had clearly gotten to him. He stood up, his attention torn between Emma, who was now silently crying, and the Olympians, who were technically his guests and whom he didnt trust for a moment. Ill show them to the door, Blake offered. Anderson nodded his approval, then quickly crossed to Emma and gathered her into his arms. Presentation de l'diteur An ancient evil is unleashed in the modern world unless one fearless P.I. can hunt it down. . . . Nikki Glass, Immortal Huntress, returns in this new novel in the acclaimed series by Jenna Black. 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