

V I N T A G E

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DARKLY DREAMING DEXTER

JEFF LINDSAY

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**DARKLY
DREAMING
DEXTER**

A N O V E L

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*For Hilary
who is everything to me*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

MOON. GLORIOUS MOON. FULL, FAT, REDDISH moon, the night as light as day, the moonlight flooding down across the land and bringing joy, joy, joy. Bringing too the full-throated call of the tropical night, the soft and wild voice of the wind roaring through the hairs on your arm, the hollow wail of starlight, the teeth-grinding bellow of the moonlight off the water.

All calling to the Need. Oh, the symphonic shriek of the thousand hiding voices, the cry of the Need inside, *the entity*, the silent watcher, the cold quiet thing, the one that laughs, the Moondancer. The moon that was not-me, the thing that mocked and laughed and came calling with its hunger. With the Need. And the Need was very strong now, very careful cold coiled creeping crackly cocked and ready, very strong, very much ready now—and still it waited and watched, and it made me wait and watch.

I had been waiting and watching the priest for five weeks now. The Need had been prickling and teasing and prodding at me to find one, find the next, find this priest. For three weeks I had known he was it, he was next, we belonged to the Dark Passenger, he and I together. And that three weeks I had spent fighting the pressure, the growing *Need*, rising in me like a great wave that roars up and over the beach and does not recede, only swells more with every tick of the bright night's clock.

But it was careful time, too, time spent making sure. Not making sure of the priest, no, I was long sure of him. Time spent to be certain that it could be done right, made neat, all the corners folded, all squared away. I could not be caught, not now. I had worked too hard, too long, to make this work for me, to protect my happy little life.

And I was having too much fun to stop now.

And so I was always careful. Always tidy. Always prepared ahead of time so it would be *right*. And when it was right, take extra time to be sure. It was the Harry way, God bless him, that farsighted perfect policeman, my foster father. Always be sure, be careful, be exact, he had said, and for a week now I had been sure that everything was just as Harry-right as it could be. And when I left work that night, I knew this was it. This night was the Night. This night felt different. This night it would happen, *had* to happen. Just as it had happened before. Just as it would happen again, and again.

And tonight it would happen to the priest.

His name was Father Donovan. He taught music to the children at St. Anthony's Orphanage Homestead, Florida. ~~The children loved him. And of course he loved the children, oh very much indeed.~~ He had devoted a whole life to them. Learned Creole and Spanish. Learned their music, too. All for the kids. Everything he did, it was all for the kids.

Everything.

I watched him this night as I had watched for so many nights now. Watched as he paused in the orphanage doorway to talk to a young black girl who had followed him out. She was small, no more than eight years old and small for that. He sat on the steps and talked to her for five minutes. She sat too, and bounced up and down. They laughed. She leaned against him. He touched her hair. A nun came out and stood in the doorway, looking down at them for a moment before she spoke. Then she smiled and held out a hand. The girl bumped her head against the priest. Father Donovan hugged her, stood, and kissed the girl good night. The nun laughed and said something to Father Donovan. He said something back.

And then he started toward his car. Finally: I coiled myself to strike and—

Not yet. A janitorial service minivan stood fifteen feet from the door. As Father Donovan passed it the side door slid open. A man leaned out, puffing on a cigarette, and greeted the priest, who leaned against the van and talked to the man.

Luck. Luck again. Always luck on these Nights. I had not seen the man, not guessed he was there. But he would have seen me. If not for Luck.

I took a deep breath. Let it out slow and steady, icy cold. It was only one small thing. I had not missed any others. I had done it all right, all the same, all the way it had to be done. It would be *right*.

Now.

Father Donovan walked toward his car again. He turned once and called something. The janitor waved from the doorway to the orphanage, then stubbed out his cigarette and disappeared inside the building. Gone.

Luck. Luck again.

Father Donovan fumbled for his keys, opened his car door, got into his car. I heard the key go in. Heard the engine turn over. And then—

NOW.

I sat up in his backseat and slipped the noose around his neck. One quick, slippery, pretty twist and the coil of fifty-pound-test fishing line settled tight. He made a small ratchet of panic and that was it.

“You are mine now,” I told him, and he froze as neat and perfect as if he had practiced, almost like he heard the other voice, the laughing watcher inside me.

“Do exactly as I say,” I said.

He rasped half a breath and glanced into his rearview mirror. My face was there, waiting for him wrapped in the white silk mask that showed only my eyes.

“Do you understand?” I said. The silk of the mask flowed across my lips as I spoke.

Father Donovan said nothing. Stared at my eyes. I pulled on the noose.

“Do you understand?” I repeated, a little softer.

This time he nodded. He fluttered a hand at the noose, not sure what would happen if he tried to loosen it. His face was turning purple.

I loosened the noose for him. “Be good,” I said, “and you will live longer.”

He took a deep breath. I could hear the air rip at his throat. He coughed and breathed again. But he sat still and did not try to escape.

This was very good.

We drove. Father Donovan followed my directions, no tricks, no hesitations. We drove south through Florida City and took the Card Sound Road. I could tell that road made him nervous, but he did not object. He did not try to speak to me. He kept both hands on the wheel, pale and knotted tight so the knuckles stood up. That was very good, too.

We drove south for another five minutes with no sound but the song of the tires and the wind and the great moon above making its mighty music in my veins, and the careful watcher laughing quietly in the rush of the night's hard pulse.

“Turn here,” I said at last.

The priest's eyes flew to mine in the mirror. The panic was trying to claw out of his eyes, down his face, into his mouth to speak, but—

“Turn!” I said, and he turned. Slumped like he had been expecting this all along, waiting for me forever, and he turned.

The small dirt road was barely visible. You almost had to know it was there. But I knew. I had been there before. The road ran for two and a half miles, twisting three times, through the saw grass and through the trees, alongside a small canal, deep into the swamp and into a clearing.

Fifty years ago somebody had built a house. Most of it was still there. It was large for what it was. Three rooms, half a roof still left, the place completely abandoned now for many years.

Except the old vegetable garden out in the side yard. There were signs that somebody had been digging there fairly recently.

“Stop the car,” I said as the headlights picked up the crumbling house.

Father Donovan lurched to obey. Fear had sealed him into his body now, his limbs and thoughts a rigid.

“Turn off the motor,” I told him, and he did.

It was suddenly very quiet.

Some small something chittered in a tree. The wind rattled the grass. And then more quiet, silence so deep it almost drowned out the roar of the night music that pounded away in my secret self.

“Get out,” I said.

Father Donovan did not move. His eyes were on the vegetable garden.

Seven small mounds of earth were visible there. The heaped soil looked very dark in the moonlight. It must have looked even darker to Father Donovan. And still he did not move.

I yanked hard on the noose, harder than he thought he could live through, harder than he knew could happen to him. His back arched against the seat and the veins stood out on his forehead and he thought he was about to die.

But he was not. Not yet. Not for quite some time, in fact.

I kicked the car door open and pulled him out after me, just to let him feel my strength. He flopped to the sandy roadbed and twisted like an injured snake. The Dark Passenger laughed and loved it and played the part. I put one boot on Father Donovan's chest and held the noose tight.

“You have to listen and do as I say,” I told him. “You *have* to.” I bent and gently loosened the noose. “You should know that. It's important,” I said.

And he heard me. His eyes, pounding with blood and pain and leaking tears onto his face, his eyes met mine in a rush of understanding and all the things that had to happen were there for him to see now. And he saw. And he knew how important it was for him to be just *right*. He began to know.

“Get up now,” I said.

Slowly, very slowly, with his eyes always on mine, Father Donovan got up. We stood just like that for a long time, our eyes together, becoming one person with one need, and then he trembled. He raised one hand halfway to his face and dropped it again.

“In the house,” I said, so very softly. In the house where everything was ready.

Father Donovan dropped his eyes. He raised them to me but could not look anymore. He turned toward the house but stopped as he saw again the dark dirt mounds of the garden. And he wanted to look at me, but he could not, not after seeing again those black moonlit heaps of earth.

He started for the house and I held his leash. He went obediently, head down, a good and docile victim. ~~Up the five battered steps, across the narrow porch to the front door, pushed shut. Father Donovan stopped. He did not look up. He did not look at me.~~

“Through the door,” I said in my soft command voice.

Father Donovan trembled.

“Go through the door now,” I said again.

But he could not.

I leaned past him and pushed the door open. I shoved the priest in with my foot. He stumbled, righted himself, and stood just inside, eyes squeezed tight shut.

I closed the door. I had left a battery lamp standing on the floor beside the door and I turned it on.

“Look,” I whispered.

Father Donovan slowly, carefully, opened one eye.

He froze.

Time stopped for Father Donovan.

“No,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

“Oh, no,” he said.

“Oh, yes,” I said.

He screamed, “NOOOO!”

I yanked on the noose. His scream was cut off and he fell to his knees. He made a wet croaking whimpering sound and covered his face. “Yes,” I said. “It's a terrible mess, isn't it?”

He used his whole face to close his eyes. He could not look, not now, not like this. I did not blame him, not really, it *was* a terrible mess. It had bothered me just to know it was there since I had set it up for him. But he had to see it. He had to. Not just for me. Not just for the Dark Passenger. For *him*. He had to see. And he was not looking.

“Open your eyes, Father Donovan,” I said.

“Please,” he said in a terrible little whimper. It got on my nerves very badly, shouldn't have, icy clean control, but it got to me, whining in the face of that mess on the floor, and I kicked his legs out from under him. I hauled hard on the noose and grabbed the back of his neck with my right hand, the

slammed his face into the filthy warped floorboards. There was a little blood and that made me madder.

“Open them,” I said. “Open your eyes. Open them NOW. *Look.*” I grabbed his hair and pulled his head back. “Do as you're told,” I said. “Look. Or I will cut your eyelids right off your face.”

I was very convincing. And so he did it. He did as he was told. He looked.

I had worked hard to make it right, but you have to use what you've got to work with. I could not have done it at all if they had not been there long enough for everything to dry up, but they were so very dirty. I had managed to clean off most of the dirt, but some of the bodies had been in the garden for a very long time and you couldn't tell where the dirt began and the body stopped. You never could tell for real, when you stop to think about it. So dirty—

There were seven of them, seven small bodies, seven extra-dirty orphan children laid out on rubber shower sheets, which are neater and don't leak. Seven straight lines pointing straight across the room

Pointing right at Father Donovan. So he knew.

He was about to join them.

“Hail Mary, full of grace—” he started. I jerked hard on the noose.

“None of that, Father. Not now. Now is for real truth.”

“Please,” he choked.

“Yes, beg me. That's good. Much better.” I yanked again. “Do you think that's it, Father? Seven bodies? Did they beg?” He had nothing to say. “Do you think that's all of them, Father? Just seven? Did I get them all?”

“Oh, God,” he rasped out, with a pain that was good to hear.

“And what about the other towns, Father? What about Fayetteville? Would you like to talk about Fayetteville?” He just choked out a sob, no words. “And what about East Orange? Was that three? Or did I miss one there? It's so hard to be sure. Was it four in East Orange, Father?”

Father Donovan tried to scream. There was not enough left of his throat for it to be a very good scream, but it had real feeling behind it, which made up for the poor technique. Then he fell forward onto his face and I let him snivel for a while before I pulled him up and onto his feet. He was not steady, and not in control. His bladder had let loose and there was drool on his chin.

“Please,” he said. “I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't help myself. Please, you have to understand—”

“I do understand, Father,” I said, and there was something in my voice, the Dark Passenger's voice, now, and the sound of it froze him. He lifted his head slowly to face me and what he saw in my eyes

made him very still. "I understand perfectly," I told him, moving very close to his face. The sweat on his cheeks turned to ice. "You see," I said, "I can't help myself, either."

We were very close now, almost touching, and the dirtiness of him was suddenly too much. I jerked up on the noose and kicked his feet out from under him again. Father Donovan sprawled on the floor.

"But *children*?" I said. "I could never do this to children." I put my hard clean boot on the back of his head and slammed his face down. "Not like you, Father. Never kids. I have to find people like you."

"What are you?" Father Donovan whispered.

"The beginning," I said. "And the end. Meet your Unmaker, Father." I had the needle ready and went into his neck like it was supposed to, slight resistance from the rigid muscles, but none from the priest. I pushed the plunger and the syringe emptied, filling Father Donovan with quick, clean calm. Moments, only moments, and his head began to float, and he rolled his face to me.

Did he truly see me now? Did he see the double rubber gloves, the careful coveralls, the slick surgical mask? Did he really see me? Or did that only happen in the other room, the Dark Passenger's room, the Clean Room? Painted white two nights past and swept, scrubbed, sprayed, cleaned as clean as could be. And in the middle of the room, its windows sealed with thick white rubberized sheets, under the lights in the middle of the room, did he finally see me there in the table I had made, the boxes of white garbage bags, the bottles of chemicals, and the small row of saws and knives? Did he see me at last?

Or did he see those seven untidy lumps, and who knows how many more? Did he see himself at last, unable to scream, turning into that kind of mess in the garden?

He would not, of course. His imagination did not allow him to see himself as the same species. And in a way, he was right. He would never turn into the kind of mess he had made of the children. I would never do that, could never allow that. I am not like Father Donovan, not that kind of monster.

I am a very neat monster.

Neatness takes time, of course, but it's worth it. Worth it to make the Dark Passenger happy, keep him quiet for another long while. Worth it just to do it right and tidy. Remove one more heap of mess from the world. A few more neatly wrapped bags of garbage and my one small corner of the world is neater, happier place. A better place.

I had about eight hours before I had to be gone. I would need them all to do it right.

I secured the priest to the table with duct tape and cut away his clothes. I did the preliminary work quickly; shaving, scrubbing, cutting away the things that stuck out untidily. As always I felt the wonderful long slow build to release begin its pounding throughout my entire body. It would flutter through me while I worked, rising and taking me with it, until the very end, the Need and the priest swimming away together on a fading tide.

And just before I started the serious work Father Donovan opened his eyes and looked at me. The

was no fear now; that happens sometimes. He looked straight up at me and his mouth moved.

“What?” I said. I moved my head a little closer. “I can't hear you.”

I heard him breathe, a slow and peaceful breath, and then he said it again before his eyes closed.

“You're welcome,” I said, and I went to work.

CHAPTER 2

BY FOUR-THIRTY IN THE MORNING THE PRIEST WAS all cleaned up. I felt a lot better. I always did, after killing. Killing makes me feel good. It works the knots out of darling Dexter's dark schemata. It's a sweet release, a necessary letting go of all the little hydraulic valves inside. I enjoy my work; sorry if that bothers you. Oh, very sorry, really. But there it is. And it's not just any killing, of course. It has to be done the right way, at the right time, with the right partner—very complicated, but very necessary.

And always somewhat draining. So I was tired, but the tension of the last week was gone, the constant voice of the Dark Passenger was quiet, and I could be me again. Quirky, funny, happy-go-lucky, dead inside Dexter. No longer Dexter with the knife, Dexter the Avenger. Not until next time.

I put all the bodies back in the garden with one new neighbor and tidied the little falling-dove house as much as I could. I packed my things into the priest's car and drove south to the small side canal where I had left my boat, a seventeen-foot Whaler with a shallow draft and a big engine. I pushed the priest's car into the canal behind my boat and climbed on board. I watched the car settle and disappear. Then I cranked up my outboard and eased out of the canal, heading north across the bay. The sun was just coming up and bouncing off the brightwork. I put on my very best happy face and just another early-morning fisherman heading home. Red snapper, anyone?

By six-thirty I was home in my Coconut Grove apartment. I took the slide from my pocket, a simple, clean glass strip—with a careful single drop of the priest's blood preserved in the center. Nice and clean, dry now, ready to slip under my microscope when I wanted to remember. I put the slide with the others, thirty-six neat and careful very dry drops of blood.

I took an extra-long shower, letting the hot hot water wash away the last of the tension and ease the knots in my muscles, scrubbing off the small final traces of clinging smell from the priest and the garden of the little house in the swamp.

Children. I should have killed him twice.

Whatever made me the way I am left me hollow, empty inside, unable to feel. It doesn't seem like a big deal. I'm quite sure most people fake an awful lot of everyday human contact. I just fake all of it, fake it very well, and the feelings are never there. But I like kids. I could never have them, since the idea of sex is no idea at all. Imagine doing those things— How can you? Where's your sense

dignity? But kids—kids are special. Father Donovan deserved to die. The Code of Harry was satisfied along with the Dark Passenger.

By seven-fifteen I felt clean again. I had coffee, cereal, and headed in for work.

The building where I work is a large modern thing, white with lots of glass, near the airport. My lab is on the second floor, in the back. I have a small office attached to the lab. It is not much of an office but it's mine, a cubicle off the main blood lab. All mine, nobody else allowed in, nobody to share with to mess up my area. A desk with a chair, another chair for a visitor, if he's not too big. Computer shelf, filing cabinet. Telephone. Answering machine.

Answering machine with a blinking light as I came in. A message for me is not a daily thing. For some reason, there are very few people in the world who can think of things to say to a blood spatter pattern analyst during working hours. One of the few people who does have things to say to me is Deborah Morgan, my foster sister. A cop, just like her father.

The message was from her.

I punched the button and heard tinny *Tejano* music, then Deborah's voice. "Dexter, please, as soon as you get in. I'm at a crime scene out on Tamiami Trail, at the Cacique Motel." There was a pause. I heard her put a hand over the mouthpiece of the telephone and say something to somebody. Then there was a blast of Mexican music again and she was back on. "Can you get out here right away? Please, Dex?"

She hung up.

I don't have a family. I mean, as far as I know. Somewhere out there must be people who carry similar genetic material, I'm sure. I pity them. But I've never met them. I haven't tried, and they haven't tried to find me. I was adopted, raised by Harry and Doris Morgan, Deborah's parents. And considering what I am, they did a wonderful job of raising me, don't you think?

Both dead now. And so Deb is the only person in the world who gives a rusty possum fart whether I live or die. For some reason that I can't fathom, she actually prefers me to be alive. I think that's nice, and if I could have feelings at all I would have them for Deb.

So I went. I drove out of the Metro-Dade parking lot and got onto the nearby Turnpike, which took me south to the section of Tamiami Trail that is home to the Cacique Motel and several hundred of its brothers and sisters. In its own way, it is paradise. Particularly if you are a cockroach. Rows of buildings that manage to glitter and molder at the same time. Bright neon over ancient, squalid, sponge-rotted structures. If you don't go at night, you won't go. Because to see these places by daylight is to see the bottom line of our flimsy contract with life.

Every major city has a section like this one. If a piebald dwarf with advanced leprosy wants to have sex with a kangaroo and a teenage choir, he'll find his way here and get a room. When he's done, he might take the whole gang next door for a cup of Cuban coffee and a *medianoche* sandwich. Nobody would care, as long as he tipped.

Deborah had been spending way too much time out here lately. Her opinion, not mine. It seemed like a good place to go if you were a cop and you wanted to increase your statistical chance catching somebody doing something awful.

Deborah didn't see it that way. Maybe because she was working vice. A good-looking young woman working vice on the Tamiami Trail usually ends up as bait on a sting, standing outside almost naked to catch men who wanted to pay for sex. Deborah hated that. Couldn't get worked up about prostitution except as a sociological issue. Didn't think bagging johns was real crime fighting. And, known only to me, she hated anything that overemphasized her femininity and her lush figure. She wanted to be a cop; it was not her fault she looked more like a centerfold.

And as I pulled into the parking lot that linked the Cacique and its neighbor, Tito's Café Cubano, I could see that she was currently emphasizing the hell out of her figure. She was dressed in a neon-pink tube top, spandex shorts, black fishnet stockings, and spike heels. Straight from the costume shop for Hollywood Hookers in 3-D.

A few years back somebody in the Vice Bureau got the word that the pimps were laughing at them on the streets. It seems the vice cops, mostly male, were picking the outfits for the women operatives who worked in the sting operations. Their choice of clothing was showing an awful lot about their preferences in kinkiness, but it did not look much like hooker wear. So everybody on the street could tell when the new girl was carrying a badge and gun in her clutch purse.

As a result of this tip, the vice cops began to insist that the girls who went undercover pick their own outfits for the job. After all, girls know more about what looks right, don't they?

Maybe most of them do. Deborah doesn't. She's never felt comfortable in anything but blues. You should have seen what she wanted to wear to her prom. And now—I had never seen a beautiful woman dressed in such a revealing costume who looked less sexually appealing than Deb did.

But she did stand out. She was working crowd control, her badge pinned to the tube top. She was more visible than the half mile of yellow crime-scene tape that was already strung up, more than the three patrol cars angled in with their lights flashing. The pink tube top flashed a little brighter.

She was off to one side of the parking lot, keeping a growing crowd back from the lab techs who appeared to be going through the Dumpster belonging to the coffee shop. I was glad I hadn't been assigned to that. The stink of it came all the way across the lot and in my car window—a dark stench of Latin coffee grounds mixed with old fruit and rancid pork.

The cop at the entrance to the parking lot was a guy I knew. He waved me in and I found a spot.

“Deb,” I said as I strolled over. “Nice outfit. Really shows your figure to full advantage.”

“Fuck off,” she said, and she blushed. Really something to see in a full-grown cop.

“They found another hooker,” she said. “At least, they think it's a hooker. Hard to tell from what's left.”

“That's the third in the last five months,” I said.

“Fifth,” she told me. “There were two more up in Broward.” She shook her head. “These assholes keep saying that officially there's no connection.”

“It would make for an awful lot of paperwork,” I said helpfully.

Deb showed me her teeth. “How about some basic fucking police work?” she snarled. “A moron could see these kills are connected.” And she gave a little shudder.

I stared at her, amazed. She was a cop, daughter of a cop. Things didn't bother her. When she'd been a rookie cop and the older guys played tricks on Deborah—showing her the hacked-up bodies that turned up in Miami every day—to get her to blow her lunch, she hadn't blinked. She'd seen it all. Been there, done that, bought the T-shirt.

But this one made her shudder.

Interesting.

“This one is special, is that it?” I asked her.

“This one is on my beat, with the hookers.” She pointed a finger at me. “And THAT means I've got a shot to get in on it, get noticed, and pull a transfer into Homicide Bureau.”

I gave her my happy smile. “Ambition, Deborah?”

“Goddamned right,” she said. “I want out of vice, and I want out of this sex suit. I want in on Homicide, Dexter, and this could be my ticket. With one small break—” She paused. And then she said something absolutely amazing. “Please help me, Dex,” she said. “I really hate this.”

“Please, Deborah? You're saying *please* to me? Do you know how nervous that makes me?”

“Cut the crap, Dex.”

“But Deborah, really—”

“Cut it, I said. Will you help me or not?”

When she put it that way, with that strange rare “please” dangling in the air, what else could I say but, “Of course I will, Deb. You know that.”

And she eyed me hard, taking back her please. “I *don't* know it, Dex. I don't know anything with you.”

“Of course I'll help, Deb,” I repeated, trying to sound hurt. And doing a really good imitation of injured dignity, I headed for the Dumpster with the rest of the lab rats.

Camilla Figg was crawling through the garbage, dusting for fingerprints. She was a stocky woman

of thirty-five with short hair who had never seemed to respond to my breezy, charming pleasantries. But as she saw me, she came up onto her knees, blushed, and watched me go by without speaking. She always seemed to stare at me and then blush.

Sitting on an overturned plastic milk carton on the far end of the Dumpster, poking through a handful of waste matter, was Vince Masuoka. He was half Japanese and liked to joke that he got the short half. He called it a joke, anyway.

There was something just slightly off in Vince's bright, Asian smile. Like he had learned to smile from a picture book. Even when he made the required dirty put-down jokes with the cops, nobody got mad at him. Nobody laughed, either, but that didn't stop him. He kept making all the correct ritual gestures, but he always seemed to be faking. That's why I liked him, I think. Another guy pretending to be human, just like me.

"Well, Dexter," Vince said without looking up. "What brings you here?"

"I came to see how real experts operate in a totally professional atmosphere," I said. "Have you ever seen any?"

"Ha-ha," he said. It was supposed to be a laugh, but it was even phonier than his smile. "You must think you're in Boston." He found something and held it up to the light, squinting. "Seriously, why are you here?"

"Why wouldn't I be here, Vince?" I said, pretending to sound indignant. "It's a crime scene, isn't it?"

"You do blood spatter," he said, throwing away whatever he'd been staring at and searching for another one.

"I knew that."

He looked at me with his biggest fake smile. "There's no blood here, Dex."

I felt light-headed. "What does that mean?"

"There's no blood in or on or near, Dex. No blood at all. Weirdest thing you ever saw," he said.

No blood at all. I could hear that phrase repeat itself in my head, louder each time. No sticky, hot, messy, awful blood. No splatter. No stain. NO BLOOD AT ALL.

Why hadn't I thought of that?

It felt like a missing piece to something I didn't know was incomplete.

I don't pretend to understand what it is about Dexter and blood. Just thinking of it sets my teeth on edge—and yet I have, after all, made it my career, my study, and part of my real work. Clearly some very deep things are going on, but I find it a little hard to stay interested. I am what I am, and isn't it

lovely night to dissect a child killer?

But this—

“Are you all right, Dexter?” Vince asked.

“I am fantastic,” I said. “How does he do it?”

“That depends.”

I looked at Vince. He was staring at a handful of coffee grounds, carefully pushing them around with one rubber-gloved finger. “Depends on what, Vince?”

“On who *he* is and what *it* he's doing,” he said. “Ha-ha.”

I shook my head. “Sometimes you work too hard at being inscrutable,” I said. “How does the killer get rid of the blood?”

“Hard to say right now,” he said. “We haven't found any of it. And the body is not in real good shape, so it's going to be hard to find much.”

That didn't sound nearly as interesting. I like to leave a neat body. No fuss, no mess, no dripping blood. If the killer was just another dog tearing at a bone, this was all nothing to me.

I breathed a little easier. “Where's the body?” I asked Vince.

He jerked his head at a spot twenty feet away. “Over there,” he said. “With LaGuerta.”

“Oh, my,” I said. “Is LaGuerta handling this?”

He gave me his fake smile again. “Lucky killer.”

I looked. A small knot of people stood around a cluster of tidy trash bags. “I don't see it,” I said.

“Right there. The trash bags. Each one is a body part. He cut the victim into pieces and then wrapped up each one like it was a Christmas present. Did you ever see anything like that before?”

Of course I had.

That's how I do it.

CHAPTER 3

THERE IS SOMETHING STRANGE AND DISARMING about looking at a homicide scene in the bright daylight of the Miami sun. It makes the most grotesque killings look antiseptic, staged. Like you're in a neat and daring section of Disney World. Dahmer Land. Come ride the refrigerator. Please hurl your lunch in the designated containers only.

Not that the sight of mutilated bodies anywhere has ever bothered *me*, oh no, far from it. I do resent the messy ones a little when they are careless with their body fluids—nasty stuff. Other than that, it seems no worse than looking at spare ribs at the grocery store. But rookies and visitors to crime scenes tend to throw up—and for some reason, they throw up much less here than they do up North. The sun just takes the sting out. It cleans things up, makes them neater. Maybe that's why I love Miami. It's such a *neat* town.

And it was already a beautiful, hot Miami day. Anyone who had worn a suit coat was now looking for a place to hang it. Alas, there was no such place in the grubby little parking lot. There were only five or six cars and the Dumpster. It was shoved over in a corner, next to the café, backed up against a pink stucco wall topped with barbed wire. The back door to the café was there. A sullen young woman moved in and out, doing a brisk business in *café cubano* and *pasteles* with the cops and the technicians on the scene. The handful of assorted cops in suits who hang out at homicide scenes, either to be noticed, to apply pressure, or to make sure they know what's going on, now had one more thing to juggle. Coffee, a pastry, a suit coat.

The crime-lab gang didn't wear suits. Rayon bowling shirts with two pockets was more their speed. I was wearing one myself. It repeated a pattern of voodoo drummers and palm trees against a lime green background. Stylish, but practical.

I headed for the closest rayon shirt in the knot of people around the body. It belonged to Angel Batista—no relation, as he usually introduced himself. Hi, I'm Angel Batista, no relation. He worked in the medical examiner's office. At the moment he was squatting beside one of the garbage bags and peering inside it.

I joined him. I was anxious to see inside the bag myself. Anything that got a reaction from Deborah was worth a peek.

“Angel,” I said, coming up on his side. “What do we have?”

“What you mean *we*, white boy?” he said. “We got no blood with this one. You're out of a job.”

“I heard.” I crouched down beside him. “Was it done here, or just dumped?”

He shook his head. “Hard to say. They empty the Dumpster twice a week—this has been here for maybe two days.”

I looked around the parking lot, then over at the moldy façade of the Cacique. “What about the motel?”

Angel shrugged. “They're still checking, but I don't think they'll find anything. The other times, I just used a handy Dumpster. Huh,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

He used a pencil to peel back the plastic bag. “Look at that cut.”

The end of a disjointed leg stuck out, looking pale and exceptionally dead in the glare of the sun. This piece ended in the ankle, foot neatly lopped off. A small tattoo of a butterfly remained, one wing cut away with the foot.

I whistled. It was almost surgical. This guy did very nice work—as good as I could do. “Very clean,” I said. And it was, even beyond the neatness of the cutting. I had never seen such clean, *dr* neat-looking dead flesh. Wonderful.

“Me cago en diez on nice and clean,” he said. “It's not finished.”

I looked past him, staring a little deeper into the bag. Nothing moving in there. “It looks pretty fine to me, Angel.”

“Lookit,” he said. He flipped open one of the other bags. “This leg, he cuts it in four pieces. Almost like with a ruler or something, huh? And so *this* one,” and he pointed back to the first ankle that I had admired so deeply, “this one he cuts in two pieces only? How's come, huh?”

“I'm sure I don't know,” I said. “Perhaps Detective LaGuerta will figure it out.”

Angel looked at me for a moment and we both struggled to keep a straight face. “Perhaps she will,” he said, and he turned back to his work. “Why don't you go ask her?”

“Hasta luego, Angel,” I said.

“Almost certainly,” he answered, head down over the plastic bag.

There was a rumor going around a few years back that Detective Migdia LaGuerta got into the Homicide Bureau by sleeping with somebody. To look at her once you might buy into that. She has all the necessary parts in the right places to be physically attractive in a sullen, aristocratic way. A true

artist with her makeup and very well dressed, Bloomingdale's chic. But the rumor can't be true. To begin with, although she seems outwardly very feminine, I've never met a woman who was more masculine inside. She was hard, ambitious in the most self-serving way, and her only weakness seemed to be for model-handsome men a few years younger than she was. So I'm quite sure she didn't get into Homicide using sex. She got into Homicide because she's Cuban, plays politics, and knows how to kiss ass. That combination is far better than sex in Miami.

LaGuerta is very very good at kissing ass, a world-class ass kisser. She kissed ass all the way up to the lofty rank of homicide investigator. Unfortunately, it's a job where her skills at posterior smooching were never called for, and she was a terrible detective.

It happens; incompetence is rewarded more often than not. I have to work with her anyway. So I have used my considerable charm to make her like me. Easier than you might think. Anybody can be charming if they don't mind faking it, saying all the stupid, obvious, nauseating things that a conscience keeps most people from saying. Happily, I don't have a conscience. I say them.

As I approached the little group clustered near the café, LaGuerta was interviewing somebody in rapid-fire Spanish. I speak Spanish; I even understand a little Cuban. But I could only get one word out of ten from LaGuerta. The Cuban dialect is the despair of the Spanish-speaking world. The whole purpose of Cuban Spanish seems to be to race against an invisible stopwatch and get out as much as possible in three-second bursts without using any consonants.

The trick to following it is to know what the person is going to say before they say it. That tends to contribute to the clannishness non-Cubans sometimes complain about.

The man LaGuerta was grilling was short and broad, dark, with Indio features, and was clearly intimidated by the dialect, the tone, and the badge. He tried not to look at her as he spoke, which seemed to make her speak even faster.

"No, no hay nadie afuera," he said softly, slowly, looking away. "Todos estan en café." *Nobody was outside, they were all in the café.*

"Donde estabas?" she demanded. *Where were you?*

The man looked at the bags of body parts and quickly looked away. "Cocina." *The kitchen.* "Entonces yo saco la basura." *Then I took out the garbage.*

LaGuerta went on; pushing at him verbally, asking the wrong questions in a tone of voice that bullied and demeaned him until he slowly forgot the horror of finding the body parts in the Dumpster and turned sullen and uncooperative instead.

A true master's touch. Take the key witness and turn him against you. If you can screw up the case in the first few vital hours, it saves time and paperwork later.

She finished with a few threats and sent the man away. "Indio," she spat, as he lumbered out of earshot.

“It takes all kinds, Detective,” I said. “Even campesinos.” She looked up and ran her eyes over me slowly, while I stood and wondered why. Had she forgotten what I looked like? But she finished with a big smile. She really did like me, the idiot.

“Hola, Dexter. What brings you here?”

“I heard you were here and couldn't stay away. Please, Detective, when will you marry me?”

She giggled. The other officers within earshot exchanged a glance and then looked away. “I don't buy a shoe until I try it on,” LaGuerta said. “No matter how good the shoe looks.” And while I was sure that was true, it didn't actually explain to me why she stared at me with her tongue between her teeth as she said it. “Now go away, you distracting me. I have serious work here.”

“I can see that,” I said. “Have you caught the killer yet?”

She snorted. “You sound like a reporter. Those assholes will be all over me in another hour.”

“What will you tell them?”

She looked at the bags of body parts and frowned. Not because the sight bothered her. She was seeing her career, trying to phrase her statement to the press.

“It is only a matter of time before the killer makes a mistake and we catch him—”

“Meaning,” I said, “that so far he hasn't made any mistakes, you don't have any clues, and you have to wait for him to kill again before you can do anything?”

She looked at me hard. “I forget. Why do I like you?”

I just shrugged. I didn't have a clue—but then, apparently she didn't either.

“What we got is nada y nada. That Guatemalan,” she made a face at the retreating Indio, “he found the body when he came out with the garbage from the restaurant. He didn't recognize these garbage bags and he opened one up to see if maybe there was something good. And it was the head.”

“Peekaboo,” I said softly.

“Hah?”

“Nothing.”

She looked around, frowning, perhaps hoping a clue would leap out and she could shoot it.

“So that's it. Nobody saw anything, heard anything. Nothing. I have to wait for your fellow nerds to finish up before I know anything.”

“Detective,” said a voice behind us. Captain Matthews strolled up in a cloud of Aramis aftershave, meaning that the reporters would be here very shortly.

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