

the
**Kirklyn
Horror**



J. M. DeSantis



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J. M. DeSantis: The First Ten Years

the
Kirklyn
Horror

J. M. DeSantis

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Editor: Susan DeSantis

Cover Illustration: J. M. DeSantis

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Claude

I

Claude's hand hesitated over the small, silver bell that rested upon the counter of the Green Ivy Inn.

"It dunna bi'e, frien'," said one of the patrons who had taken notice of Claude's sudden pause. "An' neitha' doe' tha goo' innkeepe', tha's a fac'."

Claude's eyes rested upon the man for only a moment, yet to Claude it felt as a great passage of time. He felt the throbbing of his heartbeat in his temples, and the collar of his shirt suddenly felt a size too small. His head began to ache, and he gulped hard. Did the patron notice? How long had Claude been standing like that?

A trickle of sweat began to run down Claude's forehead, and he squinted as it worked its way down to his eye. With that his lip curled, and Claude turned that curl into a smile. My, how good he had become at that.

He let out a slight chuckle to guard against the tremble he felt. The patron smiled back.

"Cheers," said Claude.

"Sláinte!" returned the patron as he raised his glass and gulped down the last of his frothy ale.

The place reeked of it, as though the very air inside the inn were dense with alcoholic humidity. Claude was surprised the candles on the walls and tables did not light the place aflame. Though he supposed the wood would not burn; the wood looked so wet it all appeared to be alive. He could not understand how the small and unremarkable charcoal portrait of a little girl hanging on the wall behind the counter did not fall to mush in its sagging frame. The palm of Claude's hand made a soft sucking sound as he pulled it away from the counter. He was practically half-rats from the fumes alone. But Claude felt the smell was a great deal more pleasing than the rank stench of foetid fungus and rot.

Ding.

The bell sounded quite different than the hollow, resonant bells of Areglos, yet it turned Claude's stomach all the same. An acrid burn flowed up his throat. To his left, out of the corner of his eye, Claude took note of three other men some distance away, two of which were deep in conversation. Notably the third man, though sitting with the other two, was not at all engaged in the talk of his companions. Instead he looked straight at Claude. More still, there was something about the man that Claude felt was out of keeping with the surroundings of this little town and its little inn.

Where the other men had great beards, unkempt hair, and simple clothes of woolen stock, the third man, though he wore similar clothing, did not quite fit with these backwoods folk. His clothes hugged his thin frame better than those of the others, in that they were tailored closer to his frame. His hair, also unkempt, did not look

so much naturally dirty as much as it was styled to look so. He had no beard, only some stubble not more than a few weeks old, and his eyes were keen. Intelligent. They stood out in a room full of sheep with dull, glintless gazes. The man seemed intently interested in Claude, like a wolf stalking its prey. Claude felt again the slight trickle of sweat upon his forehead.

Almost compulsively, Claude reached for the bell again, though he knew its sound would sicken him once more, when out of the door behind the counter came another potbellied, formidable man with thick muttonchops, no doubt to make up for what little hair grew above.

“Nah nee’ te ring i’ again, ser,” the great innkeeper said. “I’s righ’ ‘ere. Ya’ shoul’ ken we in ‘Amming are a much sim’le folk than you’s used in te big ci’y.”

Claude almost turned green. He noticed the Wolf cock its head ever so slightly. But Claude barely missed a beat and let out a soft chuckle. Nothing else came up his throat, and he counted himself fortunate for that.

“City? What makes you think I’m from a city?”

“Ooh, jes’ te look o’ya,” said the innkeeper. “Ya don’ qui’e ‘ave te righ’...semmary...sembry...oo! Dammi’, Low’ll, wha’ was te wor’ ya used?”

“Semblance.” It came from the Wolf.

“Sem’lance,” said the innkeeper with a nod and smile. “Yeah, tha’s te un. A fine wor’.”

Claude supposed he did look out of place—more even than the Wolf stuck out. Though his beard was beginning to grow out and his clothes were torn and soiled from two weeks on the road, it couldn’t quite hide

the make of his more refined clothing: a shirt, vest, slacks, and a coat—he'd long done away with his hat and scarf.

Two weeks...had it been so long? Two weeks ago. The day the resonant bells of Areglos rang for the first time over a month—where once their sound had been heard daily. He felt his stomach turn again, but he managed to twist his grimace into a smile. He was getting better at this.

“Well, if you can point me to a tailor, I'm sure I'll fit right in soon enough,” said Claude.

“An' a bar'er, no doubt?” said the innkeeper.

Claude raised his hand to his chin and rubbed the thickening hair. He had never worn a beard before, not even a moustache, despite its popularity amongst his friends and acquaintances. It was already getting too itchy to bear.

“No. I think I'll keep the beard. Seems to be the fashion here in Hamming—”

“Hm. Righ'. Fashi'n,” repeated the innkeeper over Claude.

“—and if I'm going to properly become a Hammingman, I should do as the Hammingmen do.” Here Claude ventured a side-eye at the Wolf. He usually was not so brave, but he could not help but smile. Yet when he met the cold stare of the Wolf, he quickly looked away, a cold sweat stealing up the back of his neck. “It's true. I am new to Hamming, but it seems like a nice place to settle down for a quiet life.”

“Aye,” said the innkeeper. “So'en ye 'ave an 'ome 'ere in 'amming? Fammy?”

“No,” said Claude. “No home. No family. All alone. That’s why I’m here. I’ll need a room for some days until I can find proper lodgings.”

“An’ a goo’ meal, too, I’ll wager,” said the innkeeper. He leaned on the counter and pointed at Claude. “Yous loo’ ‘alf starved, like summa mon’rel wolf ou’ te wild.”

Claude was not certain he could keep food down just yet, starved though he was.

“Sure,” said Claude, digging in his pockets and placing a handful of coin on the counter. His eye twitched, despite himself. It sounded just a little too close to the sound of a bell. “Send something up if you would, mister...?”

“Ah! Mys mistake, lad. I’s forge’in innaductions,” said the innkeeper. “Bradaigh. Though, if i’s a twis’ o’ te tongue fer ye, Brad’ll do.”

“Thank you, Brad,” said Claude with a smile. Brad smiled back. “Claude’s the name.”

“Goo’ te mee’tcha,” said Brad, reaching his hand out to shake Claude’s. As he did, Brad pulled himself forward and looked over the counter. Claude nearly lost his balance and had to brace himself against the sticky countertop to keep from smashing against it. Brad’s smile faded, and he looked at Claude again. Claude’s face froze.

“No bags wi’ ye?”

“No,” said Claude, trying his best to smile. “I’m.. I’m starting fresh in Hamming.”

“Hm. Fresh,” repeated Brad. He squinted his eyes and tilted his head to one side. He still hadn’t let go of Claude’s hand. The bones in Claude’s fingers were

beginning to ache. “An’ where was i’ ye says ye was from, a’ain?”

Claude could feel the slick perspiration on his palm, but it did nothing to help him slip his hand away from Brad’s grip. He felt his collar tighten again, and his temples began to throb. He almost began to tremble. He coughed and cleared his throat instead.

“Winchester,” said Claude. “Winchester Parva.”

For a moment Brad held Claude’s gaze. He looked back and forth between Claude’s right and left eyes. One then the other. Claude could feel the knuckles of his hand grinding together.

Then suddenly, Brad let go of Claude’s hand with a wide smile. The innkeeper clapped hard on the counter and let out a chuckle. Claude sighed. He thought he noticed the Wolf smiling in the corner.

“Winces’er Par’a. Ha!” said Brad. He shook his head and looked straight at Claude again. “I ‘aves coosins as live in Winces’er Par’a. Wha’s yer fammy name ‘ere, Claude?”

Claude almost fainted. He could barely breathe. His temples began to throb again. He felt his eyes begin to sting. He wanted to blink, but when he did his eyes fluttered like a fly’s wings.

“Se-Semple,” said Claude. “Claude Semple.”

“Sem’le. Aye,” said Brad. “A nice, sim’le name.”

Another pause. Brad continued to gaze at Claude with slightly squinted eyes, the smile on his face so incongruous that his expression gave the impression almost of a growling beast. Claude shifted in place. He felt a cold perspiration on his top lip. He thanked his luck

for the fledgling beard that hid it. The Wolf was staring at him again. No smile.

“Pay me no min’, Mr. Sem’le,” said Brad at length, and he smiled bright and wide once more. “We jes’ ‘eard tale o’ deser’ers on te road.”

“W-what do you mean? Deserters? I hadn’t heard of any war out this way.”

“Ah! I ken tha’s te wron’ wor’. I ken i’ is,” said Brad scratching his head. “Bu’ folk as cumma ou’ o’Kir’lyn tryin’ te ‘scape.”

“Kirklyn?” Claude barely got the word out. His throat felt dry. His voice cracked. He could no longer smell the stale perfume of ale. A fungoid rot seemed to permeate everything.

“Aye,” said Brad shaking his head. “Nas’y bu’iness goin’ on ‘way ou’ t’ere. Shurrey ye ‘eard?”

Ava. Cristian.

Claude tried to hold back his tears.

“Yes,” said Claude. His shoulders sank. The Wolf did not seem to miss the fact and leaned forward in his seat. He formed a steeple-like triangle with his hands in front of his mouth, leaning his elbows on the table. His eyes did not blink as they fixed on Claude. “Nasty business, indeed.”

Claude hung his head, staring down at the counter, though his mind was elsewhere. He silently thanked the innkeeper for quickly pulling him out of his momentary haze.

“Well, no nee’ te dwell,” said Brad as he came around the counter. “We all a lon’ way from Kir’lyn, thankee. Les’ see yer room, Mr. Sem’le, and ge’ ye an ‘ot

meal. A warm bath too, I shoul'a t'ink. Ye' smell o'rotten, Mr. Sem'le, tha' ye do."

Claude was barely aware of what the innkeeper was saying. His mind was on Ava, and he could feel the cool stare of the Wolf following him as the innkeeper lead him out.

II

The bath felt invigorating, and the food, though Claude had some trouble getting it down, was much needed. He had been so long on the road, so long in a state of barely conscious motion, that he hadn't realised how tired and famished he was until he had arrived at the inn. Still, every time the sound of the bell came up from downstairs, Claude felt the food was all going to come back up. Eventually he abandoned the massive portion to chill on the lone, circular table near the window, having made barely a notable go at it.

A cool breeze came in from the cracked-open window, and it felt soothing on Claude's aching body, warmed from the bath, as he lay on the bed. The weather had been similar on the day he'd left for Hamming. It had rained the day before. Not a horrible storm, but just enough to keep one indoors under circumstances not so dire as Claude's had been. Oh, how he had hated that day. The putrid stench of fungus, and the weeping. Oh! The weeping. And the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach knowing full well what he was to do the next day: the day the resonant bells of Areglos rang for the

first time in over a month. The day the bells rang twice.

Again, the sound of the bell on the inn's counter echoed up from the common room below, barely yet insidiously audible beyond the closed door. Claude's stomach turned and so did his body as he shifted and curled up slightly upon the stiff bed. More comfortable than grass and rocks, but much less so than what he had been used to for most of his life. He wondered if he couldn't procure a softer bed for himself, even amongst these less sophisticated folk. A bed without the black stain of rot. Blankets without a foetid fungoid stench.

He wanted a drink, but he was too tired to move. He didn't want to get up. He couldn't face a room of merrymaking and loud noise. He just wanted to disappear into the black nothingness of sleep. Was that what it was like for them? He hoped it was. No real conscious knowledge of the experience. Just a loss of awareness before the loss of humanity. But those tears running down Ava's cheeks were a harsh reminder of the futility of that hope.

Darkness took him. The bells rang again.

Ava. Cristian.

His eyes opened, but all Claude saw was the open window of his room, and the cold, stiff food on the plate on the wooden table beside it. Screams and cries floated up from the streets below, but most of those were filled with joy, some with anger. None were the horrors of those former nights, cold and wet and sweetening with rot.

Claude sighed. He was safe now and far away from the nightmares he had left behind, and he was tired; so very tired.

END PREVIEW

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...None knew of the origins of the horrific plague or by what other means it spread. But that was the purpose of their mission, was it not?

And Mavis. Evelyn had to find Mavis.

The Lunatic Rot.

That is what they called the plague that fell upon the city of Kirklyn. Of its source and causes the people of Kirklyn were wholly ignorant, and the Church of Areglos seemed to have no answers. Thus were the Reapers established to help contain the Rot, but even their well-trained legions were no match for the ceaseless spread of the horrid epidemic and the mad deformities it caused.

Through the tales of four individuals, the reader will glean perspectives and truths about the Rot...and perhaps even learn the Eldritch Truth of its unnameable source.



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