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# MR FROST'S CONTRACT

Phil Parker

I don't have much time. He's coming back for me. But I'm a writer, I need to put pen to paper to explain. To confess my mistakes.

Proud. Spoiled.

Everyone used those words to define me. Like Celia, as she explained why she would no longer represent me, despite the loss of income. She'd seen what too much money did to people and turned her nose up as she said it. I told her I didn't care, publishers were falling over themselves for my work, I didn't need her any longer. It might have been true now but she'd believed in me when I first set out, took risks and guided me to become a decent writer. We'd been friends for more than ten years. My wife hadn't lasted that long. I was going to miss her.

I sat in my library sipping warm champagne, absently watching crows bicker over something on the croquet lawn. I'd taken the bottle out of the cellar for Celia but she'd refused even a glass, I drank too much of the stuff apparently. With nothing better to do than bemoan the fact that people can't cope with the success of others, I chugged down the rest of the bottle.

The sun dipped behind the pine trees at the bottom of the garden and in the twilight, I



could see toads. They had the same bulbous eyes, brown leathery skin and powerful back legs but if one got too close, they could sink needle-sharp teeth into a leg, or take a chunk out of a neck. I hadn't realised these animals could be so vicious, or so big – the size of a large cat - these were toads on steroids.

I rang the bell. It took forever until Wagner slouched into the room. Needless to say, as my friends had vanished, so had the staff willing to work for me. I had no idea which agency had supplied Wagner but it was likely one hell-bent on revenge. Apart from his rude and sloppy conduct, he had to be the ugliest creature I had ever seen. He reminded me of the toads, eyes too big for his head, too many teeth for his pronounced jaw and skin covered in warts and blisters. He also had a black tongue. I'd once asked him what he'd eaten but all I got was a nonchalant shrug. I'd decided it was liquorice. I'd had a friend at school who ate the stuff all the time, he'd had a black tongue too.

'I'll be dining on my own. I'll eat at seven o'clock.'

He stood in front of me, dressed in the black suit I insisted he wore, in his perpetual slouch. He maintained it was a spinal deformity but I called it laziness. He sniffed and wiped his nose on the shiny patch on his sleeve.

'You've got a visitor at six-thirty.'

He sounded like his throat was full of phlegm that hadn't been cleared in a month.

'Who is it?'

Something guttural was spoken but I didn't catch any of it. In the early days I'd had the lazy so-and-so write things down for me, until I found he was almost illiterate.

'Dear God, Wagner!' I bellowed. It actually made the pathetic creature wince. 'I haven't invited anyone. I certainly wouldn't ask guests to this place after dark. You must have got it wrong.'

The same guttural sound and the words, six thirty.

'Anyway, how do you know about this appointment, when I don't?'

'Message.'

For the briefest of moments, our eyes met and I swear there was a smile on his grey lips.

'Your contract has expired.'

I watched him stumble out of the library, bemused. Before I could work out what the moron was talking about, my attention was drawn to the French windows. The toads had apparently abandoned their aggressive behaviour and were head-butting the glass. Not with any real force, rather as though they didn't understand why they couldn't progress any further, there were slimy marks where their skin touched the glass. I stepped closer, there had to be a hundred or more of them. That was when I noticed all the crows, perched on rose bushes and ornamental apple trees, like that scene in Hitchcock's film.



I pulled the curtain across the window. Wagner could call the pest exterminator tomorrow.

I don't know what it was that caused the name to percolate to the surface but I suddenly made sense of Wagner's appalling diction. I had to admit to experiencing similar uncertainties where my visitor's name was concerned. I'd assumed he was Greek, it had the kind of suffix you found in that language. Something-osceles. Not Isosceles because that was the triangle. And there was something like toffee in there as well, I remember that because the man's skin looked like it had been chewed and spat out.

I sat down in my armchair again, reached for the champagne flute and realised I'd emptied it. I got up and poured myself a generous brandy, if I was being visited by a boring lawyer, I'd need it. He'd definitely been a lawyer. We'd talked contracts.

But that was all we'd done. Talked.

I hadn't hit the big time then, that all started a few weeks later. Celia had been touting my novel around publishers and getting nowhere. Only the week before, she'd had that conversation that all agents have with failing writers, do you have another career to fall back on? Then I hit the jackpot. Publishers recognised my talent, books got published, international translations covered the globe and film rights were gobbled up at auctions that needed Monopoly money. I only remembered the Greek guy because it felt like Fate had heard his offer to help me become famous.

Suddenly everything fell into place. This swine was coming back to scam me, to claim that he'd been the instigator of my success. Well, I'd soon kick him out on his ear, I hadn't signed as much as a napkin so he had nothing to bind me to him. I finished off another brandy on the back of that thought.



Brandy and champagne affect me the same way every time. I fell asleep in my arm chair. I woke and, still not quite with it, stretched my legs and hit something solid. I opened my eyes.

I saw a jaw full of teeth, red with blood. A head with horns. Eyes staring at me.

I screamed, retreated into my armchair, babbling for help, pleading for the monster to leave me alone. It reared up over the top of me, arms outstretched with sharp claws.

I closed my eyes and wished I'd done things differently with my life.

And waited for the evisceration to start. And waited. And waited.

I opened one eye ever so slightly, still expecting the attack.

Nothing. No monster. No attack.

Breath couldn't fill my lungs fast enough but at the same time I wept so hard I almost choked. Only by gripping the arm of the chair, feeling its solidity, could I tell that what I'd just experienced was a dream. I took deep breaths to calm myself so I could work out how such terror could be generated by an hallucination. Brandy and champagne had never had that effect before. I felt slightly faint, I was hyperventilating of course. I sat on the edge of the armchair, head between my legs, ready to inhale.

On the plush carpet, hoof marks.

The world started to spin. I gripped the chair to stop myself from being flung away.

It was real. The thing had been there. It hadn't been my imagination.

I screamed for Wagner, screamed the place down, unable to abandon the refuge of my armchair. Eventually, unconcerned by my hysteria, he ambled into the library. I gabbled. I don't know what I expected of him; to have witnessed the creature too? To have an explanation? To reassure me I wasn't going mad?

He stood in front of me, sniffed and wiped snot on his sleeve.

'Your visitor is here.'

My gibbering tried to convey my unwillingness to receive guests. It must have failed because Wagner moved to the library door, opened it wider to allow in the man I'd last met ten years ago. It had to have been around the same time, just before New Year. He wore a heavy grey overcoat and Fedora pulled jauntily over his head, his chewed toffee complexion was no different except he had blisters on his cheek and forehead. He moved towards me, hand out.

'Mister Frost. Good to see you again.'



My stomach churned, there was a real chance I was about to be sick on his patent leather shoes. I looked up into that face, at the unusual elliptical irises; why hadn't I noticed that feature before?

'Things have certainly changed since we last met. I trust you've been satisfied with the arrangement?'

I jammed my jaws shut, vomiting over a guest is never polite, no matter the company.

He smiled. Smiled with impossibly red lips, not even lipstick could create that effect.

'But, as we say in the business, all good things must come to an end.'

I fought the vomit down, I was not going to be scammed.

'Don't. Know. You.'

His smile broadened and he pointed to the table, next to my brandy glass was a business card, black background, red lettering. Glossy.



*Mephistopheles. Your dreams. Our business.*

He said he's coming back for me. Midnight. There will be no escape. Creatures out of nightmare wait outside. Wagner stands over me with a gun. All I can do is write this confession, ironic really. I wanted success, said I've give anything for it. But it spoiled me. I let my pride get in the way.

If he gives you the same choice, to have your dreams fulfilled, turn him down. Whatever you do, turn him down. Success isn't worth the price.