

Returns And Exchanges

My life felt as though it was designed for someone else. I certainly wouldn't have chosen it had I known what it would be like. Everything I attempted collapsed into disaster; even my hobbies. School had been fraught - I struggled with learning and couldn't compensate with any outstanding athletic ability. I had no career, having failed at everything I tried, so I spent my days folded into the couch and staring at the blank wall in front of me. The few relationships I'd attempted had been houses of cards, falling at the slightest breath. I was crushingly, desperately lonely; I struggled with making friends, and I had no family. It felt as though the world was a box, a full box where everything had a space just right, but there wasn't space for me. Still, I was surprised when, at the end of another taxing session, my therapist leant back in her seat and pushed her hands back through her mousy hair, ending with her fingers clasped behind her head.

"You really hate your life that much?" she asked.

"There is nothing about this life," I answered bitterly, "that is even close to right for me. It's like I've been given the wrong one. It doesn't *fit*," I fretted. "*I don't fit.*" She looked across at me for a long time. Then she reached into a drawer I had never seen opened. After rummaging about through what looked like receipts and rubbish, she pulled a business card from the detritus and handed it to me.

I took the card and balanced it between my fingers, studying it. In the centre were the words *LIFE Management*. Then, under that, in much smaller writing, *exchanges* and *alterations*. Printed along the bottom edge of the card was an address in a street not known for anything. I flipped the card over, surprised by the quality of the stock. On the back was printed the name *Kristos Clementos*. Tiny text along the bottom edge, below the name, said *refunds considered only in extreme circumstances*.

I looked up at my therapist.

"Is this what I think it is?"

"Yes. I give these, sparingly, to the people I can't help."

"How many have there been?"

“Including you? Three.”

At least I wasn't the only lost cause.

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I hesitated in front of the building. It felt like it wasn't really there, as though if I didn't have the card in my hand, walking slowly down the street and counting numbers, I wouldn't see it or know it at all. It didn't resemble an office; more a small townhouse, with a rusted wrought iron fence. Maybe that's why it felt invisible. Like my current life, it didn't fit. Walking through the gate felt like an irreversible step. I looked down again at the card. *Exchanges. Alterations.* This Kristos Clementos could be my salvation. I had no choice. The gate left ferrous marks on my hand as I pushed it open.

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The foyer was cool and dark, like a noir film. A fan twirled lazily on the ceiling, making windmills of light and shadow on the floor and walls. I approached the desk, which was staffed by a gentleman for whom 'crisp' seemed a perfect descriptor. I read his name tag. *Michael.*

“Kristos Clementos, please.”

“Be seated. Mr Kristos will be with you momentarily.” The ends of his words broke off, like icicles on a handrail.

“Don't you need to take my name? Date of birth? Medical history?” I'd seen enough doctors. I knew the score.

Michael looked at me like a winter snowfall.

“Mr Kristos already has all the information he needs.”

I stepped back and flopped down into a soft leather chair. It wrapped itself around me like a lover. I wondered whether there would be any soft leather chairs in my new life.

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I'm not sure how long I sat there, soothed by that leather chair. My mind, quietened by my imminent release from the prison of my existence, was a skiff cast adrift on a lake; it bobbed with no clear

direction. I was jerked from my reverie by the movement of a large door opening, and the appearance of a man. *Kristos Clementos. My saviour.*

He appraised me over the top of his glasses.

“I’ve been expecting you. Please, come in.”

His office felt like an old library, or an academic’s office. The walls were lined with dark wood bookcases, each shelf straining under the weight of its leather bound contents. What little cool light there was didn’t quite seem to reach the corners, giving the room a perplexing feeling of not-quite-ending. Kristos Clementos sat down at his desk, an oak behemoth made to appear all the larger due its its complete emptiness. Not an inbox, not a pen, no stray papers. A clean slate. He sat with his back against the backrest and pressed the tips of his fingers together, making a little temple, over the top of which he gazed steadily at me.

He was not what I expected, but exactly what I expected, at the same time. A shortish man, with long hair tied back, he first reminded me of my grandfather; yet he couldn’t have been more than about 35 years old. His wire-rimmed glasses, fashionable about 30 years ago, perfectly matched his awful polyester shirt-pants-tie combo. The shirt even had short sleeves. The whole ensemble seemed at odds with someone so young. And yet, as he sat there appraising me, there was a definite aura of power about him, of wisdom, of knowing and being known. He felt like a man who could help me. If I could convince him to.

I lowered myself into the chair opposite his, grateful for the bulk of the desk sitting between us, a buffer between my fragile spirit and Kristos’s immense aura. And I waited for this quiet man to tell me how he was going to fix my mess of a life.

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“Lauren,” he said after a three minute eternity, “welcome.”

“Hi.” Awkward. Something else I disliked about myself.

He continued to gaze over his fingertips at me and I continued to squirm under his scrutiny. Seconds ticked past endlessly. He spoke again.

“I understand you find your life intolerable.” His voice was smooth like rich hot chocolate, and his demeanour and tone were gentle. All the demons that haunted my past reared their ugly heads again, fighting for space in my consciousness. Seeing all the wrongness in my life in one frame made my eyes well. Mute with pain, I nodded.

“And am I correct in my belief that you would like some kind of alteration or exchange?” he continued.

I found my voice.

“Yes. Please. I have a list here...” I pulled a crumpled piece of paper from my pocket. Since I found out about Kristos Clementos I had carried around this scrap of paper, scribing everything that was wrong with my life and how it could change for the better. I held the piece of paper out to him in trembling fingers. He read it carefully, then raised his eyes to mine again.

“Well,” he said, “much of this seems appropriate. All the things you wish to change are elements of your life that are beyond your control. I’m sure we can find a combination of exchanges and alterations that will suit.” He paused. “Naturally, the standard disclaimer applies.”

“Disclaimer?”

“Of course.” He leant back in his chair, and his liquid dark eyes met my powder blue ones. “Every transaction of this nature has a disclaimer.” He took a form and a pen from his desk drawer and slid them across to me.

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LIFE Management suggests all applicants consider very carefully the implications of their requests for exchanges and alterations. While we can implement exchanges and alterations as requested, we have limited control over how these manifest in the applicant’s life, and the flow-on effects of the initial exchange or alteration. This is largely due to the free will of all humans.

The following are standard exclusions and will not form part of any exchange or alteration:

LIFE Management will not perform any exchange or alteration that infringes on the free will of any third party.

LIFE Management will not perform further alterations or exchanges where an applicant is unsatisfied with the results of their initial request, where the unsatisfactory result is caused by the applicant's failure to fully consider the implications of their decision.

The undersigned applicant has read and agrees to the terms above, and has had any questions answered to their satisfaction by the undersigned LIFE Management representative.

Signed: _____ (applicant).

Signed: _____ Kristos Clementos for LIFE Management

Date: _____

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I was now less sure this was what I wanted.

“Give me an example,” I said.

“An example?” repeated Kristos.

“Yes. Tell me about a time when someone’s alteration didn’t turn out they way they hoped.”

“Sadly it happens more often than I would like.”

And he seemed truly saddened, not just saying the words with a veneer of false regret.

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“Carol was a woman well into her thirties. She had a string of broken relationships behind her stretching back to what she determined as the single greatest mistake in her life. As a young woman she’d been in a relationship with a man named Gordon, who adored her. But she left him, thinking she could do better. Walked away from him and left him standing in the street with a splintered heart. Fifteen years and countless emotional train wrecks later, she found herself in therapy digging up her biggest regret. She thought she’d made the biggest mistake of her life, leaving him. She never got over it and it coloured all her relationships afterward. Her alteration request was to have stayed. It was complex. There were significant background checks, to determine whether at that point in time he wanted to stay with her - we

couldn't go back there unless he would have chosen to stay with her too. But everything checked out so back she went. And it was beautiful. She felt loved and adored again. He lavished her with gifts, bought her dream house, gave her two beautiful children. Of course, all that costs money. He's not from a wealthy family; he's a self made man. His work hours can be...unpredictable. But she has to live with that of course. It's in the conditions."

"What does he do?"

"Contract killing."

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A tendril of doubt took root. That was not the happy ending I was anticipating. But nothing like that could happen to me.

Could it?

"What about my list? Is there something that's on my list that you've dealt with before?"

Kristos carefully scanned my crumpled piece of paper again, then looked back up at me. The weight of his gaze eased my fears.

"Several, actually."

"Tell me about one. Find one where you've done the exact same thing and tell me what happened."

Kristos leaned back again into his chair. It creaked, and rustled like a child fidgeting with anticipation.

"You are lonely and struggle with friendships, and you wish your parents had given you a sibling."

Again, his fingers templed as his eyes fixed on a small patch of nothing on the desk. "The desire to have someone love us unconditionally is a common one, Lauren. This is especially so of those for whom the original sources of unconditional love - their parents - have passed away." *Like yours*, his unspoken words hung between us. "Or for those whose parents were, for whatever reason, unable to love adequately. What many forget is that the bond of unconditional love must be reciprocal in order to avoid dysfunction. All parties need to love, but must also be ultimately loveable. Consider what you know about the nature of humanity."

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“Jack’s relationship with his parents was the bedrock he built his life on. When they passed away, Jack was crushed. He felt there was nobody else who truly understood him the way they did. He’d been an only child, his parents’ whole world. He dearly wished he had a brother; someone else who understood the world the same way, who looked through the same lens. His parents had wanted another child, so everything was approved, and Jack became a twin. The impact was immediate. Of course, Jack’s parents weren’t able to give him as much attention as a twin as he’d gotten when he was an only child. He coped remarkably well with that. Sadly, his brother did not. Jeremy grew up resentful, and believing Jack was favoured by their parents. After they passed, Jack felt responsible for his brother, and did his best to keep Jeremy on an honourable path. The sibling bond Jack was expecting wasn’t there. Instead of supporting each other, Jeremy railed against a world populated by people he felt were out to get him; and Jack, wracked with a guilt he couldn’t quite place, spent his days bailing Jeremy out of jail in return for a mouthful of abuse and the privilege of having his television pawned. In the end though, all Jack’s love wasn’t enough. Now he visits Jeremy as often as he can.”

“Where is Jeremy?” I could already guess. “The cemetery?”

“Not yet. But soon enough.”

“What?”

“Jeremy is on death row.”

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The tendril of doubt unfurled as I realised there was much more to this than I thought. I needed to seriously consider all the ways in which this could go wrong, and weigh those potential catastrophes against my current life. I thought this process would be simple - take all the horrors of my current existence and switch them out for better days. But it was complicated in ways I’d never imagined. I didn’t want to believe that my life could be worse than it already was. I felt a rush of shame at my selfishness. Cheeks hot, I dropped my head and watched my fingers twist in my lap; then looked up to ask Kristos for some time to think. A small smile was already dancing on his lips. Then I understood. *He knew*. He knew it all; he’d seen the catastrophe of my life, the crushing pain, the candle of hope that lit the darkness when

his card was put into my hand. Now he saw the seed of doubt sown inside me germinating and sending tiny shoots up towards the light, and my embarrassment at my own naïveté. *He knew everything.*

“Um,” I had to force the words out of my mouth, “I might need some time to think before I commit. Is that okay?”

I thought he stifled a chuckle as he pushed back his chair.

“Of course, Lauren. Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere.” We stood and he walked behind me, shepherding me to the door.

I pulled my purse out of my handbag.

“How much do I owe?”

“We never charge for our services, Lauren.”

“Can I come back?”

“Naturally.”

“Even if I decide not to proceed with any exchanges or alterations?”

“Of course.” He took my proffered hand and shook it, then clasped it briefly with both of his. “You are always welcome here, Lauren.”

I stopped, fingers wrapped around the door handle. I had one more question.

“Can I ask you something?”

A shadow crossed his face. He knew what was coming.

“What happens with refunds?”

His eyes lost focus again as he retreated inwards and I don’t know what he saw in his mind but his demeanour suggested immeasurable sadness and regret. I wasn’t surprised, then, by his answer.

“Refunds, as you know, are considered in only the most extreme circumstances. Policy restrains me from even discussing a refund with you unless you have specifically, and with intent, requested one. And they are almost always declined.” He paused. “This usually drives people to seek them in other ways.” I watched him exhale as his shoulders slumped, and I wondered how many refunds he’d declined, and how many of those had sought the other ways.

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“Well, thanks,” I said, opening the door. “I don’t know what I’ll do yet. I need to really think.”

“Yes, you do,” smiled Kristos. “Every life altering decision requires careful thought.”

“Clever wordplay there,” I said wryly. “See you soon.”

I walked through the cool foyer, past icy Michael at his desk. He didn’t look up as my shadow slid over him. Then I was outside, and the summer sunlight was blinding, chasing some of the darkness away.