

THE
REDEMPTION CLAUSE

A SHORT STORY
BY JOHN ETHIER

IN LIFE, HE WAS A SCOUNDREL; A MEGALOMANIACAL, narcissistic miscreant. In death, he was, to put it as plainly as possible: dead. Nothing more, nothing less.

Most everyone who attended the funeral of Clive Rottington III fell into one of three categories: his heirs, those who wanted to be seen by his heirs, and those who refused to believe that the Baron von Rotten was actually dead until they witnessed his body being lowered into the ground.

“Don’t you know who I am?” were the first words from his mouth as he was greeted at his new home; *home* being a relative term, of course. *Place of residence* would be more apropos. After all, it wasn’t his choice to be there.

It was nothing like the clichés he’d always heard. It was hot, though. That part, they got right.

“Is that any way to greet your host?” the man responded. “Please ... come inside. You mustn’t judge until you’ve seen the whole place.”

His host was a tall man, well-groomed; his raven black hair perfectly combed back away from his pallid, thin face. He wore a long, thick trench coat despite the near-unbearable heat.

“You’re wasting your time with me,” the Baron protested. “I have no plans to stay here. I’m a very well-connected man. I have fellows at my disposal who have gotten me out of far worse predicaments than this. And you’d be well-served to watch your step, my dear lad, so as not to worsen your fate any more than you already have.”

“You really don’t remember me, do you?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I realize it was some time ago, but how is it you don’t recall our acquaintance?”

“I think I would remember someone as ... how shall I say this without offending ... peculiar as yourself. I rarely forget a face.”

“You were all of twenty-two years old. You had just gotten yourself thrown out of Oxford. You seriously don’t remember?”

“I think you’re mistaken—”

“It was right after your big blow-up with your father.”

“How do you—”

“You were sitting all alone in your car, drunk, humbled, and feeling sorry for yourself. ‘I wish he were dead,’ you muttered.”

“How—”

“It was raining. Someone knocked on your car window; a man holding an umbrella. He asked if you were alright.”

“I don’t—”

“You’d been parked in front of the Duck & Waffle for nearly two hours, your favorite late-night place to eat, perhaps waiting for the rain to subside. The man with the umbrella escorted you inside, up the elevator to the fortieth floor, sat you down at a booth near the window, filled you with black coffee and all the duck eggs and waffles you could eat while listening to your story about how your father had cut you off. Getting thrown out of school had been the last straw. He informed you he was planning to revise his will and that you would no longer be in it.”

“Look ... I don’t—”

“Eventually, the rain let up and the fog lifted enough to see the city lights below; tomorrow would be another day. The next morning, you awoke to the news that your father had suffered a massive coronary episode during the night.”

“How do you—”

“Things changed for you that day. Even *you* never expected things to line up the way they did.”

“How can you profess to know anything about me? You have no idea how things were for me that day.”

“Don’t I? Are you telling me you didn’t inherit half your father’s fortune that day? Are you telling me you didn’t sue your own brother for control of your father’s business?”

“Yes. But I—”

“You got the life you wanted. Whatever you did with your good fortune was purely your own decision. But your fate was no longer your own. Control of your destiny had already been relinquished that night in the rain.”

“Look, I don’t know who you are or what you hope to accomplish with whatever mind games you’re playing, but I can assure you, I have no plans to stay here. These walls can’t hold Clive Rottington.”

“We have ways to deal with people who don’t wish to honor their agreements.”

“What agreement?”

The man pulled an envelope from his coat pocket, opened it, and produced a four-page document.

“Is this not your signature?”

“How do I know you didn’t forge that?”

“My dear man, if you think you’re going to dispute this, I can promise you ... you won’t win.”

“You haven’t dealt with the likes of me before.”

“Very well,” he said, returning the document to its envelope. “I will consider this matter officially in dispute. Until the issue has been resolved, we’ll see to it you have a place to sleep. We have some very fine accommodations we can offer you.”

He motioned for someone. “Jordy. Can you come over here, please? Would you show this gentleman to one of our executive suites?”

“Right away, sir.”

Jordy escorted Mr. Rottington to the elevator.

After a long ride on the lift, they finally arrived at their destination. “Allow me, sir.” Jordy reached ahead to open the large double doors. “I hope you enjoy the room, sir.

Please let us know if there's anything we can do for you. Anything at all."

"You can get me the hell out of here. That's what you can do for me."

"Sorry, sir. But that's one thing I am unable to help you with."

"No. I didn't think so."

"Enjoy your room, sir."

The room was as palatial and opulent as any he'd ever seen, with one glaring difference: there were no windows.

The phone rang. He picked it up: "Hello?"

"Hello. Mr. Rottington, I'm calling to let you know that your dispute will be heard tomorrow morning at seven o'clock. Someone will arrive at your room shortly before then to escort you to the proceedings."

"Seven o'clock? That's not acceptable. I need time to prepare my case."

"That won't be necessary."

"But I—"

"Sleep well, Mr. Rottington."

He slammed the phone down. "I've got to get out of here!" he exclaimed into the empty room. "No one treats Clive Rottington III like this and gets away with it."

He waited by the door, constantly checking his watch. *When is he going to be here?* he wondered. *It's five bloody minutes till seven!*

There was a knock at the door. He opened it before the knocking finished.

"Where have you been?"

"Good morning, sir," Jordy said in a cheery voice. "You mustn't worry, sir. It will only take us three minutes to get there. Four, if we have to wait for the elevator. But I don't see that happening. I never seem to have a wait."

After a two-and-a-half-minute elevator ride, they arrived at a room filled with people waiting patiently for their numbers to be called.

“Wait there,” the man at the desk directed them.

“I’ll wait here with you, sir,” Jordy said, his voice still cheery.

“Splendid,” replied the Baron. The word slithered from his lips, well-lubricated with sarcasm.

“This may take a while. I’ve seen these things go for hours. Try to get comfortable.”

“I’ll do my best.” He looked at his phone. “I don’t suppose you have wi-fi here?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. By orders of management.”

Three hours and twenty-two minutes later, their number was called. As they approached the desk, a man in a dark gray suit read over the paperwork without looking up.

“Clive Rottington?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It says here that you’re disputing the validity of the agreement?”

“Yes. That’s correct. I have no recollection of—”

“Denied.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your appeal is denied.”

“But you haven’t even heard my case.”

“My good sir, I’m afraid you may have been given the wrong impression. We don’t accept testimony from the accused.”

“But—”

“I have many other cases to hear, sir.”

“How can you deny my appeal without at least hearing my side of the story?”

“You’re going to tell me that you didn’t sign this?”

“Well—”

“This is your signature, is it not?”

“I will admit, it does look like—”

“Have a good day, sir. Jordy will see you to your room.”

The elevator ride back to the room took much longer than the ride down. Or was it up. There were no floor numbers. The lift just seemed to go as far as needed.

“This isn’t my room,” he said to his escort.

“These are your *permanent* quarters, sir.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. I want to go back to my other room.”

“I’m sorry for any confusion, but the executive suite was only a temporary arrangement. Now that we know you’ll be staying, we’ve prepared a long-term abode for you.”

“This is unacceptable. You can’t expect me to live like this.”

“Your room is equipped with everything you need. But if you find there is something else that you require ... anything at all ... just pick up the phone over there on the wall.”

“I *will* find a way to get out of here, you know.”

“That’s the spirit, sir. Everyone needs to have hope. Well ... if there’s nothing else, I’ll be on my way. Don’t forget to call us if you need anything. Have a good day, sir.”

He looked around his new living quarters: one central gathering area with a lone, cushionless chair and a bed in the corner, a small bathroom, and an even smaller kitchen.

He thought he would make himself some tea while he devised a plan to get out of this place. He opened a cupboard and removed a cup; a mouse scurried, startling him. The cup leapt from his hand and shattered as it hit the floor.

“Bloody Hell!”

For months, he stewed; he fumed; he seethed; he even growled from time to time. Five-hundred and thirty-seven days quietly passed by—although it was difficult to discern day from night with no windows, no tele, no indication at all of the passing of time. Sometimes he would look at his watch and not even know if it was morning, evening, or some time in between. Eventually, his stewing diminished, he fumed less often and growled on only the rarest of occasions. With so much time on his hands, he couldn't help but ponder the razor-thin line between acceptance and resignation.

There was a knock at the door.

"Jordy!"

"Hello, sir. How have you been?"

"Miserable. How would you expect I've been?"

Jordy nervously looked from side to side. "May I come in, sir? I could get into a lot of trouble if I'm seen out here."

"Certainly." He let Jordy into the room and closed the door behind him. "So ... to what do I owe the pleasure? Did you miss me?"

"Actually, sir ... I've been thinking about what you asked me. You know ... that first day when you arrived? You asked me if I could get you out of here."

Jordy had his full attention now.

"Go on ..."

"Well ... I wasn't completely honest with you. The truth is, I might be able to get you out of here."

"Are you serious?"

"Yes. Deadly serious."

"But—"

"Why?" Jordy said, finishing his sentence for him. "Simple. I'm ready to leave here. But I need your help."

"How could I possibly be able to help you? I'm powerless here."

"Yes ... but you're not powerless out there."

“But—”

“I know a way out. There’s a crack. A small rift. I’ve been monitoring it for years. It’s been growing, ever so slightly, year after year. It’s grown large enough to get a person through.”

“So, why me?”

“You’re connected.”

“Not anymore,” Clive reminded him.

“But you must understand ...” Jordy continued. “I have nothing. I’ve been dead for hundreds of years. If I were to resurface among the living, I would have no money, no way to earn money, no way to take care of myself.”

“I think you’re forgetting something. I have no money either. The vultures have undoubtedly divvied it all up by now.”

“Yes, but you know how to get it. You’re a powerful man.”

“But—”

“You’re Clive Rottington III. You know how to ...” He paused to ponder his next words. “You know how to get things. You know how to get your way. We exist in different prisons, you and I. But we can set each other free. I can get you outside these walls. You can get me outside mine. With your help, I can be a free man.”

“So, how do we—”

“We leave right now.”

“Now?”

“Yes. Why? Is that a problem?”

“No. I just—”

“Follow me.”

Jordy led them to the elevator, his movements deliberate and swift. “I want to prepare you ... this elevator ride will be much longer than the rest.”

“How much longer?”

“Long.”

The doors closed and they began to move. The ride was smooth for the first thirty minutes, then the lift began to rumble; it felt to Clive like riding in an airplane during turbulence. The rumbling continued for what seemed like an hour before finally subsiding.

“We’re almost there,” Jordy said, breaking the silence. “I want to prepare you, when we step out, it may be a bit unsettling. All you need to remember is remain calm and stay close to me.”

The doors opened, revealing a long corridor which disappeared into the darkness ahead. They exited the lift. The sound of the wind howling in the distance gave Clive a chill as they quickly made their way down the hallway. “Stay close,” Jordy reminded him.

“It’s very windy down here,” Clive remarked.

“That’s not wind,” Jordy replied flatly.

He suddenly realized that the distant howling was actually a chorus of plaintive moans.

“It’s not too much further.”

They approached a small door on the right. Jordy turned the knob and pushed it open. “Watch your head,” he warned as he ducked and entered the room. He flipped a switch and the lights flickered and hummed. Once they were both inside, he closed the door behind them.

He motioned to a large desk against the back wall. “We need to move that.”

He darted to one side of the desk. “Don’t try to lift it. It’s too heavy. Just slide it out away from the wall. We need to get behind it.”

Once the desk was out of the way, Jordy removed an access panel.

“There’s something I need to tell you before we go through.”

“What’s that?”

“Once we go through ... once we pass over into the world of the living ... we will be immortal.”

“What!”

“Yes. We’ll be immortal. We will never die.”

“Are you serious?”

“Quite.”

“So ...” Clive let the word hang in the air, waiting for Jordy to do something with it.

“Is that a problem?”

“No. I mean ... I don’t think so.”

“I just thought I should let you know before we go.”

Clive attempted to digest this latest information as Jordy got down on his hands and knees.

“Follow me.”

The two of them crawled ahead into the darkness for about a hundred feet before Clive espied a faint light ahead.

“It’s going to be a bit of a tight squeeze. I’ll go first.”

Jordy forced the crevasse open, allowing a flood of light into the narrow crawl space as he disappeared through the opening. Clive followed.

“We’re here!” Jordy exclaimed once they were on the other side.

“Where are we, exactly?”

“We’re in the basement of a deserted warehouse, just outside of London.”

“What now?”

“We wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what?”

“Nightfall.”

“Why do we wait for nightfall?”

“Trust me ... you’ll want to allow your eyes time to adjust before you expose them to sunlight. Don’t worry. It should only be another hour. You’ve waited this long ...”

“I guess you’re right.”

Clive then felt something he hadn’t felt in some time. He felt the beating of his heart. He felt the blood rushing to fill

his veins. The dull thumping in his ears, the tingling in his extremities, the clammy sensation on his palms ...

“I need to sit.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jordy replied.

When Clive awoke an hour later, he glanced over at his travel mate and was relieved to discover he wasn’t the only one who’d fallen asleep. Without waking him, he climbed the stairs to the first floor, checking to see if the sun had gone down. It had.

Clive had grown fond of Jordy. He hated to admit it, but it was true. Jordy, for all of his peculiarities, had been the closest thing he’d had to companionship over the past year and a half, and the one solely responsible for his current freedom. He was also the one responsible for the blood now coursing through his veins. The pure and simple truth was he just liked the chap. All that being said, he felt no remorse or regret in his decision to leave his companion behind.

London was exactly how he remembered it to be: cold and foggy. He loved the city. He lived his entire life there. But he knew he couldn’t stay. London would be the first place they would look for him. But he needed money.

Harry Holdsworth had been Clive’s go-to when it came to finding funds for less-than-savory ventures. Harry had a knack for keeping the books clean, even when Clive wasn’t.

They went to prep school together. Harry was four years Clive’s junior. One day in the schoolyard, there had been an incident. The event certainly would have led to Clive’s expulsion from Harrow, had it not been for the clever thinking of one Harrison Alastair Holdsworth. It

marked the first time Harry would ever extract Clive's fat from the fire.

The light was on. He rang the bell.

"Clive? Is that really you?"

"Harry. My old friend. How've you been?"

"Nevermind how *I've* been ... aren't you supposed to be dead?"

"Harry, be honest ... when have you ever known me to do as I'm supposed to?"

"Very true."

"May I come inside?"

"Of course!"

His childhood chum closed the door behind them.

"Harry, I need your help."

"How so?"

"I need money. A lot of it. And quickly."

"Are you going to explain to me what's going on?"

"No."

"Very well. How much and how soon?"

"I think fifty-thousand pounds should do for now. I need it right away, if that's possible."

"I'll see what I can do. So ... you really aren't going to tell me what's going on?"

"I really wish I could. But to be honest, I'm not sure you'd believe me anyway."

"So many secrets ..."

"You have no idea."

"Can I get you some tea?"

"That would be nice. Thank you."

"Please ... have a seat."

"Harry ... there's something else I need."

"What's that?"

"I know it's not exactly your field of expertise, but I need a passport."

"You *have* a passport."

"Correction. I *had* a passport. Now I have nothing."

“I’ll see what I can do. I think I know a guy who can help you. Where are you planning to go?”

“I haven’t decided. But I think I’ll go to America.”

“Clive—”

“Harry,” he said, cutting him off. “I really can’t tell you anything. Maybe someday ... but not now.”

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“You could say that. Let’s just say I’m trying to *avoid* trouble. Harry, you have to promise me that you won’t tell anyone that you’ve spoken to me.”

“Of course.”

“I really think the less you know, the better.”

“Can I at least ask you how you’ve been?”

“I’ve been miserable.”

“And now?”

“Harry ... I can’t even begin to tell you ...”

He set a large cup of tea on the table beside Clive. “Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich?”

“That would be marvelous. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Too much trouble? Don’t be ridiculous. I haven’t seen my friend in almost two years; my friend who I thought was dead. I think I can take the time to make him a bloody sandwich.”

“To be honest, I can’t even remember the last time I had a decent meal.”

“I really hope that someday you can explain to me what’s happened.”

“I hope that I can. But Harry ... I need to be honest with you. There’s a distinct possibility that I won’t see you again.”

“I really hope that’s not the case ...”

“I hope so too, but I really need to become hard-to-find. I’m sure you can appreciate that.”

“Who’s looking for you?”

“Harry ...”

“Right. Right. The less I know ...”

“Thank you.”

“Do you need a place to stay tonight?”

“That would be nice.”

Clive expected Harry’s “guy” to be shadier looking. The young lad didn’t appear crooked enough to be creating fake passports.

“You won’t be able to choose your new name, just so you know. It really is best to use an acquired identity. Raises fewer red flags.”

“Yes ...” Clive agreed. “I think the fewer the red flags, the better.”

“From now until you get to the United States, you will be Digby Cooper.”

“Ooh. What a ghastly name.”

“Don’t worry ... you’ll change it once you get to the States. But let me tell ya ... when they scan your passport, you’ll be thankful this Digby Cooper fellow has a clean background and a similar physical description. I’ll have a cheat sheet for you as well ... some personal info you may need to know. You’ll want to know these personal bits backwards and forwards.”

“Got it.”

“I’ve purchased a round-trip ticket to Atlanta, Georgia. You might be wondering why the round-trip ticket. They don’t like open-ended international trips if you’re not supposed to be staying. Your tourist visa is with your passport. Everything should be in order.

“As soon as you’re safely in Atlanta, you’re going to destroy all identification for Digby Cooper, as well as the return ticket to London. I suggest going to an office supply store and purchasing a really nice shredder.

“From there, you’ll be using this identification ...” He held up a ziplock bag containing a whole different set of credentials. “Again, there is some personal data that you’ll

need to learn, which I've included in the packet. From Atlanta, you'll purchase a one-way ticket to Chicago. I couldn't book it ahead of time ... we don't want for your trip to Chicago to have any trail back to London. We need for this Digby fellow's trip to Atlanta to be a dead end. The identity I've chosen for you to use once you get there belongs to someone who has never left the States. So, you may want to tamp down your British accent a bit, if you can. Not that anyone should really care at that point.

"Once you get to Chicago, I have a gentleman there who will help you with anything you need. His name is Frankie. I've told him to expect your call. He's very well connected. I've included all of his contact information with your packet."

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me," Clive said, sounding as though he meant it.

"Don't mention it. This is what I do."

"So ... how do you know Harry? I don't recall him ever mentioning you before."

"Harry is my uncle."

"What?"

"Yep. But he didn't know I did this sort of work until just recently. To be honest, I never knew Uncle Harry did the sorts of things he did either. Funny how you think you know a person ..." He let the words hang in the air.

"Yes ..." Clive replied. "It is funny. It just goes to show ... you never really know anybody. You may think you do ... but you don't. Not completely. Not until you have that moment of reckoning. That moment when a person has to make a choice. That's when you find out who a person really is."

The day he arrived in Chicago, there was a chill in the air. A fog had rolled in off Lake Michigan. It was as if the city were trying to make him feel at home.

He had been in Chicago only one time before, when he was a small lad. His father had been doing business in America and had taken his two young sons along with him. He liked the city. It was no London, but it would do.

“I hope you like pizza ...” chirped the unkempt, bearded gentleman sitting across from him.

“I’ve had it once or twice.”

“Once or twice? Well ... if you’re going to be living in Chicago, you’d be well-served to acquire a taste for it. I’m just sayin’ ...”

“I can take it or leave it, I suppose.”

“You’ve obviously never had pizza like *this* before. This is the best pizza in the world. Hands down. And you can trust that I know my pizza. Let me tell ya ... I didn’t get this body by eatin’ salads.”

He smiled at the man’s attempt at self-deprecation. “I’ll take your word for it,” he replied.

“So ... let’s get down to business. First ... I don’t have an office. If you need to talk to me, just call or text. I’ll come meet you. I just find it works better this way. Plus, it gets me outta the house.

“My understanding is that you need a clean start. Roger tells me that you don’t wish to be found.”

“That’s accurate.”

“I can absolutely make that happen. He also hinted that in your previous incarnation, you were a well-connected sort and that you would like to regain that lifestyle, but maybe you don’t have any of those contacts anymore, due to your current situation.”

“I believe you’ve summed up my situation well.”

“Great. Sounds like we’re on the same page so far. Let me tell you my plan. First, I would like to get you a fresh identity. At this stage, we don’t want to use the borrowed identities anymore. We’ll want to create one. It’s a bit trickier, but it’s really the best way to move forward. Borrowed identities catch up to you. It really is the ideal

way for travel, but once you get established somewhere, it's best to hand-craft a whole new persona. I have the means to get you a Social Security number and everything else you'll need. It doesn't come cheap ... but we can get it done. We'll need to build you a history as well. We need to make sure that anyone who decides they want to do a little research on you won't find anything out of the ordinary.

"You can rest assured ... I'm very good at what I do. So, for the most part, you can just relax and leave all the heavy lifting to me.

"There's something else I need to ask you," Frankie continued. "Do you have any family or friends that might come looking for you?"

"Only a brother who despises me and an ex-wife who despises me more. And as far as they know, I'm already dead. Very doubtful they would ever come looking for me."

"That's good. Well ... you know what I mean."

Clive shrugged off the remark.

"Once we create the new you, we'll be ready to plan your future. I have some ideas ... but we'll get to all that soon enough. Just so we're clear, any business ventures that might be available to you will likely be less than legal. But I don't think you'd have any qualms about that. Not if I'm reading the situation correctly."

"I think you're reading the situation perfectly."

Anything For Money played in the background as he waited in a booth at the back of the diner. *How very true*, he mused as he watched Frankie walk towards his table. He took note of his beard, which seemed to have doubled in length since he'd last seen him, which was only three days ago.

"John!" Frankie exclaimed as he tossed a plastic bag filled with documents onto the table.

“It’s gonna take some time to get used to that name,” Clive replied. It would be his third new name in the span of a week.

“Well ... you’ll have plenty of time to adjust to this one. Have you ordered lunch yet?”

“Not yet. I’m not sure what I’m hungry for.”

“This place has an amazing meatball sandwich.”

“I have to say,” Clive chirped. “You and I have very different tastes in food.”

“I agree. You eat far too healthy for my liking,” he said with a smile. “I’ll tell you what ... as far as I’m concerned, if it ain’t got melted cheese on it, then it ain’t worth eating. You only live once, right?”

“So I’ve heard ...” he replied, contemplating how wrong he now knew that aphorism to be.

John Henry Applegate would be the name Clive would need to get used to.

He opened the baggie and perused the contents. “Wow ... that was fast,” he said with genuine astonishment in his voice. “Who knew it would only take a few days to create a person out of whole cloth.”

“It all goes pretty quickly when you know which buttons to push.”

“So ... have you been able to—”

“Find you a way to earn some cash?”

“Yes. Any luck with that?”

“As a matter of fact ... I do have something for your consideration. It’s not glamorous by any means ...”

“I’m not looking for glamorous.”

“Good ... because this opportunity is very much a behind-the-scenes bit. But I think your business acumen will suit you well. And from what you’ve told me about your knowledge of the currency markets, I think you’ll make a good fit.”

“Sounds intriguing.”

“I’m glad you think so, because it will likely require you to break the law at least twenty times a day.”

“Is it risky?”

“Not really. To be honest, your anonymity would give you cover in a way.”

Clive researched his new persona: John Henry Applegate. Just as Frankie promised, there was a believable backstory available for any curious souls wishing to investigate. No red flags. Nothing to tie him to any previous versions of himself.

He also researched the identities he had borrowed along the way. He found nothing dubious; no threads to connect him to anyone or anything. He then searched for his own name, trying to find anything that would arouse suspicion; and again, there was nothing.

Roger and Frankie had done an excellent job keeping Clive’s whereabouts a secret. He wondered, then, why they hadn’t been as thorough with the true identity of a chap by the name of Reginald “Frankie” Franklin.

Clive understood the fine line between friend and foe. He knew how quickly a partnership could unravel. It was always better to be prepared. He always made a practice of thoroughly vetting everyone around him to assure they posed no threat to him, but also to gain a tactical edge. It was always good to have leverage. You never knew when you might need it. It was that philosophy which led him to the sordid past of Reginald Franklin. He was a man with a long history of gambling. And from what Clive could tell, he wasn’t very good at it. What intrigued Clive the most about this less-than-stellar gamester he was now doing business with was the fact that he actually hailed from Sussex, not Chicago.

Every effort had apparently been made to cover his tracks, but there were a couple of crumbs that had been left on the ground. Any good bloodhound would've been able to pick up the trail.

Sussex? he wondered, pondering if their paths had ever crossed. Clive had been to Sussex dozens of times, for business, for pleasure, and everything in between. Even if they never met there, it still seemed a bit close for comfort. He couldn't recall anyone going by the name Frankie, or even a Reginald; no Reggies or anyone with the last name of Franklin. But even if Clive didn't remember Frankie, had Frankie known who Clive was all along? The question gnawed at him.

He went about his business, day by day, week by week, month by month. He took pride in how much wealth he'd been able to amass during this second go round. He had acquired it all on his own this time. No inheritance, no rich father to pave the way, not even a name. He did cross the pond with fifty-thousand quid in his pocket, but that seed money fell away rather quickly. Making oneself scarce had its cost.

The position Frankie had procured for him got the ball rolling, as it were, but he wanted more. He also didn't like working for someone else. Assisting in shady business deals earned him enough to live comfortably in a condo on the river, but it was blackmail and extortion that got him into a Gold Coast apartment with a million-dollar view of Lake Michigan.

Through his business dealings, he'd become privy to the vulnerabilities of those around him. Exploiting those vulnerabilities for his own gain seemed inevitable. He used a surrogate to perform the deed so as to provide himself immunity from the undoubted backlash he would receive from extracting money in such a manner from his business

associates; people who had, for one reason or another, considered themselves his friends.

It had been just over two years since Clive met Frankie for the very first time at that pizza joint in Lincoln Park, and just over a month since he handed him over to the gamblers he'd been hiding from. He didn't like having a possible link back to England in such close proximity. One phone call from an untraceable cellphone to a man in Manchester had cemented Frankie's fate.

"I had him followed home one day ..." he told the man on the phone. "He rents a small flat in Wicker Park under the name Francis Peabody."

He'd begun to ponder what his immortality actually meant. How would he come to view the passing of time? Would it all get to be tiresome after hundreds of years?

The cab pulled up in front of his building. He paid the driver as the doorman opened the cab door for him. He stood in front of the impressive structure. He looked up, taking in its girth. It was a prestigious address to say the least, right on Lakeshore Drive. From the first moment he laid eyes on the gold doors on the front of the building, he knew he wanted this to someday be his abode.

He was beginning to feel at home in the Windy City. He especially enjoyed the rarified air of Chicago's upper crust. He made his way through the grand entry of his building. As he looked around at his surroundings, he felt as though he'd arrived. This was where he belonged.

"I have an elevator waiting for you, sir ..."

"Thank you, Finch."

The elevator ride to the twentieth floor took longer than normal. When the doors opened, he wasn't greeted with the afternoon sunlight washing across the apartment as was usual this time of day. There must have been an error. Had the elevator malfunctioned? Had it taken him to wrong floor by mistake? This was not his apartment. There was no fireplace, no designer kitchen, no spiral staircase

leading to the second floor. This room had no windows, no view of the lake, no artwork on the walls. It had only a small bed in the corner and a lone, cushionless chair, upon which sat a very well-dressed man, legs crossed, hands folded, waiting.

“Jordy?”

“Clive. So nice to see you again.”

“How did you—”

“How did I what? How did I find you?”

“I don’t understand. You—”

“I what? Please, Clive ... do finish that sentence. I can’t wait to hear the end of it.”

“Where are we?” Clive asked.

“I think you know where we are.”

“But ... you said I would be immortal ...”

“I lied.”

“You *lied*?”

“Yes. I lied. Sue me.”

Clive wondered how this could be happening. He wondered if he was dreaming. He wondered how Jordy got into his building. But more than anything else, he wondered how he hadn’t noticed his horns before now. He wondered the same about his forked tongue and cloven hooves. How does one go about hiding such a thing? Unless he had never been meant to notice.

“Actually,” Jordy continued. “It wasn’t really a lie. You are immortal in a sense. But not in the way you think. You can’t die ... you’re already dead. I did give you life, though ... the blood you felt coursing through your veins was real. But your soul never left my sight.”

“But why?”

“The Redemption Clause.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s written into your contract.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Every man is given his day of reckoning. Every man gets one chance to redeem himself. But when you were given that chance, you abandoned the one who set you free. You betrayed the ones who helped you. You double-crossed the ones whose employ you accepted.”

“But they were putting me at risk—”

“No. They weren’t.”

“But—”

“Clive ... you turned your back on everyone who was trying to help you.”

“*You* weren’t trying to help me ...” Clive shot back.

“Yes, but you thought that I was.”

“What about Frankie? He wasn’t honest with me about his real identity.”

“Frankie was a witness to a crime. The two of you had never met at any time in the past. He didn’t meet your friend’s nephew until he was already living in America. The two met one afternoon on Navy Pier. Roger didn’t even know that Frankie used to live in England. He was relocated and given a new identity in exchange for his testimony. They even paid to have his accent removed, so he wouldn’t arouse suspicion ... and you sold him out.

“You sold a man down the river after he helped you. All because of your unfounded paranoia and your petty self-interests. But I want to thank you, actually ...”

“Thank me?”

“Yes. Because of your phone call, Frankie was so desperate ... he didn’t know what to do. So, he came to us. I offered him a reprieve. A stay of execution, if you will. I promised to protect him from the people who sought to harm him in exchange for the legal rights to his soul. Albus paid him a visit this morning. The deal is done.”

“Albus?”

“My concierge. You met him the day you arrived. Well ... actually, you met him when you were twenty-two years

old. But you were pretty drunk that night ... you may not remember things too clearly from your first meeting.”

“Why was I not informed about this Redemption Clause?”

“It was right there in the contract. It’s not my fault if you didn’t read everything before signing it ...”

“If I would have known—”

“If you had known the consequences, your actions would’ve been tainted. You needed to believe there were no consequences to your actions. You needed to believe that you could live forever.

“The true measure of a man is what he does when no one is looking. At least when he *thinks* no one is looking. This is the only true way to redeem one’s soul. Contrary to what people think, there is no such thing as rehabilitation. It does not exist. One cannot be cured of who they are. One cannot simply be rehabilitated, because it is not of his own volition. The only true way to know if a man has redeemed himself is if they have nothing to gain by doing the right thing, but they do it anyway. Therein lies the rub. That is the crux. The balance between good and evil. At least what we perceive as good and evil.”

Jordy reached into his coat pocket. He unfolded the papers and read from the contract.

“From Article II, Section III: ‘The undersigned, herein known as Subject, will be presented with a single opportunity for Redemption at a time to be determined by the Caretaker of the Soul. The fate of the Soul may be modified at the discretion of the Caretaker if and when the Subject acts in a manner consistent with a mortal seeking Redemption. Such acts must be performed with no bias or prejudice, no fear of retribution, and no expectation of punishment or reward. This stipulation will herein be known as the Redemption Clause.’”

He returned the document to pocket.

“This was your day of reckoning. You made your choice without bias or prejudice. You had no expectation of punishment or reward. And you chose your own self-interests at the peril of all those around you. You were given life, freedom, immortality. At least you thought you were. And you did not seek to redeem yourself.

“Do you see that bed over there in the corner? the bed that reeks of malevolence? the bed whose sheets are stained with the iniquities of man? You made that bed. I think you know how the rest of the saying goes.”

Clive opened the cupboard to get a cup for his tea as he did every day at this time—or whatever he perceived to be *this time*, not actually knowing day from night. He was again visited by the mouse, but he wasn't startled. He'd become all-too accustomed to the presence of his little housemate.

“Well, my friend. It looks like it's you and me.”

The diminutive creature stared back at him, unable to speak. His expression was challenging to read. Was he looking forward to forging a long-term relationship with Clive? Or was he becoming annoyed by all the constant interruptions? Perhaps his expression was merely the look of indifference. Clive was unsure but wasn't concerned. He knew he would have the better part of eternity to figure it out.