



Dexter's Final Cut: Dexter Morgan (7) (Dexter Series)

By Jeff Lindsay

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Lights. Camera. Murder. The *Dexter* series continues with a wild ride through Hollywood.

Mega-star Robert Chase is famous for losing himself in his characters. When he and a group of actors descend on the Miami Police Department for "research," Chase becomes fixated on Dexter Morgan, the blood spatter analyst with a sweet tooth and seemingly average life. Chase shadows Dexter's every move, trying to learn what makes him tick. However, Dexter's favorite pastime of hunting down the worst killers who've escaped legal prosecution--and introducing them to his special brand of justice--presents, well, a bit of a problem. It's a secret best kept out of the spotlight if Dexter wants to stay out of the electric chair, but even Dexter isn't immune to the call of fame. . . .

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Dexter's Final Cut: Dexter Morgan (7) (Dexter Series) By Jeff Lindsay Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #68747 in Books
- Published on: 2014-06-03
- Released on: 2014-06-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.01" h x .80" w x 5.19" l, .51 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

JEFF LINDSAY is the *New York Times* best-selling author and creator of the Dexter novels, most recently *Double Dexter*. He lives in south Florida with his wife and three daughters. His novels are the inspiration for the hit Showtime and CBS series *Dexter*.

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Chapter 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-fooding 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 neeeeed," 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.

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