

JEFF
LINDSAY
DEARLY
DEVOTED
DEXTER
A N O V E L

D o u b l e d a y

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ALSO BY JEFF LINDSAY

DARKLY DREAMING DEXTER

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FOR TOMMIE AND GUS,
WHO HAVE CERTAINLY WAITED LONG ENOUGH

CHAPTER 1

IT'S THAT MOON AGAIN, SLUNG SO FAT AND LOW IN THE tropical night, calling out across a curdled sky and into the quivering ears of that dear old voice in the shadows, the Dark Passenger, nestled snug in the backseat of the Dodge K-car of Dexter's hypothetical soul.

That rascal moon, that loudmouthed leering Lucifer, calling down across the empty sky to the dark hearts of the night monsters below, calling them away to their joyful playgrounds. Calling, in fact, to

that monster right there, behind the oleander, tiger-striped with moonlight through the leaves, his senses all on high as he waits for just the right moment to leap from the shadows. It is Dexter in the dark, listening to the terrible whispered suggestions that come pouring down breathlessly into my shadowed hiding place.

My dear dark other self urges me to pounce—now—sink my moonlit fangs into the oh-so-vulnerable flesh on the far side of the hedge. But the time is not right and so I wait, watching cautiously as my unsuspecting victim creeps past, eyes wide, knowing that something is watching but not knowing that I am *here*, only three steely feet away in the hedge. I could so easily slide out like the knife blade I am, and work my wonderful magic—but I wait, suspected but unseen.

One long stealthy moment tiptoes into another and still I wait for just the right time; the leap, the outstretched hand, the cold glee as I see the terror spread across the face of my victim—

But no. Something is not right.

And now it is Dexter's turn to feel the queasy prickling of eyes on his back, the flutter of fear as I become more certain that something is now hunting *me*. Some other night stalker is feeling the sharp interior drool as he watches *me* from somewhere nearby—and I do not like this thought.

And like a small clap of thunder the gleeful hand comes down out of nowhere and onto *me* blindingly fast, and I glimpse the gleaming teeth of a nine-year-old neighbor boy. "Gotcha! One, two, three on Dexter!" And with the savage speed of the very young the rest of them are there, giggling wildly and shouting at me as I stand in the bushes humiliated. It is over. Six-year-old Cody stares at me, disappointed, as though Dexter the Night God has let down his high priest. Astor, his nine-year-old sister, joins in the hooting of the kids before they skitter off into the dark once more, to new and more complicated hiding places, leaving me so very alone in my shame.

Dexter did not kick the can. And now Dexter is *It*. Again.

You may wonder, how can this be? How can Dexter's night hunt be reduced to this? Always before there has been some frightful twisted predator awaiting the special attention of frightful twisted Dexter—and here I am, stalking an empty Chef Boyardee ravioli can that is guilty of nothing worse than bland sauce. Here I am, frittering away precious time losing a game I have not played since I was ten. Even worse, I am *IT*.

"One. Two. Three—" I call out, ever the fair and honest gamesman.

How can this be? How can Dexter the Demon feel the weight of that moon and not be off among the entrails, slicing the life from someone who needs very badly to feel the edge of Dexter's keen judgment? How is it possible on this kind of night for the Cold Avenger to refuse to take the Dark Passenger out for a spin?

"Four. Five. Six."

Harry, my wise foster father, had taught me the careful balance of Need and Knife. He had taken a boy in whom he saw the unstoppable need to kill—no changing that—and Harry had molded him into a man who only killed the killers; Dexter the no-bloodhound, who hid behind a human-seeming face and tracked down the truly naughty serial killers who killed without code. And I would have been one of

them, if not for the Harry Plan. *There are plenty of people who deserve it, Dexter*, my wonderful foster-cop-father had said.

“Seven. Eight. Nine.”

He had taught me how to find these special playmates, how to be sure they deserved a social call from me and my Dark Passenger. And even better, he taught me how to get away with it, as only a cop could teach. He had helped me to build a plausible hidey-hole of a life, and drummed into me that I must fit in, always, be relentlessly normal in all things.

And so I had learned how to dress neatly and smile and brush my teeth. I had become a perfect fake human, saying the stupid and pointless things that humans say to each other all day long. No one suspected what crouched behind my perfect imitation smile. No one except my foster sister, Deborah, of course, but she was coming to accept the real me. After all, I could have been much worse. I could have been a vicious raving monster who killed and killed and left towers of rotting flesh in my wake. Instead, here I was on the side of truth, justice, and the American way. Still a monster, of course, but I cleaned up nicely afterward, and I was OUR monster, dressed in red, white, and blue 100 percent synthetic virtue. And on those nights when the moon is loudest I find the others, those who prey on the innocent and do not play by the rules, and I make them go away in small, carefully wrapped pieces.

This elegant formula had worked well through years of happy inhumanity. In between playdates I maintained my perfectly average lifestyle from a persistently ordinary apartment. I was never late to work, I made the right jokes with co-workers, and I was useful and unobtrusive in all things, just as Harry had taught me. My life as an android was neat, balanced, and had real redeeming social value.

Until now. Somehow, here I was on a just-right night playing kick the can with a flock of children, instead of playing Slice the Slasher with a carefully chosen friend. And in a little while, when the game was over, I would take Cody and Astor into their mother, Rita’s, house, and she would bring me a can of beer, tuck the kids into bed, and sit beside me on the couch.

How could this be? Was the Dark Passenger slipping into early retirement? Had Dexter mellowed? Had I somehow turned the corner of the long dark hall and come out on the wrong end as Dexter Domestic? Would I ever again place that one drop of blood on the neat glass slide, as I always did—my trophy from the hunt?

“Ten! Ready or not, here I come!”

Yes, indeed. Here I came.

But to what?

It started, of course, with Sergeant Doakes. Every superhero must have an archenemy, and he was mine. I had done absolutely nothing to him, and yet he had chosen to hound me, harry me from my good work. Me and my shadow. And the irony of it: me, a hardworking blood-spatter-pattern analyst for the very same police force that employed him—we were on the same team. Was it fair for him to pursue me like this, merely because every now and then I did a little bit of moonlighting?

I knew Sergeant Doakes far better than I really wanted to, much more than just from our professional

connection. I had made it my business to find out about him for one simple reason: he had never liked me, in spite of the fact that I take great pride in being charming and cheerful on a world-class level. But it almost seemed like Doakes could tell it was all fake; all my handmade heartiness bounced off him like June bugs off a windshield.

This naturally made me curious. I mean, really; what kind of person could possibly dislike me? And so I had studied him just a little, and I found out. The kind of person who could possibly dislike Debonair Dexter was forty-eight, African American, and held the department's record for the bench press. According to the casual gossip I had picked up, he was an army vet, and since coming to the department had been involved in several fatal shootings, all of which Internal Affairs had judged to be righteous.

But more important than all this, I had discovered firsthand that somewhere behind the deep anger that always burned in his eyes there lurked an echo of a chuckle from my own Dark Passenger. It was just a tiny little chime of a very small bell, but I was sure. Doakes was sharing space with something, just like I was. Not the same thing, but something very similar, a panther to my tiger. Doakes was a cop, but he was also a cold killer. I had no real proof of this, but I was as sure as I could be without seeing him crush a jaywalker's larynx.

A reasonable being might think that he and I could find some common ground; have a cup of coffee and compare our Passengers, exchange trade talk and chitchat about dismemberment techniques. But no: Doakes wanted me dead. And I found it difficult to share his point of view.

Doakes had been working with Detective LaGuerta at the time of her somewhat suspicious death, and since then his feelings toward me had grown to be a bit more active than simple loathing. Doakes was convinced that I'd had something to do with LaGuerta's death. This was totally untrue and completely unfair. All I had done was watch—where's the harm in that? Of course I had helped the real killer escape, but what could you expect? What kind of person would turn in his own brother? Especially when he did such neat work.

Well, live and let live, I always say. Or quite often, anyway. Sergeant Doakes could think what he wanted to think, and that was fine with me. There are still very few laws against thinking, although I'm sure they're working hard on that in Washington. No, whatever suspicions the good sergeant had about me, he was welcome to them. But now that he had decided to act on his impure thoughts my life was a shambles. Dexter Derailed was fast becoming Dexter Demented.

And why? How had this whole nasty mess begun? All I had done was try to be myself.

CHAPTER 2

T HERE ARE NIGHTS EVERY NOW AND THEN WHEN THE Dark Passenger really must get out to play. It's like walking a dog. You can ignore the barking and scratching at the door for only so long, and then you must take the beast outside.

Not too long after Detective LaGuerta's funeral, there came a time when it seemed reasonable to listen to the whispers from the backseat and start to plan a small adventure.

I had located a perfect playmate, a very plausible real estate salesman named MacGregor. He was a happy, cheerful man who loved selling houses to families with children. Especially young boys—MacGregor was extremely fond of boys between the ages of five and seven. He had been lethally fond of five that I was sure of, and quite likely several more. He was clever and careful, and without a visit from Dark Scout Dexter he would probably stay lucky for a long time. It's hard to blame the police, at least this once. After all, when a young child goes missing, very few people would say, "Aha! Who sold his family their house?"

But of course, very few people are Dexter. This is generally a good thing, but in this case it came in handy to be me. Four months after reading a story in the paper about a missing boy, I read a similar story. The boys were the same age; details like that always ring a small bell and send a Mister Rogers whisper trickling through my brain: "Hello, neighbor."

And so I dug up the first story and compared. I noticed that in both cases the paper milked the grief of the families by mentioning that they had recently moved into new homes; I heard a small chuckle from the shadows, and I looked a little closer.

It really was quite subtle. Detective Dexter had to dig quite a bit, because at first there didn't seem to be any connection. The families in question were in different neighborhoods, which ruled out a great many possibilities. They went to different churches, different schools, and used different moving companies. But when the Dark Passenger laughs, somebody is usually doing something funny. And I finally found the connection; both houses had been listed with the same real estate agency, a small outfit in South Miami, with only one agent, a cheerful and friendly man named Randy MacGregor.

I dug a little more. MacGregor was divorced and lived alone in a small concrete-block house off Old Cutler Road in South Miami. He kept a twenty-six-foot cabin cruiser at Matheson Hammock Marina, which was relatively close to his house. The boat would also be an extremely convenient playpen, a way to get his little chums off alone on the bounding main where he would not be seen or heard while he explored, a real Columbus of pain. And for that matter, it would provide a splendid way to dispose of the messy leftovers; just a few miles out from Miami, the Gulf Stream provided a nearly bottomless dumping ground. No wonder the boys' bodies were never found.

The technique made such good sense that I wondered why I hadn't thought of it to recycle my own leftovers. Silly me; I only used my little boat for fishing and riding around the bay. And here MacGregor had come up with a whole new way to enjoy an evening on the water. It was a very neat idea, and it instantly moved MacGregor right to the top of my list. Call me unreasonable, even illogical since I generally have very little use for humans, but for some reason I care about kids. And when I find someone who preys on children it is very much as if they have slipped the Dark Maître d' twenty dollars to move to the front of the line. I would happily unclip the velvet rope and bring MacGregor right in—assuming he was doing what it looked like he was doing. Of course, I had to be absolutely certain. I had always tried to avoid slicing up the wrong person, and it would be a shame to start now, even with a real estate salesman. It occurred to me that the best way to make sure would be to visit the boat in question.

Happily for me, the very next day it was raining, as it generally rains every day in July. But this had the look of an all-day storm, which made it just what the Dexter ordered. I left my job at the Miami-Dade police forensics lab early and cut over to LeJeune, taking it all the way to Old Cutler Road. I turned left into Matheson Hammock; as I'd hoped, it seemed deserted. But about one hundred yards ahead I knew there was a guard booth, where someone would be waiting eagerly to take four dollars from me

for the great privilege of entering the park. It seemed like a good idea not to make an appearance at the guard booth. Of course saving the four dollars was very important, but even more so was that on a rainy day in the middle of the week I might be just a little bit conspicuous, which is something I like to avoid, particularly in the course of my hobby.

On the left side of the road was a small parking lot that served the picnic area. An old coral-rock picnic shelter stood beside a lake on the right. I parked my car and pulled on a bright yellow foul-weather jacket. It made me feel very nautical, just the thing to wear for breaking into a homicidal pedophile's boat. It also made me highly visible, but I was not terribly worried about that. I would take the bicycle path that ran parallel to the road. It was screened in by mangroves, and in the unlikely event that the guard stuck his head out of the booth and into the rain, he would see nothing but a bright yellow blur jogging by. Just a determined runner out for his afternoon trot, come rain or shine.

And trot I did, moving about a quarter of a mile down the path. As I had hoped, there was no sign of life at the guard booth and I jogged to the large parking lot by the water. The last row of docks off to the right was home to a cluster of boats slightly smaller than the big sports fishermen and millionaires' toys tied up closer to the road. MacGregor's modest twenty-six footer, the *Osprey*, was near the end.

The marina was deserted and I went blithely through the gate in the chain-link fence, past a sign that said ONLY BOAT OWNERS PERMITTED ON DOCKS. I tried to feel guilty about violating such an important command, but it was beyond me. The lower half of the sign said NO FISHING OFF DOCKS OR IN MARINA AREA, and I promised myself that I would avoid fishing at all costs, which made me feel better about breaking the other rule.

The *Osprey* was five or six years old and showed only a few signs of wear from the Florida weather. The deck and rails were scrubbed clean and I was careful not to leave scuff marks as I climbed aboard. For some reason the locks on boats are never very complicated. Perhaps sailors are more honest than landlubbers. In any case, it took only a few seconds for me to pick the lock and slip inside the *Osprey*. The cabin did not have the musty smell of baked mildew that so many boats get when they are sealed up even for a few hours in the subtropical sun. Instead there was a faint tang of Pine-Sol in the air, as though someone had scrubbed so thoroughly that no germs or odors could hope to survive.

There was a small table, a galley, and one of those little TV/VCR units on a railed shelf with a stack of movies beside it: *Spider-Man*, *Brother Bear*, *Finding Nemo*. I wondered how many boys MacGregor had sent over the side to find Nemo. I dearly hoped that soon Nemo would find him. I stepped to the galley area and began to open drawers. One was filled with candy, the next with plastic action figures. And the third was absolutely crammed with rolls of duct tape.

Duct tape is a wonderful thing, and as I know very well, it can be used for many remarkable and useful things. But I did think that having ten rolls of it stuffed in a drawer on your boat was a bit excessive. Unless, of course, you were using it for some specific purpose that required a great deal of it. Perhaps a science project involving multiple young boys? Just a hunch, of course, based on the way I use it—not on young boys, of course, but on upstanding citizens like, for instance . . . MacGregor. His guilt had started to seem very likely, and the Dark Passenger flicked his dry lizard tongue with anticipation.

I went down the steps into the small forward area the salesman probably called the stateroom. It wasn't a terribly elegant bed, just a thin foam-rubber pad on a raised shelf. I touched the mattress and it crackled under the fabric; a rubber casing. I rolled the mattress to one side. There were four ring bolts

screwed into the shelf, one on each corner. I lifted the hatch beneath the mattress.

One might reasonably expect to find a certain amount of chain on a boat. But the accompanying handcuffs did not strike me as being quite so nautical. Of course, there might be a very good explanation. It was possible that MacGregor used them on quarrelsome fish.

Under the chain and handcuffs there were five anchors. That could very well be a good idea on a yacht that was meant to cruise around the world, but it seemed a bit much for a small weekend boat. What on earth could they be for? If I was taking my little boat out into the deep water with a series of small bodies I wished to dispose of cleanly and completely, what would I do with so many anchors? And, of course, when you put it that way, it seemed obvious that the next time MacGregor went cruising with a little friend he would come back with only four anchors under the bunk.

I was certainly gathering enough small details to make a very interesting picture. Still life without children. But so far I had not found anything that could not be explained away as massive coincidence, and I needed to be absolutely sure. I had to have one overwhelmingly conclusive piece of evidence, something so completely unambiguous that it would satisfy the Harry Code.

I found it in a drawer to the right of the bunk.

There were three small drawers built into the bulkhead of the boat. The interior of the bottom one seemed to be a few inches shorter than the other two. It was possible that it was supposed to be, that it was shortened by the curve of the hull. But I have studied humans for many years now, and this has made me deeply suspicious. I pulled the drawer all the way out and, sure enough, there was a small secret compartment on the back end of the drawer. And inside the secret compartment—

Since I am not actually a real human being, my emotional responses are generally limited to what I have learned to fake. So I did not feel shock, outrage, anger, or even bitter resolve. They're very difficult emotions to do convincingly, and there was no audience to do them for, so why bother? But I did feel a slow cold wind from the Dark Backseat sweep up my spine and blow dry leaves over the floor of my lizard brain.

I could identify five different naked boys in the stack of photographs, arranged in a variety of poses, as if MacGregor was still searching for a defining style. And yes indeed, he really was a spendthrift with his duct tape. In one of the pictures, the boy looked like he was in a silver-gray cocoon, with only certain areas exposed. What MacGregor left exposed told me a great deal about him. As I had suspected, he was not the kind of man most parents would wish for a scoutmaster.

The photos were good quality, taken from many different angles. One series in particular stood out. A pale, flabby naked man in a black hood stood beside the tightly taped boy, almost like a trophy shot. From the shape and coloring of the body I was quite sure the man was MacGregor, even though the hood covered his face. And as I flipped through the pictures I had two very interesting thoughts. The first was, Aha! Meaning, of course, that there was absolutely no doubt about what MacGregor had been doing, and he was now the lucky Grand Prize Winner in the Dark Passenger's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes.

And the second thought, somewhat more troubling, was this: Who was taking the pictures?

There were too many different angles for the pictures to have been taken automatically. And as I

flipped through them a second time I noticed, in two shots that had been snapped from above, the pointy toe of what looked like a red cowboy boot.

MacGregor had an accomplice. The word sounded so very Court TV, but there it was and I could not think of a better way to say it. He had not done all this alone. Someone had gone along and, if nothing else, had watched and taken pictures.

I blush to admit that I have some modest knowledge and talent in the area of semiregular mayhem, but I had never before run into anything like this. Trophy shots, yes—after all, I had my little box of slides, each with single drop of blood on them, to commemorate every one of my adventures. Perfectly normal to keep some kind of souvenir.

But to have a second person present, watching and taking pictures, turned a very private act into a kind of performance. It was absolutely indecent—the man was a pervert. If only I had been capable of moral outrage, I am quite sure I would have been full of it. As it was, though, I found myself more eager than ever to get viscerally acquainted with MacGregor.

It was stiflingly hot on the boat, and my wonderfully chic foul-weather suit was not helping. I felt like a bright yellow tea bag. I picked several of the clearest pictures and put them in my pocket. I returned the rest to their compartment, tidied the bunk, and went back up into the main cabin. As far as I could tell from peeking out the window—or did I have to call it a porthole?—there was no one lurking about and observing me in a furtive manner. I slipped out the door, making sure it locked behind me, and strolled off through the rain.

From the many movies I have seen over the years, I knew very well that walking in the rain is the correct setting for reflecting on human perfidy, and so I did just that. Oh that wicked MacGregor and his shutterbug friend. How could they be such vile wretches. That sounded about right, and it was all I could come up with; I hoped it was enough to satisfy the formula. Because it was far more fun to reflect on my own perfidy, and how I might feed it by arranging a playdate with MacGregor. I could feel a rising tide of dark delight flooding in from the deepest dungeons of Castle Dexter and building up at the spillways. And soon it would pour out on MacGregor.

There was no longer any room for doubt, of course. Harry himself would acknowledge that the photographs were more than enough proof, and an eager chuckle from the Dark Backseat sanctified the project. MacGregor and I would go exploring together. And then the special bonus of finding his friend in the cowboy boots—he would have to follow MacGregor as soon as possible, of course; no rest for the wicked. It was like a two-for-the-price-of-one sale, absolutely irresistible.

Filled with my happy thoughts, I didn't even notice the rain as I strode manfully and rapidly back to my car. I had a great deal to do.

CHAPTER 3

IT IS ALWAYS A BAD IDEA TO FOLLOW A REGULAR ROUTINE, particularly if you are a homicidal pedophile who has come to the attention of Dexter the Avenger. Happily for me, no one had ever given MacGregor this vital bit of information, and so it was quite easy for me to find him leaving his office at 6:30 PM, as he did every day. He came out the back door, locked it, and climbed into his

big Ford SUV; a perfect vehicle for hauling people around to look at houses, or for carrying bundled-up little boys down to the dock. He pulled out into the traffic and I followed him home to his modest concrete-block house on S.W. 80th Street.

There was quite a bit of traffic going by the house. I turned onto a small side street half a block away and parked unobtrusively where I had a good view. There was a tall, thick hedge running down the far side of MacGregor's lot that would keep the neighbors from seeing anything that went on in his yard. I sat in my car and pretended to look at a map for about ten minutes, just long enough to scheme and be sure that he wasn't going anywhere. When he came out of his house and began to putter around the yard, shirtless and wearing a pair of battered madras shorts, I knew how I would do it. I headed for home to get ready.

In spite of the fact that I normally have a robust and healthy appetite, I always find it difficult to eat before one of my little adventures. My interior associate quivers with rising anticipation, the moon burbles louder and louder in my veins as the night slides over the city, and thoughts of food begin to seem so very ordinary.

And so instead of enjoying a leisurely high-protein dinner, I paced my apartment, eager to begin but still cool enough to wait, letting Daytime Dexter melt quietly into the background and feeling the intoxicating surge of power as the Dark Passenger slowly took the wheel and checked the controls. It was always an exhilarating sensation to allow myself to be pulled into the backseat and let the Passenger drive. Shadows seem to grow sharper edges and the darkness fades into a lively gray that brings everything into much sharper focus. Small sounds become loud and distinct, my skin tingles, my breath roars in and out, and even the air comes alive with smells that were certainly not noticeable during the boring and normal day. I was never more alive than when the Dark Passenger was driving.

I forced myself to sit in my easy chair and I held myself in, feeling the Need roll over me and leave behind a high tide of readiness. Each breath felt like a blast of cold air sweeping through me and pumping me up bigger and brighter until I was like an enormous invincible beacon of steel ready to slash through the now-dark city. And then my chair became a stupid little thing, a hiding place for mice, and only the night was big enough.

And it was time.

Out we went, into the bright night, the moonlight hammering at me and the dead-roses breath of the Miami night blowing across my skin, and in almost no time at all I was there, in the shadows cast by MacGregor's hedge, watching and waiting and listening, just for now, to the caution that curled around my wrist and whispered *patience*. It seemed pathetic that he could not see something that gleamed as brightly as I did, and the thought gave me another surge of strength. I pulled on my white silk mask and I was ready to begin.

Slowly, invisibly, I moved from the darkness of the hedge and placed a child's plastic piano keyboard beneath his window, putting it under a gladiolus bush so it would not be seen immediately. It was bright red and blue, less than a foot long, and only had eight keys, but it would repeat the same four melodies endlessly until the battery died. I switched it on and stepped back into my place in the hedge.

"Jingle Bells" played, and then "Old MacDonald." For some reason, a key phrase was missing in each song, but the little toy piped on and into "London Bridge" in the same cheerfully lunatic tone.

It was enough to make anyone crazy, but it probably had an extra effect on someone like MacGregor who lived for children. At any rate, I certainly hoped so. I had quite deliberately chosen the little keyboard to lure him out, and I sincerely hoped, in fact, that he would think he had been found out—and that a toy had come from Hell to punish him. After all, why shouldn't I enjoy what I do?

It seemed to work. We were only on the third repetition of "London Bridge" when he came stumbling out of his house with a look of wide-eyed panic. He stood there for a moment, gaping around, his receding reddish hair looking like it had gone through a storm and his pale belly hanging slightly over the waist of his dingy pajama bottoms. He did not look terribly dangerous to me, but of course I was not a five-year-old boy.

After a moment, in which he stood with his mouth open, and scratched himself, and looked like he was modeling for a statue of the Greek god of Stupidity, MacGregor located the source of the sound—"Jingle Bells" again by now. He stepped over and bent slightly to touch the little plastic keyboard and did not even have the time to be surprised before I had a noose of fifty-pound-test fishing line pulled tight around his throat. He straightened and thought he might struggle for a moment. I pulled tighter and he changed his mind.

"Stop fighting," we said in our cold and commanding Passenger voice. "You'll live longer." And he heard his future in the words and thought he might change it, so I pulled hard on his leash and held it like that until his face turned dark and he dropped to his knees.

Just before he passed out completely I eased the pressure. "Now do as you're told," we said. He didn't say anything; he just choked in a few large and painful breaths, so I tweaked the line a touch. "Understand?" we said, and he nodded so I let him breathe.

He did not try to fight anymore as I frog-marched him into the house for his car keys and then back out into his big SUV. I climbed into the seat behind him, holding the leash in a very tight grip and allowing him only enough breath to stay alive, for now.

"Start the car," we told him, and he paused.

"What do you want?" he said in a voice that was rough with new-made gravel.

"Everything," we said. "Start the car."

"I have money," he said.

I pulled hard on his cord. "Buy me a little boy," we said. I held it tight for a few seconds, too tight for him to breathe and just long enough to let him know that *we* were in charge, *we* knew what he had done, and *we* would let him breathe only at our pleasure from now on, and when I loosened the line again he had nothing to say.

He drove as we told him to, back up S.W. 80th Street to Old Cutler Road and then south. There was almost no traffic this far out, not at this time of night, and we turned into a new development that had been going up on the far side of Snapper Creek. Construction had halted due to the owner's conviction for money laundering, and we would not be disturbed. We guided MacGregor through a half-built guard booth, around a small traffic circle, east toward the water, and to a halt beside a small trailer, the temporary office of the site, now left to teen thrill seekers and others, like me, who only wanted a little

privacy.

We sat for just a moment, enjoying the view—moon over the water, with pedophile in noose in the foreground, very beautiful.

I got out and pulled MacGregor out after me, pulled him hard so that he fell to his knees and clawed at the line around his neck. For a moment I watched him choking and drooling in the dirt, his face turning dark again and his eyes going red. Then I pulled him to his feet and pushed him up the three wooden steps and into the trailer. By the time he had recovered enough to know what was going on, I had him tied to the top of a desk, hands and feet secured with duct tape.

MacGregor tried to speak and just coughed instead. I waited; now there was plenty of time. “Please,” he said finally, in a voice like sand on glass, “I’ll give you whatever you want.”

“Yes, you will,” we said, and saw the sound of it cut into him, and even though he couldn’t see it through my white silk mask we smiled. I took out the photos I had taken from his boat and showed them to him.

He stopped moving completely and his mouth hung open. “Where did you get those?” he said, sounding rather petulant for someone who was about to be cut into small pieces.

“Tell me who took these pictures.”

“Why should I?” he said.

I used a pair of tin snips and cut off the first two fingers of his left hand. He thrashed and screamed and the blood came, which always makes me angry, so I shoved a tennis ball into his mouth and cut off the first two fingers of his right hand. “No reason,” I said, and I waited for him to slow down just a little bit.

When he finally did, he rolled an eye to me and his face was filled with that understanding that comes when you have gone beyond pain into knowing that the rest of this was forever. I took the tennis ball out of his mouth.

“Who took the pictures?”

He smiled. “I hope one of them was yours,” he said, which made the next ninety minutes a lot more rewarding.

CHAPTER 4

NORMALLY I FEEL PLEASANTLY MELLOW FOR SEVERAL days after one of my Nights Out, but the very next morning after MacGregor’s hasty exit I was still all aquiver with eagerness. I wanted very badly to find the photographer in the red cowboy boots and make a clean sweep of it. I am a tidy monster, and I do like to finish whatever I begin, and to know that someone was out there clumping around in those ridiculous shoes, carrying a camera that had seen far too much, made me anxious to follow those footprints and wrap up my two-part project.

Perhaps I had been too hasty with MacGregor; I should have given him a little more time and encouragement, and he would have told me everything. But it had seemed like something I could easily find by myself—when the Dark Passenger is driving, I am quite sure I can do anything. So far I have not been wrong, but it had put me in a bit of an awkward spot this time, and I had to find Mr. Boots on my own.

I knew from my earlier research that MacGregor did not have a social life beyond his occasional evening cruises. He belonged to a couple of business organizations, which was to be expected from a realtor, but I had not discovered anyone in particular that he seemed to pal around with. I also knew he had no criminal record, so there was no file to pull and search for known associates. The court records on his divorce simply listed “irreconcilable differences” and left the rest to my imagination.

And there I was stuck; MacGregor had been a classic loner, and in all my careful study of him I had never seen an indication that he had any friends, companions, dates, mates, or cronies. No poker night with the boys—no boys at all, except for the young ones. No church group, no Elks, no neighborhood bar, no weekly square-dancing society—which might have explained the boots—no nothing, except the photographs with those stupid pointed red toes sticking out.

So who was Cowboy Bob, and how did I find him?

There was really only one place I could go for an answer, and that would have to be soon, before someone noticed that MacGregor was missing. In the distance I heard thunder rumble, and I glanced at the wall clock with surprise. Sure enough, it was 2:15, time for the daily afternoon storm. I had moped all the way through my lunch hour, very unlike me.

Still, the storm would once again give me a little cover, and I could stop for something to eat on the way back. So with my immediate future neatly and pleasantly planned, I headed out to the parking lot, got into my car, and drove south.

The rain had started by the time I got to Matheson Hammock, and so once again I pulled on my sporty yellow foul-weather gear and jogged down the path to MacGregor’s boat.

I picked the lock again quite easily and slipped inside the cabin. During my first visit to the boat, I had been looking for signs that MacGregor was a pedophile. Now I was trying to find something a little bit more subtle, some small clue to the identity of MacGregor’s photographer friend.

Since I had to start somewhere, I went back down to the sleeping area. I opened the drawer with the false bottom and flipped through the pictures again. This time I checked the back as well as the front. Digital photography has made sleuthing a great deal more difficult, and there were no marks of any kind on the pictures and no empty film packets with traceable serial numbers, either. Any clod in the world could simply download the pictures to his hard drive and print them out at will, even someone with such hideous taste in footgear. It didn’t seem fair: Weren’t computers supposed to makes things easier?

I closed the drawer and searched through the rest of the area, but there was nothing that I hadn’t seen before. Somewhat discouraged, I went back upstairs to the main cabin. There were several drawers there, too, and I flipped through them. Videotapes, action figures, the duct tape—all things I had already noticed, and none of them would tell me anything. I pulled the stack of duct tape out, thinking, perhaps, that there was no sense in letting it go to waste. Idly, I turned over the bottom roll.

And there it was.

It really is better to be lucky than to be good. In a million years I could not have hoped for something this good. Stuck to the bottom of the duct-tape roll was a small scrap of paper, and written on the paper was, "Reiker," and under that a telephone number.

Of course there was no guarantee that Reiker was the Red Ranger, or even that he was a human being. It could well be the name of a marine plumbing contractor. But in any case, it was far more of a starting place than I'd had, and I needed to get off the boat before the storm stopped. I stuck the paper inside my pocket, buttoned up my rain slicker, and snuck off the boat and onto the footpath again.

Perhaps I was feeling so happily mellow from the aftereffects of my evening out with MacGregor, but as I drove home I found myself humming a catchy little Philip Glass tune from *1000 Airplanes on the Roof*. The key to a happy life is to have accomplishments to be proud of and purpose to look forward to, and at the moment I had both. How wonderful it was to be me.

My good mood lasted only as far as the traffic circle where Old Cutler blends into LeJeune, and then a routine glance in my rearview mirror froze the music on my lips.

Behind me, practically nosing into my backseat, was a maroon Ford Taurus. It looked very much like the sort of car the Miami-Dade Police Department maintained in large numbers for the use of plainclothes personnel.

I did not see how this could possibly be a good thing. A patrol car might follow for no real reason, but someone in a motor-pool car would have some kind of purpose, and it looked like that purpose was to make me aware I was being followed. If so, it was working perfectly. I could not see through the glare of the windshield to know who was driving the other car, but it suddenly seemed very important to know just how long the car had been following me, who was driving, and how much the driver had seen.

I turned down a small side street, pulled over, and parked, and the Taurus parked right behind me. For a moment, nothing happened; we both sat there in our cars, waiting. Was I going to be arrested? If someone had followed me from the marina, it could be a very bad thing for Dashing Dexter. Sooner or later, MacGregor's absence would be noticed, and even the most routine investigation would reveal his boat. Someone would go to see if it was there, and then the fact that Dexter had been there in the middle of the day might seem very significant.

It's little things like this that make for successful police work. Cops look for these funny coincidences, and when they find them they can get very serious with the person who is in too many interesting places by mere happenstance. Even if that person has a police ID and an amazingly charming fake smile.

There really seemed nothing for me to do except bluff my way through: find out who was following me and why, and then convince them it was a silly way to waste time. I put on my very best Official Greeting face, got out of my car, and stepped briskly up to the Taurus. The window rolled down and the always angry face of Sergeant Doakes looked out at me, like an idol for some wicked god, carved from a piece of dark wood.

"Why you leaving work in the middle of the day so much lately?" he asked me. His voice had no real

expression in it but still managed to give the impression that whatever I said would be a lie and he would like to hurt me for it.

“Why, Sergeant Doakes!” I said cheerfully. “What an amazing coincidence. What are you doing here?”

“You got something to do more important than your job?” he said. He really seemed uninterested in maintaining any sort of flow in the conversation, so I shrugged. When faced with people who have very limited conversational skills and no apparent desire to cultivate any, it’s always easier simply to go along.

“I, um—I had some personal things to take care of,” I said. Very weak, I agree, but Doakes displayed an unnerving habit of asking the most awkward questions, and with such an understated viciousness, that I found it hard enough not to stutter, let alone come up with something clever.

He looked at me for several endless seconds, the way a starving pit bull looks at raw meat. “Personal things,” he said without blinking. It sounded even stupider when he repeated it.

“That’s right,” I said.

“Your dentist is over in the Gables,” he said.

“Well—”

“Your doctor, too, over on Alameda. Got no lawyer, sister still at work,” he said. “What kind of *personal things* did I leave out?”

“Actually, um, I, I—” I said, and I was amazed to hear myself stammer, but nothing else came out, and Doakes just looked at me as though he was begging me to make a run for it so he could practice his wing shot.

“Funny,” he said at last, “I got *personal things* to do out here, too.”

“Really?” I said, relieved to find that my mouth was once again capable of forming human speech. “And what would that be, Sergeant?”

It was the first time I had ever seen him smile, and I have to say that I would have greatly preferred it if he had simply jumped out of the car and bitten me. “I’m watching YOU,” he said. He gave me a moment to admire the high gloss of his teeth, and then the window rolled up and he vanished behind the tinted glass like the Cheshire cat.

CHAPTER 5

GIVEN ENOUGH TIME, I AM SURE I COULD COME UP with an entire list of things more unpleasant than having Sergeant Doakes turn into my own personal shadow. But as I stood there in my high-fashion foul-weather gear and thought of Reiker and his red boots slipping away from me, it seemed bad enough, and I was not inspired to think of anything worse. I simply climbed into my car, started the engine, and drove through the rain to my apartment. Ordinarily, the homicidal antics of the other drivers would have comforted me, made me feel right at home, but for some reason the maroon

Taurus following so close behind took away the glow.

I knew Sergeant Doakes well enough to know that this was not simply a rainy-day whim on his part. If he was watching me, he would keep watching me until he caught me doing something naughty. Or until he was unable to watch me anymore. Naturally enough, I could readily think of a few intriguing ways to make sure he lost interest. But they were all so permanent, and while I did not actually have a conscience, I did have a very clear set of rules that worked somewhat the same way.

I had known that sooner or later Sergeant Doakes would do something or other to discourage my hobby, and I had thought long and hard about what to do when he did. The best I had come up with, alas, was wait and see.

“Excuse me?” you might say, and you have every right. “Can we truly ignore the obvious answer here?” After all, Doakes might be strong and lethal, but the Dark Passenger was much more so, and no one could stand against him when he took the wheel. Perhaps just this once . . .

No, said the small soft voice in my ear.

Hello, Harry. Why not? And as I asked, I thought back to the time he had told me.

There are rules, Dexter, Harry had said.

Rules, Dad?

It was my sixteenth birthday. There was never much of a party, since I had not learned yet to be wonderfully charming and chummy, and if I was not avoiding my drooling contemporaries then they were generally avoiding me. I lived my adolescence like a sheepdog moving through a flock of dirty, very stupid sheep. Since then, I had learned a great deal. For example, I was not that far off at sixteen—people really are hopeless!—but it just doesn’t do to let on.

So my sixteenth birthday was a rather restrained affair. Doris, my foster mom, had recently died of cancer. But my foster sister, Deborah, made me a cake and Harry gave me a new fishing rod. I blew out the candles, we ate the cake, and then Harry took me into the backyard of our modest Coconut Grove house. He sat at the redwood picnic table that he had built by the brick barbecue oven and motioned me to sit, too.

“Well, Dex,” he said. “Sixteen. You’re almost a man.”

I wasn’t sure what that was supposed to mean—me? a man? as in human?—and I did not know what sort of response was expected of me. But I did know that it was usually best not to make clever remarks with Harry, so I just nodded. And Harry gave me a blue-eyed X-ray. “Are you interested in girls at all?” he asked me.

“Um—in what way?” I said.

“Kissing. Making out. You know. Sex.”

My head whirled at the thought as though a cold dark foot were kicking at the inside of my forehead.

“Not, uh, no. I, um,” I said, silver-tongued even then. “Not like that.”

Harry nodded as if that made sense. “Not boys, though,” he said, and I just shook my head. Harry looked at the table, then back at the house. “When I turned sixteen my father took me to a whore.” He shook his head and a very small smile flickered across his face. “It took me ten years to get over that.” I could think of absolutely nothing to say to that. The idea of sex was completely alien to me, and to think of *paying* for it, especially for your child, and when that child was *Harry*—well really. It was all too much. I looked at Harry with something close to panic and he smiled.

“No,” said Harry. “I wasn’t going to offer. I expect you’ll get more use out of that fishing rod.” He shook his head slowly and looked away, far out over the picnic table, across the yard, down the street. “Or a fillet knife.”

“Yes,” I said, trying not to sound too eager.

“No,” he said again, “we both know what you want. But you’re not ready.”

Since the first time Harry had talked to me about what I was, on a memorable camping trip a couple of years ago, we had been getting me ready. Getting me, in Harry’s words, *squared away*. As a muttonheaded young artificial human I was eager to get started on my happy career, but Harry held me back, because Harry always knew.

“I can be careful,” I said.

“But not perfect,” he said. “There are rules, Dexter. There have to be. That’s what separates you from the other ones.”

“Blend in,” I said. “Clean up, don’t take chances, um . . .”

Harry shook his head. “More important. You have to be sure before you start that this person really deserves it. I can’t tell you the number of times I knew somebody was guilty and I had to let them go. To have the bastard look at you and smirk, and you know and he knows, but you have to hold the door for him and let him go—” He clenched his jaw and tapped a fist on the picnic table. “You won’t have to. BUT . . . you have to be sure. Dead sure, Dexter. And even if you’re absolutely positive—” He held his hand up in the air, palm facing me. “Get some proof. It doesn’t have to hold up in court, thank God.” He gave a small and bitter laugh. “You’d never get anywhere. But you need proof, Dexter. That’s the most important thing.” He tapped the table with his knuckle. “You have to have proof. And even then—”

He stopped, an uncharacteristic Harry pause, and I waited, knowing something difficult was coming. “Sometimes even then, you let them go. No matter how much they deserve it. If they’re too . . . *conspicuous*, for example. If it would raise too much attention, let it go.”

Well, there it was. As always, Harry had the answer for me. Whenever I was unsure, I could hear Harry whispering in my ear. I was sure, but I had no proof that Doakes was anything except a very angry and suspicious cop, and chopping up a cop was certainly the sort of thing the city got indignant

about. After the recent untimely demise of Detective LaGuerta, the police hierarchy would almost certainly be a little sensitive about a second cop going out in the same way.

No matter how necessary it seemed, Doakes was out of bounds for me. I could look out the window at the maroon Taurus nosed under a tree, but I could do nothing about it except wish for some other solution to spontaneously arise—for example, a piano falling on his head. Sadly enough, I was left hoping for luck.

But there was no luck tonight for poor Disappointed Dexter, and lately there had been a tragic lack of falling pianos in the Miami area. So here I was in my little hovel, pacing the floor with frustration, and every time I casually peeked out the window, there was the Taurus parked across the way. The memory of what I had been so happily contemplating only an hour ago pounded in my head. *Can Dexter come out and play?* Alas, no, dear Dark Passenger. Dexter is in time-out.

There was, however, one constructive thing I could do, even cooped up in my apartment. I took the crumpled piece of paper from MacGregor's boat out of my pocket and smoothed it out, which left my fingers sticky from the leftover gunk off the roll of duct tape to which the paper had been stuck. "Reiker," and a phone number. More than enough to feed to one of the reverse directories I could access from my computer, and in just a few minutes I had done so.

The number belonged to a cell phone, which was registered to a Mr. Steve Reiker of Tigertail Avenue in Coconut Grove. A little bit of cross-checking revealed that Mr. Reiker was a professional photographer. Of course, it could have been a coincidence. I am sure that there are many people named Reiker around the world who are photographers. I looked in the Yellow Pages and found that this particular Reiker had a specialty. He had a quarter-page ad that said, "Remember Them as They Are Now."

Reiker specialized in pictures of children.

The coincidence theory might have to go.

The Dark Passenger stirred and gave a small chuckle of anticipation, and I found myself planning a trip over to Tigertail for a quick look around. In fact, it wasn't terribly far away. I could drive over now, and—

And let Sergeant Doakes follow along playing Pin the Tail on the Dexter. Splendid idea, old chum. That would save Doakes a great deal of boring investigative work when Reiker finally disappeared some day. He could cut through all the dull routine and just come get me.

And at this rate, when would Reiker disappear? It was terribly frustrating to have a worthwhile goal in sight, and yet to be held in check like this. But after several hours Doakes was still parked across the street and I was still here. What to do? On the plus side, it seemed obvious that Doakes had not seen enough to take any action beyond following me. But leading the way in the very large minus column, if he continued to follow me I would be forced to stay in character as the mild-mannered forensic lab rat, carefully avoiding anything more lethal than rush hour on the Palmetto Expressway. That would never do. I felt a certain pressure, not just from the Passenger but from the clock. Before too much time passed I needed to find some proof that Reiker was the photographer who took MacGregor's pictures, and if he was, have a sharp and pointed chat with him. If he realized MacGregor had gone the way of all flesh he would most likely run for the hills. And if my associates at police headquarters realized it,

things could get very uncomfortable for Dashing Dexter.

But Doakes had apparently settled in for a long stay, and at the moment there was nothing I could do about it. It was terribly frustrating to think of Reiker walking around instead of thrashing against the duct tape. *Homicidus interruptus*. A soft moan and a gnashing of mental teeth came from the Dark Passenger, and I knew just how he felt, but there seemed to be very little I could do except pace back and forth. And even that wasn't very helpful: if I kept it up I would wear a hole in the carpet and then I would never get back my security deposit on the apartment.

My instinct was to do something that would throw Doakes off the track—but he was no ordinary bloodhound. I could think of only one thing that might take the scent out of his quivering, eager snout. It was just barely possible that I could wear him down, play the waiting game, be relentlessly normal for so long that he would have to give it up and return to his real job of catching all the truly horrible residents on the underside of our fair city. Why even now they were out there double parking, littering, and threatening to vote Democratic in the next election. How could he waste time on little old Dexter and his harmless hobby?

All right then: I would be unstintingly ordinary until it made his teeth hurt. It might take weeks rather than days, but I would do it. I would live fully the synthetic life I had created in order to appear human. And since humans are generally ruled by sex, I would start with a visit to my girlfriend Rita.

It's an odd term, "girlfriend," particularly for grown persons. And in practice an even odder concept. Generally speaking, in adults it described a woman, not a girl, who was willing to provide sex, not friendship. In fact, from what I had observed it was quite possible for one to actively dislike one's girlfriend, although of course true hatred is reserved for marriage. I had so far been unable to determine what women expect in return from a boyfriend, but apparently I had it as far as Rita was concerned. It certainly wasn't sex, which to me seemed about as interesting as calculating foreign trade deficits.

Luckily, Rita also was uninterested in sex, for the most part. She was the product of a disastrous early marriage to a man whose idea of a good time turned out to be smoking crack and beating her. Later he branched out into infecting her with several intriguing diseases. But when he battered the kids one night Rita's marvelous country-song loyalty ruptured, and she flung the swine out of her life and, happily, into prison.

As a result of all this turmoil, she had been looking for a gentleman who might be interested in companionship and conversation, someone who did not need to indulge the crude animal urges of base passion. A man, in other words, who would value her for her finer qualities and not her willingness to indulge in naked acrobatics. Ecce, Dexter. For almost two years she had been my ideal disguise, a key ingredient of Dexter as the world at large knew him. And in return I had not beaten her, had not infected her with anything, had not forced my animal lust on her, and she actually seemed to enjoy my company.

And as a bonus, I had become quite fond of her children, Astor and Cody. Strange, perhaps, but nonetheless true, I assure you. If everyone else in the world were to mysteriously disappear, I would feel irritated about it only because there would be no one to make me doughnuts. But children are interesting to me and, in fact, I like them. Rita's two kids had been through a traumatic early childhood, and maybe because I had, too, I felt a special attachment to them, an interest that went beyond maintaining my disguise with Rita.

Aside from the bonus of her children, Rita herself was quite presentable. She had short and neat blond hair, a trim and athletic body, and she seldom said things that were outright stupid. I could go in public with her and know that we looked like an appropriately matched human pair, which was really the whole point. People even said we were an attractive couple, although I was never sure what that meant. I suppose Rita found me attractive somehow, although her track record with men didn't make that too flattering. Still, it's always nice to be around somebody who thinks I am wonderful. It confirms my low opinion of people.

I looked at the clock on my desk. Five thirty-two: within the next fifteen minutes Rita would be home from her job at Fairchild Title Agency, where she did something very complicated involving fractions of percentage points. By the time I got to her house, she should be there.

With a cheerful synthetic smile I headed out the door, waved to Doakes, and drove over to Rita's modest South Miami house. The traffic wasn't too bad, which is to say that there were no fatal accidents or shootings, and in just under twenty minutes I parked my car in front of Rita's bungalow. Sergeant Doakes cruised past to the end of the street and, as I knocked on the front door, he parked across the way.

The door swung open and Rita peered out at me. "Oh!" she said. "Dexter."

"In person," I said. "I was in the neighborhood and wondered if you were home yet."

"Well, I—I just walked in the door. I must look like a mess . . . Um—come on in. Would you like a beer?"

Beer; what a thought. I never touch the stuff—and yet, it was so amazingly normal, so perfectly visit-the-girlfriend-after-work, even Doakes had to be impressed. It was just the right touch. "I would love a beer," I said, and I followed her into the relative cool of the living room.

"Have a seat," she said. "I'm just going to freshen up a little." She smiled at me. "The kids are out back, but I'm sure they'll be all over you when they find out you're here." And she swished off down the hall, returning a moment later with a can of beer. "I'll be right back," she said, and went away to her bedroom at the back of the house.

I sat on the sofa and looked at the beer in my hand. I am not a drinker—really, drinking is not a recommended habit for predators. It slows the reflexes, dulls the perceptions, and knits up the raveled sleeve of care, which always sounded to me like a very bad thing. But here I was, a demon on vacation, attempting the ultimate sacrifice by giving up my powers and becoming human—and so a beer was just the thing for Dipsophobic Dexter.

I took a sip. The taste was bitter and thin, just as I would be if I had to keep the Dark Passenger buckled into his seat belt for very long. Still, I suppose beer is an acquired taste. I took another sip. I could feel it gurgle all the way down and splash into my stomach, and it occurred to me that with all the excitement and frustration of the day I hadn't eaten lunch. But what the hell—it was just a light beer; or as the can proudly proclaimed: LITE BEER. I suppose we should be very grateful they hadn't thought of a cuter way to spell beer.

I took a big sip. It wasn't that bad when you got used to it. By golly, it really WAS relaxing. I, at any rate, felt more relaxed with each swig. Another refreshing sip—I couldn't remember that it had tasted

this good when I'd tried it in college. Of course, I was just a boy then, not the manly mature hardworking upright citizen I was now. I tilted the can, but nothing came out.

Well—somehow the can was empty. And yet I was still thirsty. Could this unpleasant situation really be tolerated? I thought not. Absolutely intolerable. In fact, I did not plan to tolerate it. I stood up and proceeded to the kitchen in a firm and unyielding manner. There were several more cans of lite beer in the refrigerator and I took one back to the couch.

I sat. I opened the beer. I took a sip. Much better. Damn that Doakes anyway. Maybe I should take him a beer. It might relax him, get him to loosen up and call the whole thing off. After all, we were on the same side, weren't we?

I sipped. Rita came back wearing a pair of denim shorts and a white tank top with a tiny satin bow at the neckline. I had to admit, she looked very nice. I could really pick a disguise. "Well," she said as she slid onto the couch next to me, "it's nice to see you, out of the blue like this."

"It certainly must be," I said.

She cocked her head to one side and looked at me funny. "Did you have a hard day at work?"

"An awful day," I said, and took a sip. "Had to let a bad guy go. Very bad guy."

"Oh." She frowned. "Why did—I mean, couldn't you just . . ."

"I wanted to just," I said. "But I couldn't." I raised the beer can to her. "Politics." I took a sip.

Rita shook her head. "I still can't get used to the idea that, that—I mean, from the outside it seems so cut-and-dried. You find the bad guy, you put him away. But politics? I mean, with—what did he do?"

"He helped to kill some kids," I said.

"Oh," she said, and looked shocked. "My God, there must be something you can do."

I smiled at her. By gum, she had seen it right away. What a gal. Didn't I say I could pick 'em? "You have put your finger right on it," I said, and I took her hand to look at that finger. "There is something I can do. And very well, too." I patted her hand, spilling only a little bit of beer. "I knew you'd understand."

She looked confused. "Oh," she said. "What kind of—I mean— What will you do?"

I took a sip. Why shouldn't I tell her? I could see she already got the idea. Why not? I opened my mouth, but before I could whisper even one syllable about the Dark Passenger and my harmless hobby, Cody and Astor came racing into the room, stopped dead when they saw me, and stood there looking from me to their mother.

"Hi Dexter," Astor said. She nudged her brother.

"Hi," he said softly. He was not a big talker. In fact, he never said much of anything. Poor kid. The whole thing with his father had really messed him up. "Are you drunk?" he asked me. It was a big speech for him.

“Cody!” Rita said. I waved her off bravely and faced him.

“Drunk?” I said. “Me?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Certainly not,” I said firmly, giving him my very best dignified frown. “Possibly a little bit tipsy, but that’s not the same thing at all.”

“Oh,” he said, and his sister chimed in, “Are you staying for dinner?”

“Oh, I think I should probably be going,” I said, but Rita put a surprisingly firm hand on my shoulder.

“You’re not driving anywhere like this,” she said.

“Like what?”

“Tipsy,” said Cody.

“I’m not tipsy,” I said.

“You said you were,” said Cody. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard him put four words in a row like that, and I was very proud of him.

“You did,” Astor added. “You said you’re not drunk, you’re just a little tipsy.”

“I said that?” They both nodded. “Oh. Well then—”

“Well then,” Rita chimed in, “I guess you’re staying for dinner.”

Well then. I guess I did. I am pretty sure I did, anyway. I do know that at some point I went to the refrigerator for a lite beer and discovered they were all gone. And at some later point I was sitting on the couch again. The television was on and I was trying to figure out what the actors were saying and why an invisible crowd thought it was the most hilarious dialogue of all time.

Rita slid onto the couch next to me. “The kids are in bed,” she said. “How do you feel?”

“I feel wonderful,” I said. “If only I could figure out what’s so funny.”

Rita put a hand on my shoulder. “It really bothers you, doesn’t it? Letting the bad guy go. Children . . .” She moved closer and put her arm all the way around me, laying her head on my shoulder. “You’re such a good guy, Dexter.”

“No, I’m not,” I said, wondering why she would say something so very strange.

Rita sat up and looked from my left eye to my right eye and back again. “But you are, you KNOW you are.” She smiled and nestled her head back down on my shoulder. “I think it’s . . . nice that you came here. To see me. When you were feeling bad.”

I started to tell her that wasn’t quite right, but then it occurred to me: I *had* come here when I felt bad. True, it was only to bore Doakes into going away, after the terrible frustration of losing my playdate

with Reiker. But it had turned out to be a pretty good idea after all, hadn't it? Good old Rita. She was very warm and she smelled nice. "Good old Rita," I said. I pulled her against me as tight as I could and leaned my cheek against the top of her head.

We sat that way for a few minutes, and then Rita wiggled to her feet and pulled me up by the hand. "Come on," she said. "Let's get you to bed."

Which we did, and when I had flopped down under the top sheet and she crawled in beside me, she was just so nice and smelled so good and felt so warm and comfortable that—

Well. Beer really is amazing stuff, isn't it?

CHAPTER 6

I WOKE UP WITH A HEADACHE, A FEELING OF TREMENDOUS self-loathing, and a sense of disorientation. There was a rose-colored sheet against my cheek. My sheets—the sheets I woke up to every day in my little bed—were not rose-colored, and they did not smell like this. The mattress seemed too spacious to be my modest trundle bed, and really—I was quite sure this was not my headache either.

"Good morning, handsome," said a voice somewhere over my feet. I turned my head and saw Rita standing at the foot of the bed, looking down at me with a happy little smile.

"Ung," I said in a voice that sounded like a toad's croak and hurt my head even more. But apparently it was an amusing kind of pain, because Rita's smile widened.

"That's what I thought," she said. "I'll get you some aspirin." She leaned over and rubbed my leg. "Mmm," she said, and then turned and went into the bathroom.

I sat up. This may have been a strategic mistake, as it made my head pound a great deal more. I closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and waited for my aspirin.

This normal life was going to take a little getting used to.

But oddly enough it didn't, not really. I found that if I limited myself to one or two beers, I could relax just enough to blend in with the slipcover on the couch. And so several nights a week, with ever-faithful Sergeant Doakes in my rearview mirror, I would stop over at Rita's house after work, play with Cody and Astor, and sit with Rita after the kids were in bed. Around ten I would head for the door. Rita seemed to expect to be kissed when I left, so I generally arranged to kiss her standing in the open front door where Doakes could see me. I used all the technique I could muster from the many movies I have seen, and Rita responded happily.

I do like routine, and I settled into this new one to a point where I almost began to believe in it myself. It was so boring that I was putting my real self to sleep. From far away in the backseat of the deepest darkest corner of Dexterland I could even hear the Dark Passenger starting to snore gently, which was a little scary and made me feel a tiny bit lonesome for the first time. But I stayed the course, making a

small game of my visits to Rita to see how far I could push it, knowing that Doakes was watching and, hopefully, beginning to wonder just a little bit. I brought flowers, candy, and pizza. I kissed Rita ever more outlandishly, framed in the open front door to give Doakes the best possible picture. I knew it was a ridiculous display, but it was the only weapon I had.

For days on end Doakes stayed with me. His appearances were unpredictable, which made him seem even more threatening. I never knew when or where he might turn up, and that made me feel like he was always there. If I went into the grocery store, Doakes was waiting by the broccoli. If I rode my bicycle out Old Cutler Road, somewhere along the way I would see the maroon Taurus parked under a banyan tree. A day might go by without a Doakes sighting, but I could feel him out there, circling downwind and waiting, and I did not dare hope that he had given up; if I could not see him, he was either well hidden or waiting to spring another surprise appearance on me.

I was forced into being Daytime Dexter on a full-time basis, like an actor trapped in a movie, knowing that the real world was right there, just beyond the screen, but as unreachable as the moon. And like the moon, the thought of Reiker pulled at me. The thought of him clomping through his unworried life in those absurd red boots was almost more than I could stand.

Of course I knew that even Doakes could not keep this up forever. He was, after all, receiving a handsome salary from the people of Miami for performing a job, and every now and then he had to perform it. But Doakes understood the rising interior tide that battered at me, and he knew that if he kept the pressure on long enough, the disguise would slip, HAD to slip, as the cool whispers from the backseat became more urgent.

And so there we were, balanced on a knife edge that was unfortunately only metaphorical. Sooner or later, I had to be me. But until then I would see an awful lot of Rita. She couldn't hold a candle to my old flame, the Dark Passenger, but I did need my secret identity. And until I escaped Doakes, Rita was my cape, red tights, and utility belt—almost the entire costume.

Very well: I would sit on the couch, can of beer in hand, watching *Survivor* and thinking of an interesting variation of the game that would never make it to the network. If you simply add Dexter to the castaways and interpret the title a bit more literally . . .

It was not all dismal, bleak, and wretched. Several times a week I got to play kick the can with Cody and Astor and the other assorted wild creatures of the neighborhood, which brings us back to where we began: Dexter Dismasted, unable to sail through his normal life, anchored instead to a gaggle of kids and a ravioli can. And on evenings when it was raining, we stayed inside around the dining table, while Rita bustled about doing laundry, washing dishes, and otherwise perfecting the domestic bliss of her little nest.

There are only so many indoor games one can play with two children of such tender ages and damaged spirits as Cody and Astor; most of the board games were uninteresting or incomprehensible to them, and too many of the card games seemed to require a lighthearted simplemindedness that even I could not fake convincingly. But we finally hit on hangman; it was educational, creative, and mildly homicidal, which made everyone happy, even Rita.

If you had asked me pre-Doakes if a life of hangman and Miller Lite sounded like my cup of tea, I would have been forced to confess that Dexter Oolong was somewhat darker. But as the days piled up and I slipped further into the reality of my disguise, I had to ask myself: Was I enjoying the life of Mr.

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