

A LESLIE DEATON NOVEL



A MARKED PAST
THE MERCER LEGACY

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DEDICATION

For my grandma, my mom, and my sister Sarah, who have always believed in magic, and in me.

This is a sample portion of A Marked Past. The completed novel will be released in October 2011. Details are available at:

www.lesliedeaton.blogspot.com

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Until next time!

1 Life Changing Events

“Today was the BEST day,” I sang as I slammed the kitchen door a little too hard behind me and tossed my messenger bag on the table. It slid the length of the table and then toppled to the floor before coming to a stop. “Mom, I made the cheerleading squad! I get to cheer Varsity for basketball season! GO Panthers! Can you believe it? Summer only made Junior Varsity.” I added wrinkling my nose and reaching for a bottle of juice. I twisted off the cap and took a long drink then started rambling again. It was a bad habit I had when I was excited, and today I was excited. “Where’s Dad? I can’t wait to tell him that I landed the double back tuck he helped me with. It was awesome.”

My mom smiled wide when I emerged from the refrigerator and I squealed as I hugged her. “Congratulations honey! I’m so proud of you.” She beamed. “We’ll have a special dinner to celebrate. How about Lou Malnati’s?”

“Yes! Lou Mal’s! I love Lou Mal’s! I want to bring Summer, too. Ok? I mean even if she only made JV this year, we should both be celebrating. But don’t tell Dad about the tryouts. I want to tell him,” I rambled as my mom shook her head and reached for the phone to make a reservation.

“Wait, what?” I said to myself glancing at my cell phone. “It’s already 4:30? I’ve got to text Micah before he goes to wrestling practice.” I held my finger up telling my mom I was busy as I pressed

the keys checking to see if Summer had made it home yet but there was no text waiting so she was probably still driving.

“Your dad’s still at the office so he can just meet us there. THANKS MOM!” my mom called to me as I grabbed my messenger bag and ran up the stairs two at a time.

“Oh yeah, thanks mom,” I smiled and rolled my eyes yelling back down the stairs. I wasn’t trying to be rude; I was still reeling from the excitement of making the squad. Cheerleading at our school was really competitive and I’d worked non-stop for two months on my routine. My dad even made a makeshift tumbling area in the garage where I could practice. So every night after dinner we’d go out there and he’d coach me. He always pushed me to do the best that I could no matter what I was doing, school, cheerleading, whatever. *Because Mercers are fighters Lyyla*, he always told me. His words were tough, but his bright blue eyes and wide smile seemed to keep everything in perspective. He laughed with me when my tumbling didn’t exactly work out and I landed on my head instead of my feet, and he’d pulled me into a big hug when I finally landed the double back tuck for the first time.

“That will be the winning move,” he said with the familiar sparkle in his eyes, “master that one and you’ll definitely make the squad.” His words rang in my head and I squealed because he’d been right. No one else even tried a double back tuck at try outs and I think it was the move that won it for me. I still couldn’t believe I was only a sophomore and I made the Varsity squad.

I dragged my messenger bag up the stairs behind me and tossed it on my bed, flipped open my phone, and immediately sent a text to my boyfriend Micah.

Made the V squad! So excited!! TTYL - Ly

Tossing my coat and shoes on the floor next to my bed, I shoved some ear buds into my ears and settled in to do homework. I had two hours to tackle my biology pre lab assignment before dinner. Begrudgingly, I threw open my biology lab notebook, flipped to the first clean page and started answering the required questions. I didn’t want to do homework. I wanted to jump up and down and celebrate but like I said before, my dad had pretty high standards so grades were very important to him too. So I gave in and kept studying.

An hour later I was almost done with the all of the lab prep when my bedroom door opened and I looked up to see if my dad had

come home instead of meeting us at the restaurant. I couldn't wait to tell him my good news.

But when the door opened up wide enough for me to see out, it was my mom who stuck her head inside. Glancing up at her, I smiled but then noticed that she looked like she'd been crying. I shoved my notebook into my biology book and sat up. Turning to face her, I watched as she loomed in the doorway wringing her hands. My heartbeat sped up and I was getting scared when I pulled the ear buds out of my ears to watch her. She stared at me with a pained expression but my room remained silent except for the sound of my heart beating in my own ears. I felt like I was suffocating as I waited for her to speak. Clearly something bad had happened but she didn't seem to be able to tell me what it was.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I asked feeling my heart pounding in my chest. Her face was pale and her hands shook as she stood in the door way, frozen by something I couldn't quite understand. "Did something happen? Are Grandma and Grandpa ok? Uncle Nathan?" I asked growing more terrified by the second. She shook her head from side to side and my heart sank. Someone was sick, or hurt, or worse, but she looked too terrified to speak. "Mom, what is it?" I asked a little too loudly and my voice physically startled her, making her flinch and stumble backward against the door frame.

She moved slowly, stepping into my room and sat on my bed facing me. She lifted her right hand to her face, and it floated somewhere between her lips and her chin. She looked like she had to pull the words from her mouth because they wouldn't come on their own.

"It's your dad Lyla," she whispered and I could feel my face falling, my throat felt tight, and my heart sped up even more. A million thoughts pressed on my brain at once; flooding my mind with questions and making my head shake from side to side. "He was in an accident." My mom said quietly and then before she could say more tears fell in wide ribbons down her porcelain cheeks. My whole world started to tilt. I could feel it, sliding ever so slightly off center.

"Dad? What did you say mom? He was in an accident?" I managed to push a few of the questions out as tears filled my own eyes. No. No. No. My mind repeated, over and over again.

"In front of his office, he was crossing the street and a taxi hit him." Her voice cracked and she shook her head slowly from side to side covering her face with her hands.

“Where is he?” I asked rubbing tears the in my eyes on the back on my hand. “Let’s go. Which hospital did they take him to? Mom?” I asked, panic filling my chest. I tried to climb from the bed but before I could stand up, she reached out to me grabbing my arm, and held me there.

“He didn’t make it honey. He...” her voice cracked and a sob choked her. She dropped her eyes to her hands and pushed the rest of the words out. “They tried but...he didn’t make it. They couldn’t save him.” Her words came at me in broken phrases like ocean waves in a storm. The words pelted me with water, revealing one horrible fact after another, pushing my tilting world upside down, forcing everything I held dear into a torrent of flood water. My head shook from side to side again, and my mind repeated its previous plea. No. No. No.

I watched my mom’s mouth move and I know some words floated through my ears, but my mind refused to absorb their meaning. I just shook my head slowly as the wall of pain washed over me, leaving me submerged and broken in the flood.

My mom’s face creased with pain as she watched my eyes fill with the flood water. Tears pushed themselves passed my eyelashes and crawled down my face. My dad couldn’t be gone. I’d just seen him this morning. He’d practiced with me late last night. He couldn’t be gone.

I glanced around my room, so much of him was here, so many pictures, stuffed animals, my Cubs cap, they’d all come from him. We’d spent our Saturdays roaming the streets of Chicago as a family. My mom was a photographer so she was always snapping photos, leaving my dad and me to explore the city around us. She’d run ahead or stay behind to get her picture and my dad would scout out some fun. We never passed a street fair or a carnival without winning at least one game and bringing home a souvenir. My stack of cheap stuffed animals could attest to that.

Then there was baseball, and my dad’s slight obsession with the sport. He was a huge Cubs fan and because of that he made sure I went to the games too. I stared at the tiny Cubs baseball cap hanging on my bedpost and my heart ached. It was too small for my head now, but I kept it because my dad loved that little hat. He’d taken me to my first baseball game when I was 2 and insisted on buying us matching hats. Back then the little hat had been too big, and it fell in

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my eyes, covering my face for most of the game. Now it just sat there, lifelessly watching my world flood around me.

“Lyla, honey,” my mom managed then inhaled jagged breath. “I’m so sorry.” My mom started to cry again, this time releasing a soft sob into her hands then leaning forward to hug me. Numb, I sat still, probably too rigid to be very comforting, and let her rest her head on my shoulder. I looked at her and then back at the small navy blue hat with the bright red C. Nothing would ever be the same here. I gasped involuntarily, swallowing a sob, and tried to fight off the crushing force that was pressing against my chest but the tilt and the water were too much for me.

“No.” I said softly. I didn’t want to believe it. It couldn’t be true. Just yesterday I’d made a deal with my dad that if I studied and got good test scores that he’d buy me a car later this year. He’d chuckled loudly filling the kitchen with the sound of his infectious laughter and then accepted the challenge, sealing it with a hand shake and then a big hug. *You are an amazing girl Lyla Mercer; make me proud*, he’d said.

But that wasn’t the last time I’d hugged him was it? I wondered, suddenly panicked. No, I hugged him and kissed his cheek before I went to bed last night too. Goodnight dear one, sleep well, he’d whispered, careful not to wake my mom. She was lying on the couch with her head resting on his leg, and her hand folded gently into his, sound asleep.

“Lyla,” My mom said softly, pulling me from replaying my memory of yesterday. She lifted her cheek from my shoulder and reached her hand out to me.

“Maybe they’re wrong, maybe it wasn’t Dad.” I whispered, grasping for anything that might bring him back before I really had to accept that this was happening. “Who told you that he was...” I couldn’t say the words. “What did they say? What happened?” I asked a flurry of questions, with a tremble in my voice that revealed the terror in my heart. My ears were buzzing and it sounded like I was yelling as my voice bounced off the walls in my room. I was trying to find anything that would explain what she was trying to tell me, besides the true meaning in her words. It had to be a mistake. My dad was fine I thought, raising my hand to wipe the tears that betrayed my hope.

“Your dad’s boss, Mr. Thompson, came here with the police,” the pitch of my mom’s voice was high and her breathing was uneven as she tried to explain. “They said Marcas was hit by a taxi, in the street

coming back from a meeting. The car came around the corner too fast and a few guys scattered but Marcus..." she shook her head quickly and bit her bottom lip. "They tried to save him honey, but he was hurt pretty bad. He didn't make it." She ended in a whisper and as I listened to her describe the scene but all I could hear was my dad's soft Irish accent in my head, telling me that *this too shall pass*.

It was something he said when I was upset. He'd pull me on his lap, hug me tight and whisper those four little words. This too shall pass. I stood awkwardly, crossing my arms too tightly against my chest, and paced the distance between my bed and desk. I watched my mom, waiting for her to say something else but she didn't, or couldn't. She just stared at her hands, spinning her wedding ring in circles on her finger. Her tear streaked face was pink and her eyes were swollen when we looked up at each other in silent disbelief. How could this happen?

I frowned as a tortured expression took the place of her usual easy smile. Her bottom lip was trembling so I walked back to her side, reached out to her, and pressed her shaking body against my own. Wrapping her hands around my waist she leaned against me and I kissed the top of her head. It was something my dad had done to me a thousand times while I was growing up. My dad wasn't here to take care of us anymore, so I would have to do that now. I'd do whatever I could to make her feel better. My dad was gone, and she was all I had left.

I held onto her and let a barrage of silent tears slide down my cheeks. "It's ok mom," I whispered the words even though they had no meaning. Nothing would ever be ok for us again. Our lives were irrecoverably changed by the events of the day. Leaning my head against hers I closed my eyes for a second before creasing my brow and letting another set of tears wash down my face.

"Lyla, honey," My mom whispered but I kept hugging her. I didn't want to face her, not now. I wasn't ready to accept that this was really happening, so I just patted her back gently slowly then walked to the window. "Lyla," she started again but I kept my back turned and stared out into the street. We were both drowning in the water that had flooded my world. My mom sat there in silence for a few minutes listening to the sound of the street outside, letting the world fall apart around us. I sighed, this wasn't us; we didn't fall apart, we weren't those people. Nothing really bad had ever

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happened to us; we were just a happy little family, until now. Until my dad was taken from us.

2 Our Darkest Day

The limousine pulled to a stop in front of the funeral home and I could feel my mom's heart break. It splintered into a million pieces, puncturing her lungs, constricting her chest and forcing her to choke. Reaching over to her, I squeezed her hand and she whimpered, releasing the breath that had been trapped in her chest. She raised a white linen handkerchief to her face and wiped tears from her porcelain cheeks as I watched her with sympathetic eyes. I wanted to fall apart too, wanted to cry until my eyes hurt, but I couldn't, because I had to be strong for her. It's what my dad would do. He would watch over her, and let her do what she needed, to feel better.

The driver looked back at me in the rearview mirror waiting for us to let him know we were ready to go inside. He sat in the awkward silence, surrounded by our pain, and I could see he was struggling with the weight of it. Shifting in his seat, he readjusted the vents, moved his hat a little further to the right, and then cleared his throat, looking at me again, this time in apology.

"Mom, are you ready?" I asked, surprised at the sadness in my voice. It had a ring of finality that scared me. She looked at me with a weeping expression and shook her head, so I squeezed her hand again. "When you're ready mom, no rush. You can take your time," I said quietly looking at the driver's eyes in the mirror to let him know she needed some more time.

While we waited, I closed my eyes, leaning my head back against the leather seat and gave my lips a chance to stop trembling. I wished

my dad was here. He always made things easier, even the little things that seem like that might kill you at the time.

I smiled to myself remembering how on my first day of school I'd been terrified to ride the bus. It seemed so silly now, but even back then, he'd found a way to make it bearable. I remembered lying in bed the night before my first day of kindergarten, crying under the covers. I just kept imagining that the bus would pass me by, or I wouldn't be able to climb the stairs to get on it, or even that the bus might get lost on the way to school and I'd never be able to come back home. All of it was irrational but at 6 years old it all seemed so real and nothing short of terrifying.

My dad was passing by my room that night and heard me crying from the hall. Coming in to check on me, he found my tear streaked face staring up at him from under the covers and he took me in his arms. "Dear girl, wee Lyla, you don't have to worry. I'll be there to wait with you, and I'll help you up the stairs." His eyes sparkled in the moonlight as he spoke but I shook my head in disagreement because he was missing the biggest piece of all.

"But Daddy, the bus might get lost and then I won't be able to come home ever again," I'd cried.

He held me tight against his chest, humming a lullaby and rocked me to sleep, making me forget about the worries that plagued my little mind. The next day he kept his promise. He helped me onto the bus, waved at me as I took my seat, then ran to his car and followed the bus all the way to school. When it stopped out front he stopped to, getting out to blow me a kiss as I climbed down the big stairs and leapt onto the sidewalk. It was his way of letting me know that he was always right there, watching over me, making sure I was safe. I sighed heavily. I would give anything to have him here with us now.

Opening my eyes, I slowly raised my hand to wipe the tears from my cheek and then looked over at my mom. Still gripping the delicate handkerchief in her hand, she reached out and lightly touched my shoulder, indicating that she was ready to go inside. I looked up at the driver and he nodded, quietly climbing from the car to open the door for us. She leaned toward the door this time I wasn't ready, I would never be ready to face a world without my dad in it. I took a deep breath and I held it as my mom stepped out of the car, knowing it was time for us to say goodbye.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leslie Deaton is originally from Dayton Ohio where she grew up in a haunted old farm house. As an avid writer and English major she spent her free time reading great books and writing nonsense in her journal at local coffee shops. Combining her love for writing and reading young adult novels, she dreamed up Lyla Mercer and created *A Marked Past*. She lives outside Washington DC, with her husband, three dogs and her books.

A Marked Past is her first novel.