

The Contract

It was ordinarily a gray city; a city of asphalt, tobacco smoke and grimy rain, with the blue sky only a distant sliver between the forest of crowded high-rises, the ever-replenished clouds of tobacco smoke and exhaust blurring the air. Today, the late autumn sun had flung golden light indiscriminately across the square, veiling the jagged industrial shapes of pig iron and glass with neoclassical shadows.

The girl was hurrying, striding down the gum-spotted pavement, with the haughtiness of a latter-day aristocrat. She shrugged her way through the tourists with contemptuous disregard, shook off the platitudes of a homeless Mexican with self-appointed superiority, and stepped daintily around the puddles with the care of someone who'd paid a month's salary for their boots. Without bothering to glance at the traffic light, she stepped out into the road, glancing disdainfully at the crowd waiting for the light to change.

She didn't deign to look up at the sound of tourists shuffling back out of the road to give way for the onrushing Cadillac; her head did snap around when the bumper smashed into her hip, crumpling her like a stubbed-out cigarette. She reeled sideways into the gutter, her manicured hands fumbling, clutching her knitted bag to her chest.

That's where I come in. I'm the night attendant at the Seventh Street morgue – in other words, I sit around, make sure the dead bodies don't try to walk away, and try to amuse myself by watching security camera footage of their deaths. Think it's morbid? You're right. Then again, spend every night with dead bodies, and you'd be morbid too. It's a decent job, actually – the corpses rarely complain, don't need much upkeep, and never report me to my boss if I liven things up with a couple pills.

Tonight, I'd swallowed some bootleg Valium and was looking forward to the night's passing in a pleasant purple haze. I sprawled back in my chair and watched the spattered concrete dissolve into a kaleidoscopic blur.

Then someone tapped me on the shoulder. Cushioned by the drugs, I didn't react with the manifest terror you might if you were suddenly tapped on the shoulder while alone in a morgue. I turned and said "Yes? Can I help you?"

I was mildly surprised when I saw it was the girl from the security camera footage. Behind her, an unzipped body bag lay on its stainless steel table. She wasn't looking as good – her left arm hung limp, her leg was twisted backward like a flamingo's, and her mass-produced "vintage" coat was stained brown with blood.

"Damn, lady." I remarked. "You can take a hit better than the Patriots' quarterback." Considering this pretty funny, I began to giggle inanely.

"Can you get me my bag?" she asked, through a mouthful of congealed spit.

"I'm not your goddamn butler, lady. I'm a ..." - I struggled for the words - "security professional. Whaddya need your bag for anyway?"

"I had a contract in it ... and other important things. I've got debts to settle." She tried to grimace, but her mortified lip muscles settled for a lopsided frown.

"Leave that for your next of kin, huh? It's not your problem now - that's one of death's perks."

"It's not that kind of debt. Here's twenty dollars, now get me my bag." She produced a bloodstained bill from her coat pocket.

I wondered whether I could sell police evidence for \$20. "Alright". I agreed. Reaching under the desk, I produced the bag, now flattened and striped with tire marks.

She began rummaging through it, tossing aside a compact mirror, a crushed mini-bottle of Jack Daniels', and a broken iPhone. Finally producing several sheets of paper, she began to flick through them, muttering dissatisfiedly the whole time. "Damn, damn ... no way out. Review clause ... hmm."

The doorbell rang, echoing through the empty morgue with a distorted Wagnerian magnificence. "Get the door", she snapped - or rather, tried to. Her limp tongue slurred the words instead.

I shrugged and slumped up the steps to the door, swinging it open. "Good evening, sir. How may I help you?" I've learned that exaggerated politeness can be just as effective in getting rid of unwanted visitors as sarcasm or rudeness. Yet the man's sheer strangeness jarred me out of my well-practiced routine.

His skin, a luminous pale white like the belly of a fish, gleamed in the streetlights, his eyes invisible behind tinted sunglasses. Lank grey hair fell down over the collar of an ill-fitting suit, patterned in swirls of purple. The buttons gleamed yellow-white, carved in the shape of human faces, eyes vacant, mouths open in agony and ecstasy. He looked like the love child of Muammar Qaddafi, Samuel L. Jackson, and a sleazy used car salesman.

"Nice buttons" I remarked.

"Thank you" he said, the faintest hint of a foreign accent - Russian, maybe - flattening his words. "I'm here to collect a debt."

As we descended the stairs, I asked "Are they screaming or laughing - the buttons, I mean."

He grinned, revealing long brown teeth. "Both." He stuck out a hand, adorned with inch-long nails. "I'm Lou Ciferre, but you can call me Lou." We shook, his palm dry and callused, his grip firm. "Want to hear a joke?" he offered.

"Sure", I replied.

"What happened to the Satanist dyslexic?"

I was unsure.

"He sold his soul to Santa." I burst into drug-addled giggles.

When Lou and I stepped around the corner to the attendant's desk, my laughter just fading, the dead lady dropped the papers in horror.

"Hello, Claire", Lou remarked, reaching out a hand. Claire recoiled awkwardly, slid out of my chair (which she'd taken without my permission) and fell awkwardly onto her broken arm with a crunch like a Christmas cracker.

"I must say, you don't look so good." Lou remarked to Claire, rolling my chair over to me. I sprawled back in it and watched.

"I don't want to make small talk." Claire spluttered. "I just want out of this contract."

"Claire, Claire. You can't get out of it. You signed it. I'm certainly not releasing you. Just pay your debt."

"I ... I didn't understand it was for *real*." Claire gestured desperately to the contract.

"Claire, we gave you what you asked for ... money, love, status ... if you'll return those, I'll release you."

"How can I return that?" Claire asked desperately. "It's not possible ... please, just a chance. Or, take *his* instead." Claire spat, gesturing to me. "He's worthless ... a loser ... nothing to live for ..."

"Well now!" I said, offended. Neither noticed.

"That's not the agreement", Lou chided gently. "Now where are you keeping it? Give it to me." His voice, implacably persuasive, rolled across the morgue.

"Is it in her bag?" I inquired. She'd left it on the chair. I tossed it to Lou.

"Wait - wait!" Claire's death-blurred voice was growing more and more desperate. "I demand arbitration! A neutral party can decide if the contract is fair."

“Why not?” Lou agreed peaceably. “What do you think?” He threw me the contract.

I flicked through it, trying to force the stodgy legal phrases through my mind. “Mmm ... no release except with agreement of both parties ... earthly wealth happiness in return for payment of one soul ... to be collected upon death of the debtor, Claire Matthews ...”

“I don’t know, Claire – I can call you Claire, right? It seems to me that you shouldn’t make agreements you aren’t prepared to fulfill.”

Her mouth worked in terror, preparing some new protest.

“The decision is made.” Lou said magisterially. His long, pale fingers vanished like a predatory spider into the bag’s depths, grasping. At length they caught ahold of something, wrenched it free, and emerged. Lou thrust his hand into his pocket before I could catch a glimpse of what it was he’d grabbed.

Claire’s jaw snapped open, her eyes staring with the impotent desperation of a slaughtered pig, the muscles in her neck standing out like taut cords. A whine of terror and nauseous horror and tainted, sick pleasure rose up out of her throat, setting the stainless steel tables vibrating – then, like a puppet with cut strings, she fell sideways limply.

“Here’s hoping she’s really dead this time.” I joked. “My boss wouldn’t like it if corpses started walking around.” Heaving her onto the stainless steel table, I shoved her back into the body bag, tucked her shattered arm in neatly, and zipped it up.

As I walked Lou to the door, he gave me a piercing glance. “I’m always looking for new talent, and you seem like a likely fellow.” He handed me a business card – *Lou Ciferre, VP Human Resources, SATanik Loans, Ltd.*, it said.

“If you’re ever looking for a job, give me call.” The streetlights gleamed gently on his left cuff button, a screaming female face with long curly hair. It looked a little like Claire.

“I think I will.” I said.