

Oh, Here!

I screwed up, big time. End of quarter sales figures were about to be tallied and that dick Cromwell was poised to be named Soul Man of the Month for the third straight time. I was bringing in business hot and heavy, planning to squeak past him at the finish line, so I may not have properly vetted the girl. But how in the here could I have known she'd uncover a loophole in a contract that hasn't changed in millennia?

I hesitate to send the email that will notify management of the problem because my boss is going to kill me. Well, not *kill*; that's one of the few things he can't do. No, I was killed by a cab driver in 1982. Buck Sullivan didn't hit me in a cross walk or cause me to die in a fiery crash, he shot me eight times.

Twice in the head, four times in the back, once in the thigh and once where the sun don't shine. Bucky and I laugh about it over a beer every now and then, but he wasn't laughing the day he came home early and emptied his Glock into me while I was ménage à troising his second wife and the grown daughter from his first marriage.

Anyway, I can't technically be killed, but the guy I work for is famous for thinking up creative ways to make people *wish* they were dead. Send.

To princeofd@ninecircles.com
Subject Contract No. F-358.13.21-34

May have hit a little snag on this one. Would like some face time with you to explore options before a copy goes to the client. Lunch?

Little snag is an undersell, but I can massage the details better in a sitdown with him. I've already asked one of our lawyers to do some research on the down-low, see if we have any wiggle room on this thing.

I was in a dead heat with Cromwell less than an hour before the quarterly filing cutoff when I spotted her eating a vending machine sandwich on a bench in Central Park. Yeah, I could go anywhere in the world to find clients, but what can I say? I heart New York and it's a target-rich environment.

She was perfect, which is to say a hot mess. Michelle Lachnegar was around thirty. That's years old *and* pounds overweight. If you called her hair mousey, rodents would give you the finger. Her outfit screamed thrift shop and

she had the defeated look of a virgin ten years past her Best If Used By date. Exactly the kind of girl who can't say no to me.

Taking up a position at the other end of the bench, I draped my left leg over my right, turning slightly so it looked natural when I stretched my right arm along the bench back. My fingertips were twelve inches from her shoulder, close enough to make her aware of my presence, but far enough away to preclude her freaking out.

“What would you say if I told you I have the power to give you everything you ever wanted?”

Her slow turn was studied, as if she had expected me to chat her up, and she seemed less impressed by my charcoal Armani suit and crisp lilac Versace tie than *I* had expected.

“What makes you think I don't already have everything I ever wanted?”

That caught me off guard, but in a good way. There is a sameness to this job, and I watch incredulity transition predictably to avarice a dozen times a week. Michelle was a refreshing force that inspired me to up my game.

“Touché.” I gave her a look of admiration, then soft-launched into my pitch, closing from the first word.

Several misconceptions exist about the deal we offer, so let me clarify for you, as I did for Michelle. That signature on the dotted line does *not* have to be in blood. The client's, mine or anyone else's. And yes, my firm has the power to grant a “wish” (though corporate paperwork defines it as a customer petition) but management allows sales personnel the leeway to offer as many as three of

these to prospective clients who might balk at signing over their soul for only one of the big gets: love, money, fame, power and beauty. To ensure a quick closing I put the trifecta on the table right up front.

Michelle listened to my spiel, an eyebrow cocked skeptically, and with a smile that could only be described as sardonic. Although the afternoon was cool my armpits were damp, the way they get after a good workout. I rested my case and willed her to say yes. Fast.

“Let me make sure I understand this,” she purred. “In return for my immortal soul, the entity you work for will acquiesce to three demands of mine.”

Her word choice should have red-flagged me. Most clients call them wishes. Sometimes dreams. Demand was a new one for me, but then I’ve only been at this a few decades. And *acquiesce*? Who talks like that?

Checking my Rolex, knowing I was down to the wire, I hastily reviewed the specifics: she could make three requests. Each had to be laid out in a single, grammatically correct sentence. (We do this to intimidate people into keeping it simple. Rather than risk making a boo-boo and losing it all, clients normally stick to the basics: I want to be rich; I would like to be beautiful; I want so-and-so to fall in love with me.) She would enter those requests on the second page of the contract in her own handwriting, then we would initial the entries and sign at the bottom of page three.

“At that point we’re locked in, right? No backsies?”

I laughed. Most clients never even consider they might someday want out

of the deal. They're generally gullible enough to believe money or good looks will solve their problems and make them happy. When they learn differently they start whining about how they didn't really *understand* the contract, how unfair it is for them to have to give up so much to get so little.

Michelle Lachnegar envisioned that possibility and was looking ahead for an escape clause. Or at least that's what I thought she was doing. When I made it clear the deal would be ironclad the minute we both signed, she nodded and said she'd like to think about it. She asked for twenty-four hours to consider the offer.

The cardinal rule of sales is you don't let a customer walk away to "think about it." You close right then and there; let them second-guess themselves on their own time. Anyway, how hard was her decision going to be? Guaranteed she'd ask for beauty, then true love; that's what *all* the pudgy plain girls want. The third choice would be the x-factor. Maybe money. Maybe a long, long life. Despite what the beauty queen wannabes say in the "*See, I'm not like, you know, shallow*" portion of the pageant, no one ever wastes a thought for world peace or an end to childhood hunger.

I poured on the charm and Michelle finally caved, though not before snarking about "pushy" sales tactics. I handed her the contract and my Mont Blanc Meisterstück, then waited anxiously for her to write her choices in the space provided. It felt as if she wrote forever and when she finally finished, I practically snatched the contract out of her hands in my haste to beat the deadline. Telling her I'd put the copy in the mail as soon as it was registered, I

grabbed my pen and got the here outta there.

Uh-oh. Email from the boss.

To renfrow<salesteamstyx@ninecircles.com>
Subject WTF?

Are you kidding me? This could bring down the entire company. My office, ten minutes. And you'd better have some answers.

How did he learn the details? I haven't put the hard copy into the system yet, and the only person I told was the lawyer who...*Cromwell!* That jerk's been on the job since 1658 and has spies everywhere. I should have known he'd find out and sabotage me.

Walking to the boss's office I was sweating bullets. Which is technically possible, I suppose, as a couple of Buck Sullivan's slugs are still on board.

"Renfrow! Get your ass in here!" The bellow was familiar, though it had rarely been directed at me, the successful young hustler who had reliably filled the reservations book of Hades with the promised souls of reality "stars" (who always ask for fame, but forget to ask for talent), pageant winners, heiresses and female politicians. For the record, Hillary turned me down flat, but I was able to sign an unknown governor in her stead.

The Prince of Darkness wasn't alone. The rest of the sales team for my division sat nervously on the scattered couches, and a four-deep wall liner of lawyers—we have lots of them—made the huge space feel smaller, but no cozier.

I sat in front of the desk, a skull-rendered interp of a classic Le Corbusier design, and told the story. Listening to my own words I realized, as I'm sure everyone else in the room did, that Michelle Lachnegar had played me like a Dollar Store violin. Then the boss picked up the offending contract and read her first petition aloud.

“Any man who attempts to force himself sexually on a man, woman, child or animal, other than within the context of erotic play between mutually consenting adults, will, ten seconds prior to the possibility of penetration, experience the sensation of having been kicked in the testicles with enough force to elicit a scream and induce vomiting.”

I was fairly close to upchucking myself when he laid the paper on the bony desktop and turned his penetrating gaze on me.

“Renfrow,” he said, softly, silkily.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you aware that I have recently completed, at considerable expense, an eighty million-square-foot expansion of Sector Bravo?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And would you mind telling everyone who I keep in Sector Bravo, packed in at the rate of three per square foot?”

“Uh, that would be men who have committed rape, sir.”

“Rape, exactly.”

He was nodding and smiling at me, a father acknowledging his slow child has given the correct answer. But then the smile morphed into a look of fury

and the voice rose from silk to shriek.

“So, tell me, what am I going to do with eighty million square feet of warehouse space if I LOSE MY FUCKING RAPERS?!”

The rhetorical reeked even more than the sulfur, so I remained quiet while he first seethed, then waxed sarcastic.

“Hey, I know what I can do. I can fill that space with the overflow of souls from Sector Foxtrot, the ones who have committed *non-sexual* acts of violence. Your war criminals, your murderers, your wife beaters, your child batterers. Plenty of them to go around, right, Renfrow?”

Swallowing hard, I watched him study the contract on his desk. Yeah, as if he hadn't already memorized Michelle's second request.

“Oh, wait. I won't be able to fill my shiny new accommodations with violent offenders of the non-sexual variety, will I? Tell the room why.”

Cromwell squirmed in his seat, barely able to suppress his grin. I was his first real competition in more than three hundred years and he was loving this.

With a bad case of dry-mouth I explained Michelle's second wish, which would cause any intended violence or pain, whether emotional or physical, to be experienced by the inflictor, rather than the potential victim. She had cleverly, if tortuously, phrased it so even a finger on the button that launched a drone for a kill-strike would result in the death of the button-pusher, not the target. Michelle had, in effect, figured out a way to end all war and human violence.

“I lose my rapers, my war criminals. I even lose my beer Bubbas pounding

the missus to a bloody pulp. What in the here were you thinking, Renfrow?” Without waiting for a response, the boss read out Michelle’s third petition, eliciting groans from the crowd.

I felt every stare in the room, each an accusation that my slipshod vetting was about to bring down, arguably, the most successful enterprise in history. Numero tres would dry up virtually all sources of revenue for us, as it ended the venerable tradition of screwing people over financially. Bankers—going all the way back to when they were simply moneylenders—had been our bread and butter forever. And, dude, we were *really* gonna miss Wall Street.

Once the room went quiet again, I heard Cromwell’s snort of enjoyment. Unable to lash out at my satanic accuser, I directed my frustration toward my rival.

“Shut up, Ollie. We’re trying to solve a problem, so be a professional, for Christ’s sake!”

I realized my error even before the crowd gasped; the Prince doesn’t tolerate any mention of his rival. Cromwell’s smile was triumphant, and I knew I should have ignored his disdain for now and chosen a private moment in the near future to advise you-know-who that Oliver’s nickname for him was the *Prick of Darkness*.

With bigger fish to fry, broil, torment and impale on a pitchfork, the boss let my profanity slide. Running his fingers wearily through his hair, deftly avoiding the twin protrusions, he turned to a scholarly guy in the back of the room.

“Witkowski, any chance she made a mistake?”

“No, sir. My guys went through it a dozen times. She’s wordy, but her grammar’s tighter than a snake’s anus.”

With his last possible out skunked, the big guy sagged in his executive chair, hands dangling limply at the ends of the femurs that constituted its armrests.

“Well, that’s it, then. We’re done.” He picked up the contract as though it were a turd. Or a rosary. “But when Michelle Lachnegar dies, I will spend eternity making her my bitch.”

The room went quiet again. Then, from behind the wall of lawyers, a clearing of the throat.

“Sir? I think I may have a way to get us out of this.”

The suits parted to let Sheinberg come to the fore. The Prince looked at the lawyer (did I mention we have a lot of them?) without much hope, but Sheinberg opened his mouth and blew us away with the simplicity of the solution.

“This company—your company, sir—was founded on a bedrock of lying and cheating. It’s who we are, what we stand for.”

Sure it was inspirational, but at that point I couldn’t tell where he was going with the rah-rah talk.

“Even our mission statement,” Sheinberg continued, “says ‘the client is always screwed.’ Well, I say *screw Miss Lachnegar.*”

First, he pointed out, Michelle had no way to get in touch with me.

Second, she had nothing in writing. And third, even if she had both, what could she do if we failed to honor the contract? Sue us? Our competition lived up to his promises, not us.

Worried I might slither off the hook, Cromwell protested that such a course of action went against long tradition and might damage our brand.

“On the contrary,” crowed Sheinberg. “This reinforces it. Everyone we approach already knows we’re scumbags, right? So, do you think shafting the occasional idiot on a deal is going to sully our *good name*?”

The air-quotes he put around his last two words brought the house down as relief surged through the room. The boss roared with delight, I was back-patted and kudos’d for kicking up our badass rep a notch, and Cromwell slunk out of the office. Douche.

Once the crowd had cleared, though, the Prince warned me not to cross paths with Michelle Lachnegar again, even by accident. In fact, he strongly suggested I delete New York from my cold-call sheet for a century or so. Maybe grab some of that low-hanging fruit in Hollywood. Or D.C.

To jcsdad@skymansion.org
Subject Almost Had The B*st*rd

Missed again, but came really close this time. Will lay low a few decades then try a different angle with a new sales rep. As ever, I will sacrifice my own soul, if need be, to protect you and the company.

Michael