

# The Devil's Charity

by

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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 thirties, maybe, give or take a decade. 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 realized I was in a whopping great oak-paneled 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 emphasized 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, and a woman 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.

I couldn't help it. None too discreetly, I said, 'Wow!' One look had turned me into a sappy 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 we weren'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 recognized. 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 tantalizingly 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 had 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—'

She chopped right across me. 'You didn't think. 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 had 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 caliber.'

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. The pain ditched me off my chair. Had me writhing about, my 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 realized 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 apologize 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! I figured my harvest of bad luck hadn't ended and I'd been teamed with this numbskull vixen. After the way she had 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 realized 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; and 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 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 ax ... 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 had 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-paneled 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 and I gulped in a lot of wobbly breaths, then washed them down with a few stark realizations. 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.