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Double Dexter

Written by Jeff Lindsay

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DOUBLE DEXTER

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ONE

OF COURSE THERE ARE CLOUDS. THEY TAKE OVER THE SKY and hide that pulsing swollen moon that is clearing its throat above them. The slow trickle of its light is there—but any possible glimmer is hidden, invisible behind the clouds that have rolled in low and bloated and so very full. Soon the clouds will open up and pour down a heavy summer rain, so very soon, because they, too, are full of what they must do, full to the point of bursting, so very full that they, too, must work to hold back the flood that absolutely must come, and soon.

Soon—but not now, not yet. They must wait, too, swelling with the power of all that is growing in them, the true and blinding current of what will come, of what *must* come when it is right, when it is beyond necessary and into the true shape of this moment, when it forges the real and necessary skeleton of *now*—

But that time is not yet here, not yet. And so the clouds glower and bunch and wait, letting the need build, and the tension grows with it. It will be soon; it has to be soon. In only a few moments these dark and silent clouds will shatter the silence of the night with the unbearable bright omnipotence of their might and blast the darkness into flickering shards—and then, only then, the release will come. The clouds will open up and all the tension of holding in so much weight

will flow out in the pure bliss of letting go, and the clean joy of it will pour out and flood the world with its oh-so-happy gift of light and liberation.

That moment is near, so tantalizingly close—but it is not yet. And so the clouds wait for that just-right moment, growing their darkness, swelling even bigger and heavier with shadow, until they absolutely must let go.

And here below, in the lightless night? Here on the ground, in the stark pool of shadow these clouds have made with their moon-sheltering sky-hogging sulki-ness? What can this be, over there, skyless and dark, sliding through the night so very full and ready and waiting, just like the clouds? And it *is* waiting, whatever its dark self might be; it waits tense and coiled and watching for that perfect moment to do what it will, what it must, what it has always done. And that moment skitters closer on little mice feet as if it too knows what must come and fears it, and feels the terror of the stalking moment of rightness that is even now pattering up close, closer—until it is right there behind you, looking at your neck and nearly tasting the warm flutter of those tender veins and thinking, *Now*.

And a shattering blast of lightning shreds the dark night and shows a large and soft-looking man scuttling across the ground, as if he, too, has felt the dark breath so close behind. Thunder booms and lightning flashes again and the figure is closer, juggling a laptop and a manila folder as he fumbles for keys and disappears into darkness again as the lightning ends. One more burst of lightning; the man is very close now, clutching his burden and holding a car key in the air. And he is gone again in black stillness. There is sudden silence,

a complete hush, as if nothing anywhere is breathing and even the darkness is holding its breath—

And then there comes a sudden rush of wind and a last hammer of thunder and the whole world cries out, *Now*.

Now.

And all that must happen in this dark summer night begins to happen. The skies open up and let go of their burden, the world begins to breathe again, and here in the newly wet darkness other tensions flex and uncoil so very slowly, carefully, reaching their soft sharp tendrils out toward the fumbling, clownlike figure now scrabbling to unlock his car in this sudden rain. The car's door swings open, the laptop and folder thump onto the seat, and then the soft and doughy man slides in behind the wheel, slams the door, and takes a deep breath as he wipes the water from his face. And he smiles, a smile of small triumph, something he does a lot these days. Steve Valentine is a happy man; things have gone his way a lot lately and he thinks they have gone his way again tonight. For Steve Valentine, life is very good.

It is also almost over.

Steve Valentine is a clown. Not a buffoon, not a happy caricature of inept normality. He is a real clown, who runs ads in the local papers and hires out for children's parties. Unfortunately, it is not the bright laughter of childish innocence that he lives for, and his sleight of hand has gotten somewhat out of hand. He has been arrested and released twice when parents pointed out to the police that you don't really need to take a child into a dark closet to show him balloon animals.

They had to let him go both times for lack of evi-

dence, but Valentine took the hint; from that point on nobody has complained—how could they? But he has not stopped entertaining the children, certainly not. Leopards do not change their spots, and Valentine has not changed his. He just got wiser, darker, as wounded predators do. He has moved on into a more permanent game and he thinks he has found a way to play and never pay.

He is wrong.

Tonight the bill comes due.

Valentine lives in a run-down apartment building just north of Opa-locka airport. The building looks at least fifty years old. Abandoned cars litter the street in front, some of them burned-out. The building shakes slightly when corporate jets fly low overhead, landing or taking off, and that sound interrupts the constant white noise of traffic on the nearby expressway.

Valentine's apartment is on the second floor, number eleven, and it has a very good view of a rotting playground with a rusting jungle gym, a tilting slide, and a basketball hoop with no net. Valentine has put a battered lawn chair on the balcony of his apartment, placed so he has a perfect view of the playground. He can sit and sip a beer and watch the children play and think his happy thoughts about playing with them.

And he does. He has played with at least three young boys that we know about and probably more. In the last year and a half small bodies have been pulled from a nearby canal on three occasions. They had been sexually abused and then strangled. The boys were all from this neighborhood, which means that their parents are poor and probably in this country illegally. That means that even when their children were killed they had

very little to say to the police—and that makes their children perfect targets for Valentine. Three times, at least, and the police have no leads.

But we do. We have more than a lead. We *know*. Steve Valentine watched those little boys at their games on the playground, and then he followed them away into the dusk and taught them his own very final games and then he put them into the murky trash-filled water of the canal. And he went satisfied back to his decrepit lawn chair, opened a beer, and watched the playground for a new little friend.

Valentine thought he was very clever. He thought he had learned his lesson and found a better way to live out his dreams and make a home for his alternative lifestyle and there was nobody smart enough to catch him and make him stop. Until now he has been right.

Until tonight.

Valentine had not been in his apartment when the cops came to investigate the three dead boys, and that was not luck. That was part of his predator's cleverness; he has a scanner for listening to police radio traffic. He knew when they were in the area. It would not be often. The police did not like to come to neighborhoods like this one, where the best they could hope for was hostile indifference. That is one reason Valentine lives here. But when the cops do come, he knows about it.

The cops come if they have to, and they have to if Somebody calls 911 to report a couple fighting in apartment eleven on the second floor, and if Somebody says the fight ended suddenly with the sound of screaming terror followed by silence, they come quickly.

And when Valentine hears them on his scanner,

coming to his address, to his apartment, he will naturally want to be sure he is somewhere else before they get here. He will take any material he has that hints at his hobby—and he will have some material, they always do—and he will hurry downstairs and out into the darkness to his car, thinking that he can drive away until the radio tells him that things have calmed down again.

He will not think that Someone would bother to look up his car's registration and know that he drives a light blue twelve-year-old Chevrolet Blazer with CHOOSE LIFE! plates on it and a magnetic sign on the door that says, PUFFALUMP THE CLOWN. And he will not think that Something might be waiting for him in the backseat of this car, hunched down carefully into the shadows.

He will be wrong about both of those things. Someone does know his car, and Something does wait silently hunkered down on the floor of the dark backseat of the old Chevy, waits while Valentine finishes wiping his face and smiling his secret smile of small triumph and finally—*finally*—puts the key in the ignition and starts the engine.

And as the car sputters into life, the moment comes, suddenly, *finally*, and Something roars up and out of the darkness and snakes a blinding-fast loop of fifty-pound-test nylon fishing line around Valentine's doughy neck and pulls it tight before he can say anything more than, "Guck—!" and he begins to flail his arms in a stupid, weak, pitiful way that makes Someone feel the cold contemptuous power running up the nylon line and deep into the hands holding it. And now the smile has melted from Valentine's face

and flowed instead onto ours and we are there so close behind him that we can smell his fear and hear the terrified thumping of his heart and feel his lack of breath and this is *good*.

"You belong to us now," we tell him, and our Command Voice hits him like a jolt of the lightning that crackles outside now to punctuate the darkness. "You will do just what we say and you will do it only when we say it." And Valentine thinks he has something to say about that and makes a small wet sound and so we pull the noose tight, very tight, just for a moment, so he will know that even his breath belongs to us. His face goes dark and his eyes bulge out and he raises his hands to his neck and his fingers scrabble madly at the noose for a few seconds until everything goes dark for him and his hands slide down into his lap and he slumps forward and begins to fade away and so we ease up on the noose because it is still too soon, much too soon for him.

His shoulders move and he makes a sound like a rusty ratchet as he takes in one more breath, one more in the quickly dwindling number of breaths he has left to him, and because he does not yet know that the number is so very small he takes another quickly, a little easier, and he straightens up and wastes his precious air by croaking, "What the fuck!"

A string of nasty mucus drips from his nose and his voice sounds cramped and raspy and very irritating and so we pull once more on the noose, a little more gently this time, just enough so he will know that we own him now, and he very obediently gapes and clutches at his throat and then goes silent. "No talking," we say. "Drive."

He looks up and into the rearview mirror and his eyes meet ours for the very first time—only the eyes, showing cool and dark through the slits cut in the sleek silk hood that covers our face. For just a moment he thinks he will say something and we twitch the noose very gently, just enough to remind him, and he changes his mind. He looks away from the mirror, puts the car in gear, and drives.

We steer him carefully south, encouraging him now and then with small tugs on the noose, just to keep that one thought in his mind that even breathing is not automatic and will not happen unless we say so, and he is very good for most of the trip. Only one time at a stoplight does he look back at us in the mirror and clear his throat and say, “What are you—where are we going?” and we pull very hard on his leash for a long moment and let his world go dim.

“We are going where you are told to go,” we say. “Just drive, and do not talk, and you might live a little longer.” And that is enough to make him behave, because he does not yet know that soon, so very soon, he will not *want* to live a little longer, because living as he will come to know it is a very painful thing.

We steer him carefully along side streets and into an area of battered newer houses. Many of them are empty, foreclosed, and one of them in particular has been selected and prepared and we drive Valentine to this place, down a quiet street and under a broken streetlight and into an old-fashioned carport attached to this house and we make him park the car at the back of the carport, where it cannot be seen from the road, and turn off the engine.

For a long moment we do nothing except hold the

noose and listen to the night. We push down the rising gurgle of the moon-music and the soft compelling rustle of inner wings aching to open wide and take us up into the sky, because we must be very careful. We listen for any sound that might stalk unwelcome into our night of need. We listen, and we hear the lash of the rain and the wind, and the splash of water from the carport's roof and the rattle of the trees as the summer storm moves through them, and nothing else.

We look: The house to our right, the only house that could see into this carport, is dark. It is empty, too, like the house where we have parked, and we have made certain that there is no one there either, and we silently reach out along the street, listening, carefully tasting the warm wet wind for the scent of any other thing that might see or hear—and there is nothing. We breathe in, a deep and beautiful breath filled with the taste and smell of this marvelous night and the terrible-wonderful things we will soon be doing together, just us and Puffalump the clown.

And then Valentine clears his throat, trying so very hard to do it softly, quietly, trying to clear away the tight sharp pain of the line around his neck and somehow make sense of the impossible thing that is happening to special, wonderful him—and the sound of it grates on our ears like all the awful clatter of a thousand cracking teeth and we pull hard on the noose, hard enough to break skin, hard enough to squeeze out forever the whole idea of making any sound ever again, and he arches back against the seat with his fingers scrabbling feebly at his throat for just a second before he slumps down into bulge-eyed silence. And we get rapidly out of the car, open the driver's door, and pull

him out onto his knees on the shadowed pavement of the carport.

“Quickly now,” we say. We loosen the line so very slightly and he looks up at us with a face that says the whole concept of *quickly* is fading away from him for all time and as we see this new and wonderful awareness grow in his eyes we tighten the leash just enough to bring home to him the truth of that thought and he lurches up off his knees and trundles ahead of us through the jalousied back door and into the darkness of the empty house. And now we have him in his new home: the last place he will ever live.

We lead him into the kitchen and stop to let him stand for a few silent seconds and we stay close behind him with a taut hand on his noose and he clenches his fists and then wiggles his fingers and then he clears his throat again. “Please,” he whispers, in a ruined voice that has already gone on ahead of him into death.

“Yes,” we say with all our calm patience lapping at the edges of a wild shoreline of joy—and it may be that he thinks he hears some hope in that smooth anticipation because he shakes his head, just a little bit, as if he could persuade the tide to go backward.

“Why,” he croaks. “It’s, it’s, just . . . why?”

We pull the line very tight around his throat and watch as his breath stops and his face goes dark and he drops once more to his knees and just before he goes off into unconsciousness we loosen the line, just a little bit, just enough for a small cloud of air to roll into his lungs through his ravaged throat and bring him back up into his eyes, and we tell him all of it, with full and joyful truth. “Because,” we say. And then we pull the noose tight again, tighter, very tight, and we watch

happily as he slides down the long slope into airless sleep and flops over onto his now-dark-purple face.

We work quickly now, arranging everything just right before he can wake up and spoil things. We get our small bag of toys and tools from the car and pick up the manila folder he dropped onto the car's seat and we go quickly back to the kitchen with these things. Very soon Valentine is taped in place on the counter with his clothing cut away and his mouth sealed shut and around him we have arranged the pretty photos we found in his folder, lovely shots of small boys at play, laughing at a clown in a few of them, in others simply holding a ball or riding a swing. And three of them are placed oh-so-carefully in just the right place so he *has* to see them, three simple portrait shots taken from the newspaper stories of three small boys who had been found dead in a canal.

And as we finish making everything just right, just the way it has to be, Valentine's eyelids flutter. For a moment he lies still, perhaps feeling the warm air on his naked skin and the tight unyielding duct tape holding him motionless, and perhaps wondering why. Then he remembers and his eyes slam open and he tries impossible things, like breaking the duct tape or taking large breaths or screaming out of a carefully sealed mouth loud enough for anyone else in his receding world to hear. None of this can happen, not ever again, not for him. For Valentine, only one small thing is possible at all, only one unimportant, meaningless, wonderful, necessary thing, and now it will start to happen, *now*, whatever futile flopping struggles he might try.

"Relax," we say, and we put a gloved hand onto his

bare and heaving chest. "Soon it will all be over." And we mean *all* of it, everything, every breath and blink, every leer and chuckle, every birthday party and balloon animal, every hungry trip into the dusk in the wake of a small and helpless boy—all over, forever, and soon.

We pat his chest. "But not too soon," we say, and the cold happiness of that simple truth floods up through us and into our eyes and he sees it and perhaps he knows for sure and perhaps he still feels stupid impossible hope. But as he melts back onto the counter in the tight unbreakable grip of the tape and the stronger need of this delirious night, the beautiful music of the Dark Dance begins to rise around us and we go to work, and for Valentine all hope washes away forever as that one essential thing begins to happen.

It starts slowly—not tentative, not out of uncertainty, not at all, but slowly so it will last. Slowly to draw out and relish each well-planned well-rehearsed often-practiced stroke and bring the clown *slowly* to the point of final understanding: a clear and simple insight into how it ends for him, here, now, tonight. *Slowly* we paint for him a true portrait of how it must be, stroking strong dark lines to show that this is all there will ever be. This is his very last trick, and now, here, tonight, he will slowly, carefully, meticulously, slice by slice and piece by piece, pay the toll to the happy bridge keeper with the bright blade, and *slowly* cross that final span into an unending darkness that he will soon be very willing, even very anxious, to join, because by then he will know that it is the only way out of the pain. But not now, not yet, not too soon; first we have to get him there, get him to the point of no return and just beyond

it to where it is oh-so-clear to him that we have arrived at the edge and he can never go back. He must see that, understand that, absorb that, accept it as right and necessary and immutable, and it is our happy task to take him there and then point back to the border at the edge of the end and say, *See? This is where you are now. You have crossed over and now it all ends.*

And so we go to work, with the music rising around us and the moon peeking in through a rift in the clouds and chuckling happily at what it sees, and Valentine is very cooperative. He pitches and hisses and hurls out muffled squeals as he sees that what is happening can never be undone, and it is happening so very thoroughly to rapidly disappearing *him*, Steve Valentine, Puffalump the clown, the funny happy man in whiteface who really and truly loves kids, loves them so much and so often and in such a very unpleasant way. He is Steve Valentine, party clown, who can take a child through the whole magic rainbow of life in one dark hour, all the way from happiness and wonder into the final agony of hopelessly fading sight and the dirty water of a handy canal. Steve Valentine, who was far too clever for anyone ever to make him stop or prove what he has done in a court of law. But he is not in a court of law now, and he never will be. Tonight he lies upon the bench in the Court of Dexter, and the final verdict gleams in our hand, and there is no access to court-appointed lawyers where he is going and no appeal will ever be possible.

And just before the gavel falls for the very last time we pause. A small and nagging bird has perched on our shoulder and chirped its troubled song: *Cher-wee, cher-woo, it must be true.* We know the song and we

know its meaning. It is the song of the Code of Harry, and it says that we have to be sure, have to be certain that we have done the right thing to the right person, so the pattern will be complete and we can finish with pride and joy and feel the satisfied rush of fulfillment.

And so at the place where breath comes slow and very hard for all that is left of Valentine and the final light of understanding is in his red and swollen eyes, we pause, lean over, and turn his head to face the pictures we have placed around him. We rip up one corner of the tape on his mouth and it must hurt, but it is such a very small pain compared to what he has been feeling for so long now that he makes no sound at all beyond a slow hiss of air.

"See them?" we say, shaking his wet slack chin and turning his head to make sure he sees the pictures. "See what you have done?"

He looks, and he sees them, and a tired smile twitches onto the uncovered part of his face. "Yes," he says, in a voice that is half-muffled by the tape and shattered by the noose but still sounds clear when he sees. He is drained of hope now, and every taste of life has faded from his tongue, but a small and warm memory tiptoes across his taste buds as he looks at the pictures of the boys he has taken away. "They were . . . *beautiful* . . ." His eyes wander over the pictures and stay there for a long moment and then they close. "Beautiful," he says, and it is enough; and we feel so very close to him now.

"So are you," we say, and we push the tape into place over his mouth and go back to work, winding up into well-earned bliss as the climax of our sharp symphony blares up out of the cheerful growing moonlight, and the music takes us higher and higher until finally,

slowly, carefully, joyfully, it comes to its final triumphant chord and releases everything into the warm wet night: everything. All the anger, unhappiness and tension, all the cramped confusion and frustration of the everyday pointless life we are forced to trudge through just to make *this* happen, all the petty meaningless blather of trying to blend with bovine humanity—it is all gone, all of it shooting up and out and away into the welcoming darkness—and with it, trailing along like a battered and beaten puppy, all that might have been left inside the wicked, tattered husk of Steve Valentine.

Bye-bye, Puffalump.