

UMBRIEL



Mel Keegan
and
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DreamCraft

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Chapter One

“You know it’s haunted.” Paul Morrison drained his glass and set it down on the dark, scarred wood of the bar. The pub was so old, it might have grown out of the landscape, with its thatched roof and thick, whitewashed walls, and the bartender who looked to be at least half as old.

At this hour of the afternoon they were the only patrons. An elderly sheepdog and a black cat drowsed by the hearth, but the pub might otherwise have been a crypt. Rick Gray liked it, and liked the bartender. Both appealed to the artist in him, the spirit that disliked the usual, the ordinary and mundane.

The same spirit had brought him out of the city in search of clean air, solitude, time and space to write, hours to spend roaming the local moorland and woods, and to invest in multitudes of projects — most of which would come to nothing. But a few of his projects always bore fruit, and these were his livelihood, his business. His camera, his skill, and his artist’s eye were his greatest assets.

“Haunted?” Rick gave Paul a mocking look, over the rim of his own glass. The local ale was thick and strong, dark as the gathering shadows which seemed to congeal in the pub’s corners. Afternoon was almost spent, and the sky was low. The air was heavy, sultry, alive with the disturbing sensation of an approaching change in the weather.

“There’s a legend,” Paul began, waving for the barman, and another beer.

He was elegant today, in black slacks, business shirt, black leather jacket, Italian loafers, all of which made a statement without Paul need-

ing to say a word. Rick could never compete with him. Paul was taller by a hand's span, with the big shoulders, the muscular thighs, the thick, dark hair which he wore a little long because his features were broad, rich, and the long hair was stunning on him. By contrast, Rick was smaller, and his body utterly defied him. It was gym-proof. The more time he spent lifting weights, the thinner he became; his hair was mid-brown and grew in the wrong directions, so he wore it cropped short, and his eyes were plain dark brown, while Paul's were green with flecks of gold. It had been no contest since the day they met.

"There's always a legend," Rick retorted. "This part of the country's alive with them."

Paul had grown up in the area, and since boyhood he had entertained a fascination for the bizarre. He met Rick at high school, and like knew like at a glance. They were both fourteen, both gay, both hungry for experience. Twenty years later, they were simply friends, and when Rick wanted to invest in a place out of town where peace and quiet came as part of the package with the antiquated plumbing and the mended roof, it was Paul he called.

The old abbey ruins on Byland moor were haunted? Trust him to know about it. "A legend," he repeated. "If you don't believe me, ask Tony Costerson. He's the batty old fruitcake who runs the folk museum in the village —"

"If he's batty, why would I believe a word he says?"

"— he's got a boatload of goodies about the old ruin," Paul finished. "I don't remember much about it, but I do know it's Benedictine, it was a victim of King Henry himself, and it's haunted."

Rick finished his own beer and beckoned Paul toward the hearth. A small fire was set and as the afternoon aged, the flames became inviting. The red-gold light licked around the horse harness brasses and bronze plates, and the copper-handled fire irons. "I don't mind sharing the place with a ghost or two, so long as they stay the hell out of my pictures," Rick said with all due glibness. "All I want to do is photograph the ruins. They're haunted? Fine. They're also incredibly beautiful. Every time the light changes, they look different. Dawn, dusk, sunset ... I could shoot five thousand frames in that place and never

repeat myself."

"Uh huh." Paul draped an arm across his shoulders. "Well, you just watch out for spooks. If they bug you, tell 'em to come see me ... they can walk through walls, right? Then they have to be a mine of stock tips. The ultimate in insider trading. You can't prosecute some bugger who's already dead." He drank again, and then set the glass on one end of the polished mahogany mantel, between the taxidermed grouse and salmon, and held his hands to the fire. "So, when are you going up there?"

"This afternoon," Rick mused.

"It's getting late already," Paul warned.

"But the gear's all in the car —"

"And the weather's turning."

"All the better." Rick sometimes wondered if Paul thought world-class images captured themselves, or if they were created inside a computer after some basic, boring shot was taken on a sunny morning. "You want great photographs, you have to put yourself where they are."

Paul shuddered. "Forgive me if I take off back to town ... back to the comfort of a nice, warm office."

He was a stockbroker, and a good one. He was the sole reason Rick could afford to buy the cottage known as Rokeby, a mid-eighteenth century haven of serenity and near silence, which stood at the end of the last lane to the south of Little Swinvale. The whole village was like something right out of a Peter Jackson movie, and Rick had fallen in love with it at first glance. Finding a 'for sale' notice on a cottage there was beyond anything he could have dreamed. Actually being able to afford Rokeby was something else —and this was Paul's brilliance.

The stockbroker was already looking at his watch, and Rick knew what he was going to say. It was a long drive back to Leeds, and the offices of Althorp, Hopkins and Dean. "You ought to be moving," Rick said, forestalling the predictable remark, "if you're going to get home in daylight, and before the weather breaks."

"And since I'm in a ragtop," Paul agreed, "I keep one eye on the sky."

"Told you, you should have bought the SUV," Rick chided.

"Like you? Perish the thought, loverboy. Give *some* thought to the environment," Paul said dryly.

"I need the Toyota to carry so much gear and get into places that'd kill an ordinary car. The things I do? Your wheels wouldn't survive an afternoon." Rick looked out through the window, with its tiny panes of glass — genuine antique leaded lights — and gave the green Land Cruiser a frown. It stood in the last of the grudging afternoon sun, battered, patched and repaired, hard worked for most of a decade now. "You know the kind of trouble I like to get myself into."

He had made a name for himself for risking the kind of situations, in odd and distant places, that had twice won him the cover of National Geographic. Paul would never understand, but so long as he wrangled the investment capital, kept the money flowing through canny deals, Rick was happy.

"Gotta push off," Paul said with a last glance at his watch. He leaned over and kissed Rick's cheek, which might not have raised an eyebrow in Paris or Geneva or London, but here in Little Swinvale it earned them a glare from a barman who had yet to catch up with the twentieth century. "Ciao, honey." Paul was shrugging into his jacket. "For what it's worth, I think you'll be bored to death in a month, and the cottage will be right back on the market."

"Not a chance," Rick scoffed. "It's peace and quiet I want, and they sell that by the acre in this neck of the woods."

Paul looked him up and down critically. "What you want? You know what you *need*?"

"I know what you think I need," Rick said acidly.

"You need a solid, decent guy to make an honest man of you," Paul told him quietly. "You need to put down a few roots. You need somebody to love, somebody who'll make sure you keep both feet on the ground. You're 34, Ricky. You're still bouncing around like the proverbial loose cannon, and I'll bet you're using the tweezers to pluck out the first silver ones."

Rick ouches. "You're telling me, I'm running out of time?"

"I'm just saying," Paul argued, "burying yourself in the boonies is not the way you're going to meet somebody. Shit, Ricky, you'll be lucky to find somebody around here who'll roll you over and *do* you once in a while, much less put a ring on your finger and start picking out curtains!"

"Maybe I'm not ready for middle age just yet," Rick grumbled. "All I want is somewhere quiet, where I can *think* for a change. London was starting to drive me right 'round the bend. Too many people, too much noise."

"Well, if you wanted a churchyard with lights, this would be it. You could eat brown rice and contemplate your navel to your heart's content out here." Paul gave him a poke in the chest with one long forefinger. "Mark my words. This soul-searching kick is going to last about six weeks, then you'll be out there in the garden hammering the 'for sale' sign right back in! After you've got it set up, give me a bell, and I'll see if I can't make us both some nice money on the resale. The yuppie crowd are dying to get into this area."

He was wrong, but Rick was not about to get into the old argument again. Paul was a farm kid, bred and born in the sheep country north of the village, and when he made his escape from the wilds — headed to London, first high school and then business college — he swore a herd of wild horses would not drag him back here. Only the lure of a smart property investment would persuade him to return, and then only for a day.

The pub's heavy door swung shut behind him, and Rick watched through the tiny glass panes as his old friend headed out to the 'catch me, arrest me red' BMW convertible which sat beside the battered old Toyota, looking like a diva beside a venerable, weather-beaten farm-hand.

The furniture van had swung by in the morning; the cottage was an ocean of boxes, but Rick was content to throw a sleeping bag on the mattress tonight and worry about unpacking tomorrow. The camera gear was his sole priority, and as he had told Paul, it was all in the Toyota.

With a honk of the horn, the BWM pulled out. The high-revving engine was audible all the way to the junction, where the narrow side road teed with the motorway. As the sound faded to nothing Rick stretched his shoulders, listened to the snap, crackle and pop of his spine, and for the first time he thought he felt relaxation setting in.

It was the hustle and rush of the city he hated most. If one single

element had brought him out of the streets of London, it was the urgent need to relax. The deep, desperate longing to unwind before his sinews snapped with the tension of living and striving in an industry that was getting tougher, more competitive, every day.

Fifteen years ago, fresh out of college and eager to be out and achieving, he backpacked Spain and Italy, biked his way across Greece, rode a bus beyond description through Nevada and Arizona, wore out his hiking boots in Mexico. Thousands of astonishing photographs established his professional name, won him the contracts to head out to even more improbable places, where the risks were greater, the images more striking — the pay checks more outrageous.

Even now he still thirsted for those scenes, the thrill of being on the edge, seeing and doing things that few Europeans ever had, ever would — and perhaps the piquancy of danger. But another side of Rick had begun to long for home ... a place to plant a few roots, and to find the peace, the quiet, it took for a man to look inside himself, find his own soul and get to know it.

The city was not the place to do any of that. And Little Swinvale? Rick thought it might be. He had seen a large, black spider up in the corner of the parlor, as he signed off on the delivery of his goods and chattels, and he recalled the old superstition. A spider in the house was lucky.

Not that Rick was superstitious — though Paul was, with his rabbit's foot keyring and the Feng Sheui mirrors in his home, and the horseshoe over his office door. In fact, if Paul said the abbey ruins were haunted, he very likely believed they were.

Conscious of the relaxation seeping into his fibers, Rick finished his beer. He gathered both glasses, returned them to the bar, and was fishing out his wallet as he became aware of the old barman. His name was Ted, and he was watching Rick closely, sizing him up from behind impressively thick lenses in gold spectacle frames.

It was a safe bet the news would be all over the village in a few hours: the new resident, the weird photographer, was queer. Rick did not mind if the news got around; having the truth on everyone's lips would save awkward scenes later. He glanced down at himself, won-

dering if bluejeans and sneakers were taboo in this part of the country.

"Staying for dinner, Mr. Gray?" Ted offered in a nasal Lancashire accent which was no more local to the village than Rick's London voice.

"Not staying," Rick told him, "but I'll probably be back. I want to get some work done while the light's like this."

"Like what?" The barman stooped to peer through the ancient window glass. "It's getting stormy."

"That's exactly what I mean." Rick slid twenty from his wallet and left it on the counter with the glasses. "These skies make great pictures. I'm going up to the ruins, before I lose the light."

The man's eyes widened. "This late? You must be kidding me."

Rick favored him with a wry smile. "You mean, the old abbey's haunted ... there's a legend." He nodded at the door, in the wake of the departed Paul. "He told me."

"And you don't believe a word of it." The old man swiped up the glasses. "You're likely to get yourself convinced."

"Yeah?" Rick slid the wallet into the inside pocket of his brown leather jacket, and flourished the keys to the Toyota. "Well, then, I'll be convinced, won't it?"

The bartender rolled his eyes and headed back to the kitchen with the glasses. "Dinner's on at seven. Lamb or chicken hotpot."

"Thanks. I'll probably show up about eight. There's only tinned food in the cottage, even if I felt in the mood to cook — which I don't tonight." He was on his way to the door. "I take the back road, do I? Up to the shoulder of the hill, then turn left?"

A disembodied voice floated out of the kitchen, where taps were running. "Take the road past Hopewood Farm, over the bridge, up the hill, and the ruins are right in front of you. It's not as far as it looks."

"Later," Rick called, and stepped out.

The air was heavy, humid, and the massive clouds which had hung in the northeast since morning loomed closer. The horizon was rain-slashed. Two hills over, northwards, rain was already falling, but the wind was so light, the weather front was coming south so slowly, Rick's best guess was that it would not reach the village much before midnight, by which time it would probably be rained out.

Little Swinvale was barely a dozen streets of gray- and white-walled cottages with properly trimmed hedges and obediently pruned roses. The real estate was expensive. The people who lived here had either inherited the cottages, or they were business people who could live with the high prices and long commute.

A few faces turned toward him as he left the pub; he smiled and waved dutifully, looking for anyone of his own age, perhaps his own temperament. And then he mocked himself. This was hardly the environment to hunt for a companion. And in that department Rick had never had much luck. His relationships were notoriously brief. They set out optimistically and soon ended in either yawns or tears, almost all of which were his own.

He swung up into the Toyota, twisted the key and listened to the rattle of an engine that had traveled a great many miles. The village wandered away along the curve of the main road. Paul had driven that way — back to the motorway, headed for the city. But Rick turned right out of the pub's small asphalt frontage, leaving the main road behind, and with it humans and their industries.

Chapter Two

A few of the trees were starting to turn, though autumn was still not quite ready to begin in earnest. The nights were growing longer, but afternoons were still hot. The turn of the seasons fascinated him now as much as ever. The slow slide of spring into summer and summer into autumn made him remember Aunt Grace, whose Craft was scorned twenty years ago — the same Craft which was becoming chic now.

The back road was old and unserviced. Ruts and holes pitted it, deep as craters on the surface of the moon. Usually, only farm vehicles came up here. The ancient tarmac was imprinted with the tracks of immense tires; the ditches at the roadside were deeply dug by heavy vehicles.

Bouncing on its shocks, the Toyota skirted the holes and rucks, and he watched the hand-painted signboard of Hopewood Farm go by. Black faced sheep peered at him through post-and-wire fences; a bull, alone in his paddock on the shoulder of the hill, lifted his head for long enough to notice the car.

Then Rick was crossing a stone bridge so narrow, it would allow only one vehicle at a time, while a finger of late afternoon sun slanted from a gap in the clouds. The dusty windscreen sheeted out with dappled patterns cast by the neglected, abandoned orchard trees, challenging his vision.

Over the bridge, the road raked up sharply. He tramped on the accelerator, promised himself he would take the car in for an overdue service — next week at the latest — and came up out of the shadows of the old, forgotten orchard into the gold and deep purple light of late afternoon and the incoming storm.

These were the lighting conditions a photographer dreamed of, and prayed for. They could take the most mundane of scenes and render it into pure magic. Special effects executed in the computer could only imitate the reality, and being there to capture the magic itself was a large part of the thrill for Rick. He knew the digital artist's trickery, but he fell back on it only as a last resort.

According to tourist information and local gossip alike, the foundations of St. Martin's Abbey were a thousand years old, but it had stood in ruins since around the middle of the sixteenth century, when Henry VIII dissolved those monasteries that could not afford to pay bribes, and then made off with the lead from their roofs. St. Martin's was neither rich nor powerful. Its Benedictine monks were dispersed to other duties; the wilds swiftly encroached as the whole structure decayed.

Now, only the white bones remained of a building which must have been magnificent in its day. Foxes hunted there; hares boxed in March and a few fallow deer grazed the unkempt slopes on the east side,

beyond the cloisters, where once the monastery garden would have flourished.

There was something arresting about the stark, exoskeletal remains, Rick thought. He had seen it for the first time six months before, when spring was breaking out of winter's bondage of mud and sleet; and at first glance it seemed to him that the great arches were the bones of some vast creature which had perished eons ago, and was just now weathering out of the turf as centuries of rain and snow wore down the landscape.

Fingers of red-orange light from the westering sun gleamed on the stonework while the masses of cloud in the north were angry, brooding, every shade of gray and purple and green. The artist awoke in Rick as he glimpsed the vivid interplay of color, and he rushed the Toyota onto a level patch of rocks where he could unload his gear fast.

Low light conditions demanded time exposure, and he was grateful for the stillness of the evening. Any wind at all would excite the trees, and they would blur through his shots while the shutter remained open for long seconds to capture every nuance of the fading light. The window of opportunity for such work was never very long, and he knew he had little time to waste.

The camera was a Nikon and not yet six months old; the tripod was of German manufacture, and older than Rick — one of his father's hand-me-downs which proved so efficient, he would never let it go. He set up fast, light metered the sky, the ground, the deep shadows and the highlights, and set the digital SLR for the first of many shots.

The magic of the place was almost eerie. He fancied that he could actually hear the sweet, mournful sound of plainsong, and catch a glimpse in the shadows of the gentle Benedictines who had lived and worked here before their abbey was ruined, its roofing confiscated by a monarch intent on debasing the nation's coinage.

Two of the walls were still firm enough, but the fine, fretted traceries of the windows was broken. One wall lay in mounds of pale rubble; another was gone entirely — its stones were resurrected as building materials in many of the cottages in nearby villages, and in the walls of farms like Hopewood.

Of the whole abbey ruin, one feature drew his photographer's eye

over and over. It was the last remaining gargoyle of what must once have been a regiment of the creatures, a life-sized carving in gray stone which was pitted and weathered by time.

It perched on a ledge, looking down on the turf and tumbled rocks, and it might have seemed forbidding, if not for the doves and red squirrels which nestled in against it, as if it were their refuge. The gargoyle seemed merely lonely, loveless, and the forlorn shape seduced him to frame it from every angle, at every zoom.

Little wonder this place was thought to be haunted. He could almost feel the electricity in the air, but he had felt the same thing at Giza, and Chichen Iza, and Stonehenge. He knew the sensation for what it was.

It had long been called the spirit of place. The personality that tree and earth and rock actually took on, after oceans of time. The high valleys of the Himalayas had the same haunted feeling, and the parched, windy plateau of Tibet.

Here, the walls were silent, the wind was still; not a blade of grass moved while tiny birds flitted between thorn bushes and alder and sycamore, and the sky seemed to brood like a forsaken lover. He felt a great peace settle over him as he set up scores of shots, each with the potential to be the one chosen by a major company to spearhead next spring's ad campaign.

This was the line where the bread and butter labor of the jobbing photographer blurred into the sublime creativity of the visual artist, and Rick loved it. He had always loved it.

The beauty of the place and the work was that these ruins changed with every shift in the angle of the sun and the hue and texture of the daylight. He could come back at dawn, shoot a thousand more frames ... shoot it by moonlight, or in the snow, or with a crackling frost outlining every twig, riming the ancient stone arches with ice that shimmered like glass in the winter sun.

If the place were haunted, it was a benevolent haunting. He felt nothing evil as the light faded, and he lingered a lot longer than he should. The rain was no closer, and with the absence of a breeze the air remained oddly warm long after sundown, though darkness gathered swiftly.

He stayed too long. He was daydreaming — thinking of lovers and places and events which summoned him irresistibly into yesterday — and he returned to the present to discover the ruined abbey pooled in blue-black shadow, and the ground uncertain with loose rocks, mud and gorse thickets.

The last gleam of a purple, stormy twilight brushed deep blues and mauves around the stone arches. His pupils were wide open, dilated in the dimness, and still he peered to see his camera equipment. He had wandered through the smashed cloisters, where the remnants of rooms, shoulder-high walls, odd little alcoves and buttresses made a maze, and he realized he had turned himself around.

Momentarily disoriented, he cast about for his bearings. He looked up at the highest walls, searching for the tallest point, which he had photographed so many times, he was sure he should remember it.

And there, he checked with an odd sensation, a prickle at the base of his neck. It was gone. The gargoyle should have been on its place, perched up on that ledge, with the doves and squirrels. He was absolutely certain he was looking at the correct wall from the correct angle, and —

It was gone. The ledge was empty.

"Now, that's just ... nonsense," he muttered as his hackles began to rise. "I'm just turned right around here. And dumb, very dumb."

As he became aware of the time he also felt the chill, and the hunger he had tuned out while he was working. Chicken hotpot, a shot of the Irish to ward off the chill — a game of darts, to give the locals the chance to make his acquaintance. The Swinvale Arms beckoned, if only he could remember the way out of the maze of St. Martin's.

Moonlight would have made it easy, but this was dark of the moon. The first sliver of the new moon would show itself tomorrow. Feeling his way, Rick groped back to the last place he had set up the tripod. Working by touch, he folded it up, balanced it over his left shoulder and followed his instincts, back toward the Toyota.

He was almost out of the ruins when he felt the shift of boulders under his sneakers. He knew he was going to fall in the instant before his left foot slithered away, and his only thought was for the camera. He

pulled the tripod in against his chest, wrapped one arm around it while the other shot out in a futile effort to break his fall.

Rocks he could not even see skittered away; he felt the momentary numbness and then the burn of straining tendons, but before he had a chance to curse or cry out, the back of his head discovered a boulder the size of his fist. A second of nausea, and then dimness swirled over him, like going down into murky water.

How long he was out, he did not know, but when he began to feel and think again, he was aware of two things. The first was the nagging aches in both head and right ankle. The second was the weight of something warm lying over him, something that was pleasantly warm and smelt — odd. Before he cracked open one eye he registered a faint light, and when he did open his eyes he saw a face.

It was a young man, younger than Rick himself, with long pale hair, milky skin, and features that would have seduced Leonardo. The young man was sitting back on his haunches, peering down at Rick in the light of an antique brass lantern. The smell of burning paraffin issued from it, and a faint hiss. The flame was yellow, not even moving in the still air. It cast odd shadows around the stranger's face, but Rick was arrested by the man's strange, angular beauty. He had never seen a face quite like it.

For some time they neither moved nor spoke, and then Rick tried to move. It was a mistake. With a curse of pain he settled back, and the weight of the stranger's hands fell on his chest.

"Lie still till you know how badly you're hurt," the young man advised. "You fell. I saw you fall, but I couldn't reach you to catch you."

"I fell," Rick echoed. "I've done some dumb-ass things in my life, but that just about takes the cake. Did I drop the camera? Is it busted?"

"No." The stranger reached over him, lifted up the tripod, to which the Nikon was still attached. "It was on top of you when I got here, you saved it. I covered you ... it's starting to get cold. Can you move? I didn't want to move you till you could tell how badly you hurt your head, your neck."

His accent was odd, broad with some vowels Rick did not recognize. Was he foreign? It was a charming accent, but as strange as the cast of the man's features. "Let me see," he groaned, and before he lifted his

spine off the ground he found, and flexed, every muscle and joint. "I've bugged up my ankle, but it's not broken," he mused, "and my neck's okay ... I just gave my head a bang. Good thing it's only wood."

"Wood?" the stranger echoed.

"Joke," Rick said tersely. He took his weight on his elbows, pushed himself up, and peered down the length of his own body. The cover on him was a sheepskin; it smelt a little rank, a little smoky, but it was warm. Pain hammered through his skull as he lifted it, but as the discomfort settled he looked up at his benefactor in the lamplight.

Slightly built, with wide shoulders and slender limbs, the man sat on his heels at Rick's left hand. In the darkness Rick could not tell what he was wearing, save that the clothes were drab. "Can you stand? I can help you to your car, if you think you can drive."

"Oh, I can drive," Rick growled. "Just give me a hand, will you? And thanks, mate, I owe you one. A big one. I can't believe how lucky it is you were here." He was out of the sheepskin, poised on one knee, and angled a frown up at the man. "What the hell are you doing here at this time of night?"

The young man was rolling up the sheepskin. "I live just over there." He nodded vaguely into the east. "I saw your car when I ... and you didn't leave. I wondered if you'd had a breakdown. Or if you're one of *them*."

"Them?" Rick struggled up onto his good foot.

"One of the weird ones. Now and then groups of idiots come up here looking for ghosts or goblins or something." He stooped for the lamp, and straightened. "Here, lean on my shoulder."

Grateful for the support, Rick leaned heavily on him. "They told me the ruins are haunted. Not true?"

At close proximity the young man was strikingly lovely. His hair and skin smelt of herbs, and his clothes had the scents of leather and hearth smoke. "Haunted?" Fair brows arched. "In a way, I suppose it is ... but not the way people want it to be. Can you walk now?"

"I can hop," Rick corrected. "If you help me."

The Toyota was parked at the bottom of a long, gentle slope. Clutching the tripod in one hand, clutching the stranger with the other, he

hopped carefully, deliberately, peering in the grudging light of the single flame from an antique lantern. He was about to ask why the man did not get a proper flashlight, but he bit back the words. Beggars seldom had the right to choose, and Rick himself had no flashlight either tonight.

Like a phantom, the car loomed out of the coagulated darkness. No stars glittered, and this far from the city there was no discernible light pollution from humans and their industries. The few farms in the area were buffered by woodland, leaving the moors, the abbey, lonely indeed.

With a grunt of gratitude, Rick leaned against the driver's door to catch his breath. He had left the window rolled down, and he reached in now, thrust keys into ignition, and turned on the highbeams. White light bounced back from the abbey walls; his pupils narrowed painfully as he turned to look at the young man.

The clothes were not actually drab; they were made of a patchwork of soft leather, more than likely rabbitskin — shirt and trousers, both crafted in a plain, simple design. He had never seen anything like them before, but they might have caught the eye, the imagination, of fashion gurus to whom pre-ripped jeans were the epitome of chic.

He wore a pair of work boots, old and oiled to waterproof them long after the average person would have thrown them away. The rolled sheepskin was balanced on his left shoulder, and in the backwash of the highbeams Rick saw that the lantern was a genuine antique, late nineteenth century.

The aches in head and leg had settled down into the dull throbs that would endure for some time, and he ignored them with an effort of will. He thrust out his hand. "Richard Douglas Gray. Call me Rick."

The young man shifted the lantern into his left hand, and took Rick's right with cold fingers. "You should be going home. You need to take care of yourself."

"What do I call you?" Rick held onto the man's hand when he knew he should let it go, feeling palms calloused by hard work, and an uncommon strength.

"John." The dark eyes were level on him. Frowning at him, as if John were somehow suspicious.

“John what? Is that a first name or a last name?”

“Just John.” The man seemed about to back off, and Rick gathered his wits with an effort.

“Hey, it’s okay.” He withdrew his hand. “I’m gay, it’s no big deal. It certainly isn’t a secret. If it makes you uncomfortable —”

“No.” John shifted the lantern back. “I just wondered. It’s difficult for me to ... that is, I don’t meet many people, living up here. But — no, I’m not uncomfortable. I’m ... well, like you.”

Rick’s heart gave a small lurch. “You’re gay? Well now, ‘eureka’ doesn’t even half say it! Talk about luck. Hey, jump in the car. At least let me get you some dinner, buy you a drink. I owe you. I could have spent the whole night lying there. Stupid thing to do, I know. I just lost track of the time.”

“It’s easy to do, here.” John hesitated. “You should go right home.”

“All right. If you don’t mind canned spaghetti and yesterday’s baguettes, I can manage a decent Aussie shiraz cab, and a brandy or two for dessert.”

“An Aussie shiraz cab,” John echoed, as if he were thoroughly mystified by the term.

“Red wine,” Rick said, exasperated, charmed, as he took his weight in his good foot and maneuvered the tripod and camera into the back seat.

John’s eyes closed. “Wine. I’ve not tasted wine in...”

“Too long, by the sounds of this,” Rick guessed. “Jump in. I live down on the other side of the village. You know Rokeby Cottage? I just bought it.”

“I know it.” John hesitated a moment longer and then circuited the car, blew out the lantern flame, and opened the door. “I shouldn’t be doing this, but ... for the wine, you understand. I can’t say no.”

With care and effort, Rick lifted himself into the seat and tried his right foot on the accelerator. “Damn, that’s sore. I have some liniment at home. I ought to ice it, elevate it. You know the theory. I plugged the fridge in as soon as the power came on. So long as you know how to work a can opener and a corkscrew, we’re in business.”

In the cab light, John’s skin was so pale, Rick half imagined it was

translucent, as if John had not seen the sun in so long, he had forgotten what it felt like. Rick knew a few night owls of a similar persuasion. They haunted the clubs from dusk till dawn, dancing, drinking, smoking, looking for sex and thrills, and slept away the daylight hours like any vampire.

"So, you live near here." Rick ouches as the bruised back of his skull touched the headrest. "You lived here long?"

"Always," John told him in a odd, almost amused tone.

"You like the quiet?" Rick guessed. "That's what brought me here. I was up to my arse with the city. What can I tell you? One more year in London, and if they took me out and buried me, I doubt I'd even have noticed. I was braindead and getting deader every day." He ouches again as he let off the parking brake and put the weight of his right foot on the accelerator. "Damn, that's going to be a bit sore tomorrow."

"You should rest it." John was clutching tight to the sheepskin as if it were a security blanket. His eyes were wide in the darkness.

Rick angled a glance at him in the odd glow from the dash lights. "You okay there? It's only a few minutes. The cottage is a mess because I just got in today, but there's plenty of space. I won't be able to drive you home ... gotta tell you, this ankle is really starting to give me some stick."

"It doesn't matter," John said with such complete indifference, Rick shot another glance at him. He wore a faint smile, an infinitely sad expression. "I'll find my own way."

No road lights or cat's eyes lit the trail. Rick left the highbeams on and kept the speed down, picking his way around the worst craters from memory. Under the forgotten orchard trees ... across the bridge. A minute later he caught a glimpse of lights from Little Swinvale, and braked. "You sure you don't want a proper dinner at the pub, a beer —?"

But John was adamant, with a mute shake of his head, so Rick drove on, following the curve of the road to the southern extremity of the village, and his own gate.

Rokeby had been lovingly maintained until just a few months before. An elderly couple had lived their whole lives there, and when one passed away, the other moved to live with a married daughter in the

Midlands. Rokeby came onto the market, but the 'for sale' notice was only up for three days before Rick saw it, and called Paul. Two days later a red 'sold' sticker was pasted corner to corner across the signboard, and the realtor would be along any day now, to take it away.

The gate was comfortably wide enough for the Toyota, and the house keys were already on Rick's keyring. He wished he had left the porch light on, as he twisted in the seat and maneuvered himself into a position where he could get his good foot onto the ground.

Before he took his weight on it, John was there to share the load, and Rick leaned on him gratefully. It was only a dozen steps from the drive to the door. The garden service had been in to cut back the shrubs; the gnomes had been removed and the old pear tree was stripped of the season's spoiled fruit. All this, Rick had noted as he signed off on his furniture. Tonight he locked the car deliberately since the camera gear would be stored in it till morning, and let John go a half pace ahead of him to the polished, brass-bound front door.

Still new here, he fumbled key into lock, and fumbled again, hunting for light switches that had been installed in odd place when the cottage was wired for electricity in 1962.

"There, let there be light ... and I apologize about the mess," he said as he hopped inside and threw the three bolts on the front door. Plasma screen, computers, cameras — even in the wilds, one could not be too careful.

The nearest chair was his only armchair, a big red leather recliner. He dropped his jacket, sank into the seat with a groan and carefully heeled off his right sneaker.

Sure enough, the ankle was puffy. He looked up at John in the light of too-bright overhead bulbs. "Thanks. Really. You want a drink? Kitchen table, four bags, two boxes, all my kitchen stuff from the flat in London. There's beer, wine, brandy. The corkscrew should be in the box with the bottles. Help yourself — and bring me one. Glasses are packed with the crockery ... that ought to be the small box on one of the kitchen chairs."

In the middle of the sitting room, surrounded by stacks of taped-down boxes and a disorganized jumble of chairs, tables, shelving, John

turned around and around on the spot, as if we were mesmerized. Almost everything he saw seemed strange to him. The 5.1 sound system, the big plasma screen, the desktop tower and laptop and printers, the scatter of DVD cases which bled out of an upturned bag, might have been alien artifacts.

"John, are you all right?" Rick was intent on his foot, and the ache in his head made it difficult to concentrate, but even so he was becoming aware of John's oddness.

The young man gave a guilty start. "Kitchen, bags on the table, glasses in the small box. Give me a moment."

The cottage was cold, but according to the realtor the chimney was recently swept, and Rick had ordered in a load of firewood. A stacked basket stood at the hearthside, with a black, cast iron set of fire irons. The mattress had been flopped on the floor in one of the two bedrooms; the iron bedframe was still in pieces, leaning against the wall outside the bathroom door.

He listened to the sounds of rustling and rummaging from the kitchen, and then John was back with two glasses, a bottle, and the old-fashioned corkscrew. Rick took the glasses from him, held them as he disposed of the cork.

"It's cold in here," he said as John held the bottle to his nose to inhale the rich aroma. "You want to light us a fire while the wine breathes for a minute? I'd do it, but this ankle is a disaster zone."

Without a word John was on his knees before the hearth, and Rick watched him build a fire with great dexterity. The art was being lost, lately, but John obviously knew wood as well as he knew fire. Rick might have remarked on it, but forgot the words in surprise as John produced not a lighter, nor even a box of matches, but a tinderbox.

"You like your antiques," he said as the flint and steel struck bright sparks and the wadding and wood shavings in the box's lid caught alight. John gave him an enigmatic look, and held the flame to the kindling. "It's unusual to find a young guy who has a taste for antiques, the old-fashioned life." Rick heard the awkwardness of his words and forced a laugh. "Ignore me. I'm babbling. You wait till I get half a bottle of that red into me ... I'll babble with the best of 'em. Might even make

a pass at you. If I do, fell free to kick me."

The fire had caught alight, and John sat back from the hearth. His hands reassembled the tinderbox and put it back into his pocket without him even looking at what he was doing. His dark, doe eyes gazed unblinkingly at Rick.

"I wouldn't do that. I told you ... I'm like you."

"Doesn't mean you have to fancy me," Rick said with bluff humor.

John looked away now. "Oh, I like you, if that's what you mean. I liked you the moment I looked into your face, back at St. Martin's. You have a nice face. Lovesome and fair."

The choice of words was as odd as the man himself. Rick had to smile. "Flattery will get you everywhere. You're not an actor, are you? You sound a little ... I don't know. Shakespearean."

For a moment John blinked at him, and then laughed softly and reached for bottle and glasses. "I'll take that as a compliment, though in fact it was Kit I loved."

"Kit?" Rick struggled to make the connection, and then he had it. "Christopher Marlowe, known as Kit to his friends and intimates. I remember now. We studied him in school. We read *Dido, Queen of Carthage* ... being sixteen years old, we renamed it *Dildo, Screaming Queen of Soho*. The English teacher hated our guts."

The wine was ruby red, rich. John had taken a sip, and then another. A faint flush bloomed on his cheeks with the alcohol and the growing warmth from the hearth. He savored the wine and gave Rick a heavy-eyed look. "This is very good. I ought to go, now you're safe."

"I promised you dinner," Rick argued. "Don't go so soon. You know, the last thing in the world I expected to find in this place is a gorgeous young gay guy who actually fancies me too. I'd say it bodes well — and I owe you dinner. I owe you a hell of a lot more than tinned spaghetti and day-old baguettes, but it's a place to start. There's some Belgian chocolate in one of those bags. And plenty of butter. And parmesan."

"Parmesan?" John was halfway to his feet.

"Cheese. Powdered cheese. Look for the green drum." Rick held out one arm. "Give me a hand here."

“You shouldn’t be standing.”

“I’m not. I’m leaning on you.” Rick rested half of his weight on John’s right shoulder to demonstrate his point. “I kinda like leaning on you ... and I like what you’re wearing. The leather’s so soft. Is that rabbitskin? Where did you get the clothes? I never saw anything like them before. They look handmade. They must have cost a fortune.”

They had made their way to the kitchen as he spoke, and he took his weight on his palms, on the table. Boxes and bags covered every part of it, the entire contents of the kitchen in his flat. He was not a great cook, but he possessed several pans of various sizes, and a dutch oven. He handed a stainless steel saucepan to John and began to rummage for cans, and a can opener.

The stove was gas, almost an antique in itself, and he watched, fascinated, as John took a bamboo skewer to the fireplace in the parlor, lit it like a taper, and twisted knobs till he heard, smelt, gas. The pan slapped onto it; three cans of spaghetti and meatballs began to heat while he dug out the parmesan; and once again he watched as John handled a variety of knives like an expert.

He sliced and buttered the baguettes, took the sticks of celery, mushrooms and cucumber Rick had rescued from the crisper, and chopped then into the big glass bowl. He was opening jars and bottles then, not bothering to read the labels, but sniffing and tasting each until he came to the salad dressing. A liberal dash of this splashed into the bowl, and before Rick could say a word about modern concepts of hygiene, he had tossed the impromptu salad with his fingers and was licking them clean.

Wisely, Rick said nothing. How many times in his wild youth had he been known to suck various items belonging to other young men, without suffering the slightest qualm? As his mother — always an artist, the essential bohemian — had once said, when challenged on the subject of her slapdash housekeeping, “Grow an immune system.” Rick grew up with a cast iron immune system, which paid many dividends.

The spaghetti was served in the ceramic wok bowls, because they were the most easily accessible. With a little juggling, a little maneuvering that was not unlike dancing, Rick found himself on John’s sheepskin

before the hearth, with dinner balanced on his knees and a second brimming glass of wine in his hand. John sat beside him, more interested in the wine than the food, as if he had not tasted it in far too long — and had certainly never tasted an Australian shiraz cabernet.

He was quiet, and Rick admitting to himself, how pleasant it was, sitting with a companion who did not talk incessantly. How nice it was, leaning his shoulder on John's, and watching him tend the hearth as if he had been handling fire irons all his life. He turned off the lights and they sat in the firelight to eat while conversation wound down into a comfortable silence, and the wine bottle emptied.

A long time later rain pattered at the windows, and at last Rick roused himself far enough to peer at his watch. His earlier guess was right. It was just after midnight when the weather front arrived, and it was almost exhausted. Still, the trails back to Hopewood Farm and the ruins of St. Martin's would be rivers of mud.

"That settles it," he said to John from within a cocoon of comfortable lethargy. "You're staying here tonight. We'll fry bacon and eggs, and I'll drive you home, or wherever, in the morning."

"If you say so." John looked at him, heavy-eyed, languorous with wine and warmth and the magic of good companionship. He spoke as if none of it mattered; as if the moment — the 'now' — were all that existed in his cosmos, and morning might never come.

Something about him reached out to Rick, and he could not put his finger on what the quality was. It was not simply John's strange beauty. Growing up gay, at a very early age Rick had become aware of the beauty of young men, and even though he was still moved by it, inspired, he often mourned the gay community's preoccupation with physical good looks, which time soon spoiled.

There was something more, much more, about John, an other-worldly quality, as if he were not quite connected to reality — or at least reality as Rick understood it. Whatever it was, the man's magic reached out powerfully to Rick, touched him deeply on levels far below the ordinary layers of consciousness.

They were sitting close, bathed in firelight, drowsy and languid with the wine, and Rick's lips drifted across John's cheek, encountering fine,

almost invisible stubble, and feathered across his mouth. The kiss was so easy, it seemed they had been doing it all their lives, but when their tongues touched, caressed, an electric thrill rushed through every nerve Rick possessed, waking him up.

The pleasant familiarity persisted as he subsided onto the sheepskin, taking John with him, and then he was lying on the smaller, slighter body, threading his fingers through the fine, pale hair as he explored a hot, open mouth he already seemed to know. John's arms wound around him; hands knotted into Rick's teeshirt. Raindrops hissed and crackled in the hearth; a night bird in the old pear tree protested the change in the weather — these sounds, and the whisper of their breath, were the only sounds in the world.

John's fingers were cool on his skin, under the teeshirt, popping the button on his jeans ... John's lips were hot, wet, soft as butter on his chest, his nipples, while Rick held his head to the task he had appointed himself. And John was very good at it, though Rick felt him trembling with pent-up excitement. It had been a long, long time for him, and Rick could only wonder why, since John had the looks to attract lovers at whim, in any town or city. He might not meet many gay guys in these wilds, but he could be over in York in an hour, and in Leeds in two, where the gay scene was lively enough to suit even Paul Morrison.

With wine-clumsy fingers, Rick took the hem of the odd tunic, made of its patches of baby-soft leather, and lifted it off over John's head. The fair hair tousled, and he finger-combed it smooth while John chuckled, purred, closed his eyes to enjoy the pleasure of touch.

"I don't sleep with every tall, dark, winsomely handsome man I rescue at St. Martin's just before a storm breaks," he whispered, half joking, half in earnest.

He was saying Rick should not consider him a quick or easy fuck, and the dark eyes were serious as he spoke. "I'm ... glad to hear it," Rick admitted. "I don't sleep with every blond, blue-eyed, beautiful angel of mercy who rescues me when I've been a complete idiot in the middle of nowhere."

"No?" John was teasing now.

"No." Rick kissed him again, and sat back to look at the man, whose

pale skin was golden in the firelight. "And you are beautiful. Why do you live up here, on your own? You're not hiding out, are you? Nobody's after you, are they ... not the law, surely!"

John laughed quietly. "No! I have my reasons for doing what I must. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter."

But the fair head shook slowly, emphatically, and without deigning to argue, John picked up his task where he had left off. The rain grew stronger, but the thatch had been newly repaired to get the cottage to market, and Rick was astonished by how it absorbed noise. The down-pour created hardly a sound, though the wind roared softly in the chimney.

The jeans slid off, leaving Rick's skin prickling. John knelt back to look his fill, and then stood for a moment to drop the leather pants, before he poised in the firelight to let Rick see him, desire him.

He was finely made, with a pale cock as slender as the rest of him, high, taut balls, and body hair as blond as that on his head. He was finely circumcized, very beautiful indeed, and Rick told him so, murmuring words that almost evaded his tongue, before John was in his arms once more and neither of them could speak at all.

The throb in his head made Rick's body reluctant. He knew he performed poorly, but John seemed to understand. They clasped together, rocked and rubbed, delighting in the sensation of skin on skin, making it easy. The time to get fancy, ambitious, would come later. For now, tonight, the simple frottage was more than enough, a pleasure so old, men must have been doing it in an age when big game hunting meant stalking the woolly mammoth.

His body was like whipcord, with not a spare ounce of flesh on his bones and an astonishing strength in those slender limbs. His hands were like leather after a lifetime of hard, physical work, yet they were light, delicate as they touched Rick, and they caressed as if they already knew him — what he liked, what he needed. Bemused, enchanted, Rick was fascinated by the flat, taut belly and, below it, the sparse thatch of pale gold hair and the elegant cock. As he watched, the shaft thickened with excitement and stood to attention, swift with youth, vigorous with

health.

Rick went down flat on the sheepskin and opened his arms. John's weight on him was a welcome burden; John's scent filled his head as he settled, nestled his cock along the length of Rick's own and began to move with him. The rhythm was ancient, timeworn, familiar to any man. It might almost have been a dance. Rick listened to his own cries as they heaved and twisted, glistening gold in the firelight with a film of fresh sweat.

His curses were muffled by John's tongue, and when he came, his face was pressed into John's damp, tousled hair. Limbs trembling, he held on, fingers bruising the wide, bony shoulders as John hunted for his own release. He came silently, face clenched, head thrown back. Gazing up at him, Rick was reminded of the marble carvings he had seen in old, old churches, from Rome to Paris.

For long moments John was a tortured angel, beautiful in a way Rick had seldom seen before. And then he relaxed, bone by bone, muscle by muscle, and subsided on Rick, heavy, hot, replete and exhausted.

They should have talked, but the words were too elusive. Rick wanted to insist that he had not indulged in quick, casual sex since he was a teen, but he saw no accusation in John's face, no judgment. He knew he had nothing to defend. He wanted to whisper that he had felt something much more and far deeper than pure, healthy lust, but John's face was serene now, almost aloof, though his hands continued to stroke and pet long after he was as spent as Rick.

In the end Rick said nothing of what he felt. In any case, it would all wait till morning. Declarations of love made in the dead of night, after great sex, smacked of the teenage *faux pas*, and the grown man could not bring himself to say them.

Firelight, sheepskin, wine and the lateness of the hour seduced him into sleep. Long after midnight his thoughts unraveled, skewed into dreams, while he would have preferred to hold John and wonder at the outrageous fortune that had brought them together. John's hands on him were a shameless luxury; John's voice whispering into his ear was hypnotic.

On the very verge of sleep he could have sworn John wandered into

another language, something singsong, breathy, exotic, like no language Rick had ever heard. Or it might have been the first tendrils of dream weaving into reality and transforming it into rich fantasy. He did not care. He knew only that John would be — *must* be — here beside him again, often, and for a long, long time.

With apologies...

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