

### Erebus Kincaid and the Devil

Erebus Kincaid did not think much of devils, and devils did not think much of him. He seemed such an easy mark the devil assigned to bring him in was as arrogant, self-centered, and over confident as his prey. So when they met, the devil decided to play with the retired President of The National Desking Company first. If he had bothered to do any research, he would have learned Kincaid had extricated himself from many seemingly impossible situations and would not be easily coerced or cajoled into going to Hell.

Kincaid was staring at his glass fireplace doors while sipping a glass of port, delighted by the sudden rise in National Desking's stock on rumors he had floated of a takeover. As he watched the blue and orange flames, the devil slithered out of a gas pipe and perched on top of the artificial logs. At first Kincaid thought he was dreaming. Pressing the button on his recliner to full upright, he leaned forward. The devil smiled, betraying teeth burned down to spikes from centuries howling in the flames and crooked a claw at Erebus to join him.

Kincaid felt ice forming in his chest followed by fire. He could barely breathe. Rising from his recliner, he placed his hand on the fire door. The devil carefully placed his hand, a stump with five gleaming claws opposite. As they stared into each others' red eyes, the claws grew until they covered Kincaid's hand and started to melt the glass. At the last second he snatched his hand away, grabbed the key for the gas and turned off the fire. The expression on the devil's face as he disappeared in the sudden darkness was exquisite.

Kincaid was running cold water over his hand in the bathroom sink when he thought he heard the fireplace doors bang open. He turned off the water. Yes, something was lurching down the hall, stumbling every few steps as a talon caught in the runner or a claw ripped into the wallpaper. A smell like fireworks and offal nearly gagged the man who had once headed the largest consumer products company in the world.

"Hi, Erebus," the devil said, waddling into the bathroom on bowed legs ending in enormous talons and pulling himself up onto the toilet bowl with his claws. The seat was up. "It's time we talked."

"What about?"

The talons on the devil's feet gripped the enamel rim, and his enormous genitals nearly touched the water.

"You and I have a lot in common," the devil replied, holding out a claw to shake hands with his new friend. "Why don't you fix us drinks and we can get better acquainted before we go downstairs?"

Captivated by those gleaming eyes and a smirk so much like his own, Erebus Kincaid reached out to touch the claw. Suddenly the devil shuddered, gripped the edge of the toilet, squatted down, and had the vilest bowel movement Kincaid had ever witnessed.

“You really should have some air freshener in here, Erebus,” panted the devil. “Now hand me some paper. It’s a little beyond my reach.”

“How about a courtesy flush?”

“For a friend OK.”

As the devil reached for the handle, his talons slipped on the slick enamel, and he lost his grip. Kincaid slammed the lid down on his head knocking him into the bowl. Before the he could recover, Kincaid flushed him down the drain.

No one will ever believe this, he thought.

“That wasn’t fair,” a voice bubbled up from the closed commode.

Kincaid lifted the lid and saw the devil’s head sticking out of the hole. Unable to drain, water was swirling over his face and bubbles streamed out of his mouth. Kincaid grabbed a plumber’s helper, seated it over the devil’s head, and shoved down hard.

“Oh, Erebus, that’s not nice,” the tiny voice whined.

Kincaid pushed down again and again with all his weight until the voice stopped. Exhausted, he leaned on the plumber’s helper like a warrior on his sword, peering into the empty hole at the bottom of the bowl. Nothing moved. He flushed the toilet again. Clear water swirled down and out. The pipe was clear. The devil was gone.

In the condo below Martin Siegel banged on his ceiling for quiet. Kincaid ran for his phone to call 911 and stopped. What would the police do if he said he had been attacked by a devil? What evidence did he have? He would be as helpless as his wife Louise, whom he had probated after years of claustrophobic marriage when she mistook a can of hairspray for her sinus inhaler.

Kincaid retreated to his bedroom overlooking a distant interstate. The sliding glass doors to the terrace were secure against the burglar bar. At the penthouse level, no burglar or devil was going to get him. Exhausted, he fell onto the bed and went to sleep in his clothes. He forgot to close the curtains.

He awoke with the sun in his face. As he struggled to get out of bed, a shadow passed over him. Erebus looked up. The devil was waving at him through the inner glass door. His claws and talons had morphed into gecko's paws gripping the glass.

Kincaid stood up unsteadily, tottered to the door, and removed the burglar bar. Like an old friend at the pool waving him over for cocktails, the devil beckoned him to come out. He unlocked the door, and with the last ounce of his strength slid it open as hard as he could, knocking the devil off his perch on the inner glass and down 20 floors to the ground. Kincaid slammed the door closed and fell back onto his bed.

After dozing intermittently for an hour and risking a shower in his gold plated bathroom, he dressed in end-of-the-season sale clothes from Naples, Florida and went downstairs for the "free" breakfast of day old rolls and sugary cereal the condo association provided to stroke the residents' avarice and placate visiting grandchildren. Only Kincaid, Martin Siegel, and a few other old men who wouldn't get out of bed unless it was free attended.

"I heard you banging around last night," Siegel said. "What the hell's going on?"

He was going to ask if Kincaid had brought home another lap dancer from the Brass Bar Gentleman's Club, but his friend's red eyes and shaking hands dissuaded him.

"Can you keep a secret?" Erebus asked.

"Try me."

"A devil's been after me since the eleven o'clock news. What the hell am I going to do?"

Siegel, who could barely wait to tell his wife, looked down at his coffee as if he were often consulted about devils stalking fellow residents.

“I’d talk to Dr. Mexta, buddy.”

“What the hell for? He’s a damn doctor.”

“Maybe he can prescribe some shit to put on its tail.”

Kincaid wasn’t so sure.

“May as well try” Siegel continued. “Aren’t you paying him \$20,000 a year to see him whenever you want?”

The appeal to getting something from his investment in an on-call personal physician convinced Erebus Kincaid. He ordered a limousine and half an hour later stalked into Always On Call Physicians, flashed his gold membership card at the receptionist, and demanded to see his physician.

“Is something the matter, Mr. Kincaid?” the twenty-something leading him to the examining room asked sympathetically?

“Damned right.”

“Can you tell me what?”

“I came for the doctor.”

For the nurse this was a telltale sign that the patient was suffering from Gulf Coast Gonorrhea, which had made a surprising comeback among Dr. Mexta’s patients after the Brass Bar Gentleman’s Club opened. She helped him onto the scale, took his blood pressure, said “Doctor will be with you soon,” and left him to stew for nearly an hour in a white-walled room smaller than the isolation cells at the county jail.

“Don’t get up,” the devil said, bursting into the room in a lab coat far too large for his shrunken frame. “I’ve been reviewing your chart, Erebus: enlarged prostate, cholesterol well controlled by statins, borderline triglycerides, but your blood pressure is out of control. Is something bothering you?”

“How did you get here?” gasped Kincaid.

“I climbed into the front seat while the driver was opening the door for you.”

Just then Felix Mexta, M.D., mid-fifties, tanned from endless afternoons on the tennis court, entered to greet one of the people he had to keep alive to maintain his lifestyle.

“Erebus,” he cried, extracting his patient’s first name from his laptop, the only information he needed for successful relationship selling. Sporting a bright red tie that contrasted nicely with his gleaming white lab coat and shirt, he sat down on an aluminum stool, not noticing his infernal colleague crouching beneath him. “What brings you here?”

The devil raised a claw to his lips to signal silence.

“Unusual dreams,” Kincaid replied, looking from the devil to the doctor.

Dr. Mexta was typing something that would prompt the computer to spew out questions for a differential diagnosis.

“Hmm,” he said, as if searching for the next question. “Describe the dreams,” he read from the computer.

“A devil is stalking me.”

When Dr. Mexta typed that in, he learned that the last time malign spirits were part of a differential was in Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* published in 1621. “Can you tell me more?”

“He was in my fireplace last night and followed me to the bathroom, and then was hanging outside on the glass doors to my bedroom this morning.”

Dr. Mexta was intrigued enough to type that into the computer.

“Floridly psychotic,” the laptop replied. “Consider prescribing an antipsychotic and inpatient treatment.” Mexta closed the laptop and nodded to show he understood. If he admitted his patient to a psychiatric hospital, he would receive an override for each day he was there.

“Erebus, I can give you some medicines that might help,” he said slowly so the patient would see him as an ally rather than as someone who thought he was crazy.

Kincaid looked down at the devil. He was mouthing, “No way.”

“I was hoping you would give me for something for the devil.”

Felix Mexta didn’t need the laptop to tell him he was losing his patient.

“Maybe we should talk about places where they’re really good at handling situations like this,” he suggested to regain the initiative. “Mellow Acres is very nice. They even have a wine bar and a gourmet chef.”

Mellow Acres was where Kincaid’s wife had screamed out her last years until a stroke brought permanent relief. He was on his feet and out the door before the physician could stop him.

“Tell him this is all confidential,” the devil said following him into the hall.

“If you tell anyone about this, I’ll have your license!” Kincaid screamed at the doctor.

Dr. Mexta watched as he stalked down the hall, nearly tripping over a balled-up lab coat between his feet. A smell like burning rubber nearly overpowered the doctor. He looked down. The linoleum under his stool had melted.

“Where to now, sir?” the driver asked as Kincaid climbed into the limo with the balled-up lab coat beside him. Where, indeed? The question caught him by surprise; he hadn’t expected his personal physician to deny him a prescription for his personal devil.

“The Tiara Building,” he replied, suddenly remembering the new skyscraper where his attorney Harris Scintilton had recently moved his office. Scintilton had the two top floors with spectacular river views beneath the aluminum crown that gave the building its name.

“Hi, Erebus,” the lawyer greeted him, called out of a negotiation by Kincaid’s unexpected appearance. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Kincaid did not speak until they were seated in Scintilton’s 1,000 square foot office. The lawyer drew the blinds across the huge window to create an atmosphere of calm understanding. When he turned to face his client, the devil was perched on Kincaid’s right shoulder, wiping his nose with his tie. The lawyer, who had confronted many devils in his career, was not surprised to see him.

“I had a call this morning from the Securities and Exchange Commission,” Scintilton began. “They didn’t like that TV interview yesterday.”

“All I said was that I couldn’t confirm or deny any takeover rumors.”

“They didn’t ask you about takeover rumors. National Desking’s stock went up seven points when you said that.”

“I can’t spend all my time holding the SEC’s hands. I have other problems.”

The devil smirked.

Scintilton pressed his fingers together and waited for his client to continue.

“A devil has been following me around since last night, Harris. How the hell do I get rid of him?”

The devil smiled shyly and curled his claws at the lawyer, like a teenager pantomiming “Hi.”

“We could go for a restraining order.”

“They’d probate me.”

Scintilton nodded. Kincaid wasn’t as crazy as he seemed.

“Your estate documents are up to date,” the lawyer said soothingly.

Erebus Kincaid’s heart nearly stopped. If he was disabled or died, Harris Scintilton had his power of attorney and would be his executor, a prospect for such colossal legal fees that the lawyer’s eyes were glazing over contemplating them.

“What’s your advice?” Kincaid demanded.

“If the two of you are getting along, take some time together, maybe a cruise to Alaska or a trip to Europe. I’ve seen a lot of people put off going to hell indefinitely. The devils are never in any hurry to go back.”

The devil held up a circle from his thumb and index claw to show the lawyer that he was reading him right. Erebus Kincaid stood up.

“I hope I haven’t disappointed you,” the lawyer said apologetically. “My devil and I have developed a very good working relationship.”

“What’s that?” Kincaid asked, turning back from the door.

“It’s like referral sales. I give him prospects, and he gives me time.”

A burst of hot bile told Kincaid who had sent the devil his way. He did not wait for the lawyer to show him to the elevator.

“Why don’t we try your club for lunch?” the devil suggested when the driver asked, “Where next?”

A martini and a decent meal would make up for a miserable morning, Kincaid thought, so he agreed. The four story City Club’s renaissance façade proclaimed comfort, conservatism, stability, and control, qualities absent from his recent experience. Nodding to the receptionist

behind the huge mahogany desk, he entered the elevator, surprised she didn't say anything about his now naked diabolical companion. The odor in the elevator was sickening.

Long reserved for the Club's male elite, the second floor dining room was an oligarch's paradise of deep toned woods, sumptuous chairs, hovering white-coated waiters, and a spectacular oversized nude female painting beside the fireplace that made even the most determined of the new female members wonder if belonging were worth being compared to it. Kincaid entered, his devil swaggering beside him. Glances became turned heads, conversation stopped, and he was greeted with bigger grins than a recently elected politician. The devil, too, worked the room like a politician, waving and shaking hands with other devils lurking at the feet of the diners or sitting at their tables.

"I'll start with a Tanqueray martini, the black bean soup but hold the sour cream, and then the shirred eggs," the devil said. "Shall we think about dessert later, Erebus?"

"Later," he replied and ordered the rib eye steak and a glass of Bordeaux. His presence downtown meant he had been meeting with his lawyer, and to his fellow diners that meant the rumors about National Desking being in play were true. Several diners were working their cells to take large positions in its stock.

"I have a delicate stomach," the devil said, gripping his abdomen after washing down his soup with the martini. "Will you excuse me? I believe we passed the men's room on the way in."

Kincaid nodded and signaled the waiter for another glass of wine.

"I'd like another martini, too," added the devil.

Dropping to the floor, he lurched back through the room. None of the humans noticed him, but their devils did and high fived him as he passed. Harris Scintilton and his devil had taken their regular places. Springing onto their table, the devil toasted the lawyer with his martini

before dropping back to the floor. Kincaid felt his stomach clench and the wine turn to acid in his mouth.

I've got to get out of here, he thought. None of the humans had noticed his devil because they all had their own. After 40 years of membership, he finally realized that the City Club was a kind of Hell. He hurried to the back bar off the far end of the room, where he had placed so many winning bets with the bookmaker posing as a bartender in the good old male-only days.

"Something for you, sir?" a new bartender asked, but Kincaid raised a finger for quiet and opened the door to the stairs to the first floor. If the devil were distracted by the fragrances and toiletries in the men's room, he might get several minutes head start.

"What happened to your friend?" the driver greeted him.

Kincaid didn't answer. Where could he go to escape Hell, or was he already damned to placate his devil until the time came for their fiery descent together? He looked up the street and saw the steeple of the Downtown Church of Our Savior at the end of the next block. Over the decades, he had made a point of going to church on Christmas and Easter, as long as it didn't interfere with anything more important.

"The church," he said. "And don't park out front.

"You don't think you can shake him, do you?" laughed the driver.

Kincaid didn't wait for him to open the door. He bolted into the church past the receptionist for the elevator to the Rector's study. Alarmed by the smell of burning cinders and offal, Debbie, the Rector's administrative assistant was getting up to see if something was on fire when he entered.

"I have to see him," Kincaid demanded.

“May I say who’s calling?” she asked, reluctant to disturb the after lunch nap of The Rev. Charles Spears.

“Erebus Kincaid!” he cried so loud that Spears heard him through the wall.

“A Mr. Kincaid is here to see you,” she said when the priest picked up his phone.

Erebus could not hear Spears’ reply, but Debbie smiled and said, “We can work you into his schedule.”

Spears was wide awake. When he had first been called to the church twenty years before, Kincaid had taken him to lunch at the city’s finest restaurant. Following perfectly prepared and presented courses accompanied by fine wines, the server had presented Kincaid the bill. With an elaborate flourish he drew a thick line through the space for “Service” and signed only for the food and wine.

While Kincaid snorted in disdain, the priest placed a \$10 bill beside his napkin. They did not speak again except for perfunctory remarks after the few services the old man attended. His pledge to the church was \$5 a week and hardly ever paid. When someone from the finance committee asked him to bring it current he replied, “I don’t pay for movies I don’t see.”

Spears hardly recognized the tormented retiree reeking of burning garbage, who lurched into his study and collapsed into a guest chair without even trying to shake hands.

“Charlie, we’ve got a problem,” Erebus Kincaid began.

“We do?”

“I’m being followed, can’t you see, by a devil . . .”

Suddenly his throat clenched, and he pointed at the window. Hanging on with his lemur paws, the devil was enjoying the contrast between Kincaid in his bright Florida colors and the priest in gray tweed jacket and frayed collar. Catching Kincaid’s eye, he pressed his face against

the glass and mouthed an obscenity. Spears stood up quickly and held an icon of the Resurrection before the leering face. As if the icon were an electric prod, the devil flipped off the window and dropped two stories through the roof of the limo below, leaving a trail of smoke behind him.

“I didn’t think you could move so fast,” Kincaid said admiringly.

“We don’t have much time,” the priest said. “He’ll be back.”

“What can I do?” pleaded Erebus.

“For starters, you can wear this,” the priest said, removing a small crucifix on a leather strap from his desk. “Don’t take it off even to bathe.”

“Like a panic button?”

Kincaid lifted the strap over his head and tucked the crucifix behind his tie.

“Not like that, Erebus. You have to show your faith for it to work.”

A man who had worshipped only himself placed the crucifix over his gold tie tack.

“That’s good for a start,” the priest continued. “But you can’t beat this thing with externals.”

“Can’t you do a, what do you call it, an exorcism?”

“There are no quick fixes. We’re only at the first crisis.”

Kincaid stared at the priest with that “now he’s going to ask me for money” look that he had used so successfully to deflect requests for charity. The priest’s demand, however, was for far more.

“You have to confess.”

Kincaid was stunned. In one of his favorite negotiating maneuvers, he stood up and walked to the window. A fire truck had pulled up below, and firemen were spraying foam into the smoldering limousine. He returned to his seat.

“Charlie, is what I say confidential?”

“No. God will hear it, and God will judge you.”

“And confession will take care of it?”

“There’s more,” the priest continued. “You have to confess every week, attend church every Sunday and the men’s Bible study every Thursday morning at 8 and start serving at the dinner for the homeless Monday nights.”

“For how long?”

“Until you believe. You could stop then, but you won’t want to.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s the problem.”

“You seem to know a lot about devils,” countered Kincaid.

“With a downtown church, I have to.”

The priest paused.

“Have you talked to your kids about this?” he asked.

Erebus shuddered.

“Michael and Vikki haven’t talked to me since I had to put their mother in the home.”

“Better bring your check register to our next meeting,” Spears said, realizing it would be easier to wean him from his worship of money than reconcile him to the family he had alienated.

“Are you asking for money?”

“Your checkbook will tell me more about you than you will.”

For the first time in his life, the past president of The National Desking Company faced someone who was telling him what to do without showing any respect for his wealth or position. Anger swelled in his chest and he was getting ready to leave, when Debbie buzzed the priest's phone.

"Charles, the fire department says we have to leave the building. There's a car outside that might explode."

Spears ushered the wavering penitent and Debbie down the stairs and across the street.

"What's happening, Erebus?" Harris Scintilton greeted his client, interrupting the walk back to his office from the Club with his devil strutting beside him. Seeing the priest, the devil ducked behind the lawyer like a timid lap dog.

Kincaid did not answer. After the limousine had been towed away and firemen finally gave the all clear, he told the priest he was ready to confess. Leaving Spears' study an hour later, he felt light headed with relief that the devil had not interrupted his confession and hauled him away to hell.

"I'll do the whole program, Charlie," he promised.

"Remember, Erebus, it has to show."

The limousine driver was waiting for him at the door to the church.

"You owe me for six hours," he said, holding out a device for a credit card.

Worse than being panhandled, Erebus Kincaid hated people demanding money he owed them. Suddenly all the joy he had experienced ebbed away, replaced by the same rancid anger that had driven him through a lifetime of relentless self-aggrandizement. He looked up the street, where barricades with flashing orange lights marked the parking place where the devil had

plunged through the limousine into the blacktop. Through wisps of smoke, the orange flashers illuminated a familiar face grinning up at him from the hole.

“Six hours?” he said, looking at the bill. “You’ve been here longer than that.”

He lined through the six and wrote eight. Then he added a 20% tip.

“It’s been a long afternoon,” he said to the amazed driver. “And here’s my card. If you have any trouble with your insurance, call me.”

Erebus Kincaid let the driver call him a cab and returned to his condo to see what life without a personal devil would be like.