

Small Print

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Lester Parker checked the lock on the door of his cheap motel room for the fifth time; once again, it held. He checked the drapes where he had clothes-pinned them together; there were no cracks or gaps. He couldn't afford to be careless, couldn't possibly be too careful. If anyone from any of the local churches saw him—

He'd picked this motel because he knew it, frequented it when he had "personal business," and knew that for an extra ten bucks left on the bed, the room would be cleaned completely with no awkward questions asked. Like, was that blood on the carpet, or, why was there black candlewax on the bureau? Although he hadn't checked in under his own name, he couldn't afford awkward questions the next time he returned. They knew his face, even if they didn't know his name.

Unless, of course, this actually worked. Then it wouldn't matter. Such little irregularities would be taken care of.

His hands trembled with excitement as he opened his briefcase on the bed and removed the two sets of papers from it. One set was handwritten, in fading pen on yellowed paper torn from an old spiral-bound notebook. These pages were encased in plastic page-protectors to preserve them. The other was a brand-new contract, carefully typed and carefully checked.

He had obtained—been given—the first set of papers less than a week ago, here in this very motel.

He'd just completed a little "soul-searching" with Honey Butter, one of the strippers down at Lady G's and a girl he'd "counseled" plenty of times before. He'd been making sure that he had left nothing incriminating behind—it had become habit—when there was a knock on the door.

Reflexively he'd opened it, only realizing when he had it partly open just where he was, and that it could have been the cops.

But it hadn't been. It was one of Honey's coworkers with whom he also had an arrangement; she knew who and what he really was and she could be counted on to keep her mouth shut. Little Star DeLite looked at him from under her fringe of thick, coarse peroxide-blond hair, a look of absolute panic on her face, her heavily made-up eyes blank with fear. Without a word, she had seized his hand and dragged him into the room next door.

On the bed, gasping in pain and clutching his chest, was a man he recognized; anyone who watched religious broadcasting would have recognized that used-car-salesman profile. Brother Lee Willford, a fellow preacher, but a man who was to Lester what a whale is to a sardine. Brother Lee was a televangelist, with his own studio, his own TV shows, and a take of easily a quarter million a month. Lester had known that Brother Lee had come to town for a televised revival, of course; that was why he himself had taken the night off. No one would be coming to his little storefront church as long as Brother Lee was in town, filling the football stadium with his followers.

He had not expected to see the preacher here—although he wasn't particularly surprised to see him with Star. She had a weakness for men of the cloth, and practically begged to be "ministered to." Besides, rumor said that Brother Lee had a weakness for blonds.

Lester had taken in the situation in a glance, and acted accordingly.

He knew enough to recognize a heart attack when he saw one, and he had also known what would happen if Brother Lee was taken to a hospital from this particular motel. People would put two and two together—and come up with an answer that would leave Brother Lee in the same shape as Jim Bakker. Ruined and disgraced, and certainly not fluid enough to pay blackmail.

First things first; Brother Lee's wallet had been lying on the stand beside the bed. Lester grabbed it, pulled some bills out of it and shoved them at Star. The little blond grabbed them and fled without a word.

Now one complication had been dealt with. Star wouldn't say anything to anyone; a hooker whose clients died didn't get much business.

Then, he had helped Brother Lee back into his pants; shoved the wallet into his coat-pocket (a small part of his mind writhing with envy to see that the suit was Armani and the fabric was silk) and draped the coat over Brother Lee's shoulders. He could not be found here; he had to be found somewhere neutral and safe.

There were car keys on the nightstand too; Lester had assumed they were for the vehicle outside. He had hoped there was a car-phone in it, but even if there hadn't been he could still have worked something out.

But there had been a phone, a portable; Lester dialed the emergency number, returned to the motel room, got Brother Lee into the car and got the car down into the street moments before the ambulance arrived. There was, after all, no harm in being rescued from the street—only in being taken from a motel room in a state of undress. He had followed the ambulance in Brother Lee's car, and claiming to be a relative, set himself up in the waiting room.

The reporters came before the doctors did. He had told them a carefully constructed but simple story; that he had met Brother Lee just that day, that the great man had offered his advice and help out of the kindness of his heart, and that they had been driving to Lester's little storefront church when Brother Lee began complaining of chest pains, and then had collapsed. Smiling modestly, Lester credited the Lord with helping him get the car safely to the side of the road. He'd also spewed buckets of buzzwords about God calling the man home and how abundant life was to believers. The reporters accepted the story without a qualm.

He had made certain that Brother Lee found out exactly what he had told the reporters.

He bided his time, checking with the hospital twice a day, until Lee was receiving visitors. Finally Brother Lee asked to see him.

He had gone up to the private room to be greeted effusively and thanked for his "quick thinking." Lester had expected more than thanks, however.

He was already framing his discreet demand, when Brother Lee startled him by offering to give him his heart's desire.

"I'm going to give you the secret of my success," the preacher had said, in a confidential whisper. "I used to be a Man of God; now I just run a nice scam. You just watch that spot there."

Lester had been skeptical, expecting some kind of stunt; but when the quiet,

darkly handsome man in the blue business suit appeared in a ring of fire at the foot of Brother Lee's hospital bed, he had nearly had a heart-attack himself. It wasn't until Brother Lee introduced the-being-as "My colleague, Mister Lightman" that Lester began to understand what was going on.

Brother Lee had made a compact with the Devil. The "number one saver of souls" on the airwaves was dealing with the Unholy Adversary.

And yet-it made sense. How else could Brother Lee's career have skyrocketed the way it had without some kind of supernatural help? Lester had assumed it was because of Mafia connections, or even help from-Him-but it had never occurred to him that Brother Lee had gone over to the Other Side for aid. And Brother Lee and his "colleague" had made it very clear to Lester that such aid was available to him as well.

Still, there was such a thing as high-tech trickery. But Mr. Lightman was ready for that suspicion.

"I will give you three requests," the creature said. "They must be small-but they should be things that would have no chance of occurring otherwise." He had smiled, and when Lester had a glimpse of those strange, savagely pointed teeth, he had not thought "trickery," he had shuddered. "When all three of those requests have been fulfilled, you may call upon me for a more complete contract, if you are convinced."

Lester had nodded, and had made his requests. First, that the transmission of his car, which he had already had inspected and knew was about to go, be "healed."

Lightman had agreed to that one, readily enough.

Second, that his rather tiresome wife should be removed permanently from his life.

Lightman had frowned. "No deaths," he had said. "That is not within the scope of a 'small' request."

Lester had shrugged. "Just get her out. You can make me look stupid," he said. "Just make me sympathetic." Lightman agreed.

And third, that the sum of ten thousand, two hundred and fifty three dollars end up in Lester's bank account. Why that sum, Lester had no idea; it was picked arbitrarily, and Lightman agreed to that, as well.

He had vanished the same way he had arrived, in a ring of fire that left no marks on the hospital linoleum. That was when Brother Lee had given him the battered pages, encased in plastic sleeves.

"This is yours, now," Brother Lee had said. "When you want Lightman to bring you a contract, you follow these directions." He grimaced a little. "I know they're kind of unpleasant, but Lightman says they prove that you are sincere."

Lester had snorted at the idea of the Devil relying on sincerity, but he had taken the sheets anyway, and had returned to his car to wait out the fulfillment of the requests.

The very first thing that he noticed was that the transmission, which had been grinding and becoming harder to shift, was now as smooth as if it was brand new. Now, it might have been possible for Lightman to know that Lester's

tranny was about to go—certainly it was no secret down at the garage—but for him to have gotten a mechanic and a new transmission into the parking lot at the hospital, performed the switch, and gotten out before Lester came down from the hospital—well, that was practically impossible.

But there were other explanations. The men at the garage might have been lying. They might have doctored his transmission the last time he was in, to make him think it needed work that it didn't. Something could have been "fixed" with, he didn't know, a turn of a screw.

Then two days later, he came home to find a process-server waiting for him. The papers were faxed from his wife, who was filing for divorce in Mexico. He found out from a neighbor that she had left that morning, with no explanations. He found out from a sniggering "friend" that she had run off with a male stripper. As he had himself specified; she was gone, he had been made to look stupid, but among his followers, he also was garnering sympathy for having been chained to "that kind" of woman for so long.

She had cleaned out the savings account, but had left the checking account alone.

But that left him in some very dire straits; there were bills to pay, and her secretarial job had been the steady income in the household. With that gone—well, he was going to need that ten grand. If it came through.

Late that Wednesday night, as he was driving back from the storefront church and contemplating a collection of less than twenty dollars, the back of an armored car in front of him had popped open and a bag had fallen out. The armored car rolled on, the door swinging shut again under its own momentum as the car turned a corner. There was no one else on the street. No witnesses, either walking or driving by.

He stopped, and picked up the bag.

It was full of money; old worn bills of varying denominations; exactly the kind of bills people put into the collection plate at a church. There were several thousand bills in the bag.

They totaled exactly ten thousand, two hundred, and fifty three dollars. Not a copper penny more.

He drove straight to the bank, and deposited it all in his savings account. Then he drove straight home, took out the papers Brother Lee had given him and began to read.

Before he was finished, his mind was made up.

The ritual called for some nasty things—not impossible to obtain or perform, but unpleasant for a squeamish man to handle and do. Dancing around in the nude was embarrassing, even if there was no one there to see him. And although he was certain that this motel room had seen worse perversions than the ones he was performing, he felt indescribably filthy when he was through.

Still; if this really worked, it would be worth it all.

If. . . .

"Now how could you possibly doubt me?" asked a genteel voice from behind him.

Lester jumped a foot, and whirled. Mr. Lightman sat comfortably at his ease in the uncomfortable green plastic chair beneath the swag-lamp at the window. Lester thought absently that only a demonic fiend could have been comfortable in that torture-device disguised as a chair.

He was flushing red with acute shame, and terribly aware of his own physical inadequacies. Mr. Lightman cocked his head to one side, and frowned.

"Shame?" he said. "I think not. We'll have none of that here."

He gestured—not with his index finger, but with the second. Suddenly Lester's shame vanished, as if the emotion had been surgically removed. And as he looked down bemusedly at himself, he realized that his physical endowments had grown to remarkable adequacy.

"A taste of things to come," Lightman said easily. "You must be a perfect specimen, you know. People trust those who are handsome; those who are sexy. Think how many criminals are convicted who are plain, or even ugly—and how few who are handsome. People want to believe in the beautiful. They want to believe in the powerful. Above all, they want to believe."

Lester nodded, and lowered himself down onto the scratchy bedspread. "As you can see, I'm ready to deal," he told the fiend calmly.

"So I do see." Lightman snapped his fingers, and the neatly-typed pages of Lester's contract appeared in his hand. He leafed through them, his mouth pursed. "Yes," he murmured, and, "Interesting." Then he looked up. "You seem to have thought this through very carefully. Brother Lee was not quite so-thorough. The late Brother Lee."

Lester nodded; then took in the rest of the sentence. "The-late?"

Lightman nodded. "His contract ran out," the fiend said, simply. "Perhaps he had been planning to gain some extra years by bringing you into the flock, but he had not written any such provision into his contract—and a bargain is a bargain, after all. The usual limit for a contract is seven years. I rarely make exceptions to that rule."

Lester thought back frantically, and could recall no such provision in his own contract.

But then he calmed himself with the remembrance of his loophole. The very worst that would happen would be that he would live a fabulous life and then die. That prospect no longer held such terror for him with the hard evidence of an afterlife before him. With the Devil so real, God was just as real, right?

That beautiful loophole; so long as he repented, merciful God would forgive his sins. The Adversary would not have him. And he would repent, most truly and sincerely, every sin he committed as soon as he committed them. It was all there in the Bible, in unambiguous terms. If you repented, you were forgiven. That was the mistake everyone else who made these bargains seemed to make; they waited until the last minute, and before they could repent, wham. He wouldn't be so stupid.

But Mr. Lightman seemed blithely unconcerned by any of this. "I'd like to make a slight change in this contract, if I might," he said instead. "Since Brother Lee's empire is going begging, I would like to install you in his place. Conservation of effort, don't you know, and it will make his flock so much

more comfortable."

Lester nodded cautiously; the fiend waved his hand and the change appeared in fiery letters that glowed for a moment.

"And now, for my articles." Lightman handed the contract back, and there was an additional page among the rest. He scanned them carefully, including all the fine print. He had expected trouble there, but to his surprise, it seemed to be mostly verses from the Bible itself, including the Lord's Prayer, with commentaries. It looked, in fact, like a page from a Bible-studies course. He looked up from his perusal to see Lightman gazing at him sardonically.

"What, have you never heard that the Devil can quote Scripture?" The fiend chuckled. "It's simply the usual stuff. So that you know that I know all the things people usually count on for loopholes."

That gave him pause for a moment, but he dismissed his doubts. "I'm ready to sign," he said firmly.

Lightman nodded, and handed him a pen filled with thick, red fluid. He doubted it was ink.

He was the most popular televangelist ever to grace the home screen; surpassing Brother Lee's popularity and eclipsing it. His message was a simple one, although he never phrased it bluntly: buy your way into heaven, and into heaven on earth. Send Lester Parker money, and Lester will not only see that God puts a "reserved" placard on your seat in the heavenly choir, he'll see to it that God makes your life on earth a comfortable and happy one. He told people what they wanted to hear, no uncomfortable truths. And there were always plenty of letters he could show, which told stories of how the loyal sheep of his flock had found Jesus, peace of mind, and material prosperity as soon as they sent Lester their check.

Of course, some of those same people would have been happy to ascribe a miraculous reversal of fortune to their "personal psychic" if they'd called the Psychic Hotline number instead of Lester's. Above all else, people wanted to believe—wasn't that what both sides said?

He had a computerized answering service for all his mail; no dumping letters into the trash at the bank for him, no sir! He had a fanatically loyal bunch of part-time housewives read the things, enter the letter's key words into the computer, and have an answer full of homey, sensible advice and religious homilies tailored to the individual run up by the machine in about the time it took to enter the address. Every letter came out a little different; every letter sounded like one of his sermons. Every letter looked like a personal answer from Lester. The computer was a wonderful thing.

They could have gotten the same advice from Dear Abby—in fact, a good part of the advice tendered was gleaned from the back issues of Dear Abby's compiled columns. But Abby didn't claim to speak for God, and Lester did.

He also preached another sort of comfort—that hatred was no sin. It was no accident that his viewers were nearly one hundred percent white; white people had money, and black, yellow, and red ones didn't, or if they did, they generally weren't going to part with it. That's what his Daddy had taught him. He sprinkled his sermons with Bible quotations proving that it was no sin to hate unbelievers—or to act on that hatred. After all, those people had placed themselves beyond the pale of God's forgiveness. They had not and would not

repent. They should be purged from the body of mankind. "If thine eye offends thee, pluck it out!" he stormed, and his legions of followers went out looking for offending eyes, their own blind to mirrors.

Most of his prosperity he owed to his own cleverness, but there were times when he needed that little helping hand—just as he had thought he might. Like the time when his network of informers let him know that Newsweek had found his ex-wife, and she was going to spill some embarrassing things about him. Or that one of his many ex-mistresses was going to write a tell-all biography. Or that the IRS was planning an audit.

All he had to do was whisper Lightman's name, and his request, and by midnight, it was taken care of.

By twelve-oh-one, he was truly, sincerely, repenting that he had ordered his wife's murder—or whatever other little thing he had requested. Truly, sincerely, and deeply, confessing himself to God and showing that repentance in concrete sacrifices of tears and cash. From the beginning, he had told himself that he was acting on God's behalf, spitting in the face of Satan by tricking the Great Trickster. He told himself every time he prayed that he was working for God.

It was a foolproof scheme, and the seven years flew by. During the last year, he was cautious, but resigned. He knew that Lightman would arrange for his death, so there was no point in trying to avoid it. And, indeed, on the very instant of the seventh-year anniversary of the contract, he had a heart attack. As he prayed before his video-congregation. Just like Brother Lee.

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Lester stood beside the body in the expensive hospital bed and stared down at it. The monitors were mostly flatlined; the only ones showing any activity were those reporting functions that had been taken over by machines. Strange, he thought. The man in the bed looked so healthy.

"Ah, Lester, you're right on time," Lightman said genially, stepping around from behind a curtain.

Lester shrugged. "Is there any reason why I shouldn't be?" he asked, just as genially. He could afford to be genial; after all, he wasn't going to be leaving with Lightman.

"What, no screaming, no crying, no begging?" Lightman seemed genuinely surprised. "Normally your kind are the worst—"

Lester only chuckled. "Why should I be worried?" he replied. "You only think you have me. But I repented of every single one of those crimes I asked you to commit. Every death, every blackmail scheme, every disgrace—I even repented the small things, repented every time I accepted someone's Social Security check—every time I arranged a special-effects miracle or convinced someone to leave me everything in their will—"

But he stopped as Lightman began laughing. "Oh yes, you did," Lightman told him merrily. "And my Opponent has forgiven you for those sins. But you didn't read the fine print." He handed Lester the copy of his contract, and pointed to the last page. "Read the commentary, dear boy. Carefully, this time."

The words leapt off the page at him.

Sins repented will be forgiven by the Opposition, but forgiveness does not imply repayment. All sins committed by the party of the first part must be

repaid to the party of the second part regardless of whether or not forgiveness has been obtained.

"These are the sins you'll be repaying, my boy," Lightman said pleasantly, waving his hand. A stack of computer forms as tall as Lester appeared beside him. "But that is not why I am truly pleased to have you among us—"

Another stack of computer forms appeared, impossibly high, reaching up as far as Lester could see, millions of them.

"This stack—" Lightman placed his hand on the first pile "--represents all the sins you committed directly. But this pile represents all those you encouraged others to commit, with your doctrine of salvation through donation and hate-thy-neighbor. And those, dear boy, you did not repent of. You are a credit to our side! And we will be so happy to have you with us!"

The floor opened up, and Lightman stood in midair. "Learn to enjoy it, dear Lester," he chuckled, as the demons drew the false prophet down among them. "You'll reach your depth soon enough."

Lightman smiled as the mountain of sin forms buried Lester Parker. "So I believe."