



Dexter in the Dark

by Jeff Lindsay

IN THE BEGINNING

IT REMEMBERED A SENSE OF SURPRISE, AND THEN FALLING, *but that was all. Then IT just waited.*

IT waited a very long time, but IT could wait easily because there was no memory and nothing had screamed yet. And so IT did not know IT was waiting. IT did not know it was anything at that point. IT just was, with no way to mark time, with no way even to have the idea of time.

So IT waited, and IT watched. There was not a great deal to see at first; fire, rocks, water, and eventually some little crawly things, which began to change and get bigger after a while. They didn't do very much except to eat each other and reproduce. But there was nothing to compare that to, so for a while that was enough.

Time passed. IT watched as the big things and the little things killed and ate one another aimlessly. There was no real joy in watching that, since there was nothing else to do and there were plenty more of them. But IT didn't seem able to do anything but watch. And so IT began to wonder: Why am I watching this?

IT could see no real point to anything that happened and there was nothing IT could do, and yet there IT was, watching. IT thought about this a very long time, but came to no conclusions. There was still no way to think any of this through; the whole idea of purpose wasn't quite there yet. There was just IT and them.

There were lots of them, more all the time, busily killing and eating and copulating. But there was only one of IT, and IT did none of those things, and IT began to wonder why that was, too. Why was IT different? Why was IT so unlike everything else? What was IT, and if IT actually was something, was IT supposed to do something, too?

More time passed. The countless changing crawly things slowly got bigger and better at killing each other. Interesting at first, but only because of the subtle differences. They crawled, hopped, and slithered to kill one another—one actually flew through the air to kill. Very interesting—but so what?

IT began to feel uncomfortable with all this. What was the point? Was IT supposed to be a part of what IT watched? If not, then why was IT here watching?

IT became determined to find the reason IT was here, whatever that was. So now when IT studied the big things and the little things, IT studied the ways IT was different from them. All the other things needed to eat and drink or they died. And even if they ate and drank, they eventually died anyway. IT didn't die. IT just went on and on. IT didn't need to eat or drink. But gradually IT became aware that IT did need...something—but what? IT could feel that somewhere there was a need, and the need was growing, but IT could not tell what it was; there was just the sense that something was missing.

No answers came as ages of scales and egg clutches paraded by. Kill and eat, kill and eat. What is the point here? Why do I have to watch all this when I can't do anything about it? IT began to feel just a little bit sour about the whole thing.

And then suddenly one day there was a brand-new thought: Where did I come from?

IT had figured out long ago that the eggs the others hatched from came from copulation. But IT had not come from an egg. Nothing at all had copulated to bring IT into existence. There had been nothing there to copulate when IT first became aware. IT had been there first and, seemingly, forever, except for the vague and disturbing memory of falling. But everything else had been hatched or born. IT had not. And with this thought the wall between IT and them seemed to grow vastly higher, stretching up impossibly tall, separating IT from them completely and eternally. IT was alone, completely alone forever, and that hurt. IT wanted to be a part of something. There was only one of IT—shouldn't there be a way for IT to copulate and make more, too?

And that began to seem infinitely more important, that thought: MORE of IT. Everything else made more. IT wanted to make more, too.

It suffered, watching the mindless things in their roiling riotous living. Resentment grew, turned into anger, and finally the anger turned into rage toward the stupid, pointless things and their endless, inane, insulting existence. And the rage grew and festered until one day IT couldn't stand it any longer. Without a pause to think what IT

was doing, IT rose up and rushed at one of the lizards, wanting somehow to crush it. And a wonderful thing happened.

IT was inside the lizard.

Seeing what the lizard saw, feeling what it felt.

For a long while IT forgot rage altogether.

The lizard did not appear to notice it had a passenger. It went about its business of killing and copulating, and IT rode along. It was very interesting to be on board when the lizard killed one of the littler ones. As an experiment, IT moved into one of the little ones. Being in the one that killed was far more fun, but not enough to lead to any real purposeful ideas. Being in the one that died was very interesting and did lead to some ideas, but not very happy ones.

IT enjoyed these new experiences for a while. But although IT could feel their simple emotions, they never went beyond confusion. They still didn't notice IT, didn't have any idea that-well, they simply didn't have any idea. They didn't seem capable of having an idea. They were just so limited-and yet they were alive. They had life and didn't know it, didn't understand what to do with it. It didn't seem fair. And soon IT was bored once more, and growing angry all over again.

And finally one day the monkey things started to show up. They didn't seem like much at first. They were small and cowardly and loud. But one tiny difference finally caught IT's attention: they had hands that let them do some amazing things. IT watched as they became aware of their hands, too, and began to use them. They used them for a great variety of brand-new things: masturbating, maiming one another, and taking food from the smaller of their own kind.

IT was fascinated and watched more closely. IT watched them hit each other and then run away and hide. IT watched them steal from one another, but only when no one was looking. IT watched them do horrible things to each other and then pretend that nothing had happened. And as IT watched, for the first time, something wonderful happened: IT laughed.

And as IT laughed, a thought was born, and grew into clarity wrapped in glee.

IT thought: I can work with this.

ONE

WHAT KIND OF MOON IS THIS? NOT THE BRIGHT, GLEAMING moon of slashing happiness, no indeed. Oh, it pulls and whines and shines in a cheap and guttering imitation of what it should do, but there is no edge to it. This moon has no wind in it to sail carnivores across the happy night sky and into slash-and-slice ecstasy. Instead this moon flickers shyly through a squeaky-clean window, onto a woman who perches all cheerful and perky on the edge of the couch and talks about flowers, canapés, and Paris.

Paris ?

Yes, with moon-faced seriousness, Paris is what she is talking about in that far-spreading syrupy tone. She is talking about Paris. Again.

So what kind of moon can this possibly be, with its near-breathless smile and smirking lace around the edges? It batters feebly at the window, but it can't quite get in past all the sickly-sweet warbling. And what kind of Dark Avenger could simply sit across the room, as poor Dazed Dexter does now, pretending to listen while mooning blearily on his chair?

Why, this moon must be a honeymoon-unfurling its marital banner across the living-room night, signaling for all to rally round, sound the charge, once more into the church, dear friends-because Dexter of the Deadly Dimples is getting married. Hitched to the wagon of bliss pulled by the lovely Rita, who has turned out to have a lifelong passion to see Paris.

Married, honeymoon in Paris...Do these words really belong in the same sentence as any reference at all to our Phantom Flenser?

Can we really see a suddenly sober and simpering slasher at the altar of an actual church, in Fred Astaire tie and tails, slipping the ring onto a white-wrapped finger while the congregation sniffles and beams? And then Demon Dexter in madras shorts, gawking at the Eiffel Tower and snarfing café au lait at the Arc de Triomphe? Holding hands and trundling giddily along the Seine, staring vacantly at every gaudy trinket in the Louvre?

Of course, I suppose I could make a pilgrimage to the Rue Morgue, a sacred site for serial slashers.

But let us be just a tiny bit serious for a moment: Dexter in Paris? For starters, are Americans still allowed to go to France? And for finishers, Dexter in Paris? On a *honeymoon*? How can someone of Dexter's midnight persuasions possibly consider anything so ordinary? How can someone who considers sex as interesting as deficit accounting enter into marriage? In short, how by all that is unholy, dark, and deadly can Dexter really mean to do this?

All wonderful questions, and very reasonable. And in truth, somewhat difficult to answer, even to myself. But here I am, enduring the Chinese water torture of Rita's expectations and wondering how Dexter can possibly go through with this.

Well then. Dexter can go through with this because he must, in part to maintain and even upgrade his necessary disguise, which prevents the world at large from seeing him for what he is, which is at best not something one would really like to have sitting across the table when the lights go out-especially if there is silverware present. And quite naturally, it takes a great deal of careful work to make sure it is not generally known that Dexter is driven by his Dark Passenger, a whispery-silk voice in the shaded backseat that from time to time climbs into the front seat to take the wheel and drive us to the Theme Park of the Unthinkable. It would never do to have the sheep see that Dexter is the wolf among them.

And so work we do, the Passenger and I, work very hard at our disguise. For the past several years we have had Dating Dexter, designed to present a cheerful and above all normal face to the world. This charming production featured Rita as the Girlfriend, and it was in many ways an ideal arrangement, since she was as uninterested in sex as I am, and yet wanted the companionship of an Understanding Gentleman. And Dexter really does understand. Not humans, romance, love, and all that gabble. No. What Dexter understands is the lethally grinning bottom line, how to find the utterly deserving among Miami's oh-so-many candidates for that final dark election to Dexter's modest Hall of Fame.

This does not absolutely guarantee that Dexter is a charming companion; the charm took years of practice, and it is the pure artificial product of great laboratory skill. But alas for poor Rita-battered by a terribly unfortunate and violent first marriage-she can't seem to tell the margarine from the butter.

All well and good. For two years Dexter and Rita cut a brilliant swathe across the Miami social scene, noticed and admired everywhere. But then, through a series of events that might well leave an enlightened observer somewhat skeptical, Dexter and Rita had become accidentally engaged. And the more I pondered on how to extricate myself from this ridiculous fate, the more I realized that it was a logical next step in the evolution of my disguise. A married Dexter-a Dexter with two ready-made children!-is surely a great deal further from seeming to be anything at all like what he really is. A quantum leap forward, onto a new level of human camouflage.

And then there are the two children.

It may seem strange that someone whose only passion is for human vivisection should actually enjoy Rita's children, but he does. I do. Mind you, I don't get all weepy-eyed at the thought of a lost tooth, since that would require the ability to feel emotion, and I am quite happily without any such mutation. But on the whole, I find children a great deal more interesting than their elders, and I get particularly irritable with those who cause them harm. In fact, I occasionally search them out. And when I track these predators down, and when I am very sure that they have actually done what they have been doing, I make sure they are quite unable to do it ever again-and with a very happy hand, unspoiled by conscience.

So the fact that Rita had two children from her disastrous first marriage was far from repellent, particularly when it became apparent that they needed Dexter's special parenting touch to keep their own fledgling Dark Passengers strapped into a safe, snug Dark Car Seat until they could learn how to drive for themselves. For presumably as a result of the emotional and even physical damage inflicted on Cody and Astor by their drug-addled biological father, they too had turned to the Dark Side, just like me. And now they were to be my children, legally as well as spiritually. It was almost enough to make me feel that there was some guiding purpose to life after all.

And so there were several very good reasons for Dexter to go through with this-but Paris? I don't know where it came from, this idea that Paris is romantic. Aside from the French, has anyone but Lawrence Welk ever thought an accordion was sexy? And wasn't it by now clear that they don't like us there? And they insist on speaking French, of all things?

Perhaps Rita had been brainwashed by an old movie, something with a perky-plucky blonde and a romantic dark-haired man, modernist music playing as they pursue each other around the Eiffel Tower and laugh at the quaint hostility of the dirty, Gauloise-smoking man in the beret. Or maybe she had heard a Jacques Brel record once and decided it spoke to her soul. Who can say? But somehow Rita had the notion firmly welded into her steel-trap brain that Paris was the capital of sophisticated romance, and the idea would not come out without major surgery.

So on top of the endless debates about chicken versus fish and wine versus cash bar, a series of monomaniacal rambling monologues about Paris began to emerge. Surely we could afford a whole week, that would give us time to see the Jardin des Tuileries *and* the Louvre-and maybe something by Molière at the Comédie-Française. I had to applaud the depth of her research. For my part, my interest in Paris had faded away completely long ago when I learned that it was in France.

Luckily for us, I was saved from the necessity of finding a politic way of telling her all this when Cody and Astor made their subtle entrance. They don't barrel into a room with guns blazing as most children of seven and ten do. As I have said, they were somewhat damaged by their dear old biological dad, and one consequence is that you never see them come and go: they enter the room by osmosis. One moment they are nowhere to be seen and the next they are standing quietly beside you, waiting to be noticed.

"We want to play kick the can," Astor said. She was the spokesperson for the pair; Cody never put more than four words together in a single day. He was not stupid, very far from it. He simply preferred not to speak most of the time. Now he just looked at me and nodded.

"Oh," said Rita, pausing in her reflections on the land of Rousseau, Candide, and Jerry Lewis, "well then, why don't you-"

"We want to play kick the can with *Dexter*," Astor added, and Cody nodded very loudly.

Rita frowned. "I guess we should have talked about this before, but don't you think Cody and Astor-I mean, shouldn't they start to call you something more, I don't know-but just Dexter? It seems kind of-"

"How about mon papere?" I asked. "Or Monsieur le Comte?"

"How about, I don't think so?" muttered Astor.

"I just think-" said Rita.

"Dexter is fine," I said. "They're used to it."

"It doesn't seem respectful," she said.

I looked down at Astor. "Show your mother you can say 'Dexter' respectfully," I told her.

She rolled her eyes. "Puh-*leeeeeeze*," she said.

I smiled at Rita. "See? She's ten years old. She can't say *anything* respectfully."

"Well, yes, but-" Rita said.

"It's okay. They're okay," I said. "But Paris-"

"Let's go outside," said Cody, and I looked at him with surprise. Four entire syllables-for him it was practically an oration.

"All right," said Rita. "If you really think-"

"I almost never think," I said. "It gets in the way of the mental process."

"That doesn't make any sense," Astor said.

"It doesn't have to make sense. It's true," I said.

Cody shook his head. "Kick the can," he said. And rather than break in on his talking jag, I simply followed him out into the yard.

TWO

OF COURSE, EVEN WITH RITA'S GLORIOUS PLANS UNFOLDING, life was not all jubilation and strawberries. There was real work to do, too. And because Dexter is nothing if not conscientious, I had been doing it. I had spent the past two weeks dabbing on the last few brushstrokes of a brand-new canvas. The young gentleman who served as my inspiration had inherited a great deal of money, and he had apparently been using it for the kind of dreadful homicidal escapades that made me wish I was rich, too. Alexander Macauley was his name, though he called himself "Zander," which seemed somewhat preppy to me, but perhaps that was the point. He was a dyed-in-the-wool trust-fund hippie, after all, someone who had never done any real work, devoting himself entirely to lighthearted amusement of the kind that would have made my hollow heart go pitter-pat, if only Zander had shown slightly better taste in choosing his victims.

The Macauley family's money came from vast hordes of cattle, endless citrus groves, and dumping phosphates into Lake Okeechobee. Zander came frequently to the poor areas of town to pour out his largesse across the city's homeless. And the favored few he really wished to encourage he reportedly brought back to the family ranch and gave employment, as I learned from a teary-eyed and admiring newspaper article.

Of course Dexter always applauds the charitable spirit. But in general, I am so very much in favor of it because it is nearly always a warning sign that something nefarious, wicked, and playful is going on behind the Mother Teresa mask. Not that I would ever doubt that somewhere in the depths of the human heart there really and truly does live a spirit of kind and caring charity, mingled with the love of fellow man. Of course it does. I mean, I'm sure it must be in there somewhere. I've just never seen it. And since I lack both humanity and real heart, I am forced to rely on experience, which tells me that charity begins at home, and almost always ends there, too.

So when I see a young, wealthy, handsome, and otherwise normal-appearing young man lavishing his resources on the vile downtrodden of the earth, I find it difficult to accept the altruism at face value, no matter how beautifully presented. After all, I am fairly good at presenting a charming and innocent picture of myself, and we know how accurate that is, don't we?

Happily for my consistent worldview, Zander was no different—just a lot richer. And his inherited money had made him a little bit sloppy. Because in the meticulous tax records I uncovered, the family ranch appeared to be unoccupied and idle, which clearly meant that wherever he was taking his dear dirty friends, it was not to a healthy and happy life of country labor.

Even better for my purposes, wherever they went with their new friend Zander, they were going barefoot. Because in a special room at his lovely Coral Gables home, guarded by some very cunning and expensive locks that took me almost five full minutes to pick, Zander had saved some souvenirs. It's a foolish risk for a monster to take; I know this full well, since I do it myself. But if someday a hardworking investigator comes across my little box of memories, he will find no more than some glass slides, each with a single drop of blood preserved upon it, and no way ever to prove that any of them is anything sinister at all.

Zander was not quite so clever. He had saved a shoe from each of his victims, and counted on too much money and a locked door to keep his secrets safe.

Well really. No wonder monsters get such a bad reputation. It was just too naive for words—and shoes? Seriously, shoes, by all that's unholy? I try to be tolerant and understanding of the foibles of others, but this was a bit much. What could possibly be the attraction in a sweaty, slime-encrusted, twenty-year-old sneaker? And then to leave them right out in the open like that, too. It was almost insulting.

Of course, Zander probably thought that if he was ever caught he could count on buying the best legal care in the world, who would surely get him off with only community service—a little ironic, since that was how it had all started. But one thing he had not counted on was being caught by Dexter instead of the police. And his trial would take place in the Traffic Court of the Dark Passenger, in which there are no lawyers—although I certainly hope to catch one someday soon—and the verdict is always absolutely final.

But was a shoe really enough proof? I had no doubt of Zander's guilt. Even if the Dark Passenger hadn't been singing arias the entire time I looked at the shoes, I knew very well what the collection meant—left to his own devices, Zander would collect more shoes. I was quite sure that he was a bad man, and I wanted very much to

have a moonlight discussion with him and give him some pointed comments. But I had to be absolutely sure-that was the Harry Code.

I had always followed the careful rules laid down by Harry, my cop foster father, who taught me how to be what I am with modesty and exactness. He had shown me how to leave a crime scene clean as only a cop can, and he had taught me to use the same kind of thoroughness in selecting my partner for the dance. If there was any doubt at all, I could not call Zander out to play.

And now? No court in the world would convict Zander of anything beyond unsanitary fetishism based on his display of footwear-but no court in the world had the expert testimony of the Dark Passenger, either, that soft, urgent inner voice that demanded action and was never wrong. And with that sibilance mounting in my interior ear it was difficult to stay calm and impartial. I wanted to claim Zander for the Final Dance the way I wanted my next breath.

I wanted, I was sure-but I knew what Harry would say. It wasn't enough. He taught me that it's good to see bodies in order to be certain, and Zander had managed to hide all of them well enough to keep me from finding them. And without a body, no amount of wanting it would make it right.

I went back to my research to find out where he might be stashing a short row of pickled corpses. His home was out of the question. I had been in it and had not had a hint of anything other than the shoe museum, and the Dark Passenger is normally quite good at nosing out cadaver collections. Besides, there was no place to put them at the house-there are no basements in Florida, and it was a neighborhood where he could not dig in the yard or carry in bodies without being observed. And a short consultation with the Passenger convinced me that someone who mounted his souvenirs on walnut plaques would certainly dispose of the leftovers neatly.

The ranch was an excellent possibility, but a quick trip to the old place revealed no traces at all. It had clearly been abandoned for some time; even the driveway was overgrown.

I dug deeper: Zander owned a condo in Maui, but that was much too far away. He had a few acres in North Carolina-possible, but the thought of driving twelve hours with a body in the car made it seem unlikely. He owned stock in a company that was trying to develop Toro Key, a small island south of Cape Florida. But a corporate site was certainly out of the question-too many people might wander in and poke around. In any case, I remembered trying to land on Toro Key when I was younger, and it had armed guards strolling about to keep people away. It had to be somewhere else.

Among his many portfolios and assets, the only thing that made any sense at all was Zander's boat, a forty-five-foot Cigarette. I knew from my experience with a previous monster that a boat provided wonderful opportunities for disposing of leftovers. Simply wire the body to a weight, flip it over the rail, and wave bye-bye. Neat, clean, tidy; no fuss, no muss, no evidence.

And no way for me to get my proof, either. Zander kept his boat at the most exclusive private marina in Coconut Grove, the Royal Bay Yacht Club. Their security was very good, too good for Dexter to sneak in with a lock pick and a smile. It was a full-service marina for the terminally rich, the kind of place where they cleaned and polished your bowline when you brought the boat in. You didn't even have to fuel up your own boat; just call ahead and it would be ready for you, down to chilled champagne in the cockpit. And happily smiling armed guards infested the grounds night and day, tipping their hats at the Quality and shooting anyone who climbed the fence.

The boat was unreachable. I was as certain as I could be that Zander was using it to dispose of the bodies, and so was the Dark Passenger, which counts for even more. But there was no way to get to it.

It was annoying, even frustrating, to picture Zander with his latest trophy-probably bundled neatly into a gold-plated ice chest-calling cheerfully ahead to the dockmaster and ordering the boat fueled, and then strolling nonchalantly down the dock while two grunting Wackenhuts put the chest on board his boat and waved a respectful good-bye. But I could not get to the boat and prove it. Without this final proof, the Harry Code would not allow me to proceed.

Certain as I was, what did that leave me? I could try to catch Zander in the act the next time. But there was no way to be sure when that would be, and I couldn't watch him all the time. I did have to show up at work now

and then, and make my token appearances at home, and go through all the motions of maintaining a normal-seeming life. And so at some point in the next weeks or so if the pattern held, Zander would call the dockmaster and order his boat prepared, and-

And the dockmaster, because he was an efficient employee at a rich man's club, would make a note of exactly what he did to the boat and when: how much fuel he put in, what kind of champagne, and how much Windex he used on the windscreen. He would put all that in the file marked "Macaulay," and store it on his computer.

And suddenly we were back in Dexter's world again, with the Passenger hissing certainty and urging me to the keyboard.

Dexter is modest, even self-effacing, and certainly aware of the limits of his considerable talent. But if there was a limit to what I could discover on the computer, I had not found it yet. I sat back down and went to work.

It took me less than half an hour to hack into the club's computers and find the records. Sure enough, there was a thorough service record. I checked it against the meetings of the board of Zander's favorite charity, One World Mission of Divine Light, which was on the edge of Liberty City. On February 14, the board was delighted to announce that Wynton Allen would be moving out of the den of iniquity that is Miami and onto Zander's ranch to be rehabilitated by honest labor. And on February 15, Zander had taken a boat trip that used thirty-five gallons of fuel.

On March 11, Tyrone Meeks had been granted similar happiness. And on March 12, Zander took a boat ride.

And so it went; each time some lucky homeless person was chosen for a life of bucolic joy, Zander placed a service order on his boat within twenty-four hours.

This was not seeing the bodies-but the Harry Code had been set up to operate in the cracks of the system, in the shadow areas of perfect justice rather than perfect law. I was sure, the Passenger was sure, and this was enough proof to satisfy all of us.

Zander would go on a different kind of moonlight cruise, and not all of his money would keep him afloat.

THREE

SO ON A NIGHT LIKE MANY OTHERS, WHEN THE MOON flung down chords of manic melody onto its happily bloodthirsty children, I was humming along and preparing to go out for a sharp frolic. All the work was done and it was playtime now for Dexter. It should have been a matter of mere moments to gather my simple toys and head out the door for my appointment with the trust-fund troublemaker. But of course, with marriage looming, nothing at all was simple anymore. I began to wonder, in fact, if anything would ever be simple again.

Of course, I was building a perfect and nearly impenetrable facade of gleaming antiseptic steel and glass to cement onto the front of the Gothic horror of Castle Dexter. So I was very willing to cooperate in retiring the Old Dexter, and therefore I had been in the process of "consolidating our lives," as Rita put it. In this case that meant moving out of my comfy little nook on the edge of Coconut Grove and into Rita's three-bedroom house farther south, as this was the "sensible" thing to do. Of course, aside from being sensible it was also a Monster Inconvenience. Under the new regime there was no way I could keep anything even slightly private if I should want to. Which of course I did. Every dedicated, responsible ogre has his secrets, and there were things that I did not wish to see the light of day in anyone's hands but my own.

There was, for example, a certain amount of research on potential playmates; and there was also the small wooden box, very dear to me, that contained forty-one glass slides, each with a single drop of dried blood preserved in the center, each drop representing a single less-than-human life that had ended at my hands-the entire scrapbook of my inner life. Because I do not leave great heaps of decaying flesh lying about. I am not a slovenly, slipshod, madly slashing fiend. I am an extremely tidy, madly slashing fiend. I am always very careful indeed to get rid of my leftovers, and even some cruel implacable foe bent on proving me the vile ogre that I am would be hard-pressed to say what my little slides really were.

Still, explaining them might raise questions that could eventually prove awkward, even to a doting wife-and even more so to some fearsome nemesis passionately devoted to my destruction. There had been one such recently, a Miami cop named Sergeant Doakes. And although he was technically still alive, I had begun to think of him in the past tense, since his recent misadventures had cost him both his feet and hands, as well as his tongue. He was certainly in no shape to bring me to well-deserved justice. But I knew enough to know that if there had been one like him, there would sooner or later be another.

And so privacy seemed important-not that I had ever been a show-off where my personal affairs were concerned. As far as I knew, no one had ever seen into my little slide box. But I had never had a fiancée cleaning up for me, nor two very inquisitive kids sniffing around my things so they could learn to be much more like Dark Daddy Dexter.

Rita seemed to appreciate my need for a bit of personal space, if not the reasons for it, and she had sacrificed her sewing room, turning it into something she called Dexter's study. Eventually this would house my computer and my few books and CDs and, I suppose, my little rosewood box of slides. But how could I possibly leave it in here? I could explain it to Cody and Astor easily enough-but what to tell Rita? Should I try to hide it? Build a secret passage behind a fake bookcase leading down a winding stairway to my dark lair? Put the box in the bottom of a fake can of shaving cream, perhaps? It was something of a problem.

So far I had avoided needing to find a solution by hanging on to my apartment. But I still kept a few simple things in my study, like my fillet knives and duct tape, which could readily be explained away by my love for fishing and air-conditioning. The solution could come later. Right now I felt icy fingers prodding and tickling at my spine, and I had an urgent need to keep an appointment with a spoiled young man.

And so into my study I went, in search of a navy blue nylon gym bag I had been saving for a formal occasion, to hold my knife and tape. I pulled it from the closet, a sharp taste of anticipation building on my tongue, and put in my party toys: a new roll of duct tape, a fillet knife, gloves, my silk mask, and a coil of nylon rope for emergencies. All set. I could feel my veins gleaming with steely excitement, the wild music rising in my inner ears, the roaring of the Passenger's pulse urging me on, out, into it. I turned to go-

And ran into a matched pair of solemn children, staring up at me with expectation.

"He wants to go," Astor said, and Cody nodded, looking at me with large unblinking eyes.

I honestly believe that those who know me would say I have a glib tongue and a ready wit, but as I mentally played back what Astor had said and tried again to find a way to make it mean something else, all I could manage was a very human sound, something like, "He muh whu hoo?"

"With you," Astor said patiently, as if speaking to a mentally challenged chambermaid. "Cody wants to go with you tonight."

In retrospect, it's easy to see that this problem would come up sooner or later. And to be perfectly fair to me, which I think is very important, I had expected it-but later. Not now. Not on the edge of my Night of Need. Not when every hair on my neck was standing straight up and screeching with the pure and urgent compulsion to slither into the night in cold, stainless-steel fury-

The situation clearly called for some serious pondering, but all my nerves were clamoring for me to leap out the window and be off into the night-but there they were, and so somehow I took a deep breath and pondered the two of them.

The sharp and shiny tin soul of Dexter the Avenger was forged from a childhood trauma so violent that I had blocked it out completely. It had made me what I am, and I am sure I would snuffle and feel unhappy about that if I was able to feel at all. And these two, Cody and Astor, had been scarred the same way, beaten and savaged by a violent drug-addicted father until they, too, were turned forever away from sunlight and lollipops. As my wise foster father had known in raising me, there was no way to take that away, no way to put the serpent back in the egg.

But it could be trained. Harry had trained me, shaped me into something that hunted only the other dark predators, the other monsters and ghouls who dressed in human skin and prowled the game trails of the city. I had the indelible urge to kill, unchangeable and forever, but Harry had taught me to find and dispose of only those who, by his rigorous cop standards, truly needed it.

When I discovered that Cody was the same way, I had promised myself that I would carry on the Harry Way, pass on what I had learned to the boy, raise him up in Dark Righteousness. But this was an entire galaxy of complications, explanations, and teachings. It had taken Harry nearly ten years to cram it all into me before he allowed me to play with anything more complicated than stray animals. I had not even started with Cody-and although it made me feel like I was trying to be a Jedi Master, I could not possibly start with him now. I knew that Cody must someday come to terms with being like me, and I truly meant to help him-but not tonight. Not with the moon calling so playfully just outside the window, pulling at me like a soft yellow freight train hitched to my brain.

"I'm not, uh-" I started to say, meaning to deny everything. But they looked up at me with such an endearing expression of cold certainty that I stopped. "No," I said at last. "He's much too young."

They exchanged a quick glance, no more, but there was an entire conversation in it. "I told him you would say that," Astor said.

"You were right," I said.

"But Dexter," she said, "you said you would show us stuff."

"I will," I said, feeling the shadowy fingers crawl slowly up my spine and prodding for control, urging me out the door, "but not now."

"When?" Astor demanded.

I looked at the two of them and felt the oddest combination of wild impatience to be off and cutting mixed with an urge to wrap them both in a soft blanket and kill anything that came near them. And nibbling at the edges, just to round out the blend, a desire to smack their thick little heads together.

Was this fatherhood at last?

The entire surface of my body was tingling with cold fire from my need to be gone, to begin, to do the mighty unmentionable, but instead I took a very deep breath and put on a neutral face. "This is a school night," I said,

"and it is almost your bedtime."

They looked at me as if I had betrayed them, and I supposed I had by changing the rules and playing Daddy Dexter when they thought they were talking to Demon Dexter. Still, it was true enough. One really can't take small children along on a late-night evisceration and expect them to remember their ABCs the next day. It was hard enough for me to show up at work the morning after one of my little adventures, and I had the advantage of all the Cuban coffee I wanted. Besides, they really were much too young.

"Now you're just being a grown-up," Astor said with a withering ten-year-old sneer.

"But I am a grown-up," I said. "And I am trying to be the right one for you." Even though I said it with my teeth hurting from fighting back the rising need, I meant it-which did nothing at all to soften the identical looks of bleak contempt I got from both of them.

"We thought you were different," she said.

"I can't imagine how I could be any more different and still look human," I said.

"Not fair," Cody said, and I locked eyes with him, seeing a tiny dark beast raise its head and roar at me.

"No, it's not fair," I said. "Nothing in life is fair. Fair is a dirty word and I'll thank you not to use that language around me."

Cody looked hard at me for a moment, a look of disappointed calculation I had never seen from him before, and I didn't know if I wanted to swat him or give him a cookie.

"Not fair," he repeated.

"Listen," I said, "this is something I know about. And this is the first lesson. Normal children go to bed on time on school nights."

"Not normal," he said, sticking his lower lip out far enough to hold his schoolbooks.

"Exactly the point," I told him. "That's why you always have to *look* normal, *act* normal, make everyone else think you *are* normal. And the other thing you have to do is exactly what I tell you, or I won't do this." He didn't look quite convinced, but he was weakening. "Cody," I said. "You have to trust me, and you have to do it my way."

"*Have* to," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Have to."

He looked at me for a very long moment, then switched his stare to his sister, who looked back at him. It was a marvel of sub-vocal communication; I could tell that they were having a long, very intricate conversation, but they didn't make a sound until Astor shrugged and turned back to me. "You have to promise," she said to me.

"All right," I said. "Promise what?"

"That you'll start teaching us," she said, and Cody nodded. "Soon."

I took a deep breath. I had never really had any chance of going to what I consider a very hypothetical heaven, even before this. But to go through with this, agreeing to turn these ragged little monsters into neat, well-schooled little monsters-well, I would certainly hope I was right about the hypothetical part. "I promise," I said. They looked at each other, looked at me, and left.

And there I was with a bag full of toys, a pressing engagement, and a somewhat shriveled sense of urgency.

Is family life like this for everyone? If so, how does anyone survive it? Why do people have more than one child, or any at all? Here I was with an important and fulfilling goal in front of me, and suddenly I get blindsided by something no soccer mom ever had to face and it was nearly impossible to remember what I was thinking only moments ago. Even with an impatient growl from the Dark Passenger-strangely muted, as if just a little

confused-it took me several moments to pull myself together, from Dazed Daddy Dexter back to the Cold Avenger once again. I found it difficult to call back the icy edge of readiness and danger; it was difficult, in fact, to remember where I had left my car keys.

Somehow I found them and stumbled out of my study, and after mumbling some heartfelt nothing to Rita, I was out the door and into the night at last.

FOUR

I HAD FOLLOWED ZANDER LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW HIS ROUTINE, and since this was Thursday night, I knew exactly where he would be. He spent every Thursday evening at One World Mission of Divine Light, presumably inspecting the livestock. After about ninety minutes of smiling at the staff and listening to a brief service he would write a check for the pastor, a huge black man who had once played in the NFL. The pastor would smile and thank him, and Zander would slip quietly out the back door to his modest SUV and drive humbly to his house, all aglow with the virtuous feeling that comes only from true good works.

But tonight, he would not drive alone.

Tonight Dexter and his Dark Passenger would go along for the ride and steer him to a brand-new kind of journey.

But first the cold and careful approach, the payoff to the weeks of stealthy stalking.

I parked my car only a few miles from Rita's house at a large old shopping area called Dadeland and walked to the nearby Metrorail station. The train was seldom crowded, even at rush hour, but there were enough people around that no one paid any attention to me. Just a nice man in fashionably dark clothes carrying a gym bag.

I got off one stop past downtown and walked six blocks to the mission, feeling the keen edge sharpening itself within me, moving me back to the readiness I needed. We would think about Cody and Astor later. Right now, on this street, I was all hard, hidden brightness. The blinding orange-pink glare of the special crime-fighting streetlights could not wash away the darkness I wrapped tighter around me as I walked.

The mission sat on the corner of a medium-busy street, in a converted storefront. There was a small crowd gathered in front-no real surprise, since they gave out food and clothing, and all you had to do to get it was to spend a few moments of your rum-soaked time listening to the good reverend explain why you were going to hell. It seemed like a pretty good bargain, even to me, but I wasn't hungry. I moved on past, around back to the parking lot.

Although it was slightly dimmer here, the parking lot was still far too bright for me, almost too bright even to see the moon, although I could feel it there in the sky, smirking down on our tiny squirming fragile life, festooned as it was with monsters who lived only to take that life away in large, pain-filled mouthfuls. Monsters like me, and like Zander. But tonight there would be one less.

I walked one time around the perimeter of the parking lot. It appeared to be safe. There was no one in sight, no one sitting or dozing in any of the cars. The only window with a view into the area was a small one, high up on the back wall of the mission, fitted with opaque glass-the restroom. I circled closer to Zander's car, a blue Dodge Durango nosed in next to the back door, and tried the door handle-locked. Parked next to it was an old Chrysler, the pastor's venerable ride. I moved to the far side of the Chrysler and began my wait.

From my gym bag I pulled a white silk mask and dropped it over my face, settling the eyeholes snugly. Then I took out a loop of fifty-pound-test fishing line and I was ready. Very soon now it would begin, the Dark Dance. Zander strolling all unknowing into a predator's night, a night of sharp surprises, a final and savage darkness pierced with fierce fulfillment. So very soon, he would amble calmly out of his life and into mine. And then-

Had Cody remembered to brush his teeth? He had been forgetting lately, and Rita was reluctant to get him out of bed once he was settled in. But it was important to set him on the path of good habits now, and brushing was important.

I flicked my noose, letting it settle onto my knees. Tomorrow was photo day at Astor's school. She was supposed to wear her Easter dress from last year to look nice for the picture. Had she set it out so she wouldn't forget in the morning? Of course she wouldn't smile for the picture, but she should at least wear the good dress.

Could I really be crouched here in the night, noose in hand and waiting to pounce, and thinking about such things? How was it possible for my anticipation to be filled with these thoughts instead of the fang-sharpening eagerness of turning the Dark Passenger loose on an oh-so-deserving playmate? Was this a foretaste of Dexter's shiny new married life?

I breathed in carefully, feeling a great sympathy for W. C. Fields. I couldn't work with kids, either. I closed my eyes, felt myself fill with dark night air, and let it out again, feeling the frigid readiness return. Slowly Dexter receded and the Dark Passenger took back the controls.

And not a moment too soon.

The back door clattered open and we could hear the sound of horrible animal noises blating and bleating away inside, a truly awful rendering of "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," the sound of it enough to send anyone back to the bottle. And enough to propel Zander out the door. He paused in the doorway, turned to give the room a cheery wave and a smirk, and then the door slammed shut and he came around his car to the driver's side and he was ours.

Zander fumbled for his keys and the lock clicked open and we were around the car and behind him. Before he knew what was happening the noose whistled through the air and slipped around his neck and we yanked hard enough to pull him off his feet, hard enough to bring him to his knees with his breath stopped and his face turning dark and it was good.

"Not a sound," we said, cold and perfect. "Do exactly as we say, not a single word or sound, and you will live a little longer," we told him, and we tightened the noose just a bit to let him know he belonged to us and must do as we said.

Zander responded in a most gratifying way by slipping forward onto his face and he was not smirking now. Drool leaked from the corner of his mouth and he clawed at the noose, but we held it far too tight for him to get a finger under the line. When he was very close to passing out we eased the pressure, just enough to let him crackle in a single painful breath. "On your feet now," we said gently, pulling upward on the noose so he would do as he was told. And slowly, clawing his way up the side of his car, Zander obeyed.

"Good," we said. "Get in the car." We switched the noose to my left hand and opened the door of the car, then reached around the door post and took it again in my right as we climbed in the backseat behind him. "Drive," we said in our dark and icy command voice.

"Where?" Zander said in his voice, now a hoarse whisper from our little reminders with the noose.

We pulled the line tight again to remind him not to talk out of turn. When we thought he had received the message we loosened it again. "West," we said. "No more talk. Drive."

He put the car in gear and, with a few small tugs on the noose, I steered him west and up onto the Dolphin Expressway. For a while Zander did exactly as we said. He would look at us in the mirror from time to time, but a very slight twitch of the noose kept him extremely cooperative until we took him onto the Palmetto Expressway and north.

"Listen," he said suddenly, as we drove past the airport, "I am like really rich. I can give you whatever you want."

"Yes, you can," we said, "and you will," and he did not understand what we wanted, because he relaxed just a little bit.

"Okay," he said, voice still rough from the noose, "so how much do you want?"

We locked eyes with him in the mirror and slowly, very slowly so he would begin to understand, we tightened the line around his neck. When he could barely breathe, we held it like that for a moment. "Everything," we said. "We will have everything." We loosened the noose, just a little. "Drive," we said.

Zander drove. He was very quiet the rest of the way, but he did not seem as frightened as he should have been. Of course, he must believe that this was not really happening to him, could not possibly happen, not to him, living forever in his impenetrable cocoon of money. Everything had a price, and he could always afford it. Soon he would negotiate. Then he would buy his way out.

And he would. Eventually he would buy his way out. But not with money. And never out of this noose.

It was not a terribly long drive and we were quiet all the way to the Hialeah exit we had chosen. But when Zander slowed for the off-ramp, he glanced at me in the mirror with fear in his eyes, the climbing terror of a monster in a trap, ready to chew off his leg to escape, and the tangible bite of his panic sparked a warm glow in the Dark Passenger and made us very glad and strong. "You don't-there, there isn't-where are we going?" he stammered, weak and pitiful and sounding more human all the time, which made us angry and we yanked too hard until he swerved onto the shoulder momentarily and we had to grant him some slack in the noose. Zander steered back onto the road and the bottom of the ramp.

"Turn right," we said, and he did, the unlovely breath rasping in and out through his spit-flecked lips. But he did just as we told him to do, all the way down the street and left onto a small, dark lane of old warehouses.

He parked his car where we told him, by the rusty door of a dark unused building. A partially rotted sign with the end lopped off still said JONE PLASTI. "Park," we said, and as he fumbled the gear lever into park we were out the door and yanking him after us and onto the ground, pulling tight and watching him thrash for a moment before we jerked him up to his feet. The spit had caked around his mouth, and there was some small bit of belief in his eyes now as he stood there ugly and disgusting in the lovely moonlight, all atremble with some terrible mistake I had made against his money, and the growing notion that perhaps he was no different from the ones he had done exactly this to washed over him and left him weak. We let him stand and breathe for just a moment, then pushed him toward the door. He put one hand out, palm against the concrete-block wall. "Listen," he said, and there was a quaver of pure human in his voice now. "I can get you a ton of money. Whatever you want."

We said nothing. Zander licked his lips. "All right," he said, and his voice now was dry, shredded, and desperate. "So what do you want from me?"

"Exactly what you took from the others," we said with an extra-sharp twitch of the noose. "Except the shoe."

He stared and his mouth sagged and he peed in his pants. "I didn't," he said. "That's not-"

"You did," we told him. "It is." And pulling back hard on the leash we pushed him forward and through the door, into the carefully prepared space. There were a few shattered clumps of PVC pipe swept off to the sides and, more important for Zander, two fifty-gallon drums of hydrochloric acid, left behind by Jone Plasti when they had gone out of business.

It was easy enough for us to get Zander up onto the work space we had cleared for him, and in just a few moments we had him taped and tied into place and we were very eager to begin. We cut the noose off and he gasped as the knife nicked his throat.

"Jesus!" he said. "Listen, you're making a big mistake."

We said nothing; there was work to do and we prepared for it, slowly cutting away his clothing and dropping it carefully into one of the drums of acid.

"Oh, fuck, please," he said. "Seriously, it's not what you think-you don't know what you're about to do."

We were ready and we held up the knife for him to see that actually we knew very well what we were doing, and we were about to do it.

"Dude, please," he said. The fear in him was far beyond anything he thought possible, beyond the humiliation of wetting his pants and begging, beyond anything he had ever imagined.

And then he grew surprisingly still. He looked right into my eyes with an uncalled-for clarity and in a voice I had not heard from him before he said, "He'll find you."

We stopped for a moment to consider what this meant. But we were quite sure that it was his last hopeful bluff, and it blunted the delicious taste of his terror and made us angry and we taped his mouth shut and went to work.

And when we were done there was nothing left except for one of his shoes. We thought about having it mounted, but of course that would be untidy, so it went into the barrel of acid with the rest of Zander.

image

This was not good, the Watcher thought. They had been inside the abandoned warehouse far too long, and there could be no doubt that whatever they were doing in there, it was not a social occasion.

Nor was the meeting he had been scheduled to have with Zander. Their meetings had always been strictly business, although Zander obviously thought of them in different terms. The awe on his face at their rare encounters spoke volumes on what the young fool thought and felt. He was so proud of the small contribution he made, so eager to be near the cold, massive power.

The Watcher did not regret anything that might happen to Zander-he was easy enough to replace: the real concern was why this was happening tonight, and what it might mean.

And he was glad now that he had not interfered, had simply hung back and followed. He could easily have moved in and taken the brash young man who had taken Zander, crushed him completely. Even now he felt the vast power murmuring within himself, a power that could roar out and sweep away anything that stood before it-but no.

The Watcher also had patience, and this, too, was a strength. If this other was truly a threat, it was better to wait and to watch, and when he knew enough about the danger, he would strike-swiftly, overwhelmingly, and finally.

So he watched. It was several hours before the other came out and got into Zander's car. The Watcher stayed well back, with his headlights off at first, tailing the blue Durango easily in the late-night traffic. And when the other parked the car in the lot at a Metrorail station and got on the train, he stepped on, too, just as the doors slid closed, and sat at the far end, studying the reflection of the face for the first time.

Surprisingly young and even handsome. An air of innocent charm. Not the sort of face you might expect, but they never were.

The Watcher followed when the other got off at Dadeland and walked toward one of the many parked cars. It was late and there were no people in the lot. He knew he could make it happen now, so easily, just slip up behind the other and let the power flow through him, out into his hands, and release the other into the darkness. He could feel the slow, majestic rise of the strength inside as he closed the distance, almost taste the great and silent roar of the kill-

And then he stopped suddenly in his tracks and slowly moved away down a different aisle.

Because the other's car had a very noticeable placard lying on the dashboard.

A police parking permit.

He was very glad he had been patient. If the other was with the police... This could be a much bigger problem than he had expected. Not good at all. This would take some careful planning. And a great deal more observation.

And so the Watcher slipped quietly back into the night to prepare, and to watch.

FIVE

SOMEBODY ONCE SAID THAT THERE'S NO REST FOR THE wicked, and they were almost certainly talking about me, because for several days after I sent dear little Zander on to his just reward poor Dogged Dexter was very busy indeed. Even as Rita's frenetic planning kicked into high gear, my job followed suit. We seemed to have hit one of those periodic spells Miami gets every now and then in which murder just seems like a good idea, and I was up to my eyeballs in blood spatter for three days.

But on the fourth day, things actually got a little bit worse. I had brought in doughnuts, as is my habit from time to time-especially in the days following my playdates. For some reason, not only do I feel more relaxed for several days after the Passenger and I have a night encounter, but I also feel quite hungry. I'm sure that fact is filled with deep psychological significance, but I am far more interested in making sure I get one or two of the jelly doughnuts before the savage predators in Forensics shred them all to pieces. Significance can wait when doughnuts are on the line.

But this morning I barely managed to grab one raspberry-filled doughnut-and I was lucky not to lose a finger in the process. The whole floor was buzzing with preparation for a trip to a crime scene, and the tone of the buzz let me know that it was a particularly heinous one, which did not please me. That meant longer hours, stuck somewhere far from civilization and Cuban sandwiches. Who knew what I would end up with for lunch? Considering that I had been short-changed on the doughnuts, lunch could prove to be a very important meal, and for all I knew I would be forced to work right through it.

I grabbed my handy blood-spatter kit and headed out the door with Vince Masuoka, who despite his small size had somehow grabbed two of the very valuable filled doughnuts-including the Bavarian cream with the chocolate frosting. "You have done a little too well, Mighty Hunter," I told him with a nod at his plundered loot.

"The gods of the forest have been good," he said, and took a large bite. "My people will not starve this season."

"No, but I will," I said.

He gave me his terrible phony smile, which looked like something he had learned to do by studying a government manual on facial expressions. "The ways of the jungle are hard, Grasshopper," he said.

"Yes, I know," I said. "First you must learn to think like a doughnut."

"Ha," Vince said. His laugh was even phonier than his smile, sounding like he was reading aloud from a phonetic spelling of laughter. "Ah, ha ha ha!" he said. The poor guy seemed to be faking everything about being human, just like me. But wasn't as good at it as I was. No wonder I was comfortable with him. That and the fact that he quite often took a turn bringing the doughnuts.

"You need better camouflage," he said, nodding at my shirt, a bright pink-and-green Hawaiian pattern complete with hula girls. "Or at least better taste."

"It was on sale," I said.

"Ha," he said again. "Well, pretty soon Rita will be picking your clothes." And then abruptly dropping his terrible artificial jollity, he said, "Listen, I think I have found the perfect caterer."

"Does he do jelly doughnuts?" I said, truthfully hoping that the whole subject of my impending matrimonial bliss would simply go away. But I had asked Vince to be my best man, and he was taking the job seriously.

"The guy is very big," Vince said. "He did the MTV Awards, and all those showbiz parties and stuff."

"He sounds delightfully expensive," I said.

"Well, he owes me a favor," Vince said. "I think we can get him down on the price. Maybe like a hundred and fifty bucks a plate."

"Actually, Vince, I had hoped we could afford more than one plate."

"He was in that South Beach magazine," he said, sounding a little hurt. "You should at least talk to him."

"To be honest," I said, which of course meant I was lying, "I think Rita wants something simple. Like a buffet."

Vince was definitely sulking now. "At least talk to him," he repeated.

"I'll talk to Rita about it," I said, wishing that would make the whole thing go away. And during the trip to the crime scene Vince said no more about it, so maybe it had.

The scene turned out to be a lot easier for me than I had anticipated, and I cheered up quite a bit when I got there. In the first place, it was on the University of Miami campus, which was my dear old alma mater, and in keeping with my lifelong attempt to appear human, I always tried to remember to pretend I felt a warm, fuzzy fondness for the place when I was there. Secondly, there was apparently very little raw blood to deal with, which might mean that I could be done with it in a reasonable amount of time. It also meant freedom from the nasty wet red stuff-I really don't like blood, which may seem odd, but there it is. I do, however, find great satisfaction in organizing it at a crime scene, forcing it to fit a decent pattern and behave itself. In this case, from what I learned on the way there, that would hardly be a challenge.

And so it was with my usual cheerful good spirits that I sauntered over toward the yellow crime-scene tape, certain of a charming interlude in a hectic workday-

And came to a dead stop with one foot just inside the tape.

For a moment the world turned bright yellow and there was a sickening sensation of lurching weightless through space. I could see nothing except the knife-edged glare. There was a silent sound from the dark backseat, the feeling of subliminal nausea mixed with the blind panic of a butcher knife squealing across a chalkboard. A skittering, a nervousness, a wild certainty that something was very badly wrong, and no hint of what or where it was.

My sight came back and I looked around me. I saw nothing I didn't expect to see at a crime scene: a small crowd gathered at the yellow tape, some uniforms guarding the perimeter, a few cheap-suited detectives, and my team, the forensic geeks, scrabbling through the bushes on their hands and knees. All perfectly normal to the naked eye. And so I turned to my infallible fully clothed interior eye for an answer.

What is it? I asked silently, closing my eyes again and searching for some answer from the Passenger to this unprecedented display of discomfort. I was accustomed to commentary from my Dark Associate, and quite often my first sight of a crime scene would be punctuated by sly whispers of admiration or amusement, but this-it was clearly a sound of distress, and I did not know what to make of it.

What? I asked again. But there was no answer beyond the uneasy rustle of invisible wings, so I shook it off and walked over to the site.

The two bodies had clearly been burned somewhere else, since there was no sign of any barbecue large enough to bake two medium-size females quite so thoroughly. They had been dumped beside the lake that runs through the UM campus, just off the path that ran around it, and discovered by a pair of early-morning joggers. It was my opinion from the state of the small amount of blood evidence I found that the heads had been removed after the two had burned to death.

One small detail gave me pause. The bodies were laid out neatly, almost reverently, with the charred arms folded across the chests. And in place of the severed heads, a ceramic bull's head had been carefully placed at the top of each torso.

This is exactly the kind of loving touch that always brings some type of comment from the Dark Passenger-generally speaking, an amused whisper, a small chuckle, even a twinge of jealousy. But this time, as Dexter said to himself, *Aha, a bull's head! What do we think about that?*, the Passenger responded immediately and forcefully with-

Nothing?

Not a whisper, not a sigh?

I sent an irritated demand for answers, and got no more than a worried scuttling, as if the Passenger were ducking down behind anything that might provide cover, and hoping to ride out the storm without being noticed.

I opened my eyes, as much from startlement as anything else. I could not remember any time when the Passenger had nothing to say on some example of our favorite subject, and yet here he was, not merely subdued but hiding.

I looked back at the two charred bodies with new respect. I had no clue as to what this might mean, but since it had never happened before, it seemed like a good idea to find out.

Angel Batista-no-relation was on his hands and knees on the far side of the path, very carefully examining things I couldn't see and didn't really care about. "Did you find it yet?" I asked him.

He didn't look up. "Find what?" he said.

"I don't have any idea," I said. "But it must be here somewhere."

He reached out with a pair of tweezers and plucked a single blade of grass, staring hard at it and then stuffing it into a plastic baggie as he spoke. "Why," he said, "would somebody put a ceramic bull head?"

"Because chocolate would melt," I said.

He nodded without looking up. "Your sister thinks it's a Santeria thing."

"Really," I said. That possibility had not occurred to me, and I felt a little miffed that it hadn't. After all, this was Miami; anytime we encountered something that looked like a ritual and involved animal heads, Santeria should have been the first thing all of us thought. An Afro-Cuban religion that combined Yoruba animism with Catholicism, Santeria was widespread in Miami. Animal sacrifice and symbolism were common for its devotees, which would explain the bull heads. And although a relatively small number of people actually practiced Santeria, most homes in the city had one or two small saint candles or cowrie-shell necklaces bought at a botanica. The prevailing attitude around town was that even if you didn't believe in it, it didn't hurt to pay it some respect.

As I said, it should have occurred to me at once. But my foster sister, now a full sergeant in homicide, had thought of it first, even though I was supposed to be the clever one.

I had been relieved to learn that Deborah was assigned to the case, since it meant that there would be a minimum of bone-numbing stupidity. It would also, I hoped, give her something better to do with her time than she had appeared to have lately. She had been spending all hours of the day and night hovering around her damaged boyfriend, Kyle Chutsky, who had lost one or two minor limbs in his recent encounter with a deranged freelance surgeon who specialized in turning human beings into squealing potatoes-the same villain who had artfully trimmed away so many unnecessary parts from Sergeant Doakes. He had not had the time to finish with Kyle, but Debs had taken the whole thing rather personally and, after fatally shooting the good doctor, she had devoted herself to nursing Chutsky back to vigorous manhood.

I'm sure she had racked up numberless points on the ethical scoreboard, no matter who was keeping track, but in truth all the time off had done her no good with the department, and even worse, poor lonely Dexter had felt keenly the uncalled-for neglect from his only living relative.

So it was very good news all around to have Deborah assigned to the case, and on the far side of the path she was talking to her boss, Captain Matthews, no doubt giving him a little ammunition for his ongoing war with the press, who simply refused to take his picture from his good side.

The press vans were, in fact, already rolling up and spewing out crews to tape background shots of the area. A couple of the local bloodhounds were standing there, solemnly clutching their microphones and intoning mournful sentences about the tragedy of two lives so brutally ended. As always, I felt reverently grateful to live in a free society, where the press had a sacred right to show footage of dead people on the evening news.

Captain Matthews carefully brushed his already perfect hair with the heel of his hand, clapped Deborah on the shoulder, and marched over to talk to the press. And I marched over to my sister.

She stood where Matthews had left her, watching his back as he began to speak to Rick Sangre, one of the true gurus of if-it-bleeds-it-leads reporting. "Well, Sis," I said. "Welcome back to the real world."

She shook her head. "Hip hooray," she said.

"How is Kyle doing?" I asked her, since my training told me that was the right thing to ask about.

"Physically?" she said. "He's fine. But he just feels *useless* all the time. And those assholes in Washington won't let him go back to work."

It was difficult for me to judge Chutsky's ability to get back to work, since no one had ever said exactly what work he did. I knew it was vaguely connected to some part of the government and was also something clandestine, but beyond that I didn't know. "Well," I said, searching for the proper cliché, "I'm sure it just needs some time."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sure." She looked back at the place where the two charred bodies lay. "Anyhow, this is a great way to get my mind off it."

"The rumor mill tells me you think it's Santeria," I said, and her head swiveled rapidly around to face me.

"You think it's *not*?" she demanded.

"Oh, no, it might well be," I said.

"But?" she said sharply.

"No buts at all," I said.

"Damn it, Dexter," she said. "What do you know about this?" And it was probably a fair question. I had been known on occasion to offer a pretty fair guess about some of the more gruesome murders we worked on. I had gained a small reputation for my insight into the way the twisted homicidal sickos thought and operated-natural enough, since, unknown to everyone but Deborah, I was a twisted homicidal sicko myself.

But even though Deborah had only recently become aware of my true nature, she had not been shy about taking advantage of it to help her in her work. I didn't mind; glad to help. What else is family for? And I didn't really care if my fellow monsters paid their debt to society in Old Sparky-unless, of course, it was somebody I was saving for my own innocent pleasure.

But in this case, I had nothing whatsoever to tell Deborah. I had, in fact, been hoping she might have some small crumb of information to give to me, something that might explain the Dark Passenger's peculiar and uncharacteristic shrinking act. That, of course, was not the sort of thing I really felt comfortable telling Deborah about. But no matter what I said about this burned double offering, she wouldn't believe me. She would be sure I had information and some kind of angle that made me want to keep it all to myself. The only thing more suspicious than a sibling is a sibling who happens to be a cop.

Sure enough, she was convinced I was holding out on her. "Come on, Dexter," she said. "Out with it. Tell me what you know about this."

"Dear Sis, I am at a total loss," I said.

"Bullshit," she said, apparently unaware of the irony. "You're holding something back."

"Never in life," I said. "Would I lie to my only sister?"

She glared at me. "So it isn't Santeria?"

"I have no idea," I said, as soothingly as possible. "It seems like a really good place to start. But--"

"I knew it," she snapped. "But what?"

"Well," I started. And truly it had just occurred to me, and probably it meant nothing at all, but here I was in

mid-sentence already, so I went on with it. "Have you ever heard of a *santero* using ceramics? And bulls-don't they have a thing for *goat* heads?"

She looked at me very hard for a minute, then shook her head. "That's it? That's what you got?"

"I told you, Debs, I don't got anything. It was only a thought, something that just now came to me."

"Well," she said. "If you're telling me the truth-"

"Of course I am," I protested.

"Then, you've got doodly-squat," she said and looked away, back to where Captain Matthews was answering questions with his solemn, manly jaw jutting out. "Which is only slightly less than the horsepucky I got," she said.

I had never before grasped that doodly-squat was less than horsepucky, but it's always nice to learn something new. And yet even this startling revelation did very little to answer the real question here: Why had the Dark Passenger pulled a duck and cover? In the course of my job and my hobby I have seen some things that most people can't even imagine, unless they have watched several of those movies they show at traffic school for driving drunk. And in every case I had ever encountered, no matter how grisly, my shadow companion had some kind of pithy comment on the proceedings, even if it was only a yawn.

But now, confronted by nothing more sinister than two charred bodies and some amateur pottery, the Dark Passenger chose to scuttle away like a scared spider and leave me without guidance-a brand-new feeling for me, and I discovered I did not like it at all.

Still, what was I to do? I knew of no one I could talk to about something like the Dark Passenger; at least, not if I wanted to stay at liberty, which I very much did. As far as I was aware, there were no experts on the subject, other than me. But what did I really know about my boon companion? Was I really that knowledgeable, merely because I had shared space with it for so long? The fact that it had chosen to scuttle into the cellar was making me very edgy, as if I found myself walking through my office with no pants on. When it came down to the nub of things, I had no idea what the Dark Passenger was or where it came from, and that had never seemed all that important.

For some reason, now it did.

image

A modest crowd had gathered by the yellow tape barrier the police had put up. Enough people so that the Watcher could stand in the middle of the group without sticking out in any way.

He watched with a cold hunger that did not show on his face-nothing showed on his face; it was merely a mask he wore for the time being, a way to hide the coiled power stored inside. Yet somehow the people around him seemed to sense it, glancing his way nervously from time to time, as if they had heard a tiger growling nearby.

The Watcher enjoyed their discomfort, enjoyed the way they stared in stupid fear at what he had done. It was all part of the joy of this power, and part of the reason he liked to watch.

But he watched with a purpose right now, carefully and deliberately, even as he watched them scrabble around like ants and felt the power surge and flex inside him. *Walking meat*, he thought. *Less than sheep, and we are the shepherd.*

As he gloated at their pathetic reaction to his display he felt another presence tickle at the edge of his predator's senses. He turned his head slowly along the line of yellow tape-

There. That was him, the one in the bright Hawaiian shirt. He really was with the police.

The Watcher reached a careful tendril out toward the other, and as it touched he watched the other stop cold in his tracks and close his eyes, as if asking a silent question-yes. It all made sense now. The other had felt the subtle reach of senses; he was powerful, that was certain.

But what was his purpose?

He watched as the other straightened up, looked around, and then seemingly shrugged it off and crossed the police line.

We are stronger , he thought. *Stronger than all of them. And they will discover this, to their very great sorrow.*

He could feel the hunger growing-but he needed to know more, and he would wait until the right time. Wait and watch.

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