

"The Return"

By A.L. Likely

Of all the side effects of no longer possessing a soul, Garrett Martin found that adapting to a new center of gravity was the most troublesome. He was never a clumsy man, and though it had been two years, he still tripped when he got out of bed every morning. His body seemed to reset while he slept and it would take at least two cups of coffee and an hour on the treadmill to get back into alignment.

These "frequent bouts of dizziness" were made known to him before he sold his soul, along with a list of other possible side effects that would make most pharmaceutical companies nod in appreciation. There were many others that he could check off of that list, but this one was the worst for him because it started off each day on the wrong foot.

*Tomorrow is going to be different*, he thought and looked around at his bedroom. It was indeed an upgrade from where he was two years ago. He moved up from a divey bungalow on the north end for a four thousand square foot house that sat on six acres. He loved this house, and he loved his job. He didn't quit like you hear most people do when they win the jackpot lottery. No, he stayed on and worked like he didn't need the money. He didn't. He even started having fun, making more money in sales the last two years then he ever had, and that with a recession going on.

As for the money he received in the deal, he decided to invest most of it and see where the chips fell and they had landed high on the mark.

"It's okay," he said to himself. With an unsteady gait he walked to his closet. "Tomorrow's going to be different." Today he was going to get a *return*. His contract came with a three year guarantee. He figured there would be some hoops he'd have to jump through; With this line of business it *had* to be a given. It might take all day, but he wasn't going to leave without his soul back.

Garret opened the door to The Red City Market and strolled into the showroom. He was greeted by the same exquisite creature that had greeted him before. He thought her name was Carol, but another side effect to not having a soul was misremembering people's names just enough to be offensive.

"Welcome back Mr. Martin," she beamed. "To what do we owe this visit?"

"Hi, um, Cheryl?" he asked, knowing that that wasn't right either.

"Carla," she corrected while giggling. "That's alright Mr. Martin, it's been a few years. What can we do for you today?"

"I'd like to speak with someone about a return," he stated, trying to make his voice firm. While they may not be holding pitchforks, there was something smooth and serpent-like about the way that they conducted business, and he wasn't going to be the same pushover that walked through those doors two years ago.

"I'm sorry to hear that you are dissatisfied Mr. Martin, please follow me. Terrance Bradley is in charge of our *Hold* department which oversees returns, and he should be available to take care of you." She turned and began to walk to the back of the showroom to where the offices were located.

Garrett followed and could not pull his eyes away from her round, firm ass, and how her skirt hung on it. It swished and swayed, teasing him as she walked. After a few steps, he couldn't help himself, and reached out and pinched it. She stopped walking, looked at him over her shoulder and said, "I see not all of the side effects have abated." She giggled and kept walking.

Garrett's flushed face hadn't recovered from the previous distress of forgetting her name, only to return, but now to a shade more violet. He kept back from her a few extra paces, and forced his hands into his pockets, but he still couldn't pull his eyes away from her skirt.

Carla rapped a knuckle on the office door and opened it up, "Mr. Bradley, I have a Mr. Martin. He would like to discuss a return."

The handsome young man behind the desk clicking away on his keyboard, gave her a quick glance and said, "Of course, please Mr. Martin have a seat. If you will give me a moment to wrap up this email."

Garrett gave Carla a purposeful grazing against her body as he passed her in the doorway. She gave him a fiendish smile and closed the door behind her on her way out. Garrett sat down across the desk from the man, and tried to calm himself, which was another side effect; It took much longer now.

"So Mr. Martin, do you have your original contract with you? Makes the return process go quicker if I can just pull the information from it." Terrance smiled at him as he spoke.

"Yes, I do," Garrett said, handing the vellum document over to him. "How long does this take?"

"About ten minutes. I just have to pull up your account and reverse the transaction," Terrance explained with a nonchalant demeanor.

"Oh, I guess I was expecting something more confrontational," Garrett said with relief.

"No." He smiled as he said, "As agreed you have three years to change your mind with no questions asked." Terrance read and

typed Garrett's account number into his computer. His groomed brow furrowed as he read something from his screen. "We do have an issue it seems."

"I knew it," Garret flared. "Deceiving up to the last moment."

Terrence looked at him and held his hand up to calm him, "We have been nothing if not completely honest with you Mr. Martin. We have disclosed any side effects that one can experience, and have given you three years to live with your decision before the deal closes. Our records show that your soul was one of a few dozen that were released during a containment breach caused by the earthquake a year ago. Our records also show that a certified letter explaining the situation was signed and received by you after the incident."

Garrett sat back in the chair and thought. Yes, he remembered getting the letter but never opened it. He was drunk with the pleasures of his new wealth and figured it was just junk mail. "My apologies, I did receive it, I just never read it. What happens to it once it's released?"

"Well, it will try to find it's owner but since you are currently marked in order for us to remove it, it probably moved onto the nearest living thing that doesn't have a soul. Typically trees or more robust plant life," Terrence explained like a fifth grade teacher.

"So what? Remove the mark then go hunting for it," Garret huffed.

"No, it's been far too long for that. Even if we were to locate it, you'll never get it to release," Terrence said returning his attention to his computer and clicking away again on the keyboard. "But we are willing to give you another soul and you can keep fifty percent of the life you exchanged it for."

"Someone else's soul? Is that possible?"

"Of course, think of it like getting a skin graft or a kidney transplant. Doctor's have to trick the body and the transplant organ to get them to accept each other, then after a bit of time, it's back to running like clockwork. You're still you, with perhaps a few minor changes, but nothing that would impede you from living your life." Terrence added after seeing the look on Garrett's face.

"What kind of changes?" Garrett asked. "I mean, the side effects from not having one are enough to make me want to end it, you know? I don't want the soul of some serial killer that I'm going to have to reign in. Bad enough that I don't have any impulse control with the women I'm around, but to have the soul of some lunatic in me doesn't sound like it would be much better."

"We don't deal in sick souls Mr. Martin," Terrance stated sounding a little offended. He cleared his throat and explained. "The side effects that you are referring to, like the loss of impulse control, that happens with *no* soul. A *sick* soul is a weak one, so people like you're referencing to, serial killers and the like, typically behave as though they don't have a soul because theirs is too frail to do its job. I say again, we don't deal in sick souls. The changes I'm referring to with a soul that isn't yours has to do with taste in food, or musical preferences or the types of people you're attracted to. They may seem like minor details, and they are quite manageable, but they are also noticeable."

"So what if it's not a fit? I mean, what if I find myself in the same jam?" Garret asked. He scratched his goatee as he thought about it.

"Tell you what, I can have legal draw up a new contract that will give you eighteen months with the new soul. If at that time, you find that it won't work, we can grant you a one-time exchange or you can sell it back to us."

"Alright, but how do you go about splitting my life up into fifty percent," Garret asked switching to the other side of the agreement. He had made up his mind to give the new soul a try, but he wasn't going to bite if this side of the deal wasn't sweet enough.



"Well, as per your original contract I see you went for the Emerald package which includes a guaranteed life span minimum of ninety-four years, a minimum net worth of ten million dollars, and an increased penis size of three additional inches," Terrance explained without faltering. "Unlike some of our customers, you managed to increase your net worth instead of squander it, and I see here that it has increased to seventeen million. So, we could divide this several ways, option A will allow you to keep your whole net worth but reduce your lifespan minimum to eighty-eight years, and you will only have your original penis size; Option B reduces your net worth to thirty percent of what it is now, your minimum life span to ninety and you can keep one added inch, and Option C allows you to keep eighty percent of your net worth and additional penis size, but you will have no minimum lifespan guarantee."

"Make option B have forty-five percent and you got a deal," Garrett said after a few moments of consideration.

Terrance considered then nodded, "I think those terms are acceptable on our end. I will send this up to legal for them to draft for your review. In the meantime, you can help yourself to some coffee in the lounge or please feel free to wander the showroom. It'll be about a half hour."

Garrett stepped out of The Red City Market, took in a deep breath and felt good. The sensation of a soul returning into your body was not so dissimilar to being on an elevator that descends smoothly, but suddenly. Once the sensation passed, Garrett thought that for the first time in two years his feet were on solid ground again, but wearing a different pair of shoes.

The smell of Thai food from down the street made his stomach growl with hunger, and he decided to stroll in for lunch. He normally didn't care for Thai food, but he supposed maybe he would now, and that was okay. Maybe it would be good for him to like more things? As he walked, he reflected on how he had absolutely no desire to grab Carla's ass on his way out of the market and felt relieved knowing that his impulses were back under control.

He walked into the restaurant and waited to be seated as the sign instructed. A Thai man in his mid twenties walked up to greet him. Garrett noticed how toned his arms were and what a wonderful smile he had.

He followed him to be seated and couldn't tear his eyes from him. "I've never eaten here before. What would you recommend?"

The man smiled and said, "You should try our spring rolls."

Garrett felt a stiffening between his legs as the words left the man's mouth, and it dawned on him that he was gay, and this man before him was the most exotic and sexy thing he had ever seen. He wished he could ask him to sit and join him. He wanted to know him, not just fuck him. "Sounds great."

Sipping his water as he waited for his order of spring rolls, he contemplated his current predicament. Was it a predicament?

"Ah fuck it," he laughed to himself. "I got over a year to change my mind."