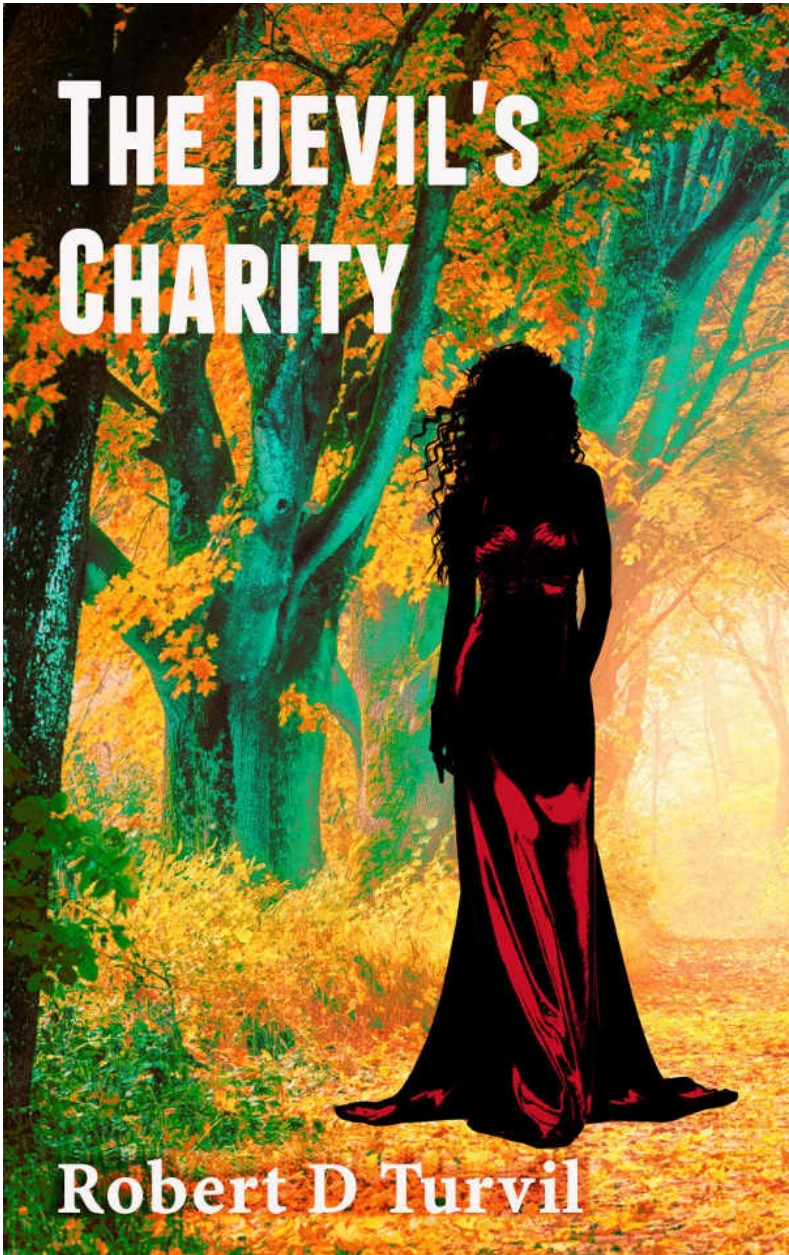


THE DEVIL'S CHARITY

The book cover features a woman with long, dark, curly hair, seen from behind, wearing a long, black, form-fitting gown. She stands in a forest with trees displaying vibrant autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The ground is covered in fallen leaves. The title 'THE DEVIL'S CHARITY' is printed in large, white, serif capital letters at the top. The author's name 'Robert D Turvil' is printed in white, serif capital letters at the bottom.

Robert D Turvil

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Also by Robert D Turvil

Vengeance of an Evil Man

Oswald Bardolf is minding his own business when a prominent politician blackmails him, but not for money. This politician wants mayhem: the kind that will undermine opposition and lever him into the World Presidency.

Bardolf is the wrong man to blackmail. Not only has he been framed, he has the resources to fight back.

Obsession, lust, greed and an all consuming hunger for revenge are the dominant forces in this compelling thriller. The result is an intricate and fast-moving story that challenges you at every twist.

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The half-story at the end is a bonus. It's 'The Night Before Christmas' and it leaves Emily with a choice – and it's not an easy one! Read her story and decide what you want to happen.

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CHAPTER ONE

Don't get me wrong. I'm not after sympathy and I'm not making excuses. I made my choices same as everyone else. We all have free will. I guess that's the point.

I could put a gloss on the way I used to be. I'd like to, but you'd soon see through it. You're not daft. But I have changed, finally, though getting you to believe me is a tough call.

As to the end – my end – I don't know, not yet. One thing though: this is my first and final account, my testament. If it gets through, you'll understand. You'll be on guard and they won't suck you in.

As to the beginning, two words: catastrophic panic, a whole gaggle of emotions infinitely worse than being forcibly drowned in a swamp infested with ravenous vermin.

You'd think I'd have remembered what had caused it. You'd think I'd have catalogued it right at the top of the never-to-be-forgotten pile. Fact is I hadn't a clue. Neither did I know how, why, when, or where it had happened, or how long whatever it was had lasted. About all I could recall was my given name: Ronald. I wasn't so sure about my surname. I think it was Foster. It sounded vaguely right. I figured I was in my forties, maybe, give or take a

decade or so in the plus direction. It didn't seem to matter.

I'd have written off the whole thing as nightmare if it hadn't been for the pains. My brain felt as if hot kebab skewers were poking about on a hunt for tasty morsels – and clamping my eyes shut didn't help. That only sparked off all the other bits that hurt: like my chest and legs and arms. No idea what was up with them, but I'd cheerfully have swapped places with an out-of-condition marathon runner stuck at the crest of his pain barrier.

Bottom line: something devastating had happened, something inordinately brutal and terrifying. Even so, I just had to manage the fallout and wait for my brain to wiggle into first gear, or so I convinced myself. I didn't question how I could be so calm, so accepting.

I realised I was in a whopping great oak-panelled room, and I wasn't alone. The vibes told me this wasn't where it had happened – the panic – though I can't tell you why. There were about thirty people there: men and women, all sorts of ages and all, like me, in armchairs spaced around the biggest conference table I'd ever seen. Well, the biggest I could remember, which isn't saying much. It was highly polished, really amazing. The thing that nagged was the top spot. It was empty.

I reckoned I should have been in it, which was odd considering I could only have sat there like a chump and sucked my thumb. What could I have said to a single person there, let alone the whole lot of them? And *there* was odd as well. The room exuded an uneasy mix of eccentric grandeur, the impact emphasised by an excess of ornate doorways. Though nothing was familiar, I picked up a connection. That was unnerving as well as odd.

When a door cracked open at the head of the room – a concealed door – it startled me, but not for long. Instinct made me stand tall and straight. Impulse made me check my suit. To my relief it felt right, as did my fine silk tie. Whether by sixth sense or something else, I

knew that proper clothes – good quality stuff – made a man, a woman too for that matter. Though I didn't know who was coming in, they weren't about to catch me looking less than my physical and sartorial best. That was certain.

There was a pause as if someone was teasing. In the lull I whispered, 'Not noticed that door,' to the guy beside me. Truth is I thought I'd forgotten it.

He didn't answer. He was too busy staring at the ageless woman who had swept in while I was talking. He was blatantly ogling. Everyone was and I did too. Even with my hollowed-out memory I was certain I'd never seen such black hair, masses of it sculpted into a glorious mane.

Couldn't help it. None too discreetly, I said, 'Wow!' One look had turned me into a soppy pubescent boy.

If she heard she gave no sign. Neither did she flinch at the barrage of other eyes upon her. Made me cringe. Every pair looked scurrilous behind a thin mask of propriety, women and men alike.

Having settled she gazed back at each of us in turn, saving the best till last. The moment she looked at me my pains faded. Finally I could breathe easy. No voice came this time, but I mouthed the word *wow* as if fixated on it, and on her, which I was. As I watched, she filled her lungs, swelling her fiery red dress. My eyes were still engrossed when she spoke.

'My name is Charity, but it's not my original name. I chose it because I'm committed. I feel for those we serve and relish my mission – our mission – to provide unique support.'

Couldn't believe it when some people sniggered. Made me scowl, offended for her. Awful manners, yet the intrusion reminded me I wasn't alone. It also nudged a thought my way: I had to know some of the people in the room. I spread a measured glance round in the hope of finding a face I recognised. Others were doing the same. Some looked disturbingly scared. Made me wonder if we

all had memory problems.

‘A few of you know me,’ Charity went on, her voice bewitching, ‘but most of you are friends-in-waiting who don’t know me... yet.’

I listened intently. Her voice was exactly as I’d imagined, as undeniably enticing as she was undeniably beautiful. Admittedly I’d nothing but air castles to back it up, but I reckoned I was one of the few who knew her. She seemed tantalisingly familiar, like my fantasy woman come to life, except I couldn’t remember having a fantasy woman or any special woman come to that.

Annoyingly my throat sprang a tickle. Normally I’d have coughed, but multiple instincts cautioned me to bottle it. Then they piled in with all sorts of other conflicting prods. I knew her, they egged. I might have forgotten her unforgettable tresses, but I had more right than most to be there. Why shouldn’t I cough and damn the consequences?

I caught myself being stupid and I couldn’t afford stupidity. What mattered was getting a grip. I had to remember *something* else I’d be worse off than a lamb spruced up for the slaughter.

Charity spoke again, her voice like a knife murdering my mental ramble. ‘Other charities provide for the blind or deaf in general. We are concerned exclusively with the partially blind *and* partially deaf.’ She spread her elegant fingers on the table, her nails perfectly manicured. ‘Our aim is to make a difference. We must never forget those who depend on us and always guard against those who would have us fail.’

To my disgust the earlier sniggers became open chortling. It came from three people: two in their fifties in impeccable attire, male and female, the other a vamp who looked about twenty. I expected Charity to say something. In her place I’d have wiped the floor with them. It seemed to me I would, yet her perfect poise remained undiminished. She didn’t so much as shame them with a glare. She merely waited for them to

quieten.

'We are a team and, as in every good team, each of us has a role to play.' She looked directly at me, but said, 'Frank.'

Thinking she'd crossed wires, I said, 'The name is Ronald. Ronald... Foster.'

She came back at once. 'Then I'm not talking to you, am I?'

Took me by surprise I can tell you. Made me blink, but I was no shrinking violet. I told her from the hip, 'You were looking at me. I thought—'

'You didn't think,' she chopped across me. 'You assumed, you presumed and I find that offensive.'

As she spoke the pains in my head switched on again, swiftly followed by renewed aches all around my body. I winced, though really I wanted to cry out. I think I said, 'Sorry.'

'Stress. That's your problem,' she announced as if she held a string of sure-fire diagnostic qualifications. 'You poke your nose where it's not invited and get worked up about things that don't concern you.'

That was it. Whoever she was, she was no fantasy woman of mine. Pain stoked my embarrassment up to anger. She was a Class A bitch and needed to be set straight. I pointed. 'Those people were laughing at you a minute ago, but *they* didn't offend you. All I did was—'

'Presume,' she cut in icily. '*Those people*, as you so arrogantly call them, are my friends. You are merely insolent, and insolence is not at all what I expect from a team player of your calibre.'

That spun me off balance. Made me think she might be dishing out some kind of backhanded compliment, but if she was, it was way off target. After humiliating me so publicly her sop felt more like poisonous nettles rubbed into an open wound.

'You call this a team!' I threw back. 'It's a bunch of idiots, most too spineless to wipe their own noses. The rest are cackling hyenas.'

Couldn't believe it when she smiled, just a faint pursing of the lips, but a definite smile. Then she spoke to this other guy. 'The task I had earmarked for Ronald will now be yours, Frank.'

I remember thinking he looked like a loser: a sheepish, never-say-boo-to-a-geese loser. That was it. A wrenching spasm burst across my entire abdomen. Felt like my intestines had been drawn out and twisted into vicious knots. Couldn't bear it. Pain ditched me off my chair. Had me writhing about, hands clawing the carpet as I convulsed.

The agony ended as abruptly as it had began, and I was mighty glad. Least I was till I realised I was back in my chair, everyone at ease as if nothing had happened. I was still struggling with this fresh bout of disorientation when Charity's voice stroked my ears.

'Will that suit you, Ronald?'

She was smiling as if we were the dearest of allies. Made me feel like screaming: what's happening to me? I couldn't. I dare not. I already knew. It was fallout from my panic, the behind-the-curtain panic that had thrown me into this *somewhere* and ripped my memory to shreds. I guessed I'd been hit by some kind of mini mind lapse, maybe triggered by pain. But for how long? It could have been minutes or hours since Charity had hacked into me.

All I had was one constant: my anger. I'd been demeaned, callously demeaned, and for no good reason. I couldn't let it go. My lips were tight when I said, 'I demand an apology.'

All eyes turned my way as if I'd lost my wits.

'You're joking, aren't you?' Charity asked. 'You're just being—'

I wasn't having it. 'No,' I chucked back. 'You ridiculed me. Made me feel— I want an apology.'

She caved in like a soft balloon. 'All right, Ronald. I don't fully understand, but if you want an apology you shall have one, full and sincere.' She stood and smoothed

her dress at the hips. 'I apologise unreservedly for any hurt I've caused you. The last thing I want is our friendship to suffer so, please, forgive me.'

I watched her start towards me, her gentle sway compelling. As she drew close, the aroma of her perfume impregnated my whole being. When she embraced me, her warmth stole my consciousness of all other existence – until her kiss pecked my cheek and she pulled away.

Sighing, she asked, 'Am I forgiven?'

I wanted to say, *no*. My anger still throbbed, but I'd lost track of the reason. As gracelessly as I could I mumbled, 'All right.'

She stepped away immediately and returned to her place, then took her own sweet time to settle. When ready she said, 'Good. You all know your tasks so, if there are no more questions, I'll close the meeting.'

Her eyes fixed on me, dark eyes that bore into my hidden core and confirmed she knew I was utterly clueless. I brazened it out and ignored her dare to confess how unglued I really was.

It sounded like a warning when she added, 'I've high hopes for my new Ronald-Susie partnership.'

I frowned at the door long after it had closed behind her. None of my aches were kicking and the freedom scraped years off the way I felt. Around me people were leaving, none in any hurry. I had to wait. What else could I do? As those minutes dragged by I'd have jumped at any available fast forward memory lapse just to get out of there. It didn't happen, yet I must have drifted off to my special place since she took me by surprise.

It was the ill-mannered vamp. She had waited till all the others had gone. 'You called me a cackling hyena,' she accused from far along the table. 'I demand an apology.'

I sagged when I saw who it was. Don't get me wrong. She looked pleasant enough, except for her hair. It was dyed red with yellow streaks. Awful! Figured my harvest of bad luck hadn't ended and I'd been teamed with this

numbskull vixen. After the way she'd behaved with Charity – sniggering the way she had – I reckoned she deserved a slice of payback. 'Sorry... bitch!' I said.

She stood and ambled over. That's when I realised her dress left very little to the imagination, even less when she perched on the table beside me.

'Apology accepted,' she said, catching me out, but she hadn't finished. 'You're old, aren't you? Even your name sounds old.'

I should have let it go, but I bristled and concocted a put-down. 'For your information, I'm not remotely old. What's more, mine is a family name and, unlike you, I take pride in my appearance.'

'Well you look old to me, sweetie,' she shot back, 'and I need someone who can keep up.'

'Shut it,' I said before things got out of hand. 'We've a job to discuss. You lead off. I'm not having you claim my ideas. Basics first: clarify the task.'

I didn't expect her to roll over, yet she shrugged lightly and said, 'It's about this decrepit hag, isn't it. She's having a rough time... can't tell half-past four from Friday. We test her limits then point the senile old bat in the proper direction. Right?'

I smiled, relieved to have something to go on, even something so jaundiced. Then it hit me. Why should I help out some doddering old dame who was having a rough time? I was having a rough time myself and nobody was sending out the cavalry for me. I searched round the whole room. Not sure why. Guess I was looking for something – anything – to grab as a mental anchor.

The bimbo didn't like my silence. 'Right?' she repeated crankily.

'Yeah, right,' I huffed at her. 'Have you all we need?'

She pushed out her chest. 'Trust me, sweetie, I've everything you'll ever need.'

Frustrated, I rubbed my forehead. For sure the last thing I needed was a promiscuous feline with delusions

of charisma. 'No, blowhard,' I corrected her. 'You've nothing I need either inside or outside that excuse of a dress.'

She flinched, I assumed from the brilliance of my rebuff. I was so wrong. She recovered quickly, laughing as she jumped off the table and wandered towards the nearest door.

'Well you've had a good eyeful,' she taunted, then she unloaded both barrels. 'I'll tell Charity that when I tell her you're a fraud. You've no idea what you're doing. Helping out some coffin-dodging old battle axe... huh!'

The bitch had tricked me. I wanted to charge after her and deliver a hefty slap for leading me on, but I couldn't afford the risk. Instead I stood and called out, 'Sorry. I'm not feeling well.'

At first she kept walking. When she turned, concern creased her face. 'Would you like to rest your poor old head on my lap?' Then she dissolved into laughter. Made me fall back in my chair as if clouted in the groin. She was still laughing when she pranced out.

'Damn you, you spiteful whore,' I booted after her, angry at having again been suckered. No one came back. I was left to stew and that's exactly what I did. It took a while for me to catch on. Charity had been playing mind games. She'd set me up. They both had. But I was no pawn. Right then I decided to fight them and right then I began to sweat.

My stomach tightened. I'd been gripped by the coldness of rising panic. Made me shake inside and out, but I knew it wasn't like before. I could still think and still trace the time-line since arriving in Charity's oak-panelled conference room, give or take the odd nonsensical lapse. *Before* was something altogether different. I sensed it. Whatever that was still hovered like a pernicious cloud behind bleak shadows, unspecific and impenetrable.

Not sure how long the attack lasted, but the shakes eventually eased. I gulped in a lot of wobbly breaths

afterwards then washed them down with a few stark realisations. I was in danger of becoming a victim, someone's victim. Cold analysis took a back seat as bubbling intuition told me to discount Charity and the vixen as hirelings. My *someone* – my nemesis – knew the whole truth and plainly didn't want to share. It was as obvious to me as inspiration to a genius. This someone had orchestrated a perverse scheme and singled me out to play headless chicken. Why, I didn't know, yet I did know without doubt that whoever it was had thrown down a gauntlet.

I snorted. No way was this *someone* getting away with blowing my life into an abyss of mind-boggling torment. I resolved to find them whatever it took and, when I did, to make their mistake crystal clear in a very hands-on kind of way.

CHAPTER TWO

I was still in grim contemplation mode when someone chirped up beside me. 'Looks like you need a friend.'

The voice yanked me from my deep struggle with the unfathomable. A woman stood close, not invading my personal space. She wasn't like Charity and definitely not like that double-dealing little whore. I pegged her at a year or two either side of thirty, probably the wrong side. Her face was kind, sympathetic. I held her gaze.

'I'm Susie,' she said. 'My guess is you're Ronald. We'll be working together.'

Relief squashed my tact. 'You mean that conniving red-haired nympho isn't—' Her confusion stopped me. 'Doesn't matter,' I said.

Her eyes flashed indignantly. 'It does matter if a nymphomaniac is impersonating me.'

Though she'd never have made the final twenty in a beauty contest, she was several points up on plain. Thing was, she had no dress sense. A drab blue sack completely spoiled the pretty decent figure I reckoned she hid underneath. Worse, she'd scraped her hair into a pig-ugly looped bun.

'Sounds like Dimple,' she concluded once I'd explained. 'The red hair and yellow highlights are a dead giveaway.' I must have looked quizzical. 'She's rather

proud of her dimpled cheeks, hence *Dimple*.' She frowned. 'Watch her though. She's Charity's protégée. You've not upset her, have you?'

The warning unsettled me. 'I may have dropped in the odd home truth.'

'Then we'd best be on our way,' she decreed. 'Your place will do. We can plan our strategy.'

I went with her to the door feeling like a ninny. I had to say something. 'To be honest, I'm a bit out of my depth.'

'Nothing we can't sort out,' she said confidently. 'Where do you live?'

It was a damn fine question. I waited until we were in the corridor before mumbling, 'That's the first problem.'

She held out her hand, palm up. 'Not really. Give me your keys.' I did. 'Magic, see? Your address quick and easy.'

That confirmed I was a ninny, a stupid one who kept an address fob with his keys. Saying nothing, I matched her pace till we exited the building.

The next thing was her asking me what I thought. Fair enough, normally, but she was asking from inside an apartment, possibly my apartment, and she'd changed into a dull green two-piece that would have depressed a regiment of fogies.

When I didn't answer, her eyes narrowed. 'Are you all right? You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

Ghosts were the least of my worries. I was more interested in how an apartment had materialised around me, especially one that looked so decidedly worldly. A glance told me that everything was bright and ultra modern, the furnishings high on the luxury scale.

I chuckled, tried to. It sounded bitter, even from the comfort of my recliner. Susie was on the sofa next to me, papers beside her and on her lap. I liked her – what I'd seen so far – but no way was I prepared to slobber out my problems just because I'd suffered another memory rift, maybe a chasm this time. I said, 'I'm fine thanks.'

She wasn't buying and asked again what I thought. I had no answer, not even the question, and she knew it. 'Okay,' I fed in cautiously, 'my memory is playing up, that's all. Can't quite get a handle on what we were talking about.'

She gazed back suspiciously. 'Tell me the last thing you remember.'

Her doling out the third degree was a bath in acid I didn't need. I'd just endured a memory jump longer than its conference room predecessor and was still feeling raw. I closed my eyes. Naively I thought I might catch a moonbeam and snatch another jump, just a mini-one. Anything to sidestep her awkward questions. Nothing happened. Nothing ever does when you need it most.

She saw my disappointment. 'I'm still here, but I'll go if you like.'

That wasn't what I wanted, as much as I understood anything of what I wanted. 'It's not you, it's me,' I told her.

Spontaneously she reached for my hand. 'I'm not your doctor, Ronald, but I am a doctor and—'

'You're a doctor!' My surprise blared out as incongruous as birthday balloons bedecking a coffin.

'You know I am. I'm a specialist in several disciplines. You've seen my CV as I've seen yours.' She paused. 'I can help if you'll let me.'

I should have followed up on the CV bits, especially to find out about mine, but her claim to medical credentials had tangled me in irrational disbelief. 'You look too... young,' I blurted like a dork.

Maybe my fatuous wince saved me. Either way, she released my hand and spoke softly. 'I was fast tracked through my graduate medical education, so I'll assume you're paying a compliment.'

I stared, my whole face parading scepticism like flags round a gaping hole. 'Oh,' was all I could think to say, short of telling her that I'd have believed a monkey

dolled up in graduation gowns ahead of her claim to medical brilliance. She just didn't seem that clever.

She stood. 'We must be honest with each other, Ronald. If you'd prefer to work with someone like Dimple, that's fine by me. But I want your decision now.'

I shook my head. 'Not Dimple.'

She sat again but stayed perched on the seat ready for a fast getaway. 'Then tell me what's wrong so we can work through it together.'

I felt like a juicy pumpkin trapped between a runaway train and unyielding buffers. I still thought twice before saying, 'It's not easy.'

What came back scraped the marrow from my bones. 'No kidding,' I heard. 'You made a right mess of it!'

I squeezed my eyes and tried to bury the impossible. The voice was undeniably familiar, but it wasn't Susie's. Instinct told me I was lying down, my only covering a thin bed sheet. When a knee crashed into my back it energised every dread I was wrestling to expunge. A clutch of sharp fingernails followed, all clawing viciously into my thigh. Hurt and fuddled, I turned. All I could see was a few yellow-streaked tufts of red hair. More than enough. I sat bolt upright and threw back the sheet. Dimple's and my own nakedness lay exposed.

'Impotent git!' she jeered, eyes vehement with scorn.

As I shuddered in turmoil she seized the moment to flaunt herself, shamelessly cavorting.

The best I could do was croak, 'How did you get here? Where's Susie?'

'Want a threesome?' she sneered. 'What for? I've seen more zing at geriatric sleepovers.'

'Answer me,' I gasped, desperate for anything to crack the inexplicable.

'Well, sweetie,' she cooed after shifting to kneel, 'let's take each question in turn. First, how did I get here?' She threw open her arms. 'Use your eyes, muttonhead. This is my room in my house where you came to beg me to work with you... and beg me to be friendly, in a sexually

explicit sort of way.'

That emptied my lungs I can tell you, left me grappling with the inconceivable. She took advantage and whacked me ferociously across the face. As I careered sideways, I became easy prey. At full force she shoved me out of bed, then manoeuvred to foot pummel my head.

'As for Susie,' she yelled, 'who the blazes knows and who the blazes cares!'

I'd absorbed a whole bevy of kicks before my wits regrouped. I made a grab for her ankles. Took most of my strength to keep her flat on the bed. Even then she squirmed on her back trying to break my hold. When she failed, she stilled and spat. Her saliva burst onto my face then slid down to mix with blood from my battering.

I could recall wrenching her off the bed, as I could recall my first punch. What I couldn't remember was what happened next, any more than I could remember how I came to be back in the conference room at the low end of the polished table.

Charity was at the head of the room, her beautiful body snug in a daring yellow gown. 'Do you think you've done well?' she asked.

To put it mildly, I wasn't exactly feeling like a chat, yet my eyes couldn't keep off her.

When I didn't answer, she said, 'Are you planning to ask about Dimple?'

A tremor ran through me, more an earthquake. Since last exiting that room, I'd suffered three serious memory lapses, huge jumps that had hurled me from one reality to another. I should have been shrieking from the rooftops. At the very least I should have been thumping my head against the wooden panels. Yet calmness was already beginning to settle me, the same calmness I'd felt in that room before. Not trusting myself to speak, I simply arched my eyebrows.

Charity went on serenely. 'She's doing well

considering the beating she's suffered. A most violent attack.' I gulped. She sighed then added, 'We've asked, of course, but she won't say who did it... though we're sure she knows him. Must be someone she likes otherwise she wouldn't be protecting him.'

I'd already been so trounced that my confusion was boiling in high pressure overdrive. The added steam of Dimple apparently liking and wanting to protect me almost blew a gasket.

Charity's tone didn't change. 'I see your hands are rather messy, Ronald, and – if you don't mind me pointing it out – you have bruising around the eyes and your nose is... nasty. In fact your whole face is a disgrace.'

My blood ran extra cold as I steeled myself for the inevitable.

'Tell me,' she asked with no emotion, 'why do you suppose the attacker copped out and failed to kill her?'

I simply gaped and she simply waited.

'Not fair I suppose,' she said when our silence had churned on long enough to make butter. 'How could you know what the attacker was thinking unless you were the attacker?'

She banged the table. Had I not been zipped in, her shock tactic would have shot me out of my skin like a bullet from an oily barrel.

She just carried on calmly, the bitch. 'Thing is, unless Dimple changes her mind and testifies, the attacker will get away with it. Circumstantial evidence – such as knowing a person to have been with her near the time – won't be enough to convict, no matter if that same person bears all the hallmarks of having been in a fight.'

Her smile came and went, its root almost certainly grounded in my blatant relief. Then she hit me with the sting.

'It's to be expected that the guilty man will be extra nice to her, better than nice.' She paused for me to look. 'So, Ronald, what do you think he ought to do, from your

purely disinterested standpoint?

I had to answer. Playing the game, I said, 'Tell her he's sorry, I suppose. Tell her he appreciates what she's doing for him.'

'Is that all?'

'And be nice,' I bolted on. 'Better than nice.'

'Yes indeed,' she agreed. 'Dimple holds the key to this man's freedom and, if I know Dimple, she'll expect to be treated well.'

Susie came in behind me, but I was too busy processing Charity's barbed message to notice.

'I had a call,' she said. 'I came at once.'

I sneaked a peep and felt a stir of comfort, till the situation butted in. As I figured it, Susie was the only one worth a thread of trust, yet she'd soon be hearing all about me and Dimple. That would make her ram two and two together and she'd be off faster than a peregrine falcon spotting prey.

After waving her to sit next to me, Charity said, 'Our friend here is not himself. He rather foolishly slipped and fell down some stairs. Now he's something of a mess.'

Susie glanced my way, face unsmiling. Can't say why, but that glance made me think it wasn't the first time she'd seen my kicked-about face. To my amazement she took gentle hold of my hand under the table. Almost made me forget about Charity, yet Susie's bleak grey outfit and the hash she'd made of her mousy hair stalled me. Couldn't help wishing she had just a breath of Charity's style.

Though the stair-slip explanation hadn't struck me as a hint, Susie took it. 'You'd like me to look after him?'

'You are his doctor.'

I knew that was wrong. 'No,' I began, but Susie emphatically cut across me.

'Yes. Following Charity's instructions, I arranged a transfer from your former doctor. I have your full medical and social history.'

Thin ice or not, there were limits. Angered, I said, 'Don't I get a say in this?' They fish-eyed me. Neither spoke. When my brain caught up, I mumbled, 'Whatever.' Not much else I could say.

'Take him home,' Charity told Susie. 'Work your magic and make him fit for purpose.'

That was it. 'I'm not a machine!' I rasped. 'I don't need greasing or pampering.'

Charity's dark eyes held me. 'Trust me, Ronald, no one will be pampering you. Fit for purpose is what I said and fit for purpose is what you must become, or you'll be dismissed from this charitable body and suffer the consequences. Do I make myself clear?'

Susie dived in quickly, already on her feet. 'Come on,' she said. 'Best we get you home. You can't afford any more slips.'

END OF SAMPLE

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