

DEATH'S GOOD INTENTIONS

By Kyle Warner

Sample chapters.

The Black Horse

They were waiting for him on the little island across the swamp. Their bonfire beckoned. They were naked, most of them, and their pale, sweaty bodies jiggled as they danced around the flame. The others wore black robes and sung a formless lullaby in deep, dark tones.

They acted like they were alone, not a care in the world as they prayed for their Dark Lord to make an appearance, but they knew they had an audience on the opposite shore.

Trey Decarr stood at the muddy shoreline with a gun in his hand and an empty bottle of whiskey by his feet. He had been watching the show since back when the fire was short and the bottle was full, thinking how best to approach his quarry.

An informant tipped him off that this little island in the Louisiana swamps was where he wanted to be tonight. The informant had hinted that he would have company on the island but could not say what kind, so Decarr came prepared.

He brought a wooden stake in case he ran into vampires and a flask of holy water in case there were demons. As expected, though, the only things awaiting him on the island were some backwards thinking people who thought that Satan still appreciated orgies around the campfire.

Satanists. He'd come prepared for them, too, quickly downing the cheap whiskey so that he might endure their senseless babble without losing his mind.

Decarr wasn't really concerned about the idiots bouncing around the bonfire.

He was not a man without skills, especially with a gun in his hand. Even with heavy drinking, he suspected he could kill anyone who rushed him and scare off all the others. And if bullets became scarce he still felt pretty confident in his hand-to-hand abilities.

Decarr was a tall, muscular man in his prime at age thirty-five. Over the years he had earned the reputation of a big, dumb brute. He didn't appreciate the label, but had to admit that the shoe was comfortable, and tried to have fun with the role whenever the situation allowed it.

He wasn't exactly a handsome guy. His looks were too intimidating, his eyes too dark, and any compliments about his appearance had become rare indeed.

So, it wasn't the opponents that awaited him on the island that gave him pause. No, it was the fact that the Satanists had put a hole in the last remaining boat on this side of the swamp. The rope that had tied it to shore earlier in the day was now angled down into the murky depths.

He thought about swimming. It wasn't far. Maybe five minutes through the muck and he would be out on the other side.

It would be easy enough. . . except for the fact that an alligator had been eyeing him since he arrived on the shore.

He only saw the big bastard's eyes when the flickering fire caught them just right. They peeked out of the water, colored the darkest shade of black that ever existed, and never looked away from him.

Decarr couldn't see the rest of the reptile but imagined it to be almost twenty feet long.

If he waded into the swamp, the gator would be on him in a flash. It would drag him under and he'd never see the surface again. His death would be quiet. No screams. Only bubbles.

Conversely, he could shoot the gator between the eyes and wade into the water unchallenged. Problem was, it would alert the groupies, making things harder on him when he reached the island.

That and he didn't really want to shoot the gator.

The giant reptile was a dragon made real on a planet which liked to think that monsters were something that belonged to myth and fantasy. An alligator couldn't really help being what it was.

Decarr could relate.

Used to be that he had lived a somewhat normal life and demons were reserved for fever dreams and bad horror movies. Not so much anymore.

Now he saw the beasts everywhere he went, and those who knew his face couldn't stop themselves from talking about his greater purpose.

Decarr had pissed on destiny years ago and never looked back. Instead of doing what was expected of him, he went to decrepit buildings and backwater bayous looking for clues that could lead him to the remaining Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

It was a long, dangerous road, one walked with baby steps.

First step today: *walk into a swamp with a hungry alligator as your swimming buddy.*

Decarr swallowed hard and waded out into the water.

The alligator stirred. Its tail swished through the water, creating waves along the stagnant surface. Mosquitoes took flight. In a tree up above, an unseen bird called out, excited about the prospect of dining on whatever tidbits the gator left behind.

Those black eyes came closer. Decarr tensed. He kept the pistol raised above his head, safe and dry, and angled it in the reptile's direction.

The snout appeared above the water. It breathed in, smelling Decarr's scent, and released a guttural growl.

The thing was so close now that Decarr thought he could count the teeth in its mouth.

Without a given reason, the alligator splashed its tail through the water, altered its course, and swam in the complete opposite direction.

Decarr remained where he was for a moment, half-expecting some larger predator to come at him from behind, but nothing happened.

Maybe the alligator knew a challenge when it saw one and simply didn't want to risk bodily harm attempting to kill a man as large as Decarr. Or maybe the gator was never hungry to begin with, it was just curious, just taking a swim...

Or maybe it knew that your flesh is rotten. That you're dying inside. Maybe it knew that you're Death himself. Even the most primal beasts—especially the most primal—recognize a monster when they see one.

Decarr pulled himself up on the island shore, covered in mud and vegetation. He wiped himself off and found that swollen leeches had latched onto his stomach and legs. He tore the bloodsuckers off and threw them back in the swamp.

Bleeding and smelling like the bog, Decarr cocked his gun and approached the campfire.

Now that he was closer he could make out lyrics in their song. He picked out lines like ‘your horse of darkness’ and ‘starve the babies, burn the fields’ and knew he was in the right place.

His foot fell on a stick. The snap was loud but he felt safe because their song was louder. Nobody had heard him—

A gun pressed up against the back of his head and a blade tapped his spine.

He sighed and held his gun with loose fingers so that the perimeter guard could snatch it away.

Dumbass, he cursed himself. The fire had blinded him to the shadows on the island and the alligator had kept him distracted from all else that moved. How had he missed the man in the woods? The guard had probably been watching him this entire time, just waiting for Decarr to swim across.

Decarr grumbled, “Take me to your fucking leader.”

The song stopped as he approached the fire. Those naked dancers went for their robes, dressing like embarrassed teenagers caught doing something naughty.

A woman stepped out of the group. She wore a pentagram necklace around her neck and her face was scarred with old burns. Decarr thought somebody must’ve thrown her in a fire once before.

Unlike the others, the woman showed no fear. Maybe she couldn’t. Could be that those burns had disconnected her emotions from her face, but Decarr didn’t think so.

She was the Queen Bitch, one of Satan’s lovers, and was well-acquainted with the worst of Earth and Hell. The others might have been posers, hopelessly drawn to this life by either local tradition or some long festering desire to rebel against society and God. But this lady was the real deal, a true believer, and one who understood the consequences for her actions but said *fuck it* and did what she wanted anyway.

Decarr would have to kill her first.

“Get on your knees,” said the scarred woman.

Decarr declined so the man behind him took a knife to his leg. He faltered just enough for the guy to get some leverage, forcing Decarr onto his knees before the scarred woman and her minions.

“This lowly creature is the Pale Rider,” the woman said.

Hushed gasps escaped the group of Satanists. One young man knelt to bow down before him, but was quickly tugged back to his feet.

Decarr yawned.

She said, “Instead of aiding the cause of our Dark Lord, Death has chosen exile.”

“I’ve chosen to fight,” Decarr said.

“And become a traitor in the process, killing our brothers and sisters in a futile attempt to save the sheep from the fire. How many of my friends have you killed, traitor?”

“They had it coming.” He gave the woman and her followers a good, long look. “You *all* have it coming.”

“You know that your cause is useless,” the woman said, “and yet you persist anyway.”

Decarr shrugged. “We all need our hobbies.”

“If you killed all the other Horsemen, they would simply be replaced by the next to be chosen. It’s a cycle and you cannot hope to stop it.”

“We’ll see.”

She scoffed. “Big goddamn hero.”

“Something like that.”

The woman asked for Decarr’s gun and the guard handed it over. She put the barrel to his head.

“My name is Lorelai. You have heard of me, yes?”

“No.”

He refused to blink as she pulled back the hammer on the pistol and brought her finger to the trigger.

Lorelai said, “You came to claim the newborn as your own.”

“No,” Decarr said, “I came to kill it.”

The Satanists gasped. Some cursed him and kicked stones his way. He showed his teeth like a mad dog and they backed off.

“You cannot have it,” Lorelai said. “However, before I kill you, I will allow you the glory of witnessing its birth into this world.” She nodded to a couple of men. “Hold him so that he cannot flee.”

The men were upon him quickly. One put him in a headlock while the other kept a gun aimed at his heart. Decarr did not resist. Not yet. He had to let the creature make its arrival before the killing could commence.

Lorelai went to the fire and removed a burning piece of wood. She stomped out the flame from the wood, revealing the charred black underneath. She put the burnt tip into the dirt and started to draw a circle about the size of a manhole cover, then scribbled black soot into the center, carefully coloring within the lines.

“Now we wait,” she said.

“That’s all?” Decarr asked, disappointed. “A circle in the dirt?”

“It only requires a door. I have created one suitable for its arrival.”

The Satanists bowed and prayed and licked their sweaty lips.

A mosquito landed on Decarr's nose. He wanted to swat it away but knew any sudden movement could result in a bullet. He was about to ask for assistance when a hushed awe came over the group.

The black circle, once so primitive and childlike, now took on a shine like oil, reflecting the campfire on its rippling surface.

It swelled upwards slowly until it could take no more, then the shiny black surface split, and a dark hoof appeared.

Decarr watched as tears formed in Lorelai's eyes. The tears trailed down her face, navigating the deep, ugly grooves. She smiled, looking wicked and mad, and Decarr felt for the first time that perhaps he had made a mistake in coming here tonight.

A second hoof appeared from out of the black. Together they landed on the dirt outside of the circle.

The black circle bubbled as the head of a black horse pushed out.

Lorelai, appearing uncertain for the first time, almost moved in to help the young colt, but then stopped herself.

The horse slid out of the hole in the ground and fell to its side, covered in black ooze. It kicked and neighed as it tried to find its footing.

Finally standing, the black colt returned to the circle from which it was born and licked up what remained of the black birthing fluids.

Soon nothing was left but the primitive circle that Lorelai had drawn with soot.

Lorelai knelt beside the horse and patted its head. "It's beautiful," she whispered. "So beautiful."

"It's evil," Decarr said. "I mean, *right?*"

"The horse is only an avatar," Lorelai said and pulled the black fluid out of the horse's mane.

"Like you, it's given little choice about its purpose in this world. It is tied to its rider and through him it is tied to fate."

"*Him,*" Decarr repeated.

Lorelai frowned, realizing her error.

"So, the Black Rider is a man this time," Decarr said. "Who is Famine and where can I find him?"

Lorelai rose up from the horse. She drew her gun and aimed at his head.

Lightning flashed. There was no thunder, no rain.

Lorelai's focus was on Decarr, so she did not notice that the lightning didn't come from the sky.

Her head snapped to the side and hot blood splashed onto Decarr's face.

A chain with a barbed spike at the end had shot through the air, embedding itself into Lorelai's skull.

The chain originated from a pulsing orb of light that hovered over the ground.

The Satanists screamed as the orb grew, forming a portal and tearing a hole in the fabric of space. Around the edges of the portal were flashing bolts of purple and blue lightning.

The chain in Lorelai's head yanked back, tearing her skull in half, and disappeared back into the portal.

Most of Lorelai's followers ran, diving into the swamp in a desperate attempt to flee. Others stood their ground, firing round after round into the portal.

Dozens of chains, all tipped with barbs, shot out from the portal, spearing the armed gunmen and ensnaring those who tried to flee.

The black horse hurried over to Decarr and nuzzled against him. Despite himself, he wrapped his arms around it, holding it tight.

The chains ripped the people into pieces. The others died screaming as they were pulled through the portal, never to be seen again.

When only Decarr and the horse remained, the chains disappeared from whence they came.

Decarr pried the pistol from Lorelai's stiffening fingers and watched as a man stepped out from the portal.

The man was naked from head to toe and covered in a red lubricant. He lacked any hair on his head or body. His skin smoked and he smelled burnt.

Decarr asked, "Did you forget your pants?"

The visitor regarded Decarr with respect. "You are he," the man said with a Spanish accent.

"Am I?" Decarr asked and did his best to hide the pistol behind his back.

"Death," the man said. He bowed slightly but was careful not to break eye contact.

"That I am," Decarr confirmed.

"I am the keeper of the sacred texts of Angralahr and master of the dark arts. Leung Bai was my teacher and you may consider me his protégé." He bowed once more. "I am the sorcerer Vasco."

"What, like a magician?"

"No, not like a magician." Vasco came closer. "Your attempt at humor does not mask your fear."

"I'm not afraid of you," Decarr said.

"Then why are you holding a gun behind your back?"

Decarr smirked and brought the gun into view.

Vasco said, "Mortal weapons cannot kill me."

“I find that basically anything succumbs as long as you shoot it enough.”

The nude sorcerer spread his arms out wide and welcomed Decarr to try.

Decarr drew and fired six bullets at Vasco’s chest. Each bullet was deflected by a vibrant flash of red light and fell harmlessly to the dirt.

The sorcerer closed the distance between them rapidly. Decarr tried to protect himself, but Vasco swiped his hand across Decarr’s stomach, leaving a deep gash.

Decarr stumbled backwards, clutching his belly as blood flowed through his fingers. He stared at Vasco, whose blood-soaked hand now appeared as a beast’s paw, with long talons and scales.

Vasco came at him again, but Decarr was ready. When Vasco went for his throat, Decarr raised his pistol to Vasco’s head and fired one more shot at close range. His aim wasn’t perfect, but the bullet took off Vasco’s left ear.

The sorcerer screamed and clutched the side of his head.

Decarr laughed. He wanted to finish Vasco off, but his legs had become like noodles. After taking one step he collapsed into the dirt, still clutching his bleeding stomach.

Vasco growled at him and opened his clawed hand, but his attention was diverted by the sound of the horse’s hooves.

The young colt bucked nervously, surrounded by the dead and the dying. Vasco’s hands became normal once more and he patted the horse reassuringly, calming the animal.

Taking the horse gently by the back of the neck, Vasco led it towards the awaiting portal. The horse did not seem frightened, it walked alongside him willingly, purposefully.

Getting back to his knees, Decarr aimed his pistol at the back of Vasco’s head.

The horse entered the portal, disappearing into the glow. Vasco remained standing outside of the portal for a moment, as if waiting for Decarr to pull the trigger.

“Why do you hesitate?” Vasco said without turning around.

“Why would you let me live?” Decarr asked.

Vasco looked over his shoulder with a grin on his face. “Simply because it’s easier that way.”

Without another word, Vasco passed through the portal. The portal closed after him, leaving a burn mark on the dirt and grass.

Decarr got to his feet, holding his guts in with his hands. In almost every conceivable way, he had failed. The horse had escaped and he had been defeated by a new and strange enemy.

Naked magicians, horses growing out of crap in the ground, crazy Satanists; it had been a long night. He’d try not to let the loss go to his head. There were still things to do.

He needed to find the black horse’s rider.

Séance

The barn doors shook violently and the chants of a dozen people echoed into the night breeze. April Frausini stood on the gravel driveway, listening in. There were many cars in the drive, and she suspected that none of them had ever seen farm country before.

This property was abandoned. There was a two story house, red barn and silo, plus a good plot of land for growing corn or soy. A family had lived here once, not long ago. Windows in the home still featured fancy curtains and the tree out back supported a tire swing.

Tonight this home was the host to a new kind of occupant.

Esmerelda Lopez was a Mexican witch of some esteem. She had been celebrated for her gift once upon a time, but she now held séances for thrill seekers in some desperate attempt to keep her head above water. Her clients did not seek a connection with a lost, departed soul, but rather sought to achieve a glimpse of the hidden world. They wanted to look at something evil and call it an 'experience.'

April and others like her had done their best to crack down on dangerous séances. It was one thing to get in touch with dead loved ones, but it was something else entirely to stir the ancient beasts that slumbered below. Not only did it pose a direct threat to all those involved, but it risked developing a new soft spot in the fabric between worlds.

April had been tracking Esmerelda's movements for some time. Arriving around midnight, she had found them already in the middle of things, and didn't know how best to interrupt. If she entered the barn uninvited, whatever they had conjured might turn itself on her and ferociously attack. Even worse, her intrusion may cause the entity to escape the barn and be set loose upon the world.

And so she waited, kicking gravel and looking at the stars.

April wondered what her friends from college were doing now. Drinking, partying, finding love and enjoying youth—April scarcely remembered these things. She was only 27 and imagined that if she wanted to, she could leave this life and fit in with others her age just fine. Perhaps she was just fooling herself, though. One can't do the things she had done, seen the things she had seen, and then just assume to live a normal life.

She had studied psychology in college and had plans for a career. Instead, she was handpicked by a man named Jameson Talbot, and given a position in an organization that wasn't supposed to exist.

Talbot knew something about April which she had spent the better part of her life trying to keep secret.

April could see ghosts.

As a child, she was often terrified and heavily medicated. Growing older, she learned to ignore the spirits and they would ignore her in turn. They were always there, though, floating in and out of space like dust in the wind. Most of them didn't mean any harm, they just looked sad and lost, observing the living as if watching an old, familiar film.

Talbot had similar abilities. He told April that he could help her develop her skill so that she could see so much more. Eventually, he said, she would be able to help others with her skill and provide some relief to those who had suffered like her.

April took him up on the offer and thought she could find some measure of peace in helping others like her learn to cope with the 'gift' they had been born with.

Soon though, with Talbot's training, April became aware of all the other creatures lurking behind the Veil of the human eye. Demons, monsters, and myths walked the streets, fitting in like regular human beings, right under everyone's noses.

What's more, Talbot told her that it was now their job to police these creatures. April was now one of the Gatekeepers, a secret society of guardians for the human race.

During her first field mission, something had gone wrong, and the Devil had gotten too close for comfort. People had died. April blamed herself.

The terrifying ordeal had been too much for April to take in. She locked herself up in seclusion for days, ignoring the pleading from Talbot.

In the time that she had spent alone, pondering the changed world and how she fit into it, Talbot came knocking on her door every night. He wanted to make sure she was okay, but she never answered him.

On the day that April finally felt ready to open the door, Talbot wasn't offering his usual caring chit-chat. He said he had to resume his duties without her with a new partner named Yoshio Ichikawa.

April felt she had been left behind—or worse, replaced.

When April finally emerged some days later, at peace with the new world she had found herself in, she learned that Talbot had died while in the field with Ichikawa.

April was left to grieve alone. She had no closure. She couldn't forgive Talbot, and now she wasn't sure if she wanted to anyway.

April had grown accustomed to solitude. She was one of the only Gatekeepers who commonly went out on missions by herself. Occasionally she could have used backup, certainly. However, most of the time she preferred it this way. When asked why, she would often respond with something about how she didn't want to lose anybody else she was close to. It was a stock answer, only half-true.

The real reason was more complex; these people had thrown her into a world she never asked to be a part of. She was happier before, blissfully ignorant of everything that happened just beyond the

naked eye. As much as she loved Talbot for helping her develop her gifts, she also hated the man and would happily give up the day in which she had met him.

Now she was standing in farm country, collecting mosquito bites and waiting on a witch.

The chants stopped. April's hand hovered in place by the barn doors and she waited for the best opportunity to enter.

Horrible screams pierced the calm, night air. April jumped back and consciously fought the instinct to cover her ears.

The barn shook like an earthquake had begun, but the ground beneath April's feet was calm.

A blast of wood splintered outwards and a woman's body flew out of the barn, landing in front of April.

April ran over to the woman and saw that she was dead. Acting quickly, April drew her revolver. She wrapped a rosary around her fist and the gun's grip, then jumped through the hole in the barn's exterior.

She landed in hay, rolled and came up with her revolver at the ready.

Men and women were flying through the air as if caught in a slow moving cyclone. They screamed and flailed their arms helplessly as they were slammed into the walls on their way around the vortex.

At the center of the barn was a table with a purple cloth over it and about a dozen chairs. Seated alone was a Mexican woman who April immediately recognized as Esmerelda Lopez, the witch she had been searching for.

Esmerelda held her arms out to the side and was shouting in Spanish. Her eyes were wide with terror and April did not believe that Esmerelda was the direct cause of her friend's problems with gravity.

April tried yelling something, but her voice went unheard with all the other screaming in the barn. She walked towards Esmerelda, aiming her gun at the witch's chest.

April was knocked back hard. She felt blood coming from her nostrils. She had walked straight into something invisible in the barn.

That didn't make sense, though. April was supposed to be able to see these things. That's why she was chosen, that's why she was here.

A vice tightened around her neck and she was lifted off the ground.

April thrust her rosary towards her invisible assailant, pressing it against a solid mass somewhere in space.

For a moment, the foul thing became clear, it was a bipedal demon with skin a pebbly brown and its head a mess of teeth and a dozen tiny eyes. Struck by the pain of the rosary, the demon released April and she fell back into the hay.

April aimed her gun at where the demon had been and opened fire. Each bullet lit up the demon for only a second but it didn't seem to hurt the creature.

Esmerelda stood over April and said, "I know how to kill it. Fire once more, when I say."

April didn't know what to think, but she didn't have a better idea. She waited for Esmerelda's command, while the other members of the séance continued to circle overhead, becoming more bloody and bruised with each passing second.

Esmerelda's shirt wrinkled as if grabbed by a strong hand, then she was pulled up into the air. She fished her hands into her purse and shouted, "Now!"

April fired. The demon lit up for a second. In that moment, Esmerelda held a personal mirror in front of her face, directed back at the demon.

As soon as the demon saw its own reflection, it turned stiff, becoming wholly visible and changing to crumbling stone. The hand which held Esmerelda suspended fell to pieces, releasing her.

One by one, all the members of the séance fell back down to earth. April got off the ground and checked on all of them. Most of them were in really bad shape, but they were alive.

Esmerelda brushed off the dusty remains of the demon. "It was a Halstaff demon," Esmerelda said. "I had never anticipated such a cruel thing. Invisible to our eyes, the only thing that can kill it is the monster's own reflection. I thank you for your assistance."

April shook the witch's hand, then snapped a pair of handcuffs onto Esmerelda's wrists. "You're welcome," April said.