

The devil's in the details

by Nicola Prentis

The knock at her front door came just as Victoria was about to open it, even though, strangely, she'd heard neither the lift nor anyone on the stairs. She balanced on one foot while she put on her other shoe, slipping on piles of unopened bills. She was late to work for the third time this month and now she had a visitor. Great.

She opened the door and forced her mouth into a smile she hoped said, 'I'd love to chat, but sorry I can't!'

'And how are we today, Victoria?' the man at her door asked. 'Good, I hope! If not, I bring you an eternity of warmth and best wishes from the wonderful director of my company.'

Victoria's smile vanished. How did he know her name?

'You know how I can be so sure? I *am* the wonderful director of my company!' he said, winking.

'I'm sorry,' said Victoria. 'I'm in a rush. I'm late for work.'

'Time!' He clicked his tongue. 'That's what they all want. Time or happiness, which one would you like more of?'

'Listen, really,' said Victoria, 'I'm not interested, sorry.'

'We've got a special offer on,' he replied. 'Twenty-five years of extra life in exchange for eternity. Or,' he smiled widely, 'double your happiness for the same price.'

'Price?' she repeated, despite it being far from the strangest part of his sentence.

'Yes, it's a fixed price, no hidden charges. We take everything you have – forever.'

It was strange that he was wasting his precious selling time on talking nonsense. 'Then I want fifty extra years or four times more happiness,' she joked.

'Oh, you could. But I have to warn you, the quality of the years after the standard twenty-five isn't always as high. I'd go for happiness.'

He pushed the lift button for her. Of course, it was obvious, at this time of day, dressed for work, that she was about to go down. OK, so her shirt wasn't ironed because she hadn't had time and her very-important-looking briefcase actually contained sandwiches for lunch because she couldn't afford to join her colleagues eating out for lunch. Plus, she worked through her breaks, desperately trying to find extra time for all the work she had to do. One day, she'd get her dream job – just as soon as she knew what that was.

Sometimes Victoria felt as if her sister had all the luck in the family. Not only did she run her own award-winning publishing company, she'd married an equally talented man, the gorgeous and funny Peter, whose only fault was not having a twin. Even the way they met sounded like the plot

of a film. Charlotte had been having a run of bad luck, ending in a car accident that had threatened to leave her unable to walk. Peter, a new doctor at the hospital, had to perform several risky operations that they had thought wouldn't work, but she was back on her feet within weeks. Even he joked that he hadn't known he was such a good surgeon. He proposed two months later. Half a year after the accident, Charlotte had set up her company and now they lived in the most expensive part of London. Victoria tried not to be jealous of her sister for any of it – not the husband, not the successful business, not their beautiful house nor their children – but it was a level of happiness that she wished she could taste for herself.

Thinking about Charlotte's accident reminded her how impossible it was to know what might happen. 'But what if I get run over by a bus tomorrow?'

'Then you'll have been blissfully happy for that one day. Time or happiness, I can only offer one. I'm not a miracle worker. That's another company.'

He winked again.

'Well, maybe you should change jobs,' she said and pressed the lift button herself.

He shook his head. 'I've tried them. Their sales team has quite a different approach. Be miserable now, then happy for eternity. It has its appeal but, honestly, it's a much harder sell.'

The lift wasn't even moving. She turned towards the stairs. 'Late' didn't begin to describe the time she would get to work. But as she started down the stairs, she suddenly remembered something.

'Damn!' she swore. She hadn't picked up her little nieces' birthday presents. There wasn't time to go back and get them now. Angela and Gabriella's perfect birthday party would be minus two messily wrapped presents from their imperfect auntie. One day they'd be old enough to wonder how their mother could be related to Victoria.

'It's time, isn't it, Victoria. I can always tell,' he called after her.

'Even if I believed this ridiculous stuff you're saying, I don't have time to discuss it with you ...'

She broke off, annoyed with herself for admitting she needed more time, and then let out a little scream as he slid down the banister and suddenly appeared in front of her, floating in the air with his arms and legs crossed.

'Then it's happiness!' he said, scratching one of two little horns that she now noticed on either side of his head.

Victoria pulled her hand off the banister and put her other hand against the wall so she wouldn't fall. She caught her nails on the rough bricks, feeling two of them break where they joined the skin. The pain made her scream again, but she didn't stop to look now she was sure who he was.

'I'm happy enough, thanks,' she said, with as much strength in her voice as she could while running down the stairs with two bleeding fingers.

'Are you happy, Victoria?' he asked as he continued sliding down the banister with her. 'Of course, you love your job, however low paid it is and never mind the fact that your boss hates you because you're never on time. You'll find the rent somehow, you always do. So resourceful.'

'You can't know that!' she shouted. 'Anyway, money doesn't buy happiness! It's the root of all evil.'

'True, Victoria, true. Very wise. It's love that makes the world go round.'

'Exactly!' she said, winning a point finally. Five more floors to go.

'I'm sure one day you'll meet someone ...' he said.

'I don't need a man to be happy, so if that's all you've got in your happy bag ...'

'So wise, Victoria,' he continued. 'So few people realise happiness comes from within, not from material things or other people. I see you're cleverer than many of our customers. Twenty-five years extra, then. I can see it in you, Victoria. You won't waste them.'

'Twenty-five on top of what, though?'

'No, no, no.' He turned the final corner with her. 'I won't tell you how long you would have lived, because then you'll know how long you've got left. We've tried that before. People just ruin it for themselves. It's in the small print but I wouldn't read that if I were you.'

'I don't believe in this stuff. Or in you!'

He jumped off the banister and bowed, holding something small and white out to her.

'Neither did your sister,' he said. 'Not until she had her accident. My card if you change your mind.'

And he disappeared, leaving Victoria with the card in her hand and her mouth open in shock.

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