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Dexter is Delicious:

The Devil is in the Detail

Written by Jeff Lindsay

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**DEXTER
IS
DELICIOUS**

JEFF LINDSAY



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CHAPTER ONE

THIS PART OF THE HOSPITAL SEEMS LIKE FOREIGN country to me. There is no sense of the battlefield here, no surgical teams in gore-stained scrubs trading witty remarks about missing body parts, no steely-eyed administrators with their clipboards, no herds of old drunks in wheelchairs, and above all, no flocks of wide-eyed sheep huddled together in fear at what might come out of the double steel doors. There is no stench of blood, antiseptic, and terror; the smells here are kinder, homier. Even the colors are different: softer, more pastel, without the drab, battleship utilitarianism of the walls in other parts of the building. There are, in fact, none of the sights and sounds and dreadful smells I have come to associate with hospitals, none at all. There is only the crowd of moon-eyed men standing at the big window, and to my infinite surprise, I am one of them.

We stand together, happily pressed up to the glass and cheerfully making space for any newcomer. White, black, brown; Latin, African-American, Asian-American, Creole – it doesn't matter. We are all brothers. No one sneers or frowns; no one seems to care about getting an accidental nudge in the ribs now and again, and no one, wonder of all, seems to harbor any violent thoughts about any of the others. Not even me. Instead, we all cluster at the glass, looking at the miraculous commonplace in the next room.

Are these human beings? Can this really be the Miami I have always lived in? Or has some strange physics experiment in an underground supercollider sent us all to live in Bizarro World, where everyone is kind and tolerant and happy all the time?

Where is the joyfully homicidal crowd of yesteryear? Where are the well-armed, juiced-up, half-crazed, ready-to-kill friends of my youth? Has all this changed, vanished, washed away forever in the light from yonder window?

What fantastic vision beyond the glass has taken a hallway filled with normal, wicked, face-breaking, neck-snapping humans and turned them into a clot of bland and drooling happy-wappys?

Unbelieving, I look again, and there it is. There it still is. Four neat rows of pink and brown, tiny wiggling creatures, so small and prunish and useless – and yet it is they who have turned this crowd of healthy, kill-crazy humans into a half-melted splotch of dribbling helplessness. And beyond this mighty feat of magic, even more absurd and dramatic and unbelievable, one of those tiny pink lumps has taken our Dark Dabbler, Dexter the Decidedly Dreadful, and made him, too, into a thing of quiet and contemplative chin spittle. And there it lies, waving its toes at the strip lights, utterly unaware of the miracle it has performed – unaware, indeed, even of the very toes it wiggles, for it is the absolute Avatar of Unaware – and yet, look what it has done in all its unthinking, unknowing wigglehood. Look at it there, the small, wet, sour-smelling marvel that has changed everything.

Lily Anne.

Three small and very ordinary syllables. Sounds with no real meaning – and yet strung together and attached to the tiny lump of flesh that squirms there on its pedestal, it has performed the mightiest of magical feats. It has turned Dexter Dead for Decades into something with a heart that beats and pumps true life, something that almost feels, that so very nearly resembles a human being –

There: It waves one small and mighty hand and that New Thing inside Dexter waves back. Something turns over and surges upward into the chest cavity, bounces off the ribs and attacks the facial muscles, which now spread into a spontaneous and unpracticed smile. Heavens above, was that really an emotion? Have I fallen so far, so fast?

Yes, apparently I have. There it goes again.

Lily Anne.

‘Your first?’ says a voice beside me, and I glance to my left – quickly, so as not to miss a single second of the spectacle on the far side of the window. A stocky Latin man stands there in jeans and a clean work shirt with MANNY stitched over the pocket.

‘Yes,’ I say, and he nods.

‘I got three,’ he says, and smiles. ‘I don’t get tired of it, either.’

‘No,’ I say, looking back at Lily Anne. ‘How could you?’ She is moving her other hand now – and now both at the same time! What a remarkable child.

‘Two boys,’ he says, shaking his head, and adds, ‘and at last, a girl.’ And I can tell from the tone of his voice that this thought makes him smile and I sneak another glance at him; sure enough, his face is stretched into an expression of happy pride that is

nearly as stupid-looking as my own. 'Boys can be so dumb,' he says. 'I really wanted a girl this time, and . . .' His smile stretches even wider and we stand together for several minutes in companionable silence, contemplating our bright and beautiful girls beyond the glass.

Lily Anne.

Lily Anne Morgan. Dexter's DNA, living and moving on through time to another generation, and more, into the far-flung future, a day beyond imagination – taking the very essence of all that is me and moving it forward past the clock-fingered reach of death, sprinting into tomorrow wrapped in Dexter's chromosomes – and looking very good doing it. Or so it seems to her loopy father.

Everything has changed. A world with Lily Anne Morgan in it is so completely unknown: prettier, cleaner, neater edges, brighter colors. Things taste better now, even the Snickers bar and cup of vending machine coffee, all I have had for twenty-four hours. The candy bar's flavor was far more subtle than I had known before, and the coffee tasted of hope. Poetry flows into my icy-cold brain and trickles down to my fingertips, because all is new and wonderful now. And far beyond the taste of the coffee is the taste of life itself. Now it is something to nurture, protect, and delight in. And the thought comes from far out beyond bizarre that perhaps life is no longer something to feed on in the terrible dark frenzy of joy that has defined me until this new apocalyptic moment. Maybe Dexter's world should die now, and a new world of pink delight will spring from the ashes. And the old and terrible need to slash the sheep and scatter

the bones, to spin through the wicked night like a thresher, to seed the moonlight with the tidy leftovers of Dexter's Dark Desiring? Maybe it's time to let it go, time to let it drain away until it is all gone, vanished utterly.

Lily Anne is here and I want to be different.

I want to be better than what I have been.

I want to hold her. I want to sit her on my lap and read her Christopher Robin and Dr Seuss. I want to brush her hair and teach her about toothpaste and put Band-Aids on her knees. I want to hug her in the sunset in a room full of puppies while the band plays 'Happy Birthday', and watch her grow up into wonderful beautiful cancer-curing symphony-writing adulthood, and to do that I cannot be who I have always been – and that is fine with me, because I realize one more important thing.

I don't want to be Dark Dexter anymore.

The thought is not so much a shock as a completion. I have lived my life moving in one direction and now I am there. I don't need to do those things anymore. No regrets, but no longer necessary. Now there is Lily Anne and she trumps all that other dancing in the dark. It is time to move on, time to evolve! Time to leave Old Devil Dexter behind in the dust. That part of me is complete, and now –

Now there is one small and very sour note singing in the choir of Dexter's happiness. Something is not quite right. Somewhere nearby some small gleam of the old wicked life flashes through the rosy glow of the new and a dry rattle of scales grates across the new melody.

Someone is watching me.

The thought comes as a silky whisper only one step removed from a chuckle. The Dark Passenger, as ever, is amused at the timing as well as the sentiment – but there is truth in the warning, too, and I turn very casual-careful, smile now stitched in place in the old fake way, and I scan the hallway behind me: first to the left, toward the vending machines. An old man, his shirt tucked into pants pulled much too high, leans against the soda machine with his eyes closed. A nurse walks by without seeing him.

I turn and look to the right, down to where the hallway ends in a 'T' that goes one way to a row of rooms and the other way to the elevators. And there it is, as plain as a blip on any radar screen, or what is left of the blip, because someone is going around the corner toward the elevators, and all I can see is half his back as he scuttles away. Tan pants, a greenish plaid shirt, and the bottom of one athletic shoe, and he is gone, and he does not leave any explanation at all of why he was watching me, but I know that he was, and this is confirmed by the cheesy smirk I feel oozing from the Passenger, as if to say, *Oh, really, we're leaving what behind?*

I know of no reason in this world, or any other, why anyone would be interested in little old me. My conscience is as clean and empty as it can possibly be – which means, of course, that I have always tidied up carefully, and in any case, my conscience has the same hard reality as a unicorn.

But someone very definitely was watching me and this is oh-so-more-than-slightly bothersome, because I can think of no wholesome and happy reason why anyone would want to watch Dull-as-Dishwater

Dexter, and I must now think that whatever threatens Dexter might also be a danger to Lily Anne – and this is not a thing that I can allow.

And of course the Passenger finds this highly amusing: that moments ago I was sniffing the bright buds of spring and forswearing the way of all flesh, and now I am once again up on point and eager to slay – but this is different. This is not recreational homicide. This is protecting Lily Anne, and even after these very first moments of life, I will quite happily rip the veins out of anything that comes near her, and it is with this comforting thought that I stroll to the corner of the hall and glance toward the elevator.

But there is nothing there. The hallway is empty.

I have only a few seconds to stare, barely enough time to enjoy my own slack-jawed silence, and my cell phone begins to vibrate on my hip. I draw it from its holster and glance at the number; it is Sergeant Deborah, my own adopted flesh and blood, my cop sister, no doubt calling to coo over the arrival of Lily Anne and offer me sibling best wishes. So I answer the phone.

'Hi,' I say.

'Dexter,' she says. 'We got a shit-storm and I need you. Get down here right away.'

'I'm not on duty right now,' I say. 'I'm on paternity leave.' But before I can reassure her that Lily Anne is fine and beautiful and Rita is in a deep sleep down the hall, she gives me an address and hangs up.

I go back and say good-bye to Lily Anne. She waves her toes, rather fondly, I think, but she doesn't say anything.