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Kelley Armstrong cainsville

Series: CAINSVILLE Plot Type: Urban Fantasy (UF) Ratings: Violence—4; Sensuality—3-4; Humor—3 Publisher and Titles: Dutton "Cainsville Files" (interactive prequel, stand-alone story available as an iTunes app, 7/2013) 1 Omens (7/2013) 2 Visions (8/2014) 3 Deceptions (8/2015) 4 Betrayals (8/2016) 5 Rituals (8/2017) (FINAL) This ongoing post was revised and updated on 9/30/17 to include a review of Rituals, the fifth and FINAL novel in the series. That review appears first, followed by an overview of the world-building and reviews all of the previous novels. FAIR WARNING:These reviews contain spoilers for previous books. NOVEL 5: Rituals PUBLISHER'S BLURB: The fifth book and the exciting conclusion to bestselling author Kelley Armstrong's "impossible-to-put-down" Cainsville series, in which she mixes hard-hitting crime writing with phenomenal world-building to create a brand of fiction all her own. When Olivia Taylor-Jones found out she was not actually the adopted child of a privileged Chicago family but of a notorious pair of convicted serial killers, her life exploded. Running from the fall-out, she found a refuge in the secluded but oddly welcoming town of Cainsville, Illinois, but she couldn't resist trying to dig out the truth about her birth parents' crimes. She began working with Gabriel Walsh, a fiendishly successful criminal lawyer who had links to town; their investigation soon revealed Cainsville's mysteries at work in Cainsville, and also entangled Olivia in a tense love triangle with the calculating Gabriel and her charming biker boyfriend, Ricky. Worse, troubling visions revealed to Olivia that the three of them were reenacting an ancient drama pitting the elders of Cainsville against the mysterious Huntsmen with Olivia as the prize. In the series' fifth and final novel, not only does Gabriel's drug addicted mother, who he thought was dead, make a surprise reappearance, but Kelley Armstrong delivers a final scary and surprising knock-out twist. It turns out a third supernatural force has been at work all along, a dark and malevolent entity that has had its eye on Olivia since she was a baby and wants to win at any cost. MY REVIEW: This is the final novel in a series that is based on a complex story arc that Armstrong began building in the first novel, so I recommend that you do not read Rituals as a stand-alone. If you have not read the previous novels, you will not be able to comprehend the intricacies of the mythology, and you will not have the knowledge about past events and characters that you need in order to fully appreciate the nuances of the story told in this book. Also: This review definitely contains SPOILERS for the previous novel. The set piece of Rituals is the love triangle: Liv, Gabriel and Ricky. Towards the end of Betrayals, the three made a pact to stick together, no matter what happens and no matter how much others try to goad them into turning on one another (which is how they wound up in this situation in the first place). They now know that they are the latest incarnations of three tragic figures from the magical past, each of whom made some truly bad choices, thus dooming all of them. (Read my review of Betrayals [below] for more information about this part of the mythology.) Although the Tylwyth Teg and the Cŵn Annwn don't know it, Liv is in the process of making her romantic choice between Gabriel and Ricky, and she does it very early in this novel, so telling you that she chooses Gabriel isn't really a spoiler. Ricky is deeply hurt by Liv's decision, but he tries to pull himself together and maintain their "stick-together" pact, although with Ricky's volatile personality, there is always a sense that he may break the pact if he is pushed hard enough. Unfortunately, a new enemy is all too ready to do that pushing. The scene between Liv and Gabriel are wonderful as tender, while at the same time sad and humorous—all at the same time. Gabriel is such a damaged person that I wanted to cheer every time he reached over to trust Liv and to show love for her. I also felt sorrow for poor Ricky, who gets friendship instead of the life-long commitment that he wished for from Liv. But let's get back to this new enemy that is mentioned in the publisher's blurb—a deadly supernatural force that insists on joining the Tylwyth Teg and the Cŵn Annwn as the third contestant for Liv's favors. While the other two groups rely on their champions (Gabriel and Ricky) to win over Liv, this new otherworldly threat—the bloodthirsty slugh—relies on fear, violence, and deadly threats. As Patrick explains, "The slugh—also called the darkness or the unforgiven—should not even be termed fae, but rather spirits. Dark and twisted spirits. It is said that they share a mission with the Cŵn Annwn, that the Huntsmen are tasked with claiming the souls of those who've wronged the fae, while the slugh do the same for those who have wronged humans." But there's a major difference between the Cŵn Annwn and the slugh: "The Huntsmen may not take all factors into consideration, but they know guilt beyond a shadow of a doubt. The slugh don't care about truth. This isn't a mission to them...It's a hunger. And a joy." Eventually, the slugh story line reaches all the way back to the incident in Liv's childhood that triggered her parents' imprisonment, but this is not by any means a straightforward connection. As Liv, Gabriel, and Ricky try to figure out who the slugh are and what they want, they must also reckon with two of their mothers: Pamela (Liv's deceased mother who is still in prison but is still powerful enough to meddle dangerously in their affairs) and Seanna (Gabriel's mother, who has abused him terribly all his life and now returns to do even more damage). The plot is filled with diabolical twists and hairpin turns, but if you have read the previous novels, you should recognize several people and places from the past who turn up to complicate the present. Two new supernaturals also insert themselves into the action: Hella and Alexios, a mated pair of dryads who pop up early in the book and insist on helping Liv and Gabriel (whom they revere as Matilda of the Night and Gwynn ap Nudd, the king of the Tylwyth Teg—the faery King of Annwn). They also recognize and accept Ricky as Arawn, king of the underworld realm of Annwn and leader of the Wild Hunt, but they are definitely members of Team Gwynn. Their scenes add some lightness and humor to an otherwise very dark story line. At first, I feared that Armstrong had dumped these two into the plot as a deus ex machina device, but she weaves them into the action so well that they fit perfectly into the story arc. This is a Halloween fun-house of a plot that teases you along, daring you to guess at what is going to happen next and then collapsing the floorboards under your feet (which, by the way, literally happens to some of the characters in this novel). Even when you think that the battle is about to be won and the conclusion is near, some of the unreliable and untrustworthy characters make more bad decisions, triggering dangerous events that threaten to destroy everyone. It's a wild ride to the finish! And that finish includes Liv's ultimate choice. Even though she's in Gabriel's bed, can she turn her back on Ricky? Will she choose to protect the Tylwyth Teg or the Cŵn Annwn or will she come up with her own unique solution? And will the two groups and the two men accept and live willingly with her choice? This is one of the best series wrap-ups that I've read in a long time. Everyone gets a story-thread resolution—even most of the secondary characters—so we know what happens next for them (if they survive through to the end, that is). Yes, we lose some characters, because it wouldn't make sense to have all of the good guys survive, but Armstrong treats those deaths respectfully and fits them into the story beautifully. Even Lloergan, Ricky's hound, gets his very own story thread of resolution. By the time I finished the final chapter, I felt the satisfaction of having fitted the final piece into a million-piece jigsaw puzzle. Now I can see the whole picture, with no gaps and no forced-together pieces. Armstrong obviously planned this story arc meticulously down to the last detail, thus providing a magnificent reading experience for fans of this series. I can't praise this series enough. It has everything I'm looking for in an urban fantasy: an innovative mythology, a fresh and exciting story arc, electrifying suspense, a complex and compelling love story, just the right amount of angst, and multi-layered primary and secondary characters (including the villains). And—lucky for us—this final novel ties it all up with a big, beautiful bow! Click HERE to go to the Rituals page on Amazon.com where you can read an excerpt by clicking on the cover art. In this alternate world, supernatural beings exists alongside, but unknown to, the mortal world. Unlike Armstrong's OTHERWORLD SERIES, this mythology does not include vampires or shape shifters. In book 1, the magical beings appear to be related to the Fae, but few details of their mythology are spelled out until the second book—just subtle hints at first. The small town of Cainsville, in the isolated countryside outside of Chicago, is the center of this magical community. On the surface, Cainsville is an idyllic little village with a cozy, otherworldly, old-fashioned feel. The buildings feature 19th century architecture with gargoyles on the roofs, and most of the businesses are owned by families who have lived in the town for many generations. Spend some time there, though, and it soon becomes obvious that dark secrets and mysteries are hidden under Cainsville's folksy, comfortable surface Armstrong has posted a link on her Facebook page for a free download of a Cainsville short story that appeared in the Spring 2014 on-line edition of Subterranean Magazine. Click HERE to go directly to that download page. Armstrong says that this story is "set back when Rose was young and it tells the full story of Bobby Sheehan, whose 'case' Olivia reads about in Visions." I'm not sure how long this link will be available. Click HERE to go to a Character Guide for CAINSVILLE provided by Wicked Scribes. Click HERE to read my review of Armstrong's OTHERWORLD SERIES. Click HERE and HERE to read my two reviews of Bitten, the TV series based on OTHERWORLD. PREQUEL: Cainsville Files (A Game App) PUBLISHER'S BLURB: In this original interactive story, it's up to you to explore the secretive town of Cainsville, gain the trust of its mysterious residents, dodge dangers both real and otherworldly, embark on a romance, and in the end, find justice. Cainsville Files features Jenn McCoy, a struggling private investigator who finds herself searching for her missing high school sweetheart—possibly a victim of the notorious Valentine Killer. Your choices will either help Jenn solve the case—or doom her to a number of memorably gruesome fates. > This fully illustrated interactive story introduces the world of Omens. > Features hundreds of choices and numerous, memorable endings—both good and bad > Fully illustrated by Julie Dillon, World Fantasy and Hugo Award nominee for Best Professional Artist > Features a complete audio experience of music and sound effects AUTHOR'S NOTE: "Okay, so that's the publisher's official description. I'll add a little more explanation here. This is a choose-your-own-adventure style mystery app for iPod/iPhone/iPad. It's a prequel to Omens, set at the time of Olivia's parents' alleged killing spree. It introduces Cainsville and includes characters from Omens—various Cainsville residents, Rose, the Larsens, a very young Gabriel and an even younger Eden (Olivia). Both the book and the game stand independently—no need to play the game to understand the book or vice-versa. I wrote the full script for the app and designed all the game play." Click HERE to go to a page on Armstrong's web site with links to retailers of this app. NOVEL 1: Omens In her "Author's Note" at the beginning of this book, Armstrong gives the reader a choice. She has sprinkled a handful of "literary Easter Eggs" throughout the book—foreign words and phrases (mostly Welsh) presented initially without context, although many are later explained in the text. The reader has the option of either pausing to search for the meanings (probably on the Internet) or, in Armstrong's words, "ignore them and travel on Olivia's journey with her, uncovering the secrets as she does and, yes, I hope that's the route you'll choose." Armstrong tells the story from multiple points of view, with the majority of the chapters narrated in Liv's first-person voice. Interspersed among Liv's chapters are a handful of unnumbered (but titled) chapters written in the third person subjective voice from the perspective of various supporting characters. Armstrong is masterful in her use of the first person point of view (POV), avoiding the awkwardness we sometimes see in the works of less-skilled writers. The POV shifts work nicely, giving Armstrong the chance to provide the reader with background information and clues that could not have been included if the viewpoint had been limited just to Liv. In the Amazon.com Editorial Reviews of this book, Booklist calls it a "reverse Cinderella story," and that's exactly right. In the first few pages of the book, 24-year-old Olivia (Liv) Taylor-Jones is enjoying her luxurious, happy life, attending a charity dinner with her handsome and wealthy fiancé, James Morgan, and thinking about spending some quality time with him as soon as they get back to his place. As the only child of wealthy parents, Liv is well educated and able to devote much of her time to volunteering at a women's shelter in Chicago. In just a few weeks, she and James will marry and live happily ever after. But then, Liv's mother phones her, asking her to come straight home, and at that point, Liv's wonderful life shatters into a million tragic pieces. What Liv learns from Mom and the family lawyer is that Liv is adopted, that her real name is Eden Larsen, and that her biological parents are Pamela and Todd Larsen, a notorious pair of serial killers who were convicted of the ritualistic mutilation slayings of four young couples two decades ago. The Larsens were sent to prison when Liv was a toddler, at which time she was adopted by the couple who have always portrayed themselves as her real parents. When both Mom and James fail to support Liv (actually, they both turn their backs on her), she disguises herself to hide from a huge crowd of paparazzi and runs off to figure out how to deal with her new identity. Although Liv has millions of dollars in her trust fund account, she takes only a minimum amount of cash and keeps her destination a secret from everyone. Eventually, two men—one polite and one dangerous—separately suggest to Liv that she should go to Cainsville. These are the first of many odd Cainsville-related characters who turn up in the story. In Cainsville, Liv gets a job at the local diner and decides to go to the prison and meet her birth mother. Before she can do that, though, she is confronted by Gabriel Walsh, a member of a long-time Cainsville family. Gabriel was Pamela's attorney for her last, failed appeal, and he wants to continue his association, hoping to attain fame and fortune through his association with such an infamous case. Gabriel is an amoral, opportunistic lawyer who puts himself first and who (so far) has never developed any personal relationships with his clients. He also lies to his clients if it's in his own best interest. The rest of the story follows Liv and Gabriel as they meet with Pamela and investigate the final pair of murders, trying to determine if someone else committed the crimes. Pamela insists that she and Todd did not commit any of the murders, but Liv isn't sure what to believe. As she and Gabriel follow the clues, they meet up with some dangerous characters and stumble on a number of bodies. The final solution pops up out of nowhere, and at first I wasn't sure that I bought into it, but after a chapter or two, everything came together and now I can see where Armstrong is going with this story line (at least I think I can). The story is filled with magical symbols, including poppies and crows portending doom and death and sinister giant ravens dive-bombing Liv and her new friends. In fact the whole "portending" element is key to Liv's character (thus the book's title). I won't say too much about that, except that when Liv comes to Cainsville, she suddenly exhibits some interesting and helpful powers. Those powers are not fully developed in this book, but I imagine that they will be in future books. The book ends with the resolution of the main plot (the murder case), but not the subplots. In fact, the primary villain warns Liv that if she turns him in, bad things are in store for her and for Cainsville. I wish that I could explain more about the circumstances of the resolution, but I don't want to give out any spoilers. I do suggest, though, that when you read about a certain organization in the later chapters that you look it up on Wikipedia because it's the real deal—a sorry chapter in American history. Remember though, that this book deals with an alternate world that runs on magic, so some aspects of that organization function very differently in the book than in real life. This is a great new series with well-developed, sympathetic characters, excellent world-building, and lots of secrets to uncover in ensuing books. At one point in the story, a character who writes paranormal romances explains that three elements are needed to write a top-notch story: sex, originality, and attention to detail. Well, we haven't gotten to the sex yet (except for a hurried up-against-a-wall scene in chapter 1), but Armstrong hits the other two out of the park. I can't wait for book 2, when we watch Liv and Gabriel's personal relationship develop and learn more about what's really going on in Cainsville. Click HERE to read a long excerpt (41 pages) from Omens. NOVEL 2: Visions Back in book 1, Armstrong gave the reader the choice of looking up the "literary Easter eggs"—Welsh words and phrases scattered through the text—that would provide plot clues if you were to look up their meanings. Then, she said that she hoped the reader would just let the mystery unfold in the context of the story arc. I chose to go the latter route, even though it was very hard to keep myself from going straight to Google every time one of those terms popped up. Now I'm glad that I waited because as Armstrong promised, things are becoming clearer as the series heroine figures out the mystery on her own (actually, with the help of a few friends). By the end of Visions, the Fae connection to Cainsville that was strongly foreshadowed in book 1 is beginning to become more evident, and the true family backgrounds of key characters are either fully revealed or strongly suggested. For example, at one point, one of the elders says, "The boy doesn't know what he is...no more than Gabriel or Olivia (Liv) know what they are." (p. 173) By the time this book ends, Olivia is well on her way to learning the full truth about her genetic heritage and that of her friends. > Side Note: After I finished reading Visions, I looked up some of the Welsh words to see whether I had figured them out correctly, and in almost every case I had—just from the context and the explanations in the narrative. If you do decide to check out the definitions, click HERE or HERE for two different easy-to-use Welsh-to-English on-line dictionaries. Also, you can usually find the names of mythological beings on Wikipedia (e.g., bean nighe). As the story opens, it's been only three weeks since Liv learned the identity of her biological parents and solved a murder case that had been pinned on them. When Liv goes back to her Chicago home to pick up some clothes, she comes out to find a dead woman in her car dressed and be-wigged to look like her. She goes back inside and calls Gabriel, but by the time he arrives on the scene, the body has vanished. Then, the same woman's head turns up in Liv's bed in the middle of the night, but again vanishes. At first, Liv is certain that she is having visions. Soon, though, she sees a picture of the same young woman on a "missing" poster and realizes that the dead woman was real—not a vision at all. Soon thereafter, Liv chases her run-away cat into an abandoned Cainsville house and discovers the woman's body, and this time the body stays put. Now that Liv knows the body is real, she has to consider that someone has been using it as a threat or a warning. The big questions are these: How did this woman die? Who is harassing Liv with body parts—and why? What is the woman's connection to Cainsville and to Liv? Just as in Omens, Liv constantly sees omens in this book—crows, ravens, owls, red poppies, and black hounds—each of which portends something slightly different. She also has several visions that take her into a different body in a different world and time. As the story progresses, Liv is approached by two preternatural men, each of whom attempts to convince her that she should choose him and his people. One man—the Huntsman—warns her about the other—Tristan. "He's warning you about us, and about those in Cainsville. Yet the accusation he levels against us could be directed at himself. He wants something from you. Everyone does." (p. 359) Eventually, Liv learns more about the men's true identities and purposes, but not all of her questions are answered before the book ends. One thing she does learn is that Cainsville is not the cozy, quiet, peaceful village that she thought it was and that its Elders have an agenda of their own that is not necessarily in her best interest. Meanwhile, as Liv tries to unravel the mystery, she has to deal with three very different men, each of whom has his own idea of her role in his life. First, there is her ex-fiancé, James Morgan, who has now decided that he wants her back at any cost, even though she no longer wants him. Then there is Ricky Gallagher, the sexy biker who makes Liv feel safe and loved. And speaking of Ricky, he's the reason that the sensuality rating of this book has jumped to 4. With Ricky, Liv discovers that there's nothing better than lots and lots of lust, mostly deep in the woods. Finally, there is Gabriel Walsh, who can't be summed up in a single sentence or even in a single paragraph. In Omens, Gabriel betrayed Olivia, and in this book he does it again—even after promising that he would always be straight with her. This betrayal is revealed early in the story and keeps Gabriel's relationship with Liv on a bumpy road all the way through the book—although every time she is in danger, her first impulse is to call him and his first impulse is to come to her rescue. Gabriel is an exceedingly damaged man. He grew up alone, fending for himself most of the time because his mother, Seanna, was either stoned on drugs and alcohol or in bed with one of her many men. Seanna disappeared when Gabriel was only fifteen, and he's been on his own ever since. Early in his life, he built a high wall around his emotions, and he has never let anyone inside. He has vowed never to put himself in the position of needing another person for any reason because he's not sure that he would recover from being left alone once again. Here, Gabriel muses about his early years: "Life itself became a game, a con, a swindle. Not just against marks, but against everyone—from teachers to landlords to any person with the power to lock him up, either in jail or in a group home. He'd lived like a shark then, always moving, stop and perish." (p. 233) > Side Note: I just finished reading and reviewing Fearless, the third novel in James Elliott's terrific PAX ARCANIA series in which the hero's friend uses the same metaphor to describe the hero—the John Darling: a shark, who "stay[s] in constant motion, wandering and killing until they die." John takes an entirely different, but equally entertaining, approach to dealing with long-term emotional fallout from the horrific events of his early years. Both John and Gabriel have the same lone wolf complex (although in John's case that term is quite literal), and both find it difficult to let anyone get past their emotional shields. Click HERE to read my reviews of that series. Now, Gabriel locks himself away in a luxury high-rise condo stocked with food, weapons, and money: "Gabriel Walsh hadn't called out of that life unscathed. The frightened and hungry kid who'd lived on the streets wasn't gone. He was hiding up here, with his security blankets." (p. 354) He lives entirely alone, never allowing anyone into his home. Gabriel enforces his self-imposed isolation so strictly that even inviting Liv to the con tours turns out to be so painful that he cancels the invitation while they are on the elevator just yards from his door. Gabriel's behavior hurts Liv deeply, causing her to stalk away from him in a barrage of angry accusations. Liv's relationships with the three men are integral parts of the story arc, and by the end, we can pretty much figure out how Ricky and Gabriel relate to opposite sides of the Fae world. It becomes obvious that at some point, Liv will be forced to choose between them, but that's about all we learn. What Armstrong does in this book is to allow us to watch Olivia's relationships develop so that we'll understand just what she will lose when she is forced to make that final choice. Here, Liv muses about the three men: "I used to say...that I'd started dating James when I discovered he wasn't nearly as boring as I'd expected...And then there was Gabriel and, yes, Ricky, and compared with them...the light that had drawn me to James had faded into a barely noticeable glow. They were complex and fascinating and original and real. So vibrantly real...James was a good man...who now bored me to tears." (p. 169) Unfortunately, Liv will soon learn that James isn't as "good" as she thinks he is. Although there is a murder plot at the center of this novel, the real fascination is in the developing relationships among the characters as they get to know one another and begin to learn that they have been born to play roles in a world they never knew anything about...until now. Armstrong provides just enough new information to appease our curiosity temporarily, but she leaves us begging for more. I can't say enough about Armstrong's character building (and world-building, for that matter). By the end of Visions, we have a clear picture of all of the lead characters, and what a relief it is that they are so original, so realistic, and so very different from the usual one-dimensional, good-against-evil heroes and heroines who battle their way through most urban fantasy series. Of course, they are on the side of good, but which side is the "good" side? And is one side all good and the other all bad? No, I don't think so. These are nuanced characters placed in an extremely ambiguous world that is built on centuries of cultural traditions, all of which they are unaware...for now at least. The Cainsville elders still have to reveal their true motives, as do the two mysterious men who try to coax Liv to their sides. This series just keeps getting better and better, and I can hardly wait for book 3! NOVEL 3: Deceptions PUBLISHER'S BLURB: [Armstrong] delivers her most suspenseful novel yet, when she discovers the discovery of Cainsville's dark past and the true nature of its inhabitants leads to murder, redemption, and unspeakable loss. Olivia Taylor-Jones' life has exploded. She's discovered she is not only adopted, but her real parents are convicted serial killers. Fleeing the media frenzy, she took refuge in the oddly secluded town of Cainsville. She has since solved the town's mysteries and finds herself not only the target of its secretive elders but also her stalker ex-fiancé. Visions continue to haunt her: particularly a little blond girl in a green sundress who insists she has an important message for Olivia, one that may help her balance the light and darkness within herself. Death stalks both Olivia and the two men most important to her as she desperately searches to understand whether ancient scripts are dictating the triangle that connects them. Will darkness prevail, or does Olivia have the power to prevent a tragic fate? MY REVIEW: Armstrong once again tells her story from several perspectives, mostly in Liv's first-person voice, but also in a handful of third-person chapters written from the point of view of Gabriel, Tristan, Ricky, and Rose. Armstrong interweaves three key story lines in this book: > The Men: The evolving relationship involving Liv, Ricky, and Gabriel—both in the folkloric past and in the real-life present—becomes more and more complex. Adding another level of difficulty to the situation is James Morgan, with his unwelcome attentions toward Liv. As the story unfolds, opposing factions put intense pressure on Liv to make an impossible choice. As various groups and individuals try to force her allegiance to one or the other, tragic events ensue. > The Visions: Liv desperately needs to gain control over the unpredictable visions that sweep over her like massive seizures, taking her to other places and times. The visions cause her physical body to lose consciousness and her temperature to rise to feverish heights. But the visions also have a positive side because they are her only source of information about the mythology that is driving others to try to kill her. Liv's relationships with the three men are integral parts of the story arc, and by the end, we can pretty much figure out how Ricky and Gabriel relate to opposite sides of the Fae world. It becomes obvious that at some point, Liv will be forced to choose between them, but that's about all we learn. 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