

DELUDED INC.

Jude gazed at the clock on his desk intently. The messianic figure emblazoned on the hour and minute hands confirmed that his next clients were indeed eleven minutes late; four more and he'd have to cancel and potentially lose a high paying client. The client he was expecting would easily help him meet his quota for the week, if not the month, so he sat there patiently; musing over the various images of past clients clutching their Pass to Heaven that dotted the wall amongst a multitude of graven images of Mary, Jesus, and other celebrities.

“Mr. Sharp,” The intercom on Jude's desk sprang to life, “your five o'clock is here.”

“Send them in please.”

He was greeted shortly thereafter by a couple dressed in their finest. The man, always leading the woman along by the hand, was dressed in what Jude guessed must have been a custom tailored suit; it had cross shaped cuff links and his American flag lapel pin had a cross in gold inlay over it. His graying hair and wild, almost desperate eyes didn't seem to detract from the man's austere demeanor and presence. The woman—most likely his wife judging by the gold wedding band and tarnished promise ring below it on the same finger—was dressed more modestly in a drab colored sundress that came well below the knee. She was far younger than he was, easily twenty years his junior. She said not a word and barely returned Jude's smile; she took a seat when her husband motioned her to do so.

“It's really a pleasure to finally meet you in person Mr-”

“Smith.” Jude looked perplexed, then nodded.

“Very well then Mr. Smith.”

“I apologize for running late,” The man continued, playing with the gold ring on his finger, “my wife took too long getting dressed.”

“Don't worry about it,” Jude took a drink, examining their facial expressions, “You didn't bring your son along today?”

“He, had other things to attend to today.” Jude nodded.

“Well, let's get down to business shall we?” Jude opened up a file on his desk and began perusing through it, “You're here at Deluded Incorporated because you feel that, at the point of your death or the eventual return of Jesus Christ and the coming rapture and Armageddon, you will be unfit to reach Heaven. We can offer a solution to your crisis with our simple program available for a nominal

fee.”

“Look,” The man said, his wife suddenly sitting up straight, “I have a check here for the agreed amount of one hundred and thirty thousand dollars, sign the certificate for my family and me and we'll be on our merry way. I do not need to listen to you prattle on about things I already know quite well.”

Jude waited for him to stop and took a drink “Mr. Smith, with all due respect, there is protocol and guidelines we have to follow. We can guarantee with a hundred percent certainty that you will go to Heaven, but only after we've dotted every I and crossed every T, so to speak.” The man was clearly growing more agitated, Jude smiled a bit “As for the cost we agreed upon, I'm afraid to have to tell you that due to some new circumstances, we are going to have to charge you three hundred thousand.”

“Three hundred grand, are you fucking mad!” this time his wife seemed more startled by the curse rather than his anger. “I refuse to pay such an exorbitant amount! This is extortion!”

“Honey please...” the woman's voice quivered and she recoiled as the man looked at her.

“Sir, this is not up for discussion. You have a family to look after and make sure that they also are able to enjoy paradise with the best of them. There is also the matter of your desire for extra privacy and added security. Our confessionists and penance counselors have been digging up every loophole and mistranslation we can find to get you and your family off the hook; but honestly, it would have been easier if you were excommunicated.”

“How can I be certain you can get me certified?”

“Sir, we could have gotten Judas certified for heaven.” Jude leaned back in his chair.

“Alright fine, its not like I have any choice, let's do this.”

“Very good sir. Now, just a few minor details to get out of the way before we can start the certification process.” Jude leaned forward and began typing something, his face partially silhouetted by the computer monitor, “Names?”

“Just put John and Jane Smith.”

“Sorry, those aliases are taken.”

The man scowled “Then just give us whatever is free.”

Jude entered a few more keystrokes. “Let's see... will Jonas and Lilith do?” The man nodded before his wife had a chance to protest her alias.

“Alright then, occupation?”

“Unemployed.”

“C'mon Jonas, we can play this game all night, or you can be honest with me.”

“I’m, a pastor.”

“That’s better, now for the sake of time and privacy, I’ll put you down as non-denominational. Is that alright?”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

Jude nodded and readjusted his glasses as he gazed at the computer screen. “Alright then Jonas, since you are using an alias we can skip with all the pleasantries and get right down to business. Tell me in your own words, what makes you think you’re fit for entry into Heaven?”

“You can’t possibly be serious”

“Sir, please, you must be patient. There are rules and obligations we must follow in order to make sure your certification process goes well and we don’t have any unexpected hitches.”

“But I’m a pastor damnit! I have helped show hundreds of thousands the light and glory of salvation! I have raised millions in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ! I have personally helped over a hundred people be born again! I have saved the souls of dozens through exorcism and witnessed for countless more! I have my own cable TV show dedicated to the Lord!”

“Ah but see, that’s where our problem begins. Because of the many different ways to decipher the true message of Christianity, one must account for all of these different facets of the Son’s lifestyle. After all, have you given away all of your worldly possessions? Have you turned the other cheek to your enemies? Have you cursed a fig tree? All of these are important parts of a greater whole and when you do not live your life according to all of these aspects, it becomes much more difficult to get you certified, not impossible though. You haven’t denied the Holy Spirit have you?”

“Of course not, I’ve accepted the Holy Trinity as-“

“That’s good enough, We had a man come in who had accidentally denied the Holy Spirit and we were only able to certify him for pre-approval to heaven; it’s too bad he died after the pope declared limbo to be non-existent.”

“Can we get back to the topic at hand?”

“Of course, sorry Jonas.” Jude entered a few things into the computer and sighed, “Well, this isn’t good.”

“What isn’t good? If you’ve led me on so help me God-“

“Now would not be the best time to use the Lord’s name in vain. You see Jonas, we rate all of our clients on a series of scales to see how well they have lived their life according to Jesus’ teachings. While you have rated a whopping nine fourteen on the ‘fire and brimstone’ scale as we like to call it, you are far too low on the other scales: Poverty Lifestyles, you only scored a one seventeen; Golden Rule Ethics, three twenty-eight; Miracle Administration, two twenty two; the list goes on and

on. Such low numbers are not conducive to a quick and easy certification.”

“Well how do I get those numbers higher?”

Jude studied the man for a bit. “Do not worry, we have several options available to us at this time. The easiest would be to obviously come back in a year and get reevaluated, that would allow you a chance to live your life according to more than one aspect of the life of Christ; judging by your current situation, though, I doubt that this is the option you would like to take?”

“I want this to be done and done by the time I leave, so no.”

“Well, then I’m afraid the only other option is to raise the numbers up, which costs a fair amount.”

“A fair amount? You’re already charging me three hundred grand!”

“Sir, remember, this is your immortal soul we’re discussing here; not only yours but that of your wife and son, as well as insurance against your family receiving a divine curse for your misdeeds. You’re already asking a lot from us sir, we’re only human after all.” The man’s hands quivered intensely and his face flushed red for a moment before he calmed down, his wife nervously placing her hand over his seemed to stay his foul temper. He adjusted his shirt collar and recomposed himself.

“How much then?”

“All together now, your bill comes to,” Jude paused and entered a few keystrokes into his computer, “five hundred thousand.”

The man choked and clutched the arm of his chair; his wife gasped and looked down at her feet. She trembled softly when he looked in her direction.

“Fine, five hundred thousand it is. You sure I shouldn’t just sign the deed of my house over to you while we’re at it?”

“That won’t be necessary sir, though I must remind you that we are still not done. Let me resolve your Christ-like lifestyle issues and we can move on.” Jude once again turned his attention to the computer for a few moments, “Okay, now then.”

“What, do I have to confess now?”

“Actually, a full confession would take far too long; we already have a confessionist report on you anyway. Most of the major sins of your life have already been covered and cleared; there is, though, the question of your wife and son.”

“What about them?”

“Well, from our studies, we’ve found the following: You a dominant and overbearing husband who has made sure to lead your wife in the right direction her life; and this she has done quite

well in fact.” Jude nodded to the woman, who gave a shy smile, “Though humility and subservience are excellent factors for a woman to receive certification, her duties as a home maker must also be brought into question. Here we find that she excels quite well, while devoting just a bit too much of her time to your business; this is an easy thing to overlook and really just a technicality. I can’t recall anyone being denied certification for something so trivial. No, the problem really begins to arise in relation to your son.”

“What has that bastard done now?”

“Honey, please...” The woman’s voice was barely a whisper.

“It’s not really what he’s done, its what you haven’t done. You see, we consider all sins prior to age twenty-one cleared after the child reaches manhood. Your son, being only nineteen, is still under your ward as far as we are concerned. Therefore all of his sins are yours to carry, again, this can be settled cheaply by waiting but-“

“For the love of God just tell me how much!”

“Six twenty-five”

“Outrageous! Do you take me for a fool? I could have you arrested for this kind of swindling.”

“Sir, may I remind you that you did sign a contract waiving all rights to an attorney, or would you like more media attention? Please try to think of your family and your reputation, not to mention your immortal soul.”

“Look, why don’t you just add up what this is going to cost me altogether and we can be done with this.”

“Well, it’s not that easy sir; we have regulations and we have protocols. We have to follow the rules, if you don’t follow the rules, then where will we end up?”

“Fine, what’s next?”

“Well, we’ve gone over most everything and while there are a lot of problems to fix, it can be doable.” Jude took a drink of water, then continued, “The major problem, however, seems to be your wife.” The woman looked up in honest surprise.

“M...Me?”

“I’m afraid so ma’am.”

“Now wait just a minute!” The man interrupted “You can not hold her accountable for sins! It says specifically in your clause that-“

“I know what it says sir, but this is not about sin, this is about something a little worse.”

“And that is?”

“You have only managed to have one child with your husband ma’am; now I am not suggesting anything bad, but it would be best if you had yourself checked for barrenness.” The woman’s eyes grew wide and she cowered under the scornful gaze of her husband. “I know this is difficult to comprehend but it is simply for your safety and insurance.”

“How much?”

“Excuse me?”

“How much to make it go away?”

“Sir, are you serious?”

“How much to make it go away?”

Jude sighed and again turned his attention to his computer. “It's going to be a lot... Lets see,” he entered a few keystrokes in “This brings your total up to one million, three hundred thousand dollars.”

The man looked as though he would have a stroke.

“That...that’s all I have left!”

His wife looked at him pleadingly “Honey, this is our only hope. Please think of our son and our family. What’s one million compared to paradise?”

The man sighed and looked down, his shoulders were sunken and he looked a bit older than before.

“Alright, it’s a deal.”

Jude smiled “You won’t regret this sir; and just to show my good will, we’ll throw the rest of the bonuses and extras in free of charge.” He slid over a hefty contract. “Now, this is all the terms and conditions we’ve talked about, a clause guaranteeing complete return to your estate all assets in the event that your certification doesn’t go through; also we have a waiver here stating that any sins caused after the date of certification are not covered and may void the certificate, we aren’t an indulgence service after all.”

“Fine... fine...” The man signed the document slowly as his wife watched with apprehension.

Jude smiled and looked over his signature. In the blank space next to price, the man had filled out ‘\$1.3 million/00.’ Jude nodded “alright then sir, we’ll expect payment by midnight tonight, why don’t you step outside and take care of that while your wife and I finalize the deal.”

The man nodded and stood wearily, heading towards the door. As soon as the click of the latch sounded his wife smiled coyly and reached across the desk; grasping Jude’s tie and pulling him forward into a passionate kiss. After several beats she broke the kiss and grinned.

“That was quite the show love.”

Jude smiled “Get a desperate man by the balls and you can demand just about anything.”

“So, everything’s okay then? The money’s ours?”

“Of course, all except for the fifteen thousand dollar certification fee.” The woman giggled at this.

“It feels so wonderful to get that rat bastard back love,” She had moved from her seat and was seated on the desk in front of Jude, playing with his hair, “I feel a bit guilty for this though, what if someone finds out? What’s going to be made of our messy divorce after the most recent incident comes to light?”

“Easy, you’ll look like a good woman who was lied to and people will sympathize for you. As for getting caught, it isn’t likely; I know how to follow rules when dealing with people like the IRS. We’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“No one knows what we’ve done, no one is watching and no one can punish us my dear.”

The woman sighed in relief and leaned her head against Jude’s shoulder, “I love you my darling.”

“And I love you as well my little dear, now, why don’t you go and entertain the good Pastor while I get our celebratory cruise ready; oh, and I’ll be sure to bring your shorter skirts and high heels.”