

One: Soul for Lease

Doris Duncely firmly believed she was just about the most unfortunate fifteen-year-old girl in the world. She didn't have a best friend. She couldn't remember ever having had any real friends; she'd never been invited to a sleepover or a birthday party, and she knew for a fact her parents didn't love her. After all, they'd never taken her to Disneyland or brought her a pet to play with. Nor had they read stories to her when she was young, and they squabbled and bickered all day long, placing the blame for their unhappy state squarely on the shoulders of their only child.

Truth to tell, Doris was at least partly to blame. She was indeed 'a most unattractive girl', as her mother often pointed out. Her father said she was 'a plain Jane', with a shake of the head and the sort of look on his face that showed he thought it was a lot worse than that.

Perhaps, if it had only been her spotty features, and doubtful hygiene, Doris might have grown up to become a classical violinist, or a best-selling author, or a renowned artist, but, unfortunately, Doris showed none of the qualities required for genius.

She was not good at school and she was worse out of it. It wasn't that she didn't try. She had spent a lot of time studying over the years, but nothing seemed to stick, so that come exam time she was invariably bottom of the class.

When Doris was ten, she tried out for the school netball team. She was tall for her age, but she had butterfingers and could never catch the ball when it was thrown to her, which after a while wasn't very often.

At fourteen and a half, she had fallen for Sean Denning—possibly the naughtiest, muckiest boy in the school—but he had rejected her scornfully, holding his nose when she shyly suggested they might sit together at the lunch table.

Not long after this, and quite by accident, Doris discovered God.

She was walking home from school, dragging her schoolbag behind her, and thinking unhappily of the reception she would undoubtedly receive when her parents discovered she had, yet again, failed her science exam. She crossed the town square and glanced up at the spire of the local church. The sun was hidden behind the tower so that the church appeared bathed in an ethereal glow.

She stared at this for a moment and felt the urge to do something. Was this a sign? Doris had never set foot inside a church—her parents weren't at all religious—but she had listened when some of her classmates talked about the communal spirit of Sunday school, and she was curious.

Quietly, she opened the door, and like a mouse she crept onto the rearmost bench. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of incense, then decided she quite liked it. Sunbeams shone through the stained-glass windows casting a serene radiance over the interior. The altar was covered with a red cloth on which mystic symbols in gold braid were etched. On top of this, sat the tabernacle. Doris didn't know it was a tabernacle, of course. She didn't understand that this was the dwelling place

of the Holy Eucharist in Christian churches the world over. But she understood it must be special because it gleamed like gold and was draped with a handsome white satin cloak.

For the first time in many years, Doris felt at peace. The polished mahogany benches were empty and hard to sit on, but they were strangely welcoming at the same time. The sun motes floating in the still air in front of her encouraged her to doze off.

When she awoke, she felt charged with energy. In her dream, she had been visited by an angel who had spoken kindly to her and promised Doris many years of happiness from this day forth. There was only one condition, said the angel: she must embrace God's word.

Doris clasped her hands together and opened her heart. Her cheeks glowed, and her eyes shone. At last she had discovered the true road to happiness; the source of well-being and respect that had eluded her all her life. She felt as though her body would float to the heavens, such was her joy.

Jumping to her feet, she fairly skipped her way home. She couldn't wait to see the change in her parents' attitude. How amazed they would be to hear of her good fortune. Surely they would be happy for her and would put aside their quarrelling?

Life at school would become glorious with everyone now clamouring to be her friend. Of course, some had been too nasty to her to ever be forgiven, and she would exclude those from her friendship entirely. A very few she would invite into her inner circle and others would be admitted only after they begged. Best of all, Sean Denning would be desperate to sit with her. But, she thought, perhaps she wouldn't let him.

It was, therefore, a shock and quite a disappointment when none of the above eventuated.

Her parents laughed cruelly at her when she told them about the angel. They dragged her by the arms to stand in front of a mirror and made her count her spots, then they sent her to bed without any supper for telling lies.

Doris was confused. Perhaps the angel was running behind schedule. She went to school the next day with more than a little trepidation. Her worst fears were confirmed when Sean Denning invited everyone to his birthday party. Everyone, that was, except Doris.

As soon as school was out, she raced across the town square and stormed into the church, hunting for her betrayer. She ran up one aisle and down the other, yelling for the swindler who had cheated her; screaming for the falsehearted traitor to reveal himself, but there was no response.

Doris felt as though her heart was in the grip of a cruel hand and being squeezed unmercifully. She slumped onto a bench and wept. She raised her wet eyes to heaven and sobbed a prayer, promising to be good, if only the angel would come back and put things right.

After a while, Doris roused herself and noticed for the first time that her surroundings seemed somewhat different from her earlier visit. The church was grey and chilly, and bare—not at all the cheerful place she remembered. Cobwebs clung to pews and dangled from the tops of stone pillars, and the fine-looking altar-cloth was faded and in tatters. The magnificent tabernacle had disappeared entirely, and there were holes in the stained glass where children had thrown rocks.

She walked to the center aisle and looked around, perplexed. Had she come to the wrong church? No, she knew there had only ever been one place of worship in the square. But now that she thought about it, the church had always seemed old and derelict on the previous occasions she had passed it by.

Sadly, the truth dawned on her, and she sank to the flagstones and buried her head in her hands. It had all been a dream, a figment of her imagination. In her desperation to be loved, her mind had invented this solution to her problems. She wasn't destined to be happy, after all. There had been no angel.

'Actually, not quite true,' a voice said from nearby.

The hairs on the back of Doris's neck prickled and she turned unwillingly towards the source of the voice.

A tall, lanky, masculine form, dressed all in black, looked at her from the pulpit. One eyebrow was raised and the figure wore a mocking grin.

For a second, she hoped it was her angel, but no, there were no wings.

'I have wings, but I keep them out of sight when I'm in public. People tend to panic when they see someone with wings.'

'Well, I can understand tha...' began Doris, then gasped. 'You can read my thoughts!' She struggled to bring her mind to order. She had been visited first by an angel: one who had lied to her, in a church that didn't exist. Now this mysterious stranger had appeared out of nowhere, confessed to having wings—although she couldn't see any sign of them—and seemed able to read her mind. It wasn't possible! Her overburdened brain must have given up the struggle at last. She was going insane.

'I can show them to you if you like,' said the stranger, and with no further ado he unfurled a dazzling pair of shiny, black, leather wings. 'Not quite what you expected, eh?'

Doris felt her throat constrict. She squeezed the words out. 'Who... what are you?'

'Well, I'm an angel, of sorts. But I'm a different brand from the irresponsible cherub who let you down so poorly. Pardon me if I sound bitchy, but that is so typical of him. Dressed all in white, with soft, snowy, feathered wings, and with that "butter-won't-melt-in-my-mouth look", and people fall for it, every time! Really, the human race needs to wise up.'

'He... he promised I'd be happy, if...'

'Yes, I know. You'd find happiness if you worshiped God, yadda, yadda, yadda. I wish I'd a dollar for every time I've heard that one.'

'You mean this other angel—the white one—is running around, playing some sort of practical joke on people?' Doris was outraged. Her frustration boiled over, and tears sprang to her eyes. Truly, she was sick to death of being teased and made fun of. It just wasn't fair.

'That's why I'm here,' said the black angel. 'This is your lucky day.'

'Hmph! I'm not going to fall for that one again,' said Doris. 'How stupid do you think I am?'

'No, no. This is the real deal. I'm not here to promise you instant happiness for the rest of your life, although that could happen if that's what you really want. I'm here to offer you something more precious, much more practical and ultimately more satisfying. This is something you've yearned for, craved for, deep down, for years.' He paused, dramatically.

'I'm here to offer you revenge.'

'Revenge?' Despite her doubts, Doris's interest was aroused.

'Revenge! A golden opportunity for you to get your own back on all those people who've given you a rough time since the day you were born. A chance for you to hold the upper hand, instead of being on the receiving end of every childish prank; a way for you to gain the advantage over your parents, and have them treat you with the respect you deserve.' The tempter laid it on thick. He was sure of his quarry, but he knew from experience it never did any harm to press the point.

'And what do I have to do in return? Sell my soul?' Doris laughed bitterly. This couldn't be happening. There was no such thing as angels, white or black. Somehow, she had managed to fall asleep again, or perhaps it was the same dream and she had never woken up. One thing she was certain of—she had no soul to barter with, and even if she did, it wouldn't be worth much.

The angel's smile wavered, and he shook his head sadly. 'No, no. That's not so, Doris. You do have a soul. Your soul is eternal, and you must understand it's a valuable item, or we won't be

allowed to make a deal. It's written in the small type. See here.' He held up a long scroll and pointed.

The words materialized in front of Doris's eyes. 'If the client does not realize that a soul has considerable market value, he or she must be made aware of this fact. Otherwise, the contract may be deemed invalid.'

The apparition rolled up the document and said, 'Lawyers make the worst sort of hellions, and I've been caught out before. Anyway, this contract's not forever. I only want your soul for three hundred years.'

'Three hundred years? What happens after that?'

'When the contract expires, you have several options. Either you can stay in Hell as my guest,' he said, smiling pleasantly. 'Or you could go upstairs and drink tea with the white angel, or if you prefer you can choose to be reborn into a different life.'

'A soul doesn't really have any value while I'm alive, does it?' said Doris.

'Well no, but when you're dead, you might see things differently.'

Doris didn't think there would be much to see after she passed on. She had quite decided that life after death would pretty much follow the same pattern as it did whilst she was alive, and that wasn't something to look forward to—not for eternity at any rate. On the other hand, being born into a different existence after three hundred years...

'Well, if you're sure,' said the dark angel. 'I can offer you beauty, riches and fame. How does that sound?'

Doris wondered what the catch was. 'For the duration of my life, no matter how long that might be?' she said.

'Yes.'

'And it's to be a long life. I don't walk out of here in front of a bus or something?'

'You won't walk out of here in front of a bus. In fact, your lifespan is guaranteed to remain unchanged as a result of this agreement.'

Doris pursed her lips and thought hard.

A sardonic laugh escaped the dark angel. 'You won't be turned into a frog or a rare flower. You will remain Doris Duncely although I would recommend you change your name to something more fitting as soon as you can.'

Doris took a deep breath. She had nothing to lose. If this was a dream, she would wake up and nothing would have changed. She glanced at the apparition. Perhaps...

'Done deal,' said the dark angel, and disappeared.

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Doris pushed the covers from her bed and stretched. What a weird dream, she thought. She ruffled her hair, then looked with astonishment at the long wavy tresses running through her fingers. She suddenly noticed the foreign, well-formed bumps straining against her nightdress. Leaping from her bed, she stood in front of a full-length mirror.

A stranger stared out at her, wearing an incredulous look on her face. She touched her cheek and the image did so too. She looked more closely. Doris Duncely lurked half-hidden in the features staring back, but what a change! The pimples were gone, and her normally severe mouth now formed a perky pout. Other improvements presented themselves to her: a smaller nose, her eyes now wider and larger, her lashes longer and her eyebrows arched delicately. Doris's waist had shrunk and her shoulders, arms and legs were toned to perfection. She spun around to admire her flawless figure, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed.

After that, life for Doris was, predictably, quite different. Her parents recognized their daughter—just—but they didn't believe a make-over could produce such a difference in their ugly duckling. They suspected something diabolical was at work, and they were afraid. Doris took advantage of their fear and mercilessly compelled them to provide her with all the things she had ever wanted. They took her to Disneyland, plied her with ice-cream and sweets and bought her a cute little puppy when they returned. Doris dreamt up a few things for them to do just for the fun of it. Revenge, she thought, is sweet.

She went to school exulting in her new social standing. Strangely though, she found that she quickly became bored with the fawning of her classmates, all of whom were intoxicated by her mysterious beauty and superior manner. She charmed and teased Sean Denning until the poor boy was dripping with perspiration, and hopelessly in love with her, then she cut him off ruthlessly, leaving him in ruins and contemplating suicide.

As soon as she turned sixteen, Doris left school, entered a beauty contest, and then eloped with one of the judges. They were married in Acapulco, and within three weeks her husband had died, leaving her his fortune. She sold her story to Women's Weekly and became a celebrity on Oprah.

Doris was as happy as she could ever have imagined. She had taken her revenge against her parents, her school friends, and the smelly Sean Denning, and she was rich, famous, and best of all, beautiful.

Walking cheerfully across the town square, she didn't notice the bus.

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Doris stared at the beautiful dead body and wailed. 'It wasn't supposed to be like this. I was to have a long life. You said I wouldn't be knocked down by a bus!'

The dark angel stood by her side. 'When you stepped outside the church, yes, that's true. I said nothing about later on. And before you complain, this was always going to be your lifespan. I didn't change that. Blame the Supreme Being, if you want to blame someone.'

'But I was having such a good time, for the first time in my life!' Doris would have cried, except the dead don't.

'Exactly! I kept my part of the bargain. Now it's time to settle up.'

The angel vanished and Doris found herself in a tiny room surrounded by mirrors. Her beautiful long hair had disappeared, her perfect figure had reverted to flab, and her spots had come back, worse than ever. Was this to be her punishment? She stared into the depths of the mirrors. Crowds of people glared back, pointing and laughing at her and their shrieks and howls filled the room. This is pretty bad, she thought, but not intolerable. She had suffered people laughing at her for sixteen years. She could hang on for a few hundred more.

She heard a door creak open in one of the panels behind her, and she turned slowly to look. A bedraggled, foul creature entered, its red eyes filled with hatred and scorn, and its tongue lolling from its mouth.

'You're not the only one to make a deal with the devil, darling,' said Sean Denning. And Doris Duncely screamed.