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Dexter's Final Cut

Written by Jeff Lindsay

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JEFF LINDSAY

DEXTER'S FINAL CUT

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INTRODUCTION

It's not that bad being dead. Surprising, really, when you think about it. I mean, everyone always seems so very terrified of the whole thing, weeping and moaning and spending years of anguish brooding about the possibility of an afterlife. And yet, here I lay in peaceful repose, quiet, pain-free, without a care in the world, doing nothing more metaphysically complicated than remembering my Last Meal—an excellent pastrami sandwich. It was brought to me, still warm, only forty minutes ago as I sat in a comfy folding chair, and I remember wondering, Where did they find such succulent pastrami in Miami nowadays? The pickle was quite tasty, too. And just to be ethnically authentic, I'd had a cream soda with it, something I hadn't tried in a very long time; delicious. Altogether, a culinary experience that made being dead seem like a very minor inconvenience.

—although to be truthful, which is sometimes unavoidable, lying here unmoving on the pavement was starting to get just the tiniest bit tedious. I really hoped I would be discovered soon; death was not really enough to keep the mind occupied, and it seemed like I had been here quite a while. I know it might not seem like the first thing you would object to about being dead—long hours and no real challenge to the work—but there it was. I was bored. And the pavement underneath me was hot and beginning to feel very hard. On top of that, there was a puddle of sticky red nastiness spreading

out around me that made me feel quite uncomfortable—of course, I mean it would have made me uncomfortable, if I had actually been alive. But if nothing else, it was certainly unsightly; I must look terribly unattractive.

Another odd concern for the newly dead, perhaps, but true. I was bound to be an uninviting sight. It was unavoidable; there's very little charm to a corpse killed by gunshot wounds, and no dignity at all to lying in the street in the Miami sunlight and waiting in a pool of sticky red mess for someone to find your body. And when my poor, bullet-riddled corpse was discovered at last, there would not even be a genuine flood of sentiment, no heartfelt outpouring of anguish and regret. Not that I ever found real emotion terribly moving, but still, one would like to be really mourned, wouldn't one?

But not today, not for poor Dead Dexter. After all, who could mourn a monster like me? No, it would be purely pro forma, even less convincing than usual, and I, of all people, could not really complain. I had spent my entire professional life—and a great deal of very rewarding hobby time—around dead bodies. I knew very well that the most natural reaction to finding a gore-soaked corpse was something like, "Ooh, gross," as your Finder guzzles an energy drink and turns up the volume on the iPod. Even that was more honest than the overblown and empty teeth-gnashing I knew I would get when my pitiful corpse was discovered. I could not even hope for a classy statement of grief and loss like, "Alas, poor Dexter!" Nobody says "alas" anymore; for that matter, I doubt anyone really feels it nowadays, either.

No, there would be little real grief for Dear Departed Dexter; no one can express it for the simple reason that no one is capable of feeling it. I may be the only one honest enough to admit that I don't, but I have never seen any compelling evidence that anyone else does, either. People are far too callous and fickle, and even in the best of times—which this was not—I could hope for no more than a moment of revulsion at the compost heap that was my human (more or less) body, and a twinge of irritation at having one more mess to deal with. And then no doubt the conversation would turn to football, or plans for the weekend, and the memory of my pastrami sandwich would last far longer than anyone's sense of loss at my untimely demise.

But after all, there was no alternative. I just had to make the best of it, and lie here like a lox until I was discovered—which seemed to me to be a long-overdue event. I had been sprawled here in direct sunlight for at least half an hour: Can a corpse get a sunburn? I was certain dead people avoided

tanning booths—even in zombie movies—but here in the midday sun, was it possible for dead skin to tan? It didn't seem right; we all like to think of cadavers as pale and ghostly, and a healthy sun-kissed epidermis would certainly spoil the effect.

But now I hear a rising chorus of fuss and bother nearby: A metallic door thumps shut, hushed voices murmur urgently, and finally I hear the sound for which I have been yearning: the hurried clatter of approaching footsteps. They stutter to a stop beside me and a woman gasps and cries out, "Nooo!" At last: some real concern for my tragic condition. A trifle melodramatic, perhaps, but it's touching, and would even be heartwarming, if only Dexter had a heart to warm.

The woman bends over me, and in the bright halo of sunlight surrounding her head, I can't make out her features. But there is no mistaking the shape of the gun that appears in her right hand. A woman with a gun—could this be Dexter's dear sister, Sergeant Deborah Morgan, stumbling across her beloved brother's tragically murdered self? Who else could possibly put on such a rare display of well-armed grief for me? And there is real tenderness in her left hand as it drops to my neck to feel for a pulse: in vain, alas, or whatever it is we say instead of "vain" nowadays. Her left hand drops away from my neck and she raises her head to the heavens and says through a tightly clenched jaw, "I'll get the bastards who did this. I swear it. . . ."

It is a sentiment I approve completely—and actually, it does sound a little bit like Deborah, but not quite enough. There is a hesitant, musical fluctuation in the voice that my sister would never permit.

No, this is not Deborah, but some histrionically tender imitation. And it sounds even less like my ferocious and foulmouthed sister when she adds, in a slightly nasal and very cranky tone, "Goddamn it, Victor, there's a shadow right across my face the whole goddamn time!"

A man who sounds like he has just lived through an endless stretch of fatigue that has taken him far beyond the point of mere human exasperation calls out, "Cut. Where's the fucking key grip?"

Victor?

Key grip?

What can this be? What, indeed, is happening? How can there be such a bizarre reaction to the tragic passing of one so young, so talented, and so deeply admired—at least by me? Is this some cosmic hiccup, a loony hallu-

cination caused by passing through the Veil and into the Beyond? Perhaps some confused moment of transition into Oneness with All Things, as Dexter shuffles off the mortal coil and heads for the Last Roundup?

And now it gets even stranger, as a surreal scene of swarming activity begins to swirl around my body. Dozens of people, silent and hidden until now, leap out onto the sidewalk and explode into furious and focused frenzy, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to amble past a gore-soaked Dexter and whirl into antlike action. Two men and a woman step right over my tragic cadaver and begin to wrestle with large tripod-mounted lights, reflectors, and bundles of electric cable, and one really has to wonder: Is this how it all ends, for all of us? Not with a Bang but a lighting change?

Unfortunately for metaphysical discovery, we must wait a little longer to answer all these very good questions. Because today is not, in fact, that long-dreaded day of infamy when Dexter Dies. It is, instead, a very small and harmless fraud: Dexter's Deception. For today, Dexter has entered the swinging swirling world of big-time professional show business. We have been granted the great and humbling boon of a real Acting Job, and today we are performing, playing a role for which we have done a lifetime of research. We have been cast as an extra, a playtime corpse, a small and motionless pawn on the great chessboard that is Hollywood.

And now, the woman who is not Deborah pats my face and stalks away to her trailer, muttering homicidal comments about those who would allow shadows on her near-perfect visage. The crew have all busied themselves with their obscure and energetic tasks, and above it all the more-than-tired voice of Victor chants a series of weary orders, and then adds, "And you need to get to wardrobe, and get cleaned up for another *take, okay, Derrick?"*

"It's Dexter," I say, rising up from the dead and into a sitting position. "With an 'X.'"

Victor shows no sign that he has heard me, or even that I exist at all. "We are already three days behind schedule, people," he moans. "Can we all move a little faster?"

I do not notice that anyone actually does move any faster, which seems perfectly fair to me. After all, if Victor chooses to ignore me, he can't really object if others ignore him, can he?

An elegant young man has appeared at my side, and he squats down beside me, bringing with him the distinct aroma of some floral cologne. "Really nice," he tells me, patting my arm. "You soooo looked really dead?"

"Thank you," I tell him.

He lays his soft hand on my arm. "Let's get you cleaned up?" he says. Almost everything out of his mouth so far has been a question, even simple statements like, "Hello, my name is Fred?" I do not hold it against him—although I am beginning to suspect that Fred would very much like me to hold something against him. But even if I were so inclined, and available, which I am not, it could never work out. He is a mere wardrobe assistant, and Dexter is Talent—it says so on the contract I signed!—and so I stand up with great dignity and follow along to the large trailer occupied by Fred and his associates. And as I walk, I ponder, and perhaps the very question is a cliché, an absurd echo of the human obsession with finding meaning where there is absolutely none. But as I look around me at all the absurdly expensive fuss and clutter, I ask it anyway.

How did I get here?

ONE

It all started so peacefully, just a few short weeks ago, on a lovely day in early autumn.

I had driven in to work as I always did, through the happy carnage that is rush hour in Miami. It had been a bright and pleasant day: sun shining, temperature in the seventies, the other drivers cheerfully honking their horns and screaming death threats, and I'd steered through it with a blissful feeling of belonging.

I had pulled into a spot in the parking lot at police HQ, still completely unaware of the lurking terror that awaited me, and carefully carried a large box of doughnuts into the building and up to the second floor. I'd arrived at my desk punctually, at my usual time. And I made it all the way into a seated position in my chair, a cup of vile coffee in one hand and a jelly doughnut in the other, before I ever for a moment suspected that today would be anything other than one more day of peaceful routine among the newly dead of Our Fair City.

And then the phone on my desk began to buzz, and because I was stupid enough to answer it, everything changed forever.

"Morgan," I said into the receiver. And if I'd known what was coming I would not have said it so cheerfully.

Someone on the other end made a throat-clearing noise, and with

a jolt of surprise I recognized it. It was the sound Captain Matthews made when he wanted to call attention to the fact that he was about to make an important pronouncement. But what momentous declaration could he possibly have now, for me, before I even finished one doughnut, and why would he speak it on the phone to a mere forensics wonk?

"Ahem, uh, Morgan," the captain said. And then there was silence.

"This is Morgan," I said helpfully.

"There's a, um," he said, and cleared his throat again. "I have a special assignment. For you. Can you come up to my office? Right now," he said. There was another slight pause, and then, most baffling of all, he added, "Uh. Please." And then he hung up.

I stared at the phone for a long moment before I replaced it in its cradle. I was not sure what had just happened, or what it meant: "Come up to my office right now"? Captains do not hand out special assignments to blood-spatter analysts, and we do not visit captains' offices socially, either. So what was this about?

My conscience was clean—most mythical objects are—but I felt a small twinge of unease anyway. Could this be trouble—perhaps a confrontation over some emerging evidence of my Wicked Ways? I always cleaned up thoroughly—No Body Part Left Behind!—and in any case, it had been quite a while since I had done anything at all worth not talking about. In fact, it had just recently started to seem like much *too* long, and the past few evenings I had been fondling my little candidates list and thinking about a new Playdate. My last Enchanting Encounter had been several months ago, and I certainly deserved another soon—unless I had somehow been discovered. But as I thought back on that wonderful evening, I could remember no slipup, no lazy shortcut, nothing but painstaking perfection. Had Somebody Somehow found Something anyway?

But no: It wasn't possible. I had been meticulously neat, as always. Besides, if my handiwork had been detected, I would not have received a polite invitation to come chat with the captain—with an actual "please" tacked onto it! I would instead be looking up at the Special Response Team clustered around my desk, peering at me through their laser-guided telescopic sights and begging me to try something.

There was clearly some other, simpler explanation for why Captain Matthews would summon me to Olympus, but no matter how diligently I pushed my mighty brain through its paces, it came up with nothing more than an urgent suggestion that I eat the doughnut before I entered the captain's august presence. It was not actually an answer, but it was a good and practical thought, and it was followed by another: It didn't really matter what he wanted. He was the captain; I was a lowly blood-spatter analyst. He gave commands and I obeyed them. That is all you know in this world, and all you need to know. And so with a rising chorus of "Duty Calls" skirling on my mental bagpipes, I got out of my chair and headed out the door, finishing my doughnut as I went.

Because he was a real captain, and very important in the general scheme of things, Matthews had a secretary, although she liked to be called an executive assistant. Her name was Gwen, and she had three virtues far above anyone else I had ever known: She was astonishingly efficient, unbearably serious, and uncompromisingly plain. It was a delightful combination and I always found it irresistible. So as I hurried up to her desk, wiping the residue of the doughnut off my hands and onto my pants where it belonged, I could not help attempting a very small bon mot.

"Fair Gwendolyn," I said. "The face that launched a thousand patrol vehicles!"

She stared at me with a slight frown. "He's waiting for you," she said. "In the conference room. Go right in."

It was not much of a zinger, but Gwen had never been known for her sparkling sense of humor, so I gave her my best fake smile anyway and said, "Wit and beauty! A devastating combination!"

"Go right in," she repeated, with a face that might have been carved from stone, or at least very hard pudding. I breezed past her and went through the door and into the conference room.

Captain Matthews sat at the head of the table, looking earnest, manly, and at least semi-noble, as he almost always did. Sitting to one side of him was my sister, Sergeant Deborah Morgan, and she did not look happy. Of course, she very seldom did; between her carefully cultivated Cop Scowl and her general outlook of surly watchfulness, the most cheerful expression she had ever managed in my presence

was a look of grudging acquiescence. Still, this morning she looked very much displeased, even for her. I turned my gaze to the other three people sitting around the table, hoping for some clue to my sister's malaise.

Sitting closest to the captain was a man who was clearly Alpha Dog of the group. He was about thirty-five and wore what looked like a very expensive suit, and Matthews had inclined his head toward the man in a way that went beyond deferential and nearly approached reverence. The man looked up at me as I entered, scanned me as if he was memorizing a row of numbers, and then turned impatiently back to Matthews.

Sitting next to this charming individual was a woman so startlingly beautiful that for a half moment I forgot I was walking, and I paused in midstep, my right foot dangling in the air, as I gaped at her like a twelve-year-old boy. I simply stared, and I could not have said why. The woman's hair was the color of old gold, and her features were pleasant and regular, true enough. And her eyes were a startling violet, a color so unlikely and yet so compelling that I felt an urgent need to move near and study her eyes at close range. But there was something beyond the mere arrangement of her features, something unseen and only *felt*, that made her seem far more attractive than she actually was—a Bright Passenger? Whatever it was, it grabbed my attention and held me helpless. The woman watched me goggle at her with distant amusement, raising an eyebrow and giving me a small smile that said, *Of course, but so what?* And then she turned back to face the captain, leaving me free to finish my interrupted step and stumble toward the table once more.

In a morning of surprises, my reaction to mere Female Pulchritude was a rather large one. I could not remember ever behaving in such an absurdly human way: Dexter does not Drool, not at mere womanly beauty. My tastes are somewhat more refined, generally involving a carefully chosen playmate and a roll of duct tape. But something about this woman had absolutely frozen me, and I could not stop myself from continuing to stare as I lurched into a chair next to my sister. Debs greeted me with a sharp elbow to the ribs and a whisper: "You're drooling," she hissed.

I wasn't, of course, but I straightened myself anyway and summoned the shards of my shattered dignity, looking around me with an attempt at regaining my usual composure.

There was one last person at the table whom I had not registered yet. He had put a vacant seat between himself and the Irresistible Siren, and he leaned away from her as if afraid he might catch something from her, his head propped up on one elbow, which was planted casually on the table. He wore aviator sunglasses, which did not disguise the fact that he was a ruggedly handsome man of about forty-five, with a perfectly trimmed mustache and a spectacular haircut. It wasn't possible to be sure with the sunglasses clamped to his face, but it certainly seemed like he hadn't even glanced at me as I'd come clown-footing into the room and into my chair. Somehow I managed to conceal my crushing disappointment at his negligence, and I turned my steely gaze to the head of the table, where Captain Matthews was once again clearing his throat.

"Ahem," he said carefully. "Since we're all here, um. So anyway." He nodded at Deborah. "Morgan," he said, and he looked at me. "And, uh—Morgan." He frowned, as if I had insulted him by choosing a name for myself that he'd already said, and the beautiful woman snickered in the silence. Captain Matthews actually blushed, which was almost certainly something he hadn't done since high school, and he cleared his throat one more time. "All right," he said, with massive authority and a sidelong glance at the woman. He nodded at the man in the impressive suit. "Mr., ah, Eissen here represents, um, BTN. Big Ticket Network." The man nodded back at Matthews with a very deliberate display of patient contempt. "And, um. They're here, in town. In Miami," he added, in case we'd forgotten what town we lived in. "They want to shoot a movie. A, um, TV show, you know."

The man in the sunglasses spoke up for the first time. "A pilot," he said, without moving his face, parting his lips only enough to reveal a blinding set of perfect teeth. "It's called a pilot."

The beautiful woman rolled her eyes and looked at me, shaking her head, and I found myself smiling eagerly back at her, without any conscious decision to do so.

"Right," said Matthews. "A pilot. Okay. So here's the thing." He

slapped the table softly with both hands and looked back at Deborah. "Mr. Eissen has asked us for our cooperation. Which we are very happy to give them. Very happy," he said, nodding at Eissen. "Good for the department. Positive image, and, uh, ahem." He frowned again, drummed his fingers on the table, and stared at Deborah. "So that's what you do, Morgan." He frowned again and shook his head. "And, uh, Morgan. Both of you."

Perhaps it was merely because I hadn't finished my cup of awful coffee, but I had no idea what Matthews was talking about. And so, since Dexter has always been a quick study, I cleared my throat, too. It worked; Matthews looked at me with an expression of surprise. "I'm sorry, Captain," I said. "But exactly *what* am I supposed to do?"

Matthews blinked at me. "Whatever it takes," he said. "Whatever they ask you to do."

Mr. Mustache spoke up, again without moving any facial muscles. "I neeeed," he said, drawing out the word pointlessly, "to learn Who. You. Are."

That made even less sense than what Matthews had said, and I could think of no reply more penetrating than, "Oh, uh-huh . . ." It must have sounded just as feeble to him as it did to me, because he moved at last, turning his entire head in my direction and flipping up the sunglasses with one manicured finger.

"I need to watch you, learn to do what you do, figure out how to *be* you," he said. And he flashed his perfect white teeth at me. "Shouldn't take more than a few days."

The beautiful woman next to him snorted and murmured something that sounded like, "Asshole . . ." The man's face gave a very slight twitch of irritation, but otherwise he ignored her.

"But why?" I said. And because I like to give as good as I get, I added, "Don't you like who you are?"

The Goddess snickered; the man merely frowned. "It's for the part," he said, sounding slightly taken aback. "I need to research my character."

I think I still looked a bit confused, because the beautiful woman gave me a dazzling smile that curled up my toes and made me happy to be alive. "I don't think he knows who you are, Bob," she said.

"Robert," he grumbled. "Not Bob."

"Some people actually haven't heard of you, you know," she said, a little too sweetly.

"He probably doesn't know who you are, either," Robert snarled back at her. "Unless he reads the tabloids."

Mr. Eissen, the man in the wonderful suit, tapped one fingertip on the table. He did it very quietly, but everyone got silent and sat up a little straighter. Eissen gave me a microscopic smile. "Robert," he said, emphasizing the name slightly, and then adding, "Robert Chase." He gave a slight, dismissive shake of his head. "Robert is a well-known actor, Mr. Morgan."

"Oh, right," I said, giving Robert a friendly nod of the head. He flipped his sunglasses back down.

"Most actors like to get a sense of the . . . *reality* . . . behind the part they're going to play," Eissen said, and somehow he made it sound like he was talking about small children going through an unpleasant phase, and he gave me another condescending smile to go with it. "Jacqueline Forrest," he went on, with a little flourish of his hand to indicate the beautiful woman. "Jackie is playing a hard-as-nails woman detective. Like your Sergeant Morgan." He smiled at Deborah, but she didn't smile back. "And Robert is playing the part of a forensics whiz. Which we hear is what you are. So Robert would like to follow you around at your job for a few days and see what you do, and how you do it."

I have always heard it said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but I did not recall anyone ever adding that flattery was actually a good thing, and I admit that I was not terribly pleased. It's not that I have anything to hide—I've already hidden all of it—but I do like my privacy, and the idea of having somebody following me around and taking notes on my behavior was a bit unsettling.

"Um," I said, and it was good to hear that my customary eloquence had leaped to the fore, "that's going to be, um, kind of difficult—"

"Doesn't matter," Captain Matthews said.

"I can handle it," Robert said.

"I can't," Deborah said, and everyone looked at her. She looked even more surly than she had when I came in, which was quite an achievement.

"What's the problem?" Eissen said.

Debs shook her head. "I'm a cop, not a fucking nanny," she said through clenched teeth.

"Morgan," Captain Matthews said, and he cleared his throat and looked around to see if anyone had noticed the bad word.

"I don't have time for this shit," Debs went on, using yet another bad word. "Brand-new this morning I got a drive-by shooting in Liberty City, an overdose at the U, and a beheading in the Grove."

"Wow," said Jackie, with breathy wonder.

Matthews waved a hand dismissively. "Not important," he said.

"The hell it isn't," my sister said.

Matthews shook his head at her. "Pass it off to Anderson or somebody. This," he said, rapping a knuckle on the table, "has priority." And he gave Jackie his most dazzling thoughtful-but-macho smile. She smiled back, apparently paralyzing Matthews for several seconds, until once more Deborah broke the spell.

"It's not my job," she insisted. "My job is taking down perps—not babysitting a model."

I looked at Jackie to see how she would take that; she just looked at Debs with awe and shook her head slowly. "Perfect," she said softly.

"Your job," Matthews said sternly, "is to follow orders. My orders," he added, glancing again at Jackie to see if she was impressed. But Jackie hadn't taken her eyes off Deborah.

"Goddamn it, Captain," Debs said, but Matthews held up a hand and cut her off.

"That's enough," he snapped. "I am assigning you to be technical adviser to these people. Period. Until further notice." Debs opened her mouth to say something, but Matthews plowed right over her. "You'll do it and do it right, and that's it, all of it, end of discussion." He leaned toward my sister slightly. "And, Morgan—watch your language, all right?" He stared at her, and she stared back, and for a moment that was all that happened, until Eissen finally broke the spell.

"Good, that's settled," he said, and he put on a fake smile to indicate that everyone was happy now. "Thank you for your cooperation, Captain. The network is very grateful."

Matthews nodded. "Well, that's, ahem. And I'm sure this is a

good thing." He looked at me and then at Deborah. "For all of us," he said, glaring at my sister.

"I'm sure you're right," Eissen said.

"This is going to be *awesome*," Jackie gurgled.

Deborah did not appear to agree.