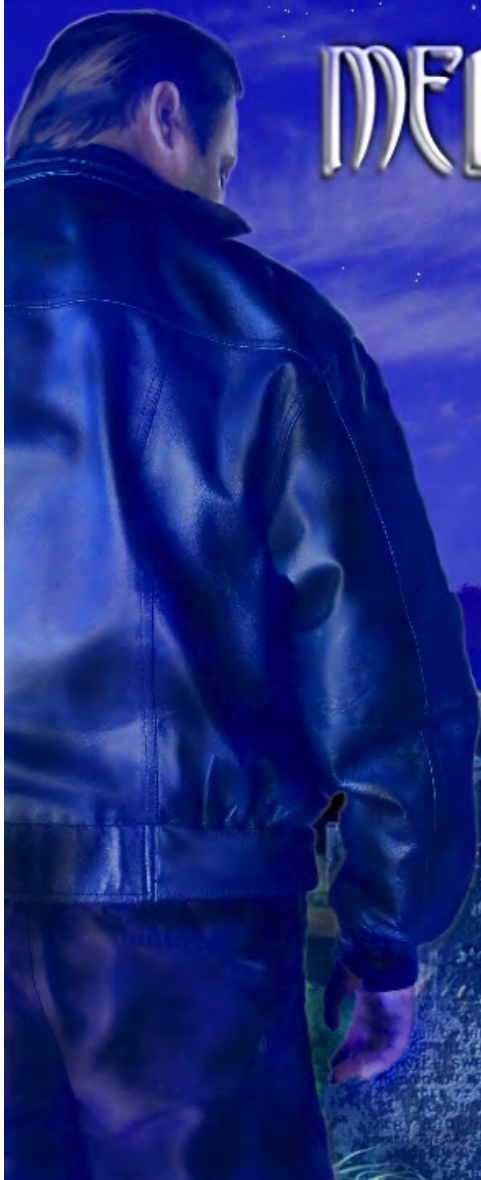


# Twilight

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# Twilight

**Mel Keegan**

**DreamCraft, South Australia**

TWILIGHT

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Twilight



# Prelude

“Time, gentlemen, please!”

The publican’s voice called across the muted noise of the front bar. From the sound of him, old Russ Flannegan had indulged in a few too many himself tonight. By closing time on a Wednesday he was always partially pickled — as inebriated as any of his patrons, and much too close to falling-down drunk to know the time.

The clock at Saint Margaret’s church, to the east of the village of Stokeleigh, had struck midnight five minutes before. The summer night was warm, the sky was light with the diamond sparkle of the stars, and low in the west the last faint traces of daylight lingered.

Nicholas Crane had watched the sunset. With thick, dark glasses protecting his eyes, he was free to breathe the open air when the sun passed below the horizon, but in June and July he was a prisoner for too many hours. The boredom and frustration of the daylight hours were under his skin like needles, goading, maddening.

The old fury kindled afresh every day, and especially when hunger gnawed at him. The yellow lights of the General Morley had beckoned, but he had not stepped inside the pub for weeks. It was not a taste for beer that bedeviled him, and old Flannegan’s regular drinkers only mocked a man who refused the offer of a pint.

The sky was a deep, rich blue, shot through with streamers of mauve, streaks of turquoise, but Crane’s mood was too bleak for him to see the beauty. Nor did he hear the softness of the wind in the thicket of willows which bordered Wykelam Beck, nor smell the sweetness of lilac and roses from the nearby cottage gardens.

Before his eyes was a red veil, and his mouth ran with fresh saliva as the pub began to empty out, and *they* appeared.

Warm, living bodies. Bodies, he thought, which pulsed with the rhythms and cycles of men who lived and worked under the sun. And



for the thousandth time he wondered what he had become.

He stepped out of the deep, purple shadows at the side of the livery stable, where he had stood for the last half hour. He had only been waiting for the old fool, Flannegan, to remember the time. He had heard the clock in the church tower strike eleven, and midnight. Drink was heavy on the publican's voice as he called time at last.

Saliva rushed, for Nicholas knew what Gordie would taste like tonight. He had been drinking for hours, and the pungency of ale and Irish whiskey would be irresistible.

First out through the door was the fat-bellied farmer, Herb Chegwiddden, and behind him came the sexton and one of the grave diggers, both of them from Saint Margaret's. They had been busy in the afternoon, Crane knew. On his way over the hill he had smelt the fresh earth in the churchyard, where a new plaster-cast angel gazed toward heaven and a marble headstone stood propped against a tree, waiting to be set in place. One of Chegwiddden's relations had been buried, and it was drinks all around tonight.

No grief twisted the farmer's pudgy face. He looked smug, Crane thought, like a man who had just come into an extra fortune. Chegwiddden paused on the rim of the lamplight which spilled from the pub's open door. He belched, and Crane smelt the whiskey on his breath. For a moment he wondered how Chegwiddden would taste ... how rich, since he was full of the Irish; and then he curled his lip at the farmer and his eyes passed on, looking for the one he wanted.

He was hungry for more than blood tonight, and it was sweeter flesh he wanted, younger and more pliant than Chegwiddden's. Gordie McGuire was a few paces behind, unsteady on his feet and giggling as he collided with the door.

"Watch theeself, lad," Flannegan told him unnecessarily as the other patrons dribbled out into the night. "You gunna get 'ome all right?"

"No," Crane whispered, "he's not, Mister Flannegan. He's coming with me ... tonight and always."

No one heard. No one noticed Crane, who was once more submerged in the deep well of shadows by the stable.

"I'll be careful, Russ," Gordie slurred. "I's 'ad a couple too many, s'all. I'll sleep it off."

"Thee's 'ad a skin-full, my lad," Flannegan informed him.

"Lay off, you two-faced bugger — you took the money fast enough." Gordie gave the landlord a shove and staggered out.

"Well, get thee 'ome and get some shuteye," Flannegan shouted after him. He shoed out the last of his customers, and the door thumped shut.

Bolts slammed with a crackling sound, and as the lamps were doused inside Gordie aimed an obscene gesture at the closed door. He was giggling again as he wove a line away from the General Morley. He was headed in the rough direction of the bridge. The footpath on the other side would have taken him back to his lodgings.

Nicholas Crane stepped out of the shadows. The moon was half full, loitering over the village. It cast just enough light into his face for Gordie to know him. The young man slewed toward him, and Nicholas caught him before he could fall.

The bull-like strength was still new, still novel enough for Nicholas to revel in it. He had been strong all his life, but never like this. He hefted Gordie as if he were a child, or a toy, and James Gordon McGuire was a grown man of nineteen years, whose younger brother had already enlisted in the Army and been sent to fight in Africa.

"Nick? Nicky, s'at you?" Gordie belched roundly.

The smell of ale and whiskey taunted Crane. Saliva rushed once more, and he swallowed it as he set Gordie back onto his feet. "Careful, now, or you'll plow the road up with your face. And it's too nice a face to leave half of it in the dust."

"Thanks. I don't usually get meself so soused," Gordie said happily, "but old Herb was buying, and who's gunna be enough of a saint to turn down a few drops of the Irish?"

The farmer had stumbled on, into Stokeleigh. Crane had lost sight of him, around the meander of the stream, but he could still hear the shuffle of his steps, the unhealthy labor of his breathing. "What's Chegwidden got to celebrate about?"

"The death of 'is dear Uncle Harold," Gordie slurred, "who jus' passed on into the Great Beyond, and left 'im about forty acres and ... cows, an' ... stuff."

"I saw a fresh grave," Crane whispered.

"You should've come to the funeral." Gordie turned on the spot, as if trying to decide which way to stagger now. "There was good food, after, an' all welcome, three o'clock this afternoon. I stuffed meself. Haven't eaten so good since Christmas. Why didn't you come? Herb would've fed you. He didn't even recognize half the people who was there." He squinted up at Nicholas. "Come to think of it, I never see you these days, unless it's pitch bloody dark."

"I wouldn't have been welcome." Crane heard the chill in his own voice. "Not now. Not inside a church, Gordie, lad."

The young man spluttered a beery laugh. "You never were! You, inside a church? You'd be struck down dead by lightning, you would!"

Crane's hands closed about the younger man's muscular upper arms and tightened. Fingers like steel bands dug in, between sinew and bone, and Gordie winced. He wriggled, hurting, but Crane would not release him. "What do you mean by that?"

"By what? You're bloody 'urting me, leggo o' me! Nicky!"

The fingers relaxed a fraction. "What did you mean, I'd be struck dead if I step into a church," Crane insisted.

"You bein' ... well, you," Gordie said sullenly. "Bloody heathen sodomite, and all ... that. You know. God's not supposed to like it." He slumped to the ground as Crane released him and knelt, rubbing his bruised arms.

"And you?" Nicholas growled. "Does God loathe you any less?"

"Eh, what?" Gordie glared up at him.

"You," Crane repeated. "Another heathen sodomite, same as me. Did a bolt from heaven smite you, when you parked your heathen buttocks on a pew in Father Massey's church?"

"Well ... no." Gordie fended him off and struggled back up to his feet. "Gerroff, Nicky. I've got to get 'ome, 'fore I bloody pass out. You want me to sleep in the street? S'not dignified, that."

"Neither is getting so pissed you can't stand up," Crane said sharply. His tone softened then. "I'll take care of you," he assured Gordie in a voice as soft as dark silk. "You'll be all right." He brushed the heavy curls back from Gordie's brow. "I'll always look after you, like I always have."

The whiskey was hitting Gordie's blood heavily by now. He would never have made it to the cottage at the far end of the village, where he was rooming with the miller's family. In season, he labored for Cheg-widden, cutting corn, haymaking, milking ... and he was going to be late for work in the morning.

As Gordie passed out cold, Crane caught him, ducked under his weight and took him easily over one shoulder. The burden was familiar. More than once, he had carried Gordie home after a celebration.

The shadows closed affectionately around him. No one saw as he passed under the willows, by the smithy. He crossed the stream not by the hump-backed bridge but by the old stepping stones. Reeds thickened the south bank but the way through was worn down by a hun-

dred pairs of feet. The village children scorned to use the bridge. Beyond the reed thickets were fields, most of which belonged to Cheg-widden. Nicholas knew every way through, every trail, shortcut and landmark.

He had left the horse hitched to the top rail of a fence. A soft snuffle from the darkness told him the animal was drowsing, and he woke her with a quiet word. She was a tall, long-legged black hunter with four white stockings. He would have relished the challenge of riding in the wake of a pack of baying foxhounds, of flying over obstacles and lying flat over the mare's withers as she outpaced the rest of the hunt.

But that world was closed to him. Those days would never return, and the memory of them only rekindled the fury under his heart. He thought of the winter sun, wan and pale over the forest, the blue of the sky reflected in the wind-tossed surface of Ulswater, the sound of the wind in the rigging and sails of the boat housed there, and the voices of gulls over the cliffs and bays where he had grown up.

Now his world was darkness. It was night, as the single alternative to death, and no power of rage could give him back the sun, nor the blue of the noonday sky.

Blood was on his mind as he lifted Gordie over the mare's shoulders. She shifted at the unaccustomed weight and then stood still as he mounted. He gathered the reins over Gordie's back, and turned the horse south, over the hill.

A bridle track wound around Stokeleigh and came up on the other side of Chegwidden's property, where the ancient, crumbling holy well stank of mildew and moss. Legends abounded in this shire, and as a child Crane had heard them all. The old folk told stories of the ghost in the ruins of Cenrick Castle, of the hobs and boggarts infesting the cliffs out on the moor, the voices which wailed and cried out of the abandoned mine workings, and the bodies which sometimes floated to the surface of the bottomless bogs.

Crane knew every story, and he believed he had glimpsed the ghost, heard the strange voices from the shafts which, empty of copper, had not been worked in fifty years. But none of the stories was as monstrous as himself, he thought sourly as he let the mare pick her way through the blue-black shadows toward the holy well. None of the tales which frightened children was as bleak and terrible as himself.

A storm of frustration made his nails raise blood in his palms. His tale could never be told. The telling would be death for him. And even now, Nicholas was not ready to die.

He smelt the mildew before he saw the well, and the odor of decay turned his belly. His heels touched the horse's sides and she hurried her pace. Little remained of the well save a tumble of gray stone, but the spring that trickled out of the hillside kept the inside wet. The lore said the sick could be cured if they knelt there, tossed in a coin and prayed.

It was a lie. Nicholas had fed too many coins into the rotten boulders, whispered too many prayers, until at last he cursed the saints and angels who had abandoned him in this sickness.

Or had he damned himself?

The fear of damnation haunted him, and his eyes were blind to the widening meander of the stream, the yellow lights from the village, the silhouette of the steeple at St. Margaret's.

The view from the hill by the holy well was one of the most beautiful in the county. *She* had loved it, when the starlight was brilliant at dark of the moon. She would walk here when the same moon was fat and bright as a carriage lantern, hanging over the woodland on the east fringe of the moor, and especially when the branches were skeletal after the gales of late autumn, before the first snows.

She never felt the cold, nor cared about the darkness. She never walked in the sunlight, nor sprawled in the hot sand, felt its heat seeping into her bones while she listened to the mew gulls, her closed eyes turned to the sky and seeing only the richness of blood.

She bathed in moonlight, rejoiced in the stars, and was in love with the night. To her, the moon was 'she,' and the sky was redolent with legend. Perseus, Pegasus, Andromeda and Hercules ... she had lived in a world of fantasy, Nicholas thought bitterly. She had lived for heroes who had not walked the earth in three thousand years.

He glared at the summer stars now, for a moment trying to see the legends there, but they were just sparklets, glittering with a cold, fierce light which almost mocked him. She had been a little mad, he supposed. Beautiful as the night, white as a dove ... strong as steel. And mad. Almost as mad as himself.

Across the saddle before him, Gordie McGuire groaned as he began to stir, and at the first sounds of retching, Crane stopped the horse and let the younger man slither to the ground. The smell of whiskey was pungent as he emptied his belly, and Crane's lip curled in distaste.

For a long time Gordie crouched on his knees in the grass, until the dry heaves abated and he could lift his head again. He blinked stupidly up at the horse. "Nicky?"

"Who else would rescue you?" Crane reached down and held out his hand. "You're an idiot, Gordie. You should know when to stop drinking! Do you want to ride behind me? You're in no condition to walk."

"Where are we goin'?" Gordie wrenched himself to his feet with a grunt of effort. He was fractionally less drunk, but his world, perceived through his normal eyes, must be a kaleidoscope of spinning blue-black shadows.

"My place," Crane told him, soft, low and smooth.

"I have to get 'ome," Gordie began.

"The miller's wife won't have you in the house, not like this." Crane took him by the forearm and pulled. How easy it was to lift him. As if Gordie's brown flesh and solid bones and rich young blood were no more than a bundle of sticks and feathers. "Get yourself sobered up, you fool. Stagger home in the morning."

In the morning, when dawn streamed out of the east with floods of gold and pink, and the light became so blinding, it drove the leper, the villain, back into the shadows.

Where a pariah belonged? Crane's jaw clenched until the muscles ached. Had he damned himself? Did the saints and angels of that cursed holy well scorn and spurn him, not because of what he had grown to manhood to become, but because of what *she* had done to him?

He closed his eyes as Gordie's weight landed lightly on the mare's broad haunches behind him. How hot he felt, Nicholas thought, as if Gordie were feverish. He always felt this way now. They all did ... any of *them*, the ones who worked and played in the daylight, so saturated in its beauty that they were indifferent to it.

*She* had no desire for the sun. She had drawn him into another world, seduced him into her own love affair with the night. She wooed him with the exotic, blinded him with the great mystery of women, of whom he knew so little, no matter how many he had tumbled. She seduced him into a realm he had never imagined.

And then the pain began, relentless and beating, and it was fury which haunted his dreams like a storm, dogged him through the long days of captivity, and on into nights which were filled with dread.

A bead of sweat broke out as he recalled the silence of an abandoned house, the rank odor of death ... the riptide of his own rage. His palms crawled as they remembered the touch of wood and brick, as if the house itself were tainted. The darkness, so thick it seemed a knife would cut it. And her. He dragged his hands across his face as if he

might wipe away both the crawling sensation and the rime of sweat.

He was damned, no doubt about it.

Gordie shifted against him, cuddled closer and sighed against his shoulder with a sound of idiotic contentment and the smell of a brewery. Arms went around Crane's middle, hands clasped over his belly.

"You're going to have a head the size of Southampton docks in the morning," Nicholas told him. Gordie only groaned in reply. "Well, sleep while you can. I'll ..." Crane checked at the throaty sound of his own voice. "I'll take care of you now."

But Gordie did not hear. He was half asleep again as the mare moved off. She knew the way home, and Crane let her set the pace. Even at this time of the year, not long after the solstice of summer, true dawn was still two hours away.

Instinctively, at the thought of dawn, Nicholas's hand went to the breast pocket of his shirt, searching for the dark glasses, making sure they were there, though he cursed himself for the reflex. Paranoia was catching, like the plague.

The shortcut took him through the wide plot belonging to St. Margaret's. Clouds had sprung up out of the northeast but the starlight was still bright, and his eyes were wide, like those of any nocturnal creature.

For this was what Nicholas Crane had become: a thing of the night, forbidden the daylight no less surely than he was forbidden the sanctuary of the church, the comfort of holy communion ... the salvation, he imagined bleakly, of his immortal soul.

The tall iron gate squealed as he kicked it open. Within, two score graves were marked with headstones, some so old they were barely readable, others still so new, they were stark, white as bleached bones. A breeze whispered in the trees along the high wall; eyes glittered there, reflecting the stars with a dim light Nicholas could see easily.

A three-foot angel at the feet of 'Charles Edward Roper, 1834 to 1902, may his rest be everlasting,' pointed toward heaven with an expression of purity, or piety, on its androgynous, infuriating face. For months, those plaster-cast features had mocked Crane, and tonight the rage overwhelmed him.

His boot lashed out, blurring the angel's features. Its nose spun away into the grass between Charles Edward Roper and his good lady, 'Elizabeth Agnes, 1841 to 1903, beloved wife and mother.' A second kick toppled the whole figure.

"Sweet Mother of God in heaven!" Gordie was suddenly wide awake, both his hands like claws on Crane's middle. "What in the name

of *Christ* are you doing, Nick? This is — Jesus, it's bloody sacrilege!"

"You don't even know how to pronounce the word," Crane growled.

"You'll be bloody *cursed*, you will! Have you gone mad?" Gordie bellowed.

He was scrambling to be down off the horse, and Crane let him go. He fell with a dull sound, in the empty plot between the Ropers and three children who were all buried in the same hole in the winter of '87, when diphtheria rampaged through the shire.

"Sweet Jesus Christ," Gordie was whimpering as he dragged himself back up to his knees. "See what you've gone-and-done?" He hugged himself, eyes darting this way and that among the gravestones. "You'll be cursed."

"I already am." Crane heard the sourness of his own voice.

"You — what?" Gordie peered up at him. "What are you on about, Nick? You're being queer. I mean, queerer than usual. Here, this place is givin' me the creeps. We shouldn't be 'ere, not at this time o' night."

"In a graveyard?" Bleakly, Crane surveyed the field of marble headstones. "You don't know me, Gordie. You don't know me at all."

"I've known you since I was a kid, knee-high to a milk churn." Gordie's voice rose sharply. "You've changed, Nicky. You 'aven't been the same, since — since that *woman* of yours! I told you she was no good for you. I *said* she was queer, and she'd make you bloody queer an' all, if you started listen' to 'er stupid talk."

Every word cut like a knife, as if it laid bare Nicholas Crane's soul and left it bleeding. The rage choked him like a fist on his throat. He looked down into Gordie's face, and for the first time he saw fear there. They had not grown up together, for Nicholas was eleven years older, but since he was barely half-grown, Gordie had tagged along like a little brother. It was Nick Crane who gave him his first beer. And his first kiss.

Tonight, fear whitened Gordie's eyes as if he might bolt at any moment, and this time he would not be back. Drunk as he was, he had looked through the mask Crane wore, and he seen the truth behind it. Or did the whiskey dull his wits and clear his vision?

So *she* had reached out of the grave even here, even now. She reached out to take away even this, the mateship of young men who had been years together, sharing everything, before she came to the county. Rage coiled through him like a snake.

"Nick? Christ, Nicky, are you all right? What's wrong? Nicky!"



He did not hear the panic in Gordie's voice. In a heartbeat, the young man was stone-cold sober as shock coursed through him.

Crane's vision was a field of red ... blood, wine, fire, dawn. He had waited too long, and he knew it. His hands closed on Gordie, trapping him before he could stagger away into the trees and pass out.

Bleating like a sacrificial goat, young McGuire let himself be dragged into the shadows and dumped in the straw-like grasses which grew thigh-high in the recesses between tree roots, where the mowers could not reach.

The earth was rich and thick there, soft as a mattress as Gordie went down, whimpering. "Nick? What's wrong with you? What 'appened to you? You're bloody 'urting me!"

Bloody ... blood.

Wolven hunger twisted Crane's belly and warped his reason. Saliva filled his mouth as he pressed Gordie into the earth. Some corner of his mind which could still think knew he had waited too long ... again. He had waited till a monster awoke inside him, and now all he could do was watch impotently, as it consumed him. He hated the creature, but even more, he hated his own helplessness before it, his inability to deny the beast, fight it off and lift his head in freedom. In sunlight.

He heard coarse cotton rip through, and felt vaguely as hands beat a tattoo on his back.

"Nick! Nicky, not 'ere, you madman." Gordie was sober now. "If you want a tumble, let's go to your place. I want it in bed, I want it nice. Not 'ere. You listening to me? I am *not* doin' it in this creepy place!"

Not here? Where? What was he talking about? Crane's mind had spun away, far beyond coherent thought. He had no concept of where he was, nor even who writhed and kicked beneath him as he pulled the shirt off Gordie McGuire's broad torso. Fresh sweat and the musk of a healthy male animal only excited him. As he pressed his face against the young man's breast he fumbled for the knife he always carried, along with the dark glasses.

The hair grew softest and thinnest in the delve of Gordie's breast. Nicholas's open mouth closed over the pale skin of one slab-like pectoral muscle. It hardened as Gordie tensed against him. Nicholas nuzzled the nipple, teased it with his teeth, bit down hard enough to make Gordie moan dizzily.

The young man did not even notice as the scalpel-like knife stroked through the softness between breast and shoulder. A wound

opened, deep, blood-hot and wet, and before it could even begin to smart Crane's mouth was over it.

The body beneath Nicholas heaved and struggled. Gordie panted and tried to throw him off, but Crane's strength was terrible. Gordie was wasting his time and breath. "Nick, you fuckin' halfwit! Nick, gerroff me, we'll get caught! *Nick!*"

The protests were smothered by Crane's palm, and at last Gordie surrendered and sprawled in the grass. He was gasping quietly in a mix of reluctant arousal and too much alcohol, but Crane heard nothing. Blood still gushed from the wound, but not a drop spilled. Nothing was wasted. His cheeks hollowed as he took it all, drinking the stuff of life from Gordie's body as if he might suck out his soul.

One nerve at a time, the madness ebbed like the tide. Awareness returned, sense by sense, before thought began to trickle back. He heard the wind in the grass first, smelt the man-musk of the body beneath him ... tasted the whiskey-richness of the blood in his throat.

Gordie lay still now, quivering, and when Crane lifted his head at last he looked down into wide, dark eyes. "What ... what did you do to me, you bugger?" Gordie's voice demanded "Did you bite me? You did, goddamn it, you bloody bit me. I'll chew you up for that ... tomorrow."

Crane's thoughts were still too dulled for him to find coherent words, but the old, familiar remorse had already begun. Anguish twisted inside him, burning like acid. He had done it again. The *creature* had possessed him. It had crushed with his hands, bitten with his teeth, drunk with his throat.

He wished he could speak, to soothe Gordie's outrage, but another hunger was stirring in him, quickening his loins, making blood pound in every extremity. Rationale dimmed away again, leaving behind only instinct. He knew only what he wanted, needed.

The animal was still loose, rampaging inside him. It stirred against his thigh, a sword demanding attention. His nostrils flared as he smelt his own musk, mixed with Gordie's into a heady brew. The whiskey was in him, too, now. From Gordie's blood to his own. He felt it, shimmering in his nerve endings, a sublime intoxication.

He lapped at the cut he had made, but it was already closed, half-healed. It would be no more than a faint, livid line in the morning. The pain would have been short, and in the heat of the moment Gordie had not even noticed it. Nicholas's tongue curled about Gordie's nipple, and heard the young man's breath catch in his throat.

"Oh, Nicky, for chrissakes ... let's go to your place. Not here! Not in a bloody graveyard."

Thought stirred, thick as molasses, words were difficult on his tongue, and Crane heard his own rich, dark chuckle as if from a great distance. "God won't like it?"

"I dunno about God," Gordie mewled. "But there's — there's dead people everywhere!"

"Dead," Crane whispered, focusing over Gordie's tousled head on the pure, infuriating plaster face he had kicked into the grass. The angel had no nose, but its loathsome piety was undimmed. Rage simmered in Crane's belly at the sight of it. "Dead," he whispered hoarsely. "Too dead to see what we're doing here, or care. Like God."

"Like — what?" Gordie pushed at him. "You're not making any sense. Nicky, please!"

"You don't know me," Crane rasped. With deft fingers he flicked open Gordie's belt buckle.

"Don't be daft. I've always known you. Stop it. Nicky! Not 'ere! Not in a — a *graveyard!*"

"There's never a better time than now, never a better place than here." Crane took a handful of trousers and underlinen and tugged.

"Nicky!" Gordie wailed.

The twice-drunk whiskey had hit Crane's head, as surely as it had overcome McGuire. He laughed shortly, a harsh sound, like a bark. "Come on, Gordie, you want it. You always do."

"Oh, Christ," Gordie sobbed. "Oh, Christ, I'm gunna be cursed, I'm gunna be cursed, I know it, gettin' buggered in God's holy backyard. Oh, my —"

But he turned onto his knees, whimpering moistly as Nicholas dropped his own clothes in an untidy pile. Slick with sweat, Crane was on him, in him, before Gordie could even complain.

The plaster angel watched, pious and implacable as the sphinx. Hunger and passion always ran in tandem, and they were always spent in a storm which left Nicholas limp, shaking. Like a barbarian idol, the beast inside was appeased with blood, placated with flesh. Gordie groaned under him, heaving in rhythm, and as coming exploded along every nerve, Crane collapsed on him, with his cheek on the broad, muscular shoulder.

Consciousness hung on. He did not dare sleep, though exhaustion sucked at his mind as if it could siphon him away through the cracks in reality, into a world of dreams. Nicholas fought his eyes open. At this

time of the year, true dawn was never far enough away. The sun was his jailer, the daylight hours a more secure prison than anything designed by man.

He took a deep breath as thought seeped back into his mind. He smelt hay and humus, and fresh earth ... and Gordie. "Sweet Christ," Nicholas murmured against McGuire's broad back, "what have I done?" His head spun as he took his weight on both palms and his knees, and he uncoupled them with all the care he could manage.

Gordie knew nothing. He was sound asleep with his head on a pillow of grass, snuffling quietly. The cut on his chest had already healed, and the quick coupling had not hurt him much, if at all — he was far from virginal, and too drunk to care.

But there was more — and Crane knew it, though Gordie would not realize the truth for some time. He stroked the younger man's back and arms, turned him over and charted his breast with oddly gentle caresses Gordie never felt.

"What have I done?" Nicholas heard the note in his own voice, part horror, part remorse, part dreadful longing.

He had done what he had long wanted to do in his sane hours, before the beast broke loose and consumed him. He had wanted Gordie with him more than anything, sharing his prison, the eon of captivity between the summer's dawn and dusk.

Even in the madness, he had known what he wanted. The creature had only taken what it needed, done what it must, and soon Gordie would be with him. Would be like him.

Crane knew this. *Her* voice murmured in his ears, speaking out of his memory — and out of the grave.

For the moment, a raw sense of triumph dispelled the remorse. He struggled to his feet and was casting about for his clothes when the first bird began to chatter in the thicket beyond the church. Nicholas sucked in a breath and swore as he became aware of the sky.

It was brightening with the silver-gray of false dawn and a surge of panic made his hands shake. He called Gordie's name as he dressed, but the fool was out cold, bollock-naked where he had collapsed. Fumbling, cursing himself, Crane dragged the linen and trousers onto McGuire's long legs.

The horse was grazing unconcernedly among the headstones. As the birds began to chorus in earnest, Nicholas lifted Gordie's dead weight up over the mare's shoulders and swung up behind him.

# Chapter One

The honk of an automobile horn and the rattle of an internal combustion engine drew Vincent Bantry's attention back to the road, and he turned over on the carriage blanket to watch the vehicle whir by.

It was an Argyll Voiturette, and its tiller steering made it obsolete already. Man was a restless beast, he decided. In less than a single decade the horseless carriage had progressed from being a noisy novelty to an accepted, indispensable tool of society. From a carriage chassis with a tiny engine mated to it like an unhappy grafting, it had developed into a genuine automobile. The Argyll Voiturette was vastly obsolete. Renault and Napier manufactured sleeker, faster vehicles.

One day, Bantry decided idly, he would own one simply as a toy. Actually owning an automobile was the privilege of the rich. A status symbol. Not that Michael Flynn would have anything to do with the machine, even supposing one was already parked in one corner of the coach house. The reek of petroleum and exhaust fumes offended him no less than the raucous din of the engine.

He was, as Bantry had told him many times, an anachronism in a changing world. Michael refused to change along with it; and why should he? He was too wealthy, too cherished by influential friends. And too far divorced from the realm of mankind to be very much affected by what went on around him.

All this was part of the allure of the night. Darkness spun a cocoon about the realm of the changeling ... and the vampyre. They flourished when the city was at its most quiet, in the hours when stillness and silence held dominion. Change encroached more slowly in their world, and not at all if they refused to permit it.

But Bantry had admitted long ago, he was hungry for the future. Flynn was merely amused by his enthusiasm for everything new. For himself, he had seen the centuries in and out, until he had become indifferent to the pageant of time. Bantry suspected he would become

equally inured after many, many years — but only twelve years had sped by since he first stumbled into Flynn's life, and much of the human endured in him.

Flynn loved him for the enduring humanity, but all the same teased him a little about it. Bantry took no offense. In the eyes of Michael Flynn ... of Jean Fourier, and Chabrier himself ... he was a child.

Twelve years had left no slightest mark of age upon him. He was forty-four years old now, according to the calendar, but the face in the mirror belonged to a young man of thirty or so. Flynn was so old, the calendar was of no consequence, save as a source of rueful humor. And Chabrier was older yet, by so many centuries, a mortal could not begin to imagine his years.

Bantry was content to accept the role of the youth, and determined to enjoy his long probation. Chabrier had never questioned his presence among the changelings. Fourier and the beautiful Maria had welcomed him into their household.

But other vampyre were reluctant to welcome young changelings, and Bantry kept his silence, kept his eyes down, for he knew he must wait out the years, however long it took. The same vampyre who refused to acknowledge him had yet to completely accept Michael, despite Chabrier's tireless efforts.

It was six months since they had seen Chabrier. The vampyre was at a gallery in Vienna, attending a champagne supper in honor of the debut of Flynn's new collection. The paintings were superb, and they wooed the public, and at least some of the critics. Michael had painted the Countess von Shoenvorts, cast in the role of Hera. She was a kind and intelligent woman of seventy, and he had flattered her, disguising her immense triple-chins. He had painted a study of the town of Vinci as seen from the balcony of the Leonardo Museum. He had rendered Chabrier, vividly in oils, in the role of Marcus Aurelius with the lightless forest of Germania as his background ... and he had finished the study of Bantry himself, as Achilles.

The collection was a decade in the making, thirty-two paintings Flynn was sufficiently pleased with to display. He had attended the showing but stood back, gratefully leaving the limelight to Chabrier, who had arranged it.

The vampyre urged journalists to study the life-sized portrait of Aurelius while photographers burned phosphorus to capture it, but he refused to pose with it. Flynn merely watched, with wide, apprehensive eyes. His fervent hope, Bantry knew, was to go unnoticed. It was

not that fame repelled him; but Michael was almost phobic about photographers.

The camera was his enemy, and Bantry's too, for it would soon disclose their most visible secrets. The changeling simply did not age. For some time their endless youth might be explained away with the story of the disease, the *phototonic mydriasis*; but if the press got hold of it, the newspapers would have a feast. Flynn would be spotlighted, and unexplainable secrets would soon come to light.

There was no record of his birth, and no records from any school, while elderly art patrons all over Europe remembered him from the days of their youth. Bantry could imagine the furor. The first headlines would read, 'Brilliant young painter dying of incurable disease.' And before long it would be, 'Young artist at least eighty years old.'

Michael would be expected to surrender himself for research, experiment; and Flynn had no more stomach for this than had any other changeling. It had happened to him once. Once was enough.

As Bantry watched, the Argyll Voiturette passed out of sight. He turned back to his companion, and found Flynn's eyes on him. Moonlight flooded the water meadow below them. The wind was balmy, the breeze in the rushes a rustling, companionable whisper. Flynn was sketching with charcoal and vellum-surfaced paper. The view out as far as the Thames was taking shape as Bantry looked on. Later, it would be painted in oils.

Flynn painted scenes of sunlight, golden tones and brilliant blue skies, as if he longed for the sun. Yet he would deny the longing, if ever Bantry broached the subject. He swore it was a simple fascination for daylight, since a sunlit landscape was something he had not seen in so many centuries.

He painted the colors from memory, and Bantry thought they were too golden, though he never criticized. Flynn's memory was playing tricks, and the paintings had a flavor of the fantastic. They were piquant with a tang of unreality, a glow which Michael invested in depictions of real things, real places.

But it was these very gold tones that wooed the rich old art patrons. Modern critics reviewed his work poorly, calling Flynn 'a left-over from the Classical era'. But his patrons were delighted, and they paid handsomely for his work. The Achilles fetched a little over two thousand pounds.

Even now, Bantry blushed rosily as he remembered the bidding. He had sat in one corner of the auction rooms, scandalized both by the

asking prices and by the inescapable fact that the painting on the dais — splendid in a heavy gilt frame — was a study of himself, almost entirely naked.

For weeks, every evening from sundown to midnight, he had sprawled on the couch at home, a bolt of Irish linen strewn haphazardly over his hip, just enough to render him a morsel of modesty. The dogs had wandered by at whim, and Flynn painted Diana also, at the feet of Achilles. At the warrior's right hand was his Grecian armor; beside him was a helmet with a blood-red hackle, and in the background, a pastorate interpretation of the walls of the lost city.

The painting was beautiful. Even Bantry could not deny it, modesty aside. It had hung for three years in their home, and for another four in Chabrier's hall, at his house in Vienna, before Chabrier himself suggested it should be one of the pieces featured in Flynn's offering.

"Why don't you buy one?" Michael said quietly. Charcoal scratched over the heavy paper as he returned to the sketch.

"Hm?" Intent on his memories of the art auction, Bantry was at a loss.

"An automobile," Flynn elaborated. "Since you so obviously want one, why don't you buy one of the damned things? It would keep you occupied, I dare say! A noisy, dirty, smelly toy for overgrown schoolboys."

"Overgrown schoolboys?" Bantry pretended injury. "I shall take such jibes personally, Michael, I warn you. I'm a quarter century past any of that nonsense, and I was an officer in Her Majesty's Army. Schoolboy, indeed."

"Well ... *boy*, at any rate," Flynn amended. He reached over to caress Bantry's nose with a charcoal smudge. "There. Warpaint suits you."

"Idiot." Bantry lifted the vellum and charcoal out of Flynn's unprotesting hands and dumped him onto the rug. Once, Flynn's changeling strength would have made him the victor in any mock struggle between them, but no more. Bantry was still the larger, the heavier and more muscular of the two, and when the change had come over him, his natural strength had tripled.

Still, Flynn was strong, even for a changeling. His body was like whipcord, his muscles as taut as those of a healthy young animal. But Bantry was his match and more, and despite the awful disparity in their ages, every protective instinct came alive in Vincent. He would try to shield Michael as if he were a child, which often annoyed Flynn as much as it amused Chabrier and Fourier.



For himself, Bantry had no intention of mending his ways, and over the years Flynn had learned to endure; and to tease. Tonight, they wrestled on the carriage rug until Bantry had the artist's slender wrists captured in one of his own large hands. Flynn was helpless.

"Boys will be boys," he said resignedly. "If they must."

"They must." Bantry stooped to kiss, reveling in the heat of Michael's tongue. It was difficult to remember a time when Flynn had felt cool, even his mouth; and Bantry no longer cared to recall those times.

He preferred to kindle Flynn's fierce passion, unleash it and bask in its heat. They had grown accustomed to each other's ways and wants. For Bantry, it was the heat of his body, the heady intoxication of brandy vapors, the storm surge of Flynn's lust. And always the gentle delirium of blood.

He bit into Flynn's shoulder, for he knew how the tiny pleasure-pain inspired a wicked thrill. Beneath his mouth, the great vein throbbed with the pulses of life. Just twice, he had tasted Flynn's blood. Once, in a hotel in Fontainebleau, the first time he had fed, as every changeling must ... the second time, very drunk on the fumes of fine spirits, at Fourier's party for the end of the century.

New Year's Eve, 1899: like all of Paris, the house was a blaze of lights. Offenbach and Strauss charmed couples onto the cleared floor to dance, and Maria was a vision in white, singing like a lark with McCormack, the Irishman who had wooed and won Rome's opera stage. John McCormack was a favorite of Melba, and Melba herself could have been at Fourier's house that night, but she was at Covent Garden with her own circle of worshippers.

Would she have outsung Maria Rinaldi? Bantry doubted it. Maria — or more properly Mario — was the last of the castrati. His lungs and gullet were those of a man, no matter the pitch of his singing voice. He had a vocal power no female body could match because of his very masculinity, the depth, shape and form of his gullet and vocal cords and yet he still commanded the incredible soprano range of the boy. The castration which preserved his voice when he was ten years old, was only the first of his changes. Greater change came later, in the year when he was seventeen. The vampyre Sabatini fell in love with him that summer.

Sabatini was long, long dead, killed by some mob in some purge, in Bucharest's darkest times. Bantry never asked, and Mario never spoke of those days, but his eyes remained shadowed even a century

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