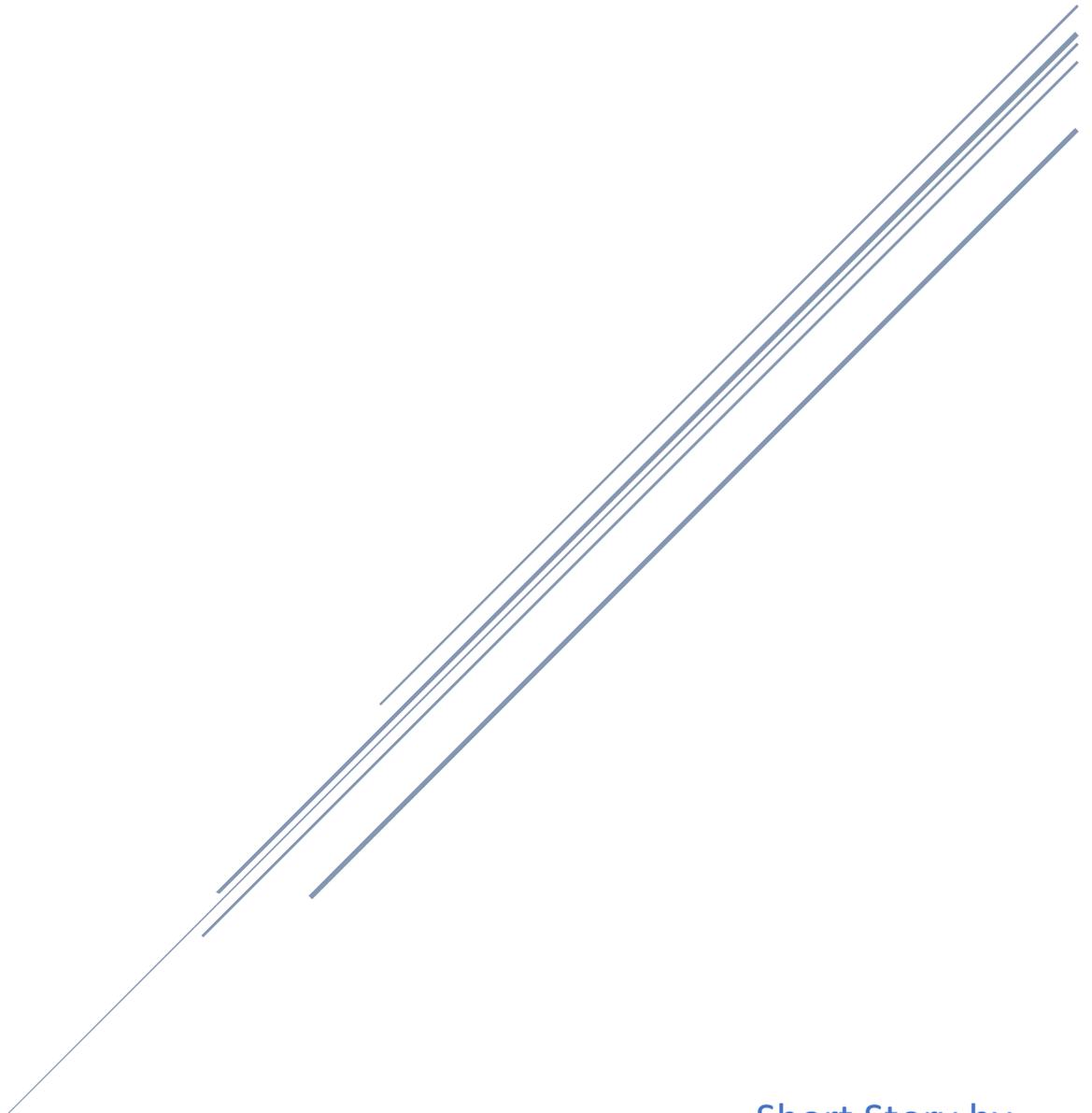


THE ADJUSTER

R. J. Davies



Short Story by



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Stepping into the room, it suddenly felt like the temperature dropped a few degrees. She scanned the room with precision, knowing exactly what ... more importantly who she was looking for. Once she saw him, she only had eyes for that one person. Crossing the room purposefully ... her clicking heels came to a stop as she stood in front of him.

He looked up, smiling an approval gaze.

Frowning in response, "Mr. Nettle come with me." Turning, she led the way down a hall and into a vacant room.

"I'm glad to see you Clara."

"Have we met?" she asked coldly pausing only slightly before she came around and sat down at the table across from him.

"You don't remember me?"

"Should I?"

"Well I suppose not. It has been some time since high school."

"Hmph," she laid her briefcase on the table. She paused as she was about to open it and tilted her head to one side. "I remember you now. You were the first boy I had ever kissed," she went about opening her briefcase. She pulled out a file with his name on it.

"You haven't smiled once since you approached me. Should I be concern?"

"Mr. Nettle this is a serious matter."

"Please call me Eric."

"Do you understand the money we invested in you?"

"I do and I intend to pay you back."

"Really you happen to have two billion dollars in the bank right now?"

"No ... but I can pay you back. I can make payments."

"Mr. Nettle," she began.

"Eric," he insisted.

"Mr. Nettle, I highly doubt you'll see two billion dollars in your lifetime. Then there is the matter of the time we invested in you. Our time and resources to train you is very valuable."

"I understand. But I can't do this. When I signed up, I didn't know what you were asking of me. I didn't realize you had intended for the candidates to give up their rights and their lives. You never said that."

"Mr. Nettle when you signed up with Xplore what did you think we wanted from you?"

"I was told that I could do the training and if it was something that I didn't feel I could handle, I could meet with an adjuster and they could process my release."

"Is that what the nice man told you when he recruited you?"

"Yes," his eyes narrowed, a little wary of her tone.

She smiled staring at him. He began to think he liked it better when she wasn't smiling.

She tapped his file with her long-manicured nails. "Well Mr. Nettle ... I am your Adjuster."

"So, tell me what do I have to do to get out?"

She chuckled. "First let me explain something to you, that the recruits don't tell you. When you sign up for Xplore. It's a one-way ticket. Yes, we are partners with the government, they help with the funding. Yet, at the end of the day when you signed your name on the forms. We own you."

"I'm a human being you can't own me."

She chuckled, "Mr. Nettle we own you. You are wanting out. You wanting to leave Xplore ... well. It's like you coming into my house and taking whatever, you want without asking and then walking out. It's stealing. You wanting to leave Xplore is like that, coming into my house and stealing from me. Now look at me Mr. Nettle, what have I ever done to you? Why do you want to steal from me?"

"You don't own me," he spoke softly.

"Yes Mr. Nettle I do," flipping open his file she flipped through a couple of sheets and paused.

He wanted to be home or any place where Xplore or this woman didn't exist.

"Alright," she slammed her hand down on the table.

He jumped.

"Since I like you, I'll make a deal with you."

He leaned forward eager.

"Here are my demands. I want one of your kidneys, three litres of bone marrow, four litres of sperm and this could start the process we want monetary compensation as well you will owe us until you go to your grave."

"I'm sorry I only have the one kidney."

"Hmm well I guess that is a problem for you Mr. Nettle. These are our standard demands for an individual to be released."

"Please there has to be something. Does it have to be my kidney?"

"No, I guess not. As long as it's a living healthy kidney."

"I don't know anyone who would give me their kidney." He felt deflated.

"Yes ... well, Mr. Nettle we are not monsters. You have a choice. If you agree to our release conditions then signed here," she passed him a form to sign.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Mr. Nettle there is something that you should know about me. I never joke and two I believe everyone has a right to choose."

"If I sign this, I'm dead. If I don't, I die in space. How is that a choice?"

"Location."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"We all die Mr. Nettle. But like I said we own you. And here I am giving you the choice of where you want to live out your final days."

He shoved the papers back at her, got up and headed for the door.

"It's a brave choice Mr. Nettle."

"I can see how you got this job ... you're a heartless bitch."

"I just happen to be very good at what I do."