


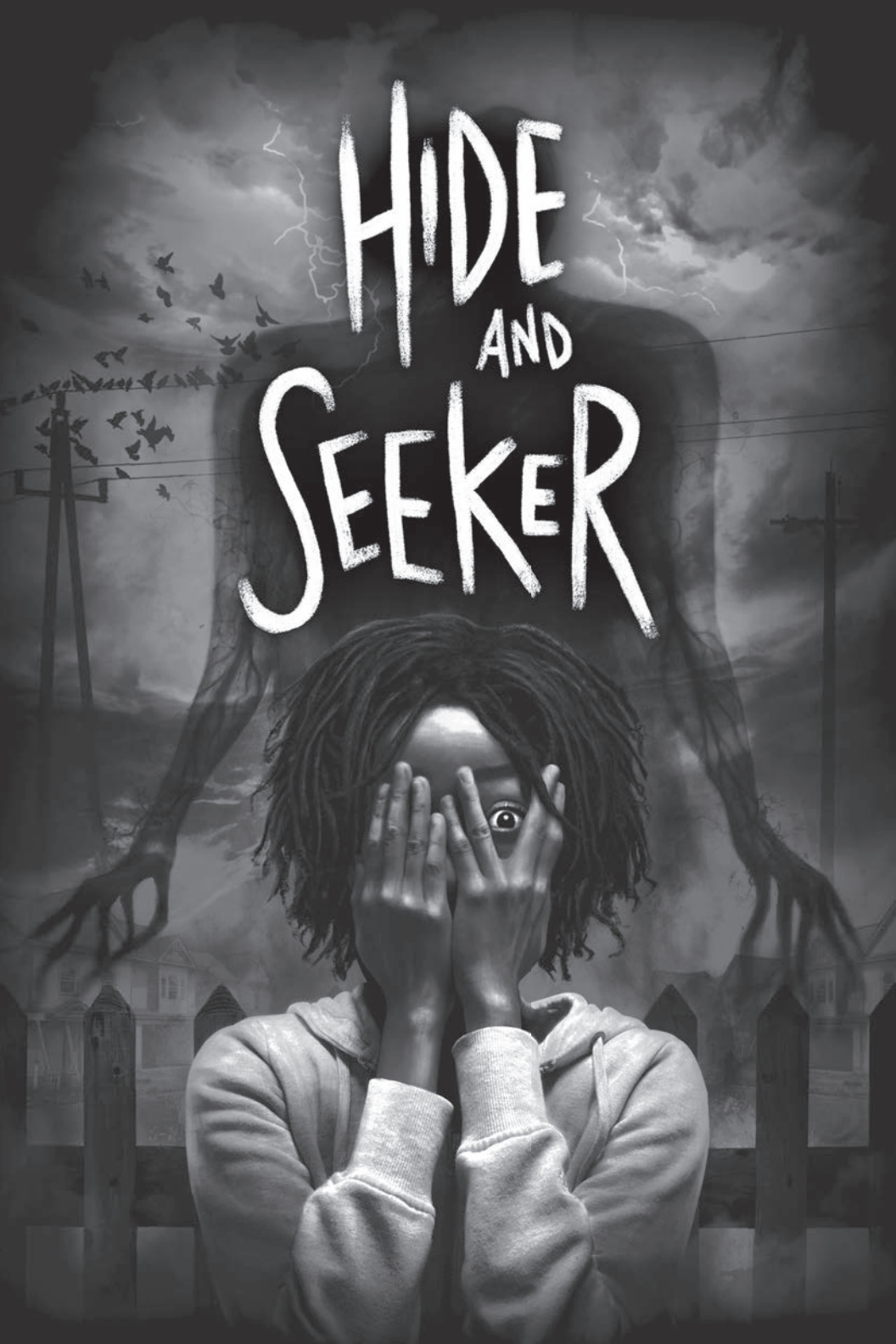
READY OR NOT, HERE IT COMES!

# HIDE AND SEEKER



DAKA HERMON

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FOR MY MOM AND DAD, MARY AND JOSEPH HERMON,  
WHO ALWAYS BELIEVED.

FOR MY GRANDMA FLORENCE DELORIS VAUGHN,  
WHO IS THE REASON I KNOW SUPERHEROES ARE REAL.

# 01

Zee never shoulda come back. Not like this.

Limp blue balloons and crinkled streamers are tangled around the mailbox at the end of Zee's driveway. I adjust my sweaty baseball cap and sigh. Not even the decorations are excited about his welcome home party.

A fat gray cloud settles directly above the house. Shadows play across the tattered roof shingles, and trails of dirt, like black tears, streak the windows. I shiver as beads of sweat roll down the sides of my hot face.

"Justin," a voice screeches.



I spin around. My friend Nia skips down the sidewalk carrying a small wrapped box.

“Hey.” She skids to a halt. Her long braids flap out behind her like a superhero cape in the wind. She extends her fist and smiles so big her dimples bite into her chipmunk cheeks.

“Hey.” I bump her knuckles with mine. I haven’t seen her since we met up for the Fourth of July fireworks last week. They’re legal in Chattanooga, so the sky was lit up most of the night.

“I love that shirt,” she says.

I study my wrinkled *Star Wars* T-shirt. Most of the design has faded. Only the outline of Darth Vader’s helmet and the words “I am” remain.

“Let me fill in the blank. I am . . . happy to see you,” she says with a giggle.

I roll my eyes and point to the box she’s holding. “What’s that?”

“A welcome home present for Zee. New paintbrushes.” She bites the corner of her lower lip. “It’s from both of us. I figured you’d be thinking about other things.”

Yeah, my “other things” list is so long I trip over it when I walk. I shift from foot to foot. “Uh, thanks.”

She stares at something over my shoulder. “That’s the second one I’ve seen since I left my house.”

I turn. A police car cruises down the street. There’s been a lot more patrols lately.

“C’mon.” She tugs me up the driveway.

I drag my feet. “We’re early. Maybe—”

“Four hundred and four days,” says Nia.

“What?”

“Zee disappeared four hundred and four days ago. It’s been one year, one month, and nine days since we’ve seen him. That’s a *long* time.”

It’s still fresh. I didn’t think things could get any worse after Zee went missing, but seven days after that I was proven wrong.

I trip over my feet as Nia pulls me up the creaking porch steps. The front door flies open. Mrs. Murphy, Zee’s mom, stands in the doorway smiling like she won the Tennessee Mega Lottery. She didn’t.

“Y’all came. I wasn’t sure . . . Zechariah is gonna be so happy,” says Mrs. Murphy.

Zee’s real name is Zechariah Murphy; his mom named him after some prophet in the Bible. We call him Zee ’cause it’s easier and sounds cooler—no offense to the Bible guy.

“How are you, sweetie? Your family okay?” The questions sprint out of Mrs. Murphy’s mouth like they’re in a fifty-yard dash.

Nia nods. “Yep. We’re all good. We just got back from our family reunion.”

“Was it fun?” Mrs. Murphy asks, running her hand over Nia’s long braids.

“Yeah, I got to see my grandma,” Nia says with a heavy sigh. “She didn’t remember me at first. My mom told me forgetting stuff can happen when you get old.”



"That's true," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Well, I don't like it," says Nia. "I wish people didn't have to grow old. My grandma can't even move around that much, but we still had some fun. We played our favorite game, Did You Know?"

"I'm glad you were able to spend some time with her," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Yeah," Nia says quietly, then she smiles. It's not as bright as usual. "Did you know about ninety-six percent of families create cool T-shirts for their family reunions?"

Mrs. Murphy shakes her head. "I didn't know that." Her dark hair swings back and forth, revealing chunks of new gray strands. "Did your family make shirts?"

Nia snorts. "Nope. We're part of the lame four percent." She holds up the present. "We brought Zee something. It's not a T-shirt."

"You didn't have to do that, but I'm sure he'll love whatever it is." Mrs. Murphy pats Nia's cheek. "And thank you for the care package. It meant a lot."

Care package? Great. I feel lower than gum on the bottom of a shoe. Since Zee was released from the hospital two weeks ago, I've only stopped by once, to tie a "Welcome Home" balloon on the mailbox. I didn't even go inside to see him. "WORST FRIEND EVER" should be tattooed on my forehead in all caps. It's just . . . I didn't want to see him so messed up. Still don't.

Mrs. Murphy turns to me. “Hi, baby.” She tugs me close.

Air swooshes out of my lungs. A mom hug.

One week after Zee disappeared, my mom died. That means it’s been 397 days since I’ve heard her voice, seen her smile, felt her arms around me.

I sink into Mrs. Murphy’s round, soft body. She smells like flowers and chocolate. For a moment I can pretend she’s mine, then a tidal wave of sadness crashes over me.

Three hundred and ninety-seven days. I know Nia didn’t mean to do it, but now I have a count stuck in my head. I’ve heard people say that losing someone doesn’t hurt as much after a while. They’re wrong. The pain is still there, but it’s not constant. I have sneak attacks. You feel okay for an hour or a day, then BAM! You experience the heartbreak all over.

I wiggle free of Mrs. Murphy.

Her piercing gaze roams over my face. I pretend not to notice the puffiness under her tired eyes. “How ya doing?” she asks.

I slide my hat back over my short locs. “I’m good.”

With a weak smile, she straightens her loose dress. “I wanted to thank you again for taking out my trash and cutting the grass while Zechariah was, uh, gone all that time. You were dealing with—”

“I had to mow other lawns anyway, and I didn’t mind helping out,” I say. “Zee would have done the same for me.”

Mrs. Murphy squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to be there for you when your mom—”

“It’s fine.” My chest tightens. I stuff my trembling hand into the right back pocket of my jeans and clutch a knobby puzzle piece. After several deep breathes the pain in my chest eases.

“I . . . I told Zee about your mom,” she says softly.

I bite the inside of my cheek. “How did he . . . Was he okay?” Another person he loved was gone. Zee’s dad died in a car accident when he was four.

Mrs. Murphy blinks hard, and I hope she doesn’t start crying. I couldn’t handle that. “It’s been hard for him. Everything’s hard right now.”

I nod. He would have wanted to say goodbye, be there for her funeral. That’s another reason why his disappearance was so strange. He’d never miss it on purpose.

“When Zee was gone I always had this feeling he was close, but I . . .” She swallows hard.

“Yeah.” I get it. Sometimes it was like Zee was right beside me. Like I sensed his presence, but I think it was because I missed him so much.

“You never gave up,” she says. “You said he’d come back and you were right.” Mrs. Murphy gestures for us to enter.

I step inside the house. My feet hit shattered picture frames propped up near the doorway. A dirty sheet covers the hardwood floor, and two paint cans sit by the couch. Leaning against a chair, there’s a large canvas forest painting with a slash mark down the middle.

My eyes travel over the walls. Dark smudges and deep scratches are visible underneath the new layer of white paint. I shudder as a chill tiptoes up and down my spine.

“Sorry about the mess. I haven’t had time to straighten up,” Mrs. Murphy says. “I’ve been busy.”

Mrs. Murphy has always kept a clean house. This isn’t like needing to dust or vacuum. The living room isn’t dirty. It’s damaged.

“You, uh, redecorating?” Nia glances around.

“Zee . . . He’s adjusting to being home again,” Mrs. Murphy says as she smooths out invisible wrinkles in her dress.

There are scratches all down her arms. She catches me staring and slides her hands in her pockets.

I lower my gaze. What happened to her? Would Zee . . . No. He’d never hurt his mom. Not on purpose.

Nia side-eyes me. “Is everything okay, Mrs. Murphy?”

“Yes, of course. I—”

A loud buzzer sound causes us all to jump.

“That’s just the stove. The cake is ready,” says Mrs. Murphy.

I dry my sweaty hands on my jeans. My heart is racing and I’m not sure why.

“I knew I smelled sweetness.” Nia smiles, but it’s too bright. Not real.

“Chocolate Coca-Cola cake,” Mrs. Murphy says, closing the front door behind us.

“Soda *in* a cake? That’s brilliant,” says Nia. “And I’m madly

in love with chocolate. It's my favorite food group. Top of the pyramid."

"I'll make sure you get an extra big piece to take home. And, Justin, I'll pack up a slice for Victoria," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Thanks." My sister loves Coca-Cola cake. My mom used to make it all the time.

"Why don't y'all head out back?" Mrs. Murphy directs us toward the kitchen back door.

I hesitate, glancing over my shoulder at the mess in the living room. "Are you sure everything is alright?"

Her eyes shift quickly from me as she chews on her bottom lip. "This party will be good for Zee. He needs to be around his friends. He's a little nervous to see everyone."

Nia and I exchange a startled look. Is Mrs. Murphy saying Zee made this mess? What is going on?

"It's fine. I promise," Mrs. Murphy says with extra cheer. "Everyone will have a great time."

She stares, her eyes pleading for us to agree. I have so many questions rattling around in my head, but I don't feel like I can ask them.

"We can't wait to see Zee. We'll have fun," Nia says.

I nod, but I'm worried. Something is not right.

"Lyric's already here." Mrs. Murphy urges us toward the back door. "He wants to provide the musical entertainment."

Nia groans. I laugh weakly. This could be interesting.

"He brought his harmonica, didn't he?" Nia asks.

Mrs. Murphy nods, her expression pained. "I got a preview. He is better."

Lyric loves music. And he plays lots of instruments, just not well. But I give him big props for his dedication.

"The tables are all set up. I'll bring some more snacks out in a little while," says Mrs. Murphy as Nia walks out the back door.

I glance down the hall toward Zee's bedroom. Three gold dead bolts on the outside of his door catch my eye. My gaze darts toward Mrs. Murphy. "What . . . ?"

She twists her hands. "Zee's not himself yet. He still has some rough nights. Nightmares and sleepwalking . . . I don't want him getting out and hurting himself."

I gulp. Zee isn't getting better. Nobody knows why he disappeared over a year ago and how he turned up miles from home, wandering in the woods and covered in scars. Zee can't explain what happened.

"He'll be okay," I say because she needs encouragement. So do I. Mrs. Murphy blinks back tears and smiles.

"Justin!" Nia yells.

With one last look down the hall at the door dead-bolted shut, I hurry outside to see Lyric hunched over a table shoveling food into his mouth. His mountain of wild curls casts a large shadow across the bowls of snacks. Though we're all heading into sixth grade, he's almost a foot taller because of his super-sized blond hair.

He smiles. Popcorn kernels are wedged between the gaps in his teeth. “Sup, y’all? Way to roll up all late and stuff.”

“The party invite said Friday at four p.m.” Nia removes her phone from her back pocket and glances at the screen. “It’s 4:07.”

“I was here at 3:45,” Lyric says.

Nia sticks out her tongue. “Whatev. You came early for the food.”

“True, true.”

I glance around. No Zee.

“Hey, man!” Lyric says, jolting me out of my troubled thoughts.

He extends his fist. I bump it with mine. Lyric is the only white kid in our neighborhood. His family moved here right before we started first grade and we’ve been tight ever since.

The Fantastic Four. That’s what we called ourselves—me, Nia, Lyric, and Zee. We were together so much our families joked that we shared the same brain. Well, until my mom got sick and Zee disappeared.

Nia sets our present down on the table next to a small object wrapped with newspaper and duct tape.

“What’s that?” I point to Lyric’s gift.

“An awesomely great surprise for Zee.” Lyric chomps on some candy. “No peeking,” he says when Nia tries to inspect the package.

“It’s a harmonica,” she says with a confident smile.

Lyric throws up his hands. “How do you know that?”

“You called me after you found it at that thrift store. You went



on and on about how music makes everything better, how your harmonica, the one you carry around with you everywhere, is the best gift you ever received and how one day when you're a famous musician you're gonna—"

"Okay, okay, Ruiner of Welcome-Home Surprises," Lyric grumbles. "Sometimes I hate that you remember everything."

Nia taps her head with her finger. "One day all the information stored in here could save your life. Knowledge is power, young one."

Lyric laughs. "Whatever. I just hope Zee likes my present. Maybe I'll teach him a song today if he's up to it."

Nia and I grimace.

Lyric removes his harmonica from the front pocket of his worn jeans and kisses it. "You're awesome," he says to the instrument.

"Have you seen Zee?" I ask.

Lyric shakes his head. "Not yet. And I stopped by a couple of days ago, but his mom said he wasn't feeling too good."

"Do you think this party's a good idea?" The locks on his door say maybe not.

Nia tucks some braids behind her ears. "I bet once he sees us he'll be fine. We can make him forget about whatever happened."

Lyric and I share a worried look. I hope she's right. We were hoping he might be able to start school with us once summer break is over. Now, I'm not so sure.

"Anybody want ice cream?" Lyric opens the top latch of a small, portable cart placed near the food table. "Sweet Dreams Homemade

Ice Cream—It'll make you scream!" is scrawled on the side of the cart in purple lettering. Underneath are peeling stickers displaying different types of treats—Popsicles, snow cones, Push-Up Pops, Drumsticks, sundae cups.

"How many have you had already?" I ask.

Lyric's lips twist to the side. "Two or three, maybe four."

Nia rolls her eyes and grabs a sundae cone cup. "You want one?" she asks me.

"Sure." She hands me a small ice cream cone. I sneak another peek at Zee's house as I remove the wrapper.

Inside, a door slams and muffled voices float out an open window. A shadow drifts across the backyard. I peer up at a black crow circling above. Two more join in the bird merry-go-round. They dive low to land on Zee's roof. Their heads twitch from side to side, then their marbled eyes lock on to me.

*Caw, caw!* a bird cries.

I jump. The ice cream slips out of my hand.

"Bad luck."

My gaze jerks to Nia. "What?"

"It's bad luck if you drop your ice cream and the cone hits the ground first," she says.

The cone is crushed and melting ice cream pools around it.

Lyric laughs. "You made that up."

"No, I didn't. I heard it somewhere. It's totally true."

I try to shake off the uneasy vibe twisting my gut. My gaze

travels around the backyard. The urge to leave is so strong I have to lock my knees to keep from moving.

“Ooooooh, this is cool!” Nia holds up a wrapper. “Sweet Dreams has facts on their wrappers. Listen to this . . . Hide and Seek may have originated from a Greek game called”—she peers at the small paper—“apo-did-ras-kin-da.”

“Say what, now?” Lyric asks.

“Apodidraskinda. I’ll have to remember that,” she says.

She memorizes random information. It’s her thing. She likes knowing stuff and learning, but she’s allergic to school. Nia says the lessons are boring and don’t focus on the subjects she’s interested in—everything not taught in our classes. She goes blank during tests, forgets all the information. Her grades don’t reflect how smart she is.

Only a strict study schedule and academic plan designed by her parents saved her from repeating fifth grade. They’re high school teachers with “unrealistic expectations”—Nia’s words, not mine.

“What did your wrapper say?” Nia asks me.

With a sigh, I kneel down and peel the wrapper off the melting chocolate. “There is a Hide and Seek world championship held annually in Italy every summer. One year there were seventy teams.” I toss the sticky paper in the trash and lick the chocolate off my fingers.

“Interesting,” Lyric says. “Sweet Dreams is out here dropping knowledge with their sugary goodness. Listen to this . . .” He

studies his Popsicle wrapper. “Hide and Seek is the most popular kid’s party game.”

“Really?” Nia’s face scrunches into a frown. “That can’t be right.”

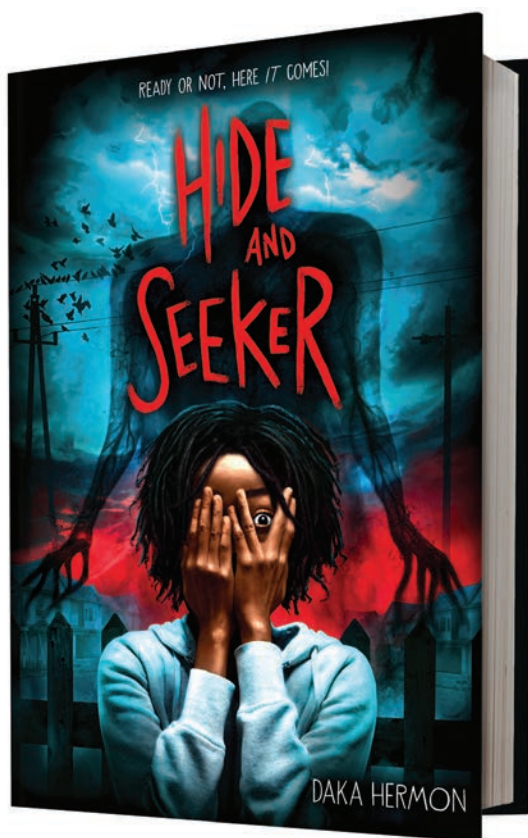
Lyric chews on his treat. His tongue and lips are blue. “Maybe we could play when—”

Suddenly, the backyard fence door swings open and smacks the small table with Zee’s gifts. Lyric drops his treat and dives for the presents but misses. Aww, man, I hope nothing’s broken.

“What up, losers?” a beastly voice asks. “Startin’ the party without us?”

I groan. Forget a dropped ice cream cone. This is the real bad luck.

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