

NEVER

NEVER

K. D. McENTIRE



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2013 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

Never. Copyright © 2013 by K. D. McEntire. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, digital, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or conveyed via the Internet or a website without prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover illustration © Sam Weber

Cover design by Grace M. Conti-Zilsberger

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228–2119

VOICE: 716–691–0133

FAX: 716–691–0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

17 16 15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McEntire, K. D., 1980–

Never / by K. D. McEntire.

pages cm.

Sequel to: *Reaper*.

Summary: Torn between her duty to her friends, the Riders, and her duty as the Lightbringer, Wendy must make the ultimate sacrifice to bring the worlds into balance once more, even if it costs her very soul.

ISBN 978–1–61614–771–6 (hardback)

ISBN 978–1–61614–722–3 (ebook)

[1. Supernatural—Fiction. 2. Soul—Fiction. 3. Death—Fiction.

4. Future life—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.M478454238Nev 2013

[Fic]—dc23

2013001487

Printed in the United States of America

For Poppy.

You always understood
that the best way to bond
with a quiet seven-year-old
was over Disney, chili dogs,
and many, many books.

I miss you so much.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, this book wouldn't exist without a truly fabulous group of people. I'd like to thank the consistently amazing Joe Monti, Lou Anders, and Gabrielle Harbowy. Thank you so much!

Thanks go to George Levchenko—not only is he an amazing photographer and web designer (Shameless Plug: <http://www.glnet.tv>)—but he very graciously answered 9 PM translation request texts and didn't frown too hard at my garbling his heritage. Thank you, George. You rock.

Karen. You know who you are, lady. Thank you.

Last but not least, thanks go to my husband Jake. Without you I'd never have time to write. Ever. Thank you so, so much.

PROLOGUE

SLAM.

“Huurrk!” SLAM.

The basement door creaked open. Rubbing her eyes and flipping open her cell phone to check the time, Laurie edged down the cold concrete stairs.

“Kara? Honey? It’s midnight. What are you doing?” Dropping her phone into her robe pocket and wrapping her arms around herself, Laurie hesitated on the top step and squinted into the dim recesses of the basement, wishing she’d thought to grab her glasses at the first loud bang. “Note to self: need LASIK,” she muttered, feeling her way down a stair at a time, following the slams and grunts and mourning her warm, soft bed upstairs. The cats had probably already stolen her spot.

“Should’ve put better lights in first,” she grumbled.

They’d purchased the house for a song two years ago and had slowly renovated the entire place from top to bottom, doing most of the tedious bits themselves but hiring contractors for the intricate work. This room was the last to go—they planned on making it into a den eventually, but for now it was snug, remarkably dry for San Francisco, and intact. There were some leftover furniture from the previous tenants: an ancient, wavy mirror, spiderwebbed with cracks; a molding chaise; and some rusting bed frames. Junk they still needed to haul off or recycle.

Laurie yanked on the closest light cord. The faint circle at the

bottom of the stairs didn't illuminate much, but it was better than nothing. Now she didn't have to squint. Kara stood at the end of the room, by the fireplace. She was wielding a sledgehammer.

SLAM.

"Kara, why are you breaking the fireplace? Aren't we leaving the basement alone until you get a raise?"

"You want a den," Kara paused to say, readying the sledgehammer for another blow. The soot-stained firebox was gigantic, plenty large enough that her swings didn't brush the stone arch or the firebox edges.

Kara braced her legs and let fly with the hammer again.

SLAM. "Half the price of those quotes was the demolition of this stupid fireplace."

SLAM. "Well, I've worked on the job for years."

SLAM. "If I can't knock down a wall, then I need to—"

SLAM. "—hang up my tool belt."

Uneasily, Laurie moved closer and pulled the cord on the dangling light bulb above, illuminating the remainder of the dusty room. Closer to Kara, Laurie could smell the Jack and Coke and, sure enough, there was a red plastic cup on a nearby stool, half full. "At this time of night? Really? Are you drunk?"

"Nope."

SLAM.

Kara stopped a moment and jerked her head toward her drink. "I've been sipping on that all night. It's all I had at the party. I'm not even close to drunk." She rubbed her hands together to get a better grip on the hammer—Laurie considered reminding Kara about the work gloves flapping out of her back pocket but, considering Kara's mood, thought better of it. No matter what Kara claimed, Laurie knew her love well enough to recognize all the signs of a truly belligerent drunk when she saw them.

Kara said, "I couldn't sleep. I've got, what, three more days off, right? I can pull this down in three days, no problem. Less if you help."

“Help?” Laurie squeaked, eyeing the neat line of tools laid out on the tarp. “I can’t . . . I don’t have any experience . . . what if it’s a retaining wall?”

This time Kara stopped and gave Laurie a look of such derision that Laurie felt stupid for even bringing the worry up. “I’m sorry. You know what you’re doing,” Laurie said, turning back to the stairs and perching on the bottom step. “Right.”

“Did I wake you?” Kara asked, wiping a forearm against her forehead, smearing sweat and dust in a dark swath across her face. “Is that why you’re down here?”

“Yeah,” Laurie said. She rubbed her neck and sighed, trying not to think of how filthy she must be getting. “Look, I know you’ve done this before. And I know you can do this alone, but . . . I don’t know, shouldn’t a *team* of professionals be doing this? This place is *old*, Kara. What if you inhale lead paint or asbestos or something?”

SLAM. “Fireplace—hell, the basement itself—is too old for that crap. It’s all hand-hewn stone, honey. Solid. It’s a real piece of craftsmanship.”

“Then why are we tearing it down, again?” Laurie wrapped her arms around her knees and tried not to stare at the cracked mirror propped up on the sidewall.

The face stared out at her.

Kara had never believed her when Laurie said that she saw the face, and that sometimes it followed her, grimacing and growling from the different mirrors around the house, but Laurie was positive that she wasn’t crazy. It was too bizarre to just be in her head. She knew what she saw.

Shivering, Laurie drew her robe closer. She’d never had this problem when they lived in Chicago; Laurie’d never had a single paranormal experience before she’d inherited the fixer-upper on Russian Hill. Glad to get out of the Windy City, Laurie had jumped at the chance to move. She’d gotten the job at the Stanford ER, and she and Kara settled down in San Francisco to start their new life.

Laurie never imagined the house would come with an occupant. She'd never been fond of horror movies, Laurie had no idea what to do, and it was getting worse.

It wasn't just the face, either, though the face was the worst of all. She also saw ghosts and skeletons and rambling, rotting things everywhere, even at work. But, the face . . . The face was awful; she hated it and, from the way it was glaring at her, she was fairly sure it felt the same way about her.

SLAM. "Old as this thing is, that earthquake a month ago could have turned it into a fire hazard. Even if we left it, I wouldn't dare use it. I can build you a *safe* fireplace, if you still want one down here. Besides, the way this room is right now, we wouldn't get our money back if we sold. So just go back to bed and let me tear the stupid thing down. Okay, honey?"

Laurie glanced at the face in her peripheral vision. It was showing its teeth now. Forget the bed and the cats; Kara had her grandmother's mirror hanging in their bedroom and the last thing Laurie felt like doing was hiding under the covers while the face watched her toss and turn. "I think I'd rather hang out, if it's all the same to you."

"You're the one who's gotta work tomorrow," Kara said with a shrug. Then she sighed and jerked a thumb at the duffel bag by the stairs. "Maybe you're right. Get a mask; if there's crap in the air, you shouldn't breathe it in. I'll put one on, too, in just a sec." She braced her legs and pulled the hammer back. "I'm on a roll here. I want one more good hit first."

Laurie scrambled to pull a dust mask out of the bag. It wasn't heavy duty like the ones Kara wore on the job, or the ones the contractors had worn to redo the insulation in the attic; this thing was barely a germ mask like she wore at the hospital. Still, every little bit helped.

Kara waited until Laurie had the mask strapped on and then swung at the back of the firebox with all her might.

CRACK-WHOOSH.

“Crap!” Laurie jumped to her feet as a blast of icy air hit her in the face and blew her hair back. “What the hell was that?”

Kara, dazed, tugged on the edge of the hammer and a large chunk of firebox tumbled forward, hitting the hearth of the fireplace with a sharp THUNK.

From the mirror, the face smiled for the first time. The dim figure spun, pale hands aloft, and piggy red eyes glowed with glee. Laurie felt her stomach sink.

“Kara!” she snapped. “That’s enough. You’re done for tonight. Let’s go upstairs.”

Kara didn’t budge.

“NOW, Kara.”

“There’s something back here,” Kara said, drifting forward and hunching over to stare into the hole that the large chunk of masonry had left behind. She reached down and picked up the Maglite from the corner of the tarp. Thumbing it on, Kara shone the light into the crevice. A bright silver shine reflected back, blinding Laurie across the room.

Hand shading her eyes, Laurie began backing up the stairs.

Kara was an Amazon of a woman. If Kara wasn’t going to leave under her own steam, Laurie knew there’d be no way she could move her; that didn’t mean that Laurie was willing to sit down here and wonder what would shine so brightly after a century or two deep in the dark, while the creepy face screamed silent laughter in the mirror.

Laurie turned to scramble up the stairs. Over her shoulder she caught one last glimpse of Kara leaning as close as she could to the hole and shining the light deep inside.

“Laurie . . . honey,” Laurie heard Kara call, “I think there’s a *room* back here—”

The door slammed behind her.

CHAPTER ONE

boosh-bissssbbb. Whoosh-bissssbbb. Whoosh-bissssbbb. The sea kissed Wendy's feet, curling the sand into miniature whirlpools around her toes as she picked her way along the tide line. She loved the way the sand gave under her soles; the crumbly, drier sand clinging to her left foot and the firm *squelch* of the still-wet sand releasing her right with each step. Wendy loved the salt smell and the foggy light, the way the beach stretched empty and quiet for forever in both directions; she even loved the slightly rank smell of rot and marsh that eddied around her now and again from the distant flats up ahead.

"Mom?" Wendy asked, stooping beside her mother as she bent to gather shells. Mary chose each shell carefully, lifting it to the cloud-hidden sunlight and peering for imperfections before rinsing it in the surf and adding it to the mesh bag dangling at her hip.

"Yes, sweets?" Mary's bag was almost full. The shells scraped against one another, a slight scratching that could only be heard in the lull between the *whoosh* of the waves lapping the shore and the *bisssing* as they drew back out to sea. The hem of Mary's long white cloak was impeccable; no sand clung to the underside, no saltwater speckled its length.

"I love you." Wendy reached for a shell to add to her mother's collection, but stopped when Mary shook her head. Her hair, glossy and dark red, glimmered in the light. Wendy had long since given up hope that her own carrot curls would darken to that lovely, bur-nished color. Her hair had a hard enough time just keeping the black dye she dosed it with on a regular basis. It always washed out far too soon.

“That one’s not good enough,” Mary explained, plucking the shell from Wendy’s fingers and flinging it into the surf. “You must only use the best materials when constructing, Wendy. Materials made to last.”

“Constructing what, Mom?” Wendy asked. Her mother dipped down again and plucked another shell from the sand. It was nearly identical to the one she’d just pitched into the sea.

“Whatever you need,” Mary replied, standing and brushing her hands together. “It has to be your very best effort. Nothing else will suffice.” The wind picked up, yanking tendrils of hair across her face. Brushing them aside, Mary sighed and pulled up the hood of her cloak.

“A storm’s coming,” she warned, jerking her chin at the black clouds gathering on the horizon. “Get ready to take cover.”

Then, spying a clear spot in the sand up ahead, Mary moved on with purpose, leaving Wendy loitering behind.

“Okay, Mom,” Wendy agreed to her mother’s back. Mary was always saying stuff like this—a storm’s coming, take cover, watch your back, do your best, you never listen . . .

No . . .

Wait . . .

That was the White Lady, wasn’t it? It was the White Lady who’d said that Wendy never listened, never asked the right questions. Mary had always drummed into Wendy the importance of watching her back, but she’d never accused Wendy of being ignorant or purposefully stupid.

But . . . who was the White Lady? Wendy knew that she ought to know—the knowledge was there, itching, in the back of her mind, hovering on the tip of her tongue—but she couldn’t quite touch it. There was a misty wall there, blocking her. Wendy frowned. She had an uneasy feeling that she was forgetting much more than who the White Lady was, right now.

“Hey, Mom?” Wendy asked, hurrying to catch up with Mary. Her mother had knelt down again, her cloak hanging low around her

as a barrier against the rising wind. Only her hands and arms were visible as she plucked shells from her bag and arranged them in a long rectangle in the sand. The shells touched edges, the flat bottoms pointing inward, the curved edges pointing out, buried deeper in the sand. "Why aren't there any babies? In the Never, I mean."

"Babies are too pure to stay in the Never," Mary replied, her nimble fingers picking the shells without glancing at her hip to see which was next. "Like animals, babies are creatures of impulse and flesh."

Mary sat back on her heels, tilting her head as she examined the long rectangle in the sand before digging into the bag once more. "No self-knowledge. Hardly any self-awareness to speak of. Babies know hunger and suffering but not the reason or the reckoning of it." Mary outlined a number in the top center of the rectangle, using the smallest shells for the detail work and outlined edge. "You have to sense what you are missing for suffering to exist." She tilted her head at her creation. "You must suffer to grow. But you knew that already. Didn't you?"

Her fingers are so white, Wendy noticed, and slim. She squinted at her mother's hands as the storm front began to move in, cutting into the soft, misty quality of the light and darkening the sky above.

Wendy eyed the sky for lightning.

"You do know that you are beautiful to me, right?" Mary finished, pale hands darting across the sand, each nearly moving independently of the other, first the left dipping into the bag for a shell, then the right. "Even in your misery, you are the most exquisite creature. Stubborn, proud, touchy. I love you most of all for your flaws, even the pieces of me that I loathe, slapping me in the face with my failures. You are *me*, made bright."

The number, 3, was complete, sitting in the top center of the rectangle, formed of white cockle-shells and outlined with tiny dark sand dollars. Mary moved on to the center right of the rectangle and fished out her last shell, a slightly larger than hand-sized conch, that she set in the center right of the rectangle. Mary spent a moment fid-

dling with the edges until the outer curve of the conch was sunk into the sand and only the cup remained. In a way, it reminded Wendy of a handle; she could easily see slipping her fingers under the smooth curve and tugging.

“Um . . . thank you?” Then, after a beat of nervous consideration, Wendy asked, “Mom . . . who’s the White Lady?” The wind was really beginning to pick up now, tugging at her windbreaker and making her plaid miniskirt snap in the breeze. Her mother’s cloak hardly moved at all.

“There,” Mary said, satisfied. She stood and brushed her cloak with her hands; no sand fell. She was spotless. “Finished.”

“Mom? Did you hear me?” Wendy asked, nervous now. She didn’t like the look of the sky, of those black clouds roiling like an overboiling pot in the near distance. The rest of the sky was shading purple-black now; the friendly, fuzzy white fog-light was nearly gone. It had to be her imagination, but Wendy fancied that she saw eyes—dark red eyes—glaring at her from the clouds.

“Mmm?” Mary asked, bone-white hands on her hips. She tilted her head and examined what Wendy now definitely recognized as a door shaped of shells in the sand. The *whoosh-bissssb* of the surf had faded; all was wind and silence.

Lightning flashed across the sky—soundless, blue-white and sharp—and Wendy instinctively counted, waiting for a clap of thunder that never came. She dropped off at fifty with a sinking in her gut. The sea could make distances tricky, Wendy knew, but the storm was much closer than that. It would be on them any minute.

“Mom?” she prodded, every inch of her tingling. “Mom, who is the White Lady?”

“Can’t remember, dear? Why don’t you try a little harder?” Pulling her hood aside, Mary looked at Wendy and Wendy cringed away.

Mary’s beloved, familiar face was a ruin, crosshatched with old scars and bleeding from fresh wounds. Her eyes were milky, one blown out completely with white, and seeping blood and pus in thin rivulets

down her cheeks. The tattoos—the exact same ones Wendy sported across her own collarbone—had shriveled and twisted with ancient age and heat, the mummified flesh split over her bones and curling at the edges like thin, weathered parchment. As a counterpoint an exquisite necklace, intricate and twisted and finely etched with Celtic markings, lay across her chest, glinting golden in the light.

“It’s you,” Wendy remembered dully, the white mists of memory parting. “You are . . . were . . . the White Lady.”

Mary’s hair snapped in the wind, the curls tickling Wendy’s cheeks from several feet away. Wendy brushed the curls away and bit her lip.

She should have known it was a dream. How many years had it been since Mary’s hair had been that long? She’d cut it when Wendy was still young, and their ritual of brushing each other’s hair every night before bed had ended a quiet death.

In the before time.

Before . . .

Before Eddie’s dad died.

“I’m still . . . I’m still sick, aren’t I?” Wendy remembered; the realization was like those soundless flashes of lightning, cutting across the pleasant, hazy fog of her memories in one sharp, brilliant blaze.

“I’m in the hospital right now. This is . . . this is just a dream. I’m dying.” Wendy pressed her hands to her lips, felt how dry they were, and how hot her flesh was. She was burning up from the inside out.

“You’re working on it,” Mary—no, the White Lady—agreed. She crossed her arms—not simply pale like Wendy thought, but bones hardly clad in flesh—across her chest and gazed at the coming storm with a strange, shallow peace that Wendy envied. “However, you don’t have to.”

“I don’t think I’ve got a whole lot of choice in the matter,” Wendy snapped. The White Lady was a sick and twisted mockery of everything her mother had been, and Wendy felt foul even being on the same beach with her. But . . . the White Lady knew things.

Knew things Mary had never gotten around to teaching Wendy, or had actively kept from her for Wendy's own safety.

"It's not like the rest of the Reapers are going to let me keep walking around," Wendy pointed out bitterly. "I'm in the way. I'm meddling with their oh-so-mysterious plans. Elise doesn't like it. Or me." Wendy smirked. "Or you, really, now that I think about it. She, in general, just doesn't seem to like much except listening to her own gums flap."

"Even after all this time you're still not asking the right questions," the White Lady said—not mockingly, Wendy realized, but sadly. "Why do the Reapers have any say in what you do or how you go about it?"

"Um," she said, "well . . . you? Them? I don't know! We have this whole family I didn't know about—that you *kept* from me, I'd like to add—and they've got rules and regulations and *a handbook*, and the best you can do is to tell me that they don't have any say in what I do?"

"The only power they have over you is what you grant them, Wendy. You are the one who let them grow close," the White Lady reminded Wendy mildly, turning to face the incoming tide and thickening storm. "You trusted Jane with your Light, she twisted it, and now you are burning with, and dying from, fever."

"If you'd warned me about the Reapers before getting yourself shredded, maybe I wouldn't've trusted them," Wendy snapped, coloring angrily. Her hands balled into fists. She wanted to punch the White Lady in her ruined-beautiful face, to crush the remains of those familiar features until any semblance of her mother was nothing but blood and bone on the sand. "Thanks for the 'I told you so,' by the way."

The White Lady shrugged, careless and cool. If she sensed Wendy's fury she didn't make much note of it. "It is not a bad thing to trust. It speaks highly of you, in fact. You take people at face value unless given a reason not to. I find that an admirable trait."

“The fact that you think *anything* about me is worthwhile is . . .” Wendy faltered. “Wait. Wait a second. You *can’t* find any part of me admirable or not. You’re dead.”

The White Lady turned; raised a mangled eyebrow. “Your point being?”

“No,” Wendy said, shaking her head sharply. “No, I mean you’re really, really dead. Not, ‘oh hey, Mom’s in a coma and her twisted soul is running around town kidnapping kids and visiting my dreams’ kind of dead, but the ‘we *buried* you’ kind of dead. I sent your soul into the Light myself! And souls . . . souls don’t come back from the Light, not that I know of at least. I killed you.”

“Yes, you did, didn’t you?” the White Lady said mildly, a thin smile twisting the corner of her lips. “You opened yourself completely to the Light and let the power flow through you. All my disguises, all my taunting, washed away in the waves of Light.”

“Can I . . . can I be like you?” Wendy asked abruptly, remembering how the other Reapers, like the White Lady, had been able to twist their shape in the dreamscape. “Can I? Can you teach me how to alter my dream-skin? You’re not my mother or the White Lady. They . . . she . . . is dead. You’re someone . . . else. So what do you want to teach me? Will you? *Can* you?”

Laughing, the White Lady abruptly flung up her arms to the crackling, furious sky. “And, at long last,” she bellowed to the heavy, laden clouds, “she finally begins asking the right questions!”

The clouds opened up. A freezing, punishing rain pounded down. Wendy was instantly soaked; icy water steamed off her blazing skin, evaporating where it hit. The world was water and noise; Wendy couldn’t see more than an inch in front of her face.

“Who are you?” Wendy shouted through the thick downpour, fumbling forward, hands outstretched toward the White Lady. Blinded by the rain, Wendy quickly stumbled and fell—the White Lady, or whomever she’d been, was gone, leaving only the door of seashells behind and the faces in the clouds, the red-rimmed eyes in

the darkness, peering down. How she could see them through the downpour was beyond Wendy's ken. All she knew was that the red eyes were getting closer, the rain icier, and soon even the heat of her fever wouldn't keep her safe.

Grabbing the conch-handle, Wendy yanked on the dreamscape door.

It opened . . . and she slipped through.