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The Dispossessed

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Chapter One

Jeff Rickman watched the blood seeping from him and was hit by a wave of nausea. Saliva flooded his mouth and he forced his gaze away from the steady, sickening pulse up to the high hammer-beam vault of the church. The building reeked of old wood, candle-wax and incense: the odour of sanctity that years of neglect and even deconsecration could not displace.

From the gothic arch of the west window the resurrected Christ smiled down at him, his arms open in welcome, palms upturned. October sunshine dazzled through the stained glass and red light spilled radiant from Christ's wounds.

Rickman began to feel a detachment, a light-headed clarity. Each dusty mote in the shafts of evening sunlight became a particle of dancing light, the shift and settle of timbers seemed to follow the tracking of the sun's rays, and the inching of the sun across the waxed floor was discernible to him. He closed his eyes and fancied he could almost hear the sighs and whispers of generations of penitents.

The pulse throbbed thickly in his throat and Rickman opened his eyes, unable to ignore the steady loss of blood. Swallowing hard, he fought the sickness, focusing instead on the pink granite pillar three feet away. In its polished surface he discovered flecks of white and gold and grey among the pink crystals. He looked downward to the carved marble vine leaves at the base and upward to the grey

clusters of grapes at the head of the column, pale against the vivid warmth of the granite. Gradually, the nausea subsided.

It's all about blood, he thought; the giving and taking of it. Religion was founded on it and steeped in it. Church was all very well, but blood ties were the strongest, they said: the ties of family and of nation. Not for Rickman, though. For him, family was no more than a name, and one that could not be relied upon at that: Rickman, Reichmann, or Richter – one theory even held that the family name was originally Lichtmann – the combination of an ancestral lisp and an immigration official's indolence had resulted in the current spelling distortion, or so the story went.

Friendship had always meant far more to Rickman than church or family or nation. He turned his head a little. Next to him, close enough to touch, was Lee Foster. He lay with his left arm flung out and his right crooked over his eyes. Rickman had known Foster a long time, and had worked closely with him over the past two years. He knew that this ordeal was far worse for Foster than it was for him. Foster would never have set foot inside this building if Rickman hadn't bullied him into it. Neither man looked at the other, nor spoke. They bled silently, each preoccupied with his own thoughts.

A light tap on his shoulder. A dark-haired woman in a white lab coat stood over him. 'You're done,' she said, clamping and disconnecting the tube attached to Rickman's arm and skilfully removing the shunt from it.

'I'm blaming you for this, Jeff,' Foster said.

Rickman turned to him. Tie loosened, shoes tucked under the trolley, Foster still managed to look smart. 'You volunteered for this, Lee – remember?'

'Yeah, well, if I ever volunteer for anything again,' Foster said, his voice slightly muffled by his shirt sleeve, 'anything at all. Lock me up till the urge goes away, okay?'

'We're thinking of having the next session at police headquarters,' the woman said. 'If Inspector Rickman can fix it for us to use the cells, you could kill two birds with one stone.'

She smiled at Rickman and he felt a momentary quickening of his pulse. She was pale – invalid pale, as if she had spent all of the summer indoors – but her skin had a luminous quality, and her eyes, large and long-lashed, were the colour of polished oak in sunshine. She finished taping Rickman's arm and moved on to Foster.

Rickman noticed that Foster had arranged his right arm so that it wouldn't flatten his hair. Foster's hair was carefully tousled, as always; he gelled and sculpted it till it gleamed in dark brown spikes. Lee Foster was apt to be vain – a characteristic that both amused and infuriated women.

'Be gentle,' he said, 'I hate needles. He threatened to tell the whole station if I didn't do this,' he went on, peeping out from under his arm. 'That's despicable, that, isn't it? Using a man's phobia to blackmail him.'

'You wouldn't believe he used to be a marine, would you?' Rickman said.

'Go 'ead, rub it in,' Foster said. 'Expose all my weaknesses – all my little foibles – to ridicule.'

Amusement sparkled in the woman's eyes, but she didn't comment, instead allowing them to argue back and forth while she clamped off the blood flow and disconnected the tube.

'Best you don't watch this bit,' she said, when she had finished. 'I'm about to take the shunt out.'

'Nobody takes the shunt out of Lee Foster,' he said, lifting his arm from his face and turning his smile onto full-beam. 'That's my name, by the way.'

She leaned closer and whispered, 'You're not my type.'

He struggled onto one elbow. 'It wasn't a marriage proposal,' he replied. Then, 'What is your type?'

Both she and Rickman heard the plaintive note in Foster's voice and they exchanged a quick, amused glance. Foster misunderstood.

'Him?' he exclaimed. 'The rugged Roman profile was all very well in *Gladiator*, but we're in the twenty-first century now, love.'

'Funny,' she shot back, 'I keep getting a whiff of caveman. Just so you know – the shunt's the bit with the needle attached. But if you want to watch, it's up to you . . .'

'I thought you nurses were supposed to reassure your patients,' he said, still trying on the charm, but Rickman saw he had lost some colour.

'I'm not a nurse, I'm a phlebotomist and you're not a patient, you're a donor,' she said. 'Now – are you going to close your eyes?'

'I'd rather look into yours.'

Those eyes . . . They crinkled at the corners, and Rickman was reminded for a moment of someone; but the likeness was gone before he had the chance to fix it in his mind, leaving only a vaguely disturbing after-image.

'You want to look in my eyes?' she asked.

The wide-eyed innocence in Foster's dark-blue eyes made him look younger than his thirty years. He gave her his sick-puppy smile and gazed adoringly at her. She stared back at him, her mouth turning up into the suggestion of a smile, then she gave a little tug and Foster yelled.

'That didn't hurt a bit, did it?' She lifted his hand and placed the first two fingers over the cotton-wool ball in the bend of his arm. 'Press firmly,' she said.

'Press firmly?' Foster scowled. 'I might just press charges.'

She chuckled, taping the dressing in place.

'Don't lift anything heavier than a pint for the next hour or so, okay?'

Foster shook his head doubtfully. 'I think I need watching,' he said. 'By a professional.' He paused a second. 'When do you get off?'

The wintry pallor of the woman's skin suffused momentarily with annoyance. '*Where* do you?' she asked.