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**Karma Trials**  
**Book One: A Broken System**

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A NOVEL BY L. DEE WALKER  
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# **A Broken System**

## **Karma Trials - Book One**

L. Dee Walker

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Illustration by: L. Dee Walker

### **Legal Crap** (that no one ever listens to)

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### **Other novels by L. Dee Walker**

The Rise of Seth – The Bloodstone Chronicles (w/Sam Beach)

Guardian of Antiquity – The Bloodstone Chronicles – book two (w/Sam Beach)

What Lies Beneath – The Bloodstone Chronicles – book three (w/Sam Beach)

Convergence – The Bloodstone Chronicles – book four (coming soon-ish w/Sam Beach)

Lies, Sacrifices, and Alibis (Publishing next)

### **Special Dedication**

First, God. Thank you for the courage and the willpower to get through the temptations and the *deadline* to finish it. The words and scenarios you gave me kept me writing and understanding enough to make people see before it's too late, hopefully.

To my fiancé Sam—you're my rock when I'm unsteady, a teacher when I need guidance, and a student when I need to teach. Thank you for always being there in every situation and keeping me laughing ... even when I didn't want to. I love you more than life itself and cherish the day you came into my life!—In loving memory of Sam Beach, you will always be in my heart. I will love you until the day I die, and I will see you again, my love. Rest in Peace and keep God laughing with your witty zingers. I miss you. Until we meet again, I am forever yours.

The couch crew – the lovable fun you bring into my life is priceless. I love you all.

My fans – you know who you are.

All of you mean the world to me, and I would be devastated if I lost *any* of you. Thank you for everything. In a world of warriors, be a merciful knight.

## **ONE**

### *The Hook*

The hook. 2020. In the land of Brimstonia, a place that looks a lot like Earth but feels different, a frightening pandemic spreads like wildfire. People hurriedly slam their doors shut, turning their homes into quiet, lonely forts. A heavy blanket of fear hangs low in the air, making the world feel heavy and strange. Streets that once burst with laughter and the sounds of cheerful conversation now echo with a haunting silence, as if the joy has been sucked right out of them.

Once filled with food, grocery stores now stand empty with bare shelves. Signs that read "OUT OF STOCK" are pasted on

the front like warning flags. Toilet paper, once a common household item, vanishes in panic as shoppers grab it off the shelves like it's made of gold.

Everywhere you look, people tighten their grips on their masks, eyes darting nervously, unsure if these thin pieces of fabric really protect them. Hand sanitizer becomes a must-have accessory. People apply it so often, it feels like a weird new lotion, all in a frantic effort to defend themselves from an invisible enemy lurking just out of sight.

Conversations drop to whispers. Friends speak less freely, afraid of saying the wrong thing and facing judgment. Some tear down statues of figures from the past, convinced they represent old injustices, while others start to admire those who break laws, believing they might usher in real change. Racial profiling and heated political debates thrive, drawing lines between neighbors like a rift that seems impossible to mend.

As the year drags on, time feels distorted, stretching endlessly, like a scene out of an old fifties, black-and-white TV show about a crazy zone. Each day blurs into the next, piling months onto a shaky, wobbling tower that feels like it could collapse at any moment. Cozy up with a cup of coffee, settle into your favorite chair, and brace yourself for the strange happenings of daily life during this chaotic period. You might witness odd events that challenge even the most logical minds while snacking on chips or cookies in your little bubble of isolation.

What if people truly knew what was happening behind the scenes? Picture a puppet master, lurking in the shadows, pulling strings that make everyone dance to his whims. Would people finally rise together and demand change? The bizarre happenings of 2020 didn't just spring up overnight; they trace back to much earlier. That year, people started to open their eyes, looking around at the swirling chaos and turbulence in their lives. The truth can be hard to face, but what do you do when it's laid bare for all to see? That's the challenging question everyone grapples with as they navigate the stormy, unpredictable waters of their new reality.

Once upon a time, a storyteller wove a tale so wild and unbelievable that it captured the entire world's attention. He stood on a grand stage, his voice booming as it promised a

miraculous cure that could fix the rebellious hearts of humanity. His claim rang out like church bells, suggesting that this divine remedy could save people from eternal damnation. And incredibly, people believed him without question, completely hooked by his words. What miracle drug could solve everything? Just a simple act of asking for forgiveness. But here's the truth: they were sadly mistaken.

Now, don't get upset—forgiveness remains a powerful tool. It can gently mend a shattered heart or soothe a troubled soul. However, it requires much more than muttering the Lord's Prayer a few times in a confessional booth to truly heal wounds.

In the world around us—where you are sitting and reading these very words right now—decency seems to have vanished into thin air, like ashes scattered by a strong gust of wind. Historians might debate whether the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah ever really existed, turning to science only when it suits their arguments. Still, the same troubles are creeping back into our world today. Sadly, many people are too caught up in their own lives to notice the chaos unfolding right before their eyes.

History has a funny way of spinning in circles, especially when people attempt to erase the past, like trying to hide a glaring pimple on an otherwise flawless face. This effort only draws more attention, like a bright lighthouse guiding ships through a dark, stormy night. Look carefully at the terrible actions and evil deeds happening in plain sight, and you might start to understand the gravity of the situation. Unfortunately, if you find nothing wrong with what's happening, you might be part of the problem. But if you turn away with a sense of disgust, there is still hope for you, as long as you take action to make a change. For now, I'll save that discussion for another time—you'll come to grasp it eventually.

In the end, it all boils down to a simple battle:

Evil versus good. Light versus darkness. Right versus wrong.

These choices are ever-present; certain individuals seem to revel in causing harm and watching others falter. Yet, thankfully, some brave souls strive hard to guide you toward better choices, even if their words often fall on deaf ears. It's

wise to heed their advice; it may save you from suffering in this life and whatever lies beyond.

Long ago, wise scholars penned a book warning about today's problems. It's as if the world has completely forgotten how the tale concludes—the final chapter, the ultimate battle between right and wrong. I can hardly blame them, though; many false prophets have twisted the words and meanings of those wise seers. Now, as sin and evil roam freely, wrongdoers try to downplay their actions, claiming they are simply "mental issues." They insist that no real crimes have been committed, just a handful of misunderstood individuals who meant no harm. They urge victims to simply move on and get over it.

But that's not how any of this works.

Don't misunderstand me; the other side isn't any better either. Many believe that warriors fighting against evil are like deities, and that every word they speak is pure gold. But that's a dangerous illusion. Everyone carries a sliver of darkness within them, no matter how kind or brave they appear. Each person has their price; nobody is truly perfect. Even angels, crafted from a divine design, have their own imperfections. There's a deeper meaning behind all this chaos, something I'll delve into later.

Let me take you back to the very first day—a day etched in memory. I'll change the names to protect the innocent, because trust me, this story takes a few shocking twists and turns. It all began when the leaders of Karma realized something was terribly wrong with their system; it had become far too biased. This awakening started with an impulsive stray wandering into the wrong place at the right moment.

## **TWO**

### *Something Hinky with the System*

Leticia Mayfield, the new kid on the block, sat in the bustling office on her first day, feeling a mixture of excitement and anxiety. She didn't want to make waves on her first day, but an unexpected discovery was about to change everything. After checking her notes once, twice, and three times—and getting the same disappointing results—her heart sank. With a shaky

hand, she pushed a loose strand of her strawberry-blond hair behind her ear.

Her chocolate brown eyes flicked to her supervisor, a woman buried beneath a mountain of paperwork and brimming with tasks. Leticia could sense the urgency radiating from the busy atmosphere; the hum of conversations and the sound of keyboards clicking filled the room. To her right, a line of colleagues, preoccupied with their own pressing matters, waited patiently. Yet this wasn't just another situation where she could wait her turn. Leticia needed her supervisor's attention, and she needed it now. "Oh, she isn't going to like this one bit," she thought, anxiety knotting her stomach. The longer she hesitated, the harder it would be to explain why she waited.

"Dani, I found something," she began, her voice steady but low. She hesitated for a moment, trying to find the right words to convey the seriousness of her discovery. "There's something 'hinky' with the system." She pointed toward her monitor, where confusing error messages lit up the screen, a puzzle begging for answers.

Danielle "Dani" Thurman lifted her hand high, a bright beacon in the noisy office. Instantly, conversations faded, and silence wrapped around her like a soft blanket. "What does 'hinky' mean? When looking at a system that affects billions, calling it 'hinky' feels wrong."

"That's pretty much the gist of it. It just doesn't belong here. It's like it snuck in—which can't be right because that would mean—could you come and check this out?" The words stumbled from her lips, frustration evident in her voice.

Not exactly thrilled by the vague explanation, Dani stood, stretching her arms skyward. "Ooh, my bones are creaking like an old door! Sitting in this chair day after day is exhausting. Let's set a time to get up and move around the office. We all need it! I want everyone to mark off a break every two hours to stand and stretch."

"Sure thing. I'll get right on that," Leticia chimed, her fingers flying over the keys as she kept typing. "Have you been sipping on some happy juice? You should share it with the rest of us!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. We'll never have fun if we don't laugh about our situation! Do you really want to spend eternity without having fun?"

"Um. Yeah. Fun. More like numbers over here and letters over there. So, can you come check this out? It's not supposed to be in the mainframe. At least, I don't think it is."

"Yep," Dani muttered, exasperation creeping into her voice. "Every newbie thinks they've discovered some life-or-death issue needing my immediate attention. Everyone in this office has found something inconsequential. Oy."

"What was that? If you're talking to me, I didn't catch it," Leticia called over, curiously.

With a huff, Dani took a deep breath, pushing down her irritation. She forced a bright smile, determined to keep things light. "Coming."

Dani grabbed a shiny candy bar from the cluttered desk nearby, the wrapper crinkling as she twisted it open. With a mischievous smirk, she leaned over Leticia's shoulder, her eyes darting to the glowing screen. In a swift motion, Dani shoved Leticia aside, her fingers flying over the keyboard with urgency. "Hang on. What the bloody hell?! Hinky is right!" Her disbelief showed in the widening of her eyes as she navigated through the different frames on the display. "Whoa! This shouldn't be in the system at all, especially not in the mainframe."

Leticia craned her neck, trying to catch a glimpse. "So, is it as big as I think it is?" she asked, her brow furrowing with curiosity.

"Where did you even find this? You didn't do it, did you?" Dani's voice was laced with surprise.

"Me?! Whoa! No. I just stumbled upon it—an Easter egg buried behind a pile of useless junk files. It's crazy that no one else turned it up." Leticia shook her head, her eyes wide with intrigue.

"Well, to be fair, we're not digging around in the system like you are," Dani shot back, a playful grin tugging at her lips.

"You did say to monitor the system for errors, right? That gives me a lot of wiggle room," Leticia defended, her demeanor turning serious again.

"Okay, but you say you found all this buried behind some junk files. Hm. This is interesting," Dani mused, her fingers tapping thoughtfully against the desk. "It looks like someone is trying to hide something important from us monitoring them."

Leticia's gaze shifted from the monitor back to Dani, confusion pooling in her expression. "Wait. What? Isn't that what we do? Monitor the system?"

"Yeah, something like that," Dani replied, her excitement noticeable. "This really piques my curiosity. Duplicate this, tear your copy apart, and learn everything you can about it. I want to know why someone would bother hiding it if it's legitimate." With that, she hopped up from the chair, her energy spilling over as she rushed back to her desk.

"I wondered the same thing," Leticia said, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the strange symbols on the screen, trying to plan her next move.

"Then figure it out," Dani encouraged, already diving back into her work, people once again lining up, striving for her attention.

"I'm on it," Leticia promised, determination setting her jaw as she prepared to tackle the mystery before her.

## THREE

### *Foreign Code*

Ten cups of strong coffee and fifteen hours later, Leticia had managed to reverse engineer the odd array of numbers and letters. Frustration creased her brow as she examined the results. "You can't be fucking serious?!" Taking a moment to breathe it all in, she swallowed the last bit of her not-quite-cold coffee, cringing slightly from the bitter taste it left in the back of her throat. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she waved Dani over, excitement buzzing in her chest. "Okay, Dani, I finished, and you are not going to believe this shit. It's a lot bigger than we thought. I'll put it up on the main screen."

"That bad, huh?" Dani, seated at her desk, cast aside the stack of papers around her, dismissed the people around her desk, and turned her chair toward Leticia, a chocolate snack clutched in her hand. With a curious glint in her eyes, she glanced at the big screen TV mounted on the wall. "Okay, darling, impress me."

Leticia's fingers flew over the keyboard as she prepared the presentation. "It's worse than I thought. I understand why someone hid it from view." As Leticia clicked a button, the lights dimmed in the room, and the screen came alive with numbers and letters, drawing the attention of most people present. "The code, as you can see here, is programmed to stop bad karma from occurring with anyone associated with these initials: NP, CS, BS, HC, BO, JB, MC, GB. And those are just the ones off the top of my list; it's a pretty damn big list. Any person put into the system under those initials receives protection against bad karma for any actions they take."

"Any actions?" Dani chewed thoughtfully on her chocolate, her eyes narrowing as she concentrated on the data flashing before them. "That seems outside the realm of reality. I wonder why these people have such protection?"

Leticia rifled through the clutter on her desk until she unearthed her notes. With determined strides, she approached Dani and handed over the papers. "I looked into it. The obvious suspects would be government officials, but that could be a ploy. Those initials pop up across all three political parties."

Dani studied both the tablet and the screen, raising an eyebrow. "Yes, I can see how one might come to that conclusion. However, that karma level is on another floor. They have loopholes due to national security and strict rules about what qualifies. So why would they need to shield them at our level first?"

From the back of the room, Bryan Owens spoke up, his voice a mix of skepticism and curiosity. "My guess is that most of it is bullshit, but isn't it a stretch to assume they're all government officials? My initials are in there. What if someone wants to take over karma? What better way to do that than from the inside out?" With his wavy blond hair and striking blue eyes, Bryan had a reputation for cleverness. He appeared innocent

enough, but many didn't know the shadowy secrets he carried. If they did, his sweet facade would shatter.

Taken aback, Leticia stared at him as if he spoke in another language. "That's what I said! It could be a trick, or it could be so absurd that it's real. What else could it be?!"

Bryan chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek, his brow furrowing as he examined the screen. "Come to think of it, you might be onto something. It is too coincidental that these initials are linked to the prevention of bad karma. It must be someone influential, maybe someone famous, who has twisted the law a dozen times and needs to enlist others for their shady endeavors."

Dani leaned forward, her finger jabbing sharply toward the screen. "All good points, but why would they hide this and protect those who break the commandments if it wasn't illegal?" She gestured to a specific section of the code, her eyes narrowed in focus. "Like that right there. It tells the system to ignore this name and calls it a voided character—someone who doesn't exist, almost like a glitch."

She shook her head, frustration simmering beneath the surface. "I hate to sound all conspiratorial, but I wouldn't put it past the government—and the super wealthy—to think they're above all the laws."

Bryan sat back in his chair, crossing his arms as he let out a scoff. The disbelief was evident on his face. "Not to be a doubting Thomas, but since when do government officials follow any laws, whether it's one side or the other? They act like they're untouchable. So why would they care about stopping someone from facing bad karma? In fact, how would they even know about us?"

Leticia's expression shifted to one of determination as she pointed to a line on the document. "I think anyone with a set of eyes would see that," she insisted. "This has been in effect for a long, long time. Look at that date."

Bryan squinted at the screen, his mouth tightening as he caught sight of her reference. "Kinda like government officials—lifetime positions, or so it seems." He shook his head, a mixture of anger and disbelief coloring his voice.

Dani straightened up, her excitement bubbling over as she clapped her hands together. "Good thing we no longer have to worry about their political affairs. Okay, it's time to fight fire with fire."

Leticia raised an eyebrow, her expression shifting to confusion as she returned to her desk. "What exactly does that mean?"

Dani leaned in closer, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. "Sometimes, you can defeat a fire by starting a controlled one, but in this case, we're about to start a shitstorm." Her grin widened, anticipation crackling in the air around them.

Bryan rubbed his hands together, his eyes shining with excitement. He bounced slightly on his chair, feeling the energy in the room. "Finally! We get to do some major shit around here. Wait, will it be legal?"

Dani wiggled her brows and gave him a playful wink. "But of course, I am the boss, aren't I?" She straightened her shoulders, a confident smile on her face.

Bryan shrugged, turning back to the glowing computer screen full of data. "Legal enough for me." His fingers tapped rhythmically on the keyboard as he focused on the details.

With a quick snap of her fingers, Dani shot a glance at Leticia, who sat nearby with a stack of papers scattered across her desk. "Leticia, do you feel capable of putting that back together and inserting it into the mainframe, or should I have Bryan do it?"

Leticia blinked rapidly, glancing nervously from Bryan to Dani. "To be honest, since I'm the newbie, maybe you should have Bryan finish. I can piece it back together, and then he can find a spot to slip it in." She bit her lip, hoping her suggestion would be taken seriously.

Dani nodded, her smile widening. "Good enough. Okay, first, Leticia will reassemble the code, but don't touch theirs. They're probably monitoring it for any changes. Bryan, create something that counters their information, making it look like a false flag. Find a sneaky place to tuck it in so no one will discover it."

Leticia settled back in her chair, ready to get to work. "I'm on it." Her fingers shuffled through the papers as she sorted the jumbled notes.

Bryan nodded confidently. "No biggie. Once she gets the information to me, I'll integrate it into the mainline system's coding piece by piece, attaching it to the last line of the existing code. No one should be checking that without our approval. It's going to take some time."

"I need you to finish that as soon as you can," Dani urged, her tone serious. "Though time isn't of the essence here, it's imperative to hurry." She took another bite of her chocolate candy, savoring the sweetness while analyzing the situation. "Let's see who raises a big fuss about it and what key role they play in this mess."

As the overhead lights flickered back to life, Bryan twisted in his chair to face Dani. "Then again, if someone does find it, you might discover who's responsible for all this. Why would they be nosing around the system?"

"Very true." Dani leaned back, rocking slightly, her mind racing through the possibilities. "It will be nice to get karma back on the road to redemption."

A sudden, chilling thought struck Bryan. He cleared his throat, his expression shifting to concern. "Dani, the moment I activate that, it will create a problem with the system. People who have been forgotten, viewed as just glitches, will suddenly be thrust into the spotlight and pulled into our judicial system. We don't know how many there are."

Pausing mid-bite, Dani chewed slowly, her mind working through his suggestion. "Yeah. Good point. That's going to lead to an epic failure. It'll likely freeze the software apps and force a hard reboot on all computers. I can guarantee our phones will ring off the hook with complaints. We can make excuses. Bryan, monitor the information for changes. Adjust the system so you can catch anyone digging where they don't belong."

"I'm on it," Bryan replied, determination in his voice.

Dani picked up the phone, pressing a button that made her voice echo through the room. "Listen up, everyone. This is not a drill. The system is about to suffer a hard hit, and it may crash

multiple times. I'm sure every department is going to call and complain about it. Dispatchers, remember your script. "We are looking into the problem. Once we identify the issue, the system will be back online." Nothing else. Save any work as soon as possible and give us the go-no-go signal to start."

After hanging up, she glanced at the few workers in the main office, their faces reflecting the seriousness of the situation. "Once Bryan removes that flag, it will relocate people from their protected status and throw them into the system. They will likely suffer like never before."

Understanding her duties, Leticia nodded, raising a finger as if to voice a concern. "Um, quick question. What will stop anyone from just removing them from the record?"

"That's against the rules," Dani replied firmly, crossing her arms. "No matter who it is. Once in the system, no one can eliminate them. Once the red flag sends the alert, it has to go before a trial and receive points or fines. That's why the system made it seem like a glitch. All those protected individuals are probably stored in a folder that needs higher clearance than we have."

Letting out a short laugh, Bryan pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, but I'm pretty sure we're dealing with people who don't follow any laws."

Considering his statement, Dani narrowed her eyes and growled low in her throat. "I, for one, will be happy to show them that no one is above the commandments or laws. It's high time they suffer for their immoralities in real life instead of waiting for the afterlife."

"You're talking about an incredible number of people," Leticia interjected, her finger pointing at the computer screen. "These instructions have been in effect for decades, maybe even longer. Look at the dates on those five alone: NP, CS, JB, HC, BS, LG... If those are government officials, they have been in office since, well, since the nomads came out of their caves!"

Dani laughed, shaking her head, and then turned back to her desk, her fingers dancing over the keyboard. "Prepare yourselves, people. Save anything you're doing right now

because when he installs the new lines, everything is going to change. Life as we know it is about to become quite hectic."

Bryan turned to Dani, his brow furrowing in thought. "What initials do I use as an authority in the Easter Egg code?"

"Put mine," Dani said with a grin, a playful glint in her eye at the implication. "DT."

## FOUR

### *Careful What You Ask For*

In the bustling recruiting department, Evelyn Trask focused on the last stack of paperwork at her cluttered desk, a reflection of what used to be. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead as her thoughts drifted back to her frantic daily life. Each morning had become a whirlwind, packed with one chaotic event after the next, leaving her little time to catch her breath.

One particular day stood out in her mind. She had found herself scheduling a dance rehearsal with only ten minutes to spare before a pivotal baseball game. Heart pounding, she dashed to gather the enthusiastic little dancers, her sneakers squeaking against the polished floor. After ushering those adorable kids to their performance, she zoomed off to run essential errands, feeling like an athlete in a fierce triathlon.

The clock seemed to taunt her with each passing minute. Rushing back and forth to various locations, she celebrated the sparkling smiles of winning children while also comforting those who felt the sting of defeat—all while her slow cooker worked away, attempting to prepare a healthy family dinner.

She often felt overwhelmed by events she deemed minor setbacks, while the little ones viewed them as disasters. To a child, losing a toy could spark an emotional storm, sending her pulse racing and flooding her with adrenaline. In those moments, Evelyn longed to tear her hair out in frustration.

Yet even amidst the chaos, a thrill of excitement surged as she navigated each unexpected situation. Every crisis felt like a lesson waiting to be learned, even if it sent her emotions into turmoil, much like a roller coaster ride at the fair.

Now, as she neared her fifth anniversary in the same job, a sense of fatigue settled in. The repetition of her duties gripped her, and she craved a change to escape the dull routine that threatened to drive her mad.

Careful what you ask for, Evelyn.

One morning, the IT Department unveiled a shiny new app designed to streamline their tasks and reduce paper waste. The software organized her appointments neatly, listing them in some kind of intelligent order across her computer screen and syncing with her electronic tablet. No longer confined to her small cubicle, Evelyn could now move around the office while staying on top of her responsibilities.

She hated to admit it, but the "stupid thing" did make her work easier. The days of running around, engaging in lively conversations to solve issues, or digging through mounds of files were fading away, as the app took care of everything.

As she dreamed of what life used to be, her monitor's mainframe blinked into oblivion and went dark. With raised brows, she stared in disbelief at the black rectangle before her. The collective groans of her coworkers echoed around her, signaling they faced the same situation.

When the system jolted back to life, excitement drummed in her chest as she opened the new app everyone loved. Hesitantly, she scanned her appointment book. Her brow furrowed when she spotted a blank space where an important entry should have been. She scoffed and rebooted her system, hoping for a quick fix. It took only a moment to restore everything, yet the empty slot stubbornly remained. Her heart raced as she glanced around her desk, uncertainty swirling in her mind.

"Is this a glitch in the system?" The words tumbled out before she could hold them back.

With her fingers drumming nervously on the desk, she recalled the troubleshooting steps she had memorized. She pressed the button to pull up the entry.

"Sunday, August 7, 2022. 8 AM."

Nothing appeared.

That was impossible. Evelyn had no appointments scheduled for the next fifteen minutes. Blinking her steely-gray eyes, she peeked over the partition, hoping to catch someone playing a trick on her. Her coworkers went back to work as scheduled. Getting ready for their next appointment, fingers sliding over the electronic device, and the clackety clack of keyboards sounded around her, as they prepared for their usual script. No one looked at her with a "gotcha" expression.

She settled back in her chair with a frustrated sigh, fluffing her disheveled gray hair, shuffling old papers on her desk that she still needed to put into the system. Well, now was as good a time as any, she figured, as she tried to appear busy while the eerie emptiness of her agenda gnawed at her thoughts.

"Am I fired? Is this a clue? Is something wrong?" she spoke aloud to no one.

Interlacing her fingers tightly on the desk, she focused on the slow ticking of the clock; each second felt like an eternity.

Tick tock. Tick tock.

As nothing else happened, doubt crept into her mind. Was this a new policy from corporate that they sit for fifteen minutes? Maybe all their griping about how they didn't have time to update the system with all of the old files finally paid off? Watching the second hand, she pondered whether time always moved that slowly as she started to input the information into the system.

## **FIVE**

*Ginormous*

Veronica "Ronni" Lewis stood in what appeared to be an office, though she wasn't entirely sure. The walls reminded her of the Millennium Dome in London. Even though the space covered one million square feet, it felt small and cramped in that moment.

"Where the hell am I now?" The thought crashed through her mind, bringing her swirling thoughts to an abrupt halt. Neon words—bold, red, and jagged—flashed before her eyes like

warning signs, draining her energy and sending a sharp throb through her head.

She shifted her gaze, taking in the vast expanse of white partitions that stretched endlessly around her. Neatly aligned in countless rows and columns, they mirrored the pristine floor beneath her feet, creating a world that felt both endless and empty.

"Whoa! Talk about ginormous," she marveled to herself. It was the only word that felt right, a term she usually reserved for describing sights as vast as the Grand Canyon. This immense room, which she would soon realize bore the markings of a hospital administration building, gleamed with cleanliness. It was as if the entire space had been washed in alcohol, leaving a faint, sterile scent hanging in the air. The smooth, white, frosted marble floors sparkled under the bright lights, reflecting her wide-eyed expression.

As Ronni scanned the area, her heart raced. She noticed a few people nearby, each looking just as bewildered as she felt. A thought echoed loudly in her mind: "I have to be dreaming."

A few people resembled characters from a silly circus. Thick white cream bubbled on their faces, making them appear as if they were getting ready for a show. Others wore dark green mud masks that hardened on their skin while bright pink curlers twisted their hair into loops. They shuffled around in cozy pajamas that draped loosely over their bodies, looking completely relaxed. A handful of others flaunted shiny, tight-fitting dresses that glittered in the dim light, paired with towering high heels that clacked against the floor like horse hooves. Their eyes sparkled with layers of makeup that could hide a lifetime, but lines etched across their faces told a different story. The foundation settled into the cracks and crevices, revealing the journeys of their lives.

Ronni glanced in the opposite direction and spotted an extraordinarily tall man beside her. Tall, dark, and handsome. His dark hair framed a chiseled jaw, and he wore a fitted blue blazer that showcased his broad shoulders. A playful smile danced on his lips, mixing alpha manliness with a youthful charm, making Ronni's heart quicken as if she were a puppy seeing its owner return home. With his polished looks, he could

easily step off the cover of a romance novel, dressed in a sharp suit with a gleaming tie and shiny black shoes that reflected the light.

Next to him, Ronni felt out of place in her faded blue denim jeans, patched in several spots, and her old sweatshirt with frayed cuffs. The fabric hung off her, making her feel like a drifter lost in a crowd of polished stars.

In her dreams, unpleasant events could shift at the turn of a handle—whether it was a drooling monster chasing her or distress about her family. A simple door could open to a bright and cheerful scene, and she could walk through to safety and happiness. But now, in this strange reality, there was no door, no escape in sight. She closed her eyes and wished to change her attire, but the effort only made her eyebrows knit together in frustration, giving her a constipated look.

As her fingers combed through her wild, fiery red hair, she leaned closer to the tall man, gesturing towards the gathering. "You know," she started, her voice light but edged with embarrassment, "if I had known I'd meet a crowd tonight, I definitely would've spruced myself up before bed. It never fails; when you look your worst, you meet everyone in the world plus one! You know what I'm saying?"

His lips twisted into a half-disgusted sneer as his sharp blue eyes flicked over her, seemingly unimpressed. He returned his gaze to the odd scene around them, dismissing her completely.

How rude, she thought, pulling back slightly. Who does this guy think he is?

Determined to shake off the disappointment, Ronni decided he was the type who judged others by their appearance, just as she had done earlier. With a mental shift, she removed him from the glamorous romance cover and imagined him on a boring nonfiction book instead—something filled with political lies, where truth often took a backseat.

They dominated the scene with their diverse styles of fashion, from the flashy logos of expensive Prada to worn, faded clothes that told stories of their own. Bright colors splashed everywhere, drawing attention to them like magnets. But a strange confusion hung in the air, as if they had all stepped into

an unfamiliar world. Each person wore an expression of shock, their eyes wide and brows furrowed, searching for answers in the faces around them. Nothing felt right. The unfamiliarity of it all gnawed at Ronni. Thoughts raced through her mind with increasing urgency. I've got to be dreaming, she thought.

Suddenly, men in polished loafers and sharp three-piece suits, along with women in sleek business skirts and sensible low-heeled pumps, floated into view. Their clothing matched the same plain color of the surroundings, as if they blended into the stark office environment. One by one, they ushered the confused group away, leading them to small cubbyholes behind half-walls where they disappeared like shadows.

Ronni stood alone, anxiety prickling at her skin. Being the last one left made her heart race faster. She twisted her head from side to side, her mind spinning with questions: What just happened? Why did they leave her? Where was she supposed to go? The heat of anger surged within her, a slow simmer that threatened to boil over.

"They went around me like I'm the fucking plague!" Ronni erupted, her voice filling the air. "Are we supposed to wear masks here, too? I don't see a fucking sign for it! None of them had one!" Her eyes blazed a fierce green as she shot glaring looks to her left and right, hoping someone would notice the blatant oversight. She sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm the storm brewing inside her. "Yo! What the hell, people? Have none of you heard of first-come, first-served? I demand some attention! Now!"

As her voice rang out, several heads cautiously peeked over the partitions, curiosity dancing in their eyes. They looked at her as if they had just realized she stood there, never mind that they just literally danced around her before.

## **SIX**

### *Technical Difficulties*

Hearing the shrieking, Evelyn shook her head, her brow furrowing in annoyance. "That must be my missing appointment, and she doesn't sound happy. This is going to deserve a scathing email later to IT."

With swift determination, she snatched the electronic pad from her cluttered desk and dashed toward the source of the commotion. "Stop shouting like some spoiled child! You're being too loud. The sound here echoes something fierce. Use your inside voice! Inside voice!"

She held the legal-sized electronic tablet in front of her, trying to appear calm and collected. A practiced smile stretched across her face, though it felt more like a mask. From her training, she knew people responded better when someone seemed in charge rather than equally lost. "I'm Evelyn Trask. I'm sorry I didn't rush, but I had a..." She hesitated, searching for the right words. "Technical situation. We can start getting you processed if you tell me your name."

"Getting me processed?" Ronni asked, disbelief clear in her voice. She inhaled deeply, letting out the breath slowly, attempting to collect her thoughts. "Into what?"

"Yes," Evelyn said firmly, "we need to process you into the system before we can continue."

"Talk about a weird ass dream," Ronni muttered, shaking her head as if trying to wake up from an absurd reality.

Evelyn's smile brightened, although it felt more forced than genuine as she pointed to the hand-held minicomputer resting in her palm. "Now, what is your name?"

"Shouldn't you fucking know my name?!" Ronni exclaimed, her voice rising as anger flared in her eyes.

Somewhere, buried deep in the annals of history, rested a forgotten paragraph about the creature who first uttered a curse word. Such words stirred a primal response, sending an icy shiver through those who heard them—an insult that could infuriate or wound. Few praised the originator of such language; others damned him. Yet they all overlooked one truth: words are not weapons unless the receiver allows them to be. At their core, they are just sounds, devoid of purpose unless given power.

Evelyn kept her painted-on smile in place, but her eyes grew wide like saucers. "Language! My goodness! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? I swear!"

"My mother is dead to me. I haven't spoken to her in years." The words tumbled out with the bitterness of old wounds.

Evelyn took a deep breath, nodding as she processed her words. "Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. It must've been really tough not having your mother to turn to. I felt that way when I lost mine. It was like a huge hole in my heart, wanting to call her about everything, both the good and the bad. We were best friends, so without her, I felt completely alone."

"I'm sorry for your loss. My mother and I never had that kind of relationship. We were more like enemies stuck together, tied to a nuclear missile, each one on the verge of setting it off at any given time." She crossed her arms tight against her chest, the tension in her body clear.

"I see. However, that doesn't matter right now. The quicker we get you into the system, the quicker we can sort this out. Now, what is your name? I told you I had some technical issues. I don't know who you are or where you're supposed to be. I can guide you if you give me your name."

Ronni stared at her, feeling toxic guilt creeping inside her for the outburst. She sighed deeply, the weight of confusion pressing down on her. Groaning, she nodded, her frustration bubbling under the surface. "You're right. I'm just... frustrated and confused. I have no clue what the hell is going on. I didn't mean to take that out on you, but you're the representative here. Wait! What is this place? Where am I?"

"Name?" Evelyn repeated, her patience starting to thin. She mused on whether the new trainees should witness this experience. She doubted they would manage to stay calm. "We have limited time. I need your name to answer your long list of questions."

"Oh. I guess you're right. It's Veronica Lewis, but I go by Ronni. Is this some kind of joke?"

"Why? Are you amused?" Evelyn's tone sharpened as she focused on the pad, sliding her finger up and down, searching for the name. Each click felt heavier as she scrolled, only to find that Lewis wasn't on her lengthy list—not after Lewandowsky or before Leyva. Her heart skipped a beat, and she wondered if there might be more technical issues. She chewed the inside of

her cheek, worry gnawing at her as she searched. "Hm. I don't see you."

"Imagine that? More technical issues?" Ronni's sarcastic words dripped with impatience. She had come for answers, not more questions.

"Possibly. I may need to call IT," Evelyn muttered, her focus drifting as frustration simmered.

"Possibly," Ronni huffed. "With the number of issues you're having, it could be system failures. I'd get them to check your disk, read your error rate, and maybe even look for smart flags. You might have too many retired NAND blocks or sectors that are remapped into bad ones."

"Yes. I'll do that," Evelyn mumbled, her mind spinning with terms she didn't understand. She continued to scroll through her system, only half-listening to Ronni. She navigated down the list again, scanning between Vernon and Vest, even going through the R section in case a rookie entered her information incorrectly. After checking and rechecking three times, Evelyn cleared her throat. "You're not here. I'm not sure what to do with this. It's never happened before."

"Alrighty then! Show me the way out, and I'll leave!" Ronni shot back, frustration lacing her voice.

"It doesn't quite work like that. It's just—" Grimacing, Evelyn pushed through the overused phrase of the morning, "technical difficulties. Follow me. I'll get this sorted." Her gaze darted to the clock on the wall. Five minutes had passed. Tick-tock. The second hand seemed to move faster than before. Turning, she led the way back to her partition, determination tightening her chest.

"I'm guessing all this technical difficulty bullshit means I'm not supposed to be here, right? So, does that mean this is a mistake of some sort?" Ronni trailed behind, her eyes darting around the unfamiliar, sterile environment. "While you're figuring that out, tell me what this place is. Have you not heard of all the beautiful colors of the rainbow? Geez, there is more to life than white. Careful, people might start to wonder about you for using such a boring color."

Inside her workstation, a small room furnished with a plain desk, an office chair, a file cabinet, and a plastic chair, Evelyn gestured toward the chair. "Have a seat. This will only take a minute." Her fingers danced over the keyboard as she checked the clock, counting down the seconds. Tick tock. "What's wrong with white? It's supposed to be soothing. Helps people relax."

"More like put them to sleep." Ronni's face scrunched up as she surveyed the stark, monochrome surroundings. "It just reminds me of a hospital, death, and jail. None of those fill me with thoughts of cuddly puppies and kindness—more like nightmares. Is that it? I'm having a nightmare?"

Evelyn cleared her throat and let out a soft chuckle, though it didn't carry any real humor. "Comical. Don't forget, angels wear white, too. And no, you are not having a nightmare. If you were, I wouldn't be here."

"You would if you were scheduled to cast in my nightmare." Ronni leaned closer, a playful wink flashing at Evelyn. "So true! Angels do wear white." Leaning back, she let out a deep sigh, the weight of her frustration evident. "But don't forget one important thing."

Still half-focused on her screen, Evelyn took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled. "What's that?"

"Satan is an angel."

"Fallen angel."

"Keyword there: angel."

Evelyn shot Ronni a sharp glance, holding it for longer than necessary before returning her attention to the computer. Once she accessed the mainframe database, her expression shifted from "Happy to help you" to "oh double darn" in two point three seconds. "Oh. There you are. It seems there has been a slight little mix-up. Just a little rinky-dink wrinkle. Nothing big at all."

"For it to be such a non-existent wrinkle, you've got a horrible poker face."

"We can get you to the right place. I'm not sure why they sent you here. You should be in another location. Possibly one not as," she paused for a moment, "white."

"Can't say that upsets me. Hit me with it, Granny. I'm ready." Ronni inhaled deeply, taking in the drabness of the office with a huff of frustration. "This would get overly annoying. How do you work, seeing the same color day after day, never changing? I'd try to make an ink smear to break the repetitive sight. Maybe even throw a pen in the main laundry to give everyone a burst of color."

"And that's why you don't belong in this section."

"Good! As long as it's not black. That would be creepy. Dark. Shadows. A true nightmare. So, why am I even here? Where is here?"

"Um, well, there's no easy way to say this, my dear. You, um, well, long story short, you died."

## **SEVEN**

### *You're Dead*

Ronni stared at the woman with wide, bewildered eyes, her head tilting from side to side like a confused puppy. "I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you correctly. Did you say died?"

"Yes," came the calm response.

"Died? As in no longer breathing, body lying in a ditch, bugs all over me?" Ronni's skin prickled at the gruesome image. "Never mind all that. How about boring me with the long story?"

"Okay. Well—"

"Never mind. You're crazy. That's not possible."

Evelyn furrowed her brow, caught off guard by Ronni's outburst. "Why not?"

"Because I still feel alive."

"Maybe so, but you're dead," Evelyn said, her tone unyielding.

In an instant, Ronni sprang from her seat as if it shocked her. She let out a piercing scream that echoed off the walls. "Hello? I need a fast track back to Earth! Who's in charge here? There's been a huge mistake! I gotta get back to my kids!"

The employees jumped in surprise at the unexpected interruption as something akin to a shrieking alarm rushed in. Their electronic pads slipped from their fingers as Ronni snatched them before sprinting back again, leaving them trying to process the chaos unfolding before them. They dashed after Ronni, desperation etched on their faces for the equipment she just stole, colliding into one another amidst the frenzy.

With a worker hot on her heels, Ronni tossed one of the pads away like it was a Frisbee, aiming for a perfect throw. She darted into another office and repeated the process, and the startled clients followed, their confusion only adding to the growing chaos. The room erupted into a whirlwind of movement, expensive tablets flying through the air like discs launched in a wild Frisbee-throwing game.

Those who trailed behind called out for everyone to stop. One employee leaped to retrieve his tablet, but his fingers fumbled, sending it slipping from his grip. He groaned as it struck him in the back of the head, quickly followed by a barrage of other tablets. Undeterred, he reached for it again, only to see someone else snatch it up and toss it carelessly across the room. Anarchy reigned as everyone joined in, turning the once orderly office into a chaotic playground of flying electronics.

"This has to be a test!" Evelyn shouted, ducking as she dodged projectiles and darted after Ronni, the ringleader of the chaos. "Please, Ronni, let's discuss this like adults. Stop being ridiculous. This isn't going to end well for you."

"Not until you get me to the highest level in this place! I wanna speak to your boss!" Ronni shouted back, racing around cubicles, bumping into startled people and sending them sprawling. "There's been a huge mistake! You said it yourself! You have to fix this and send me back! I gotta get back to my kids!"

"She is trying to get me fired!" Evelyn muttered, ducking just in time to avoid a tablet that zipped past her head. She sidestepped

another body that came tumbling into her path. "I don't believe those were my exact words."

The office erupted into utter chaos. Frustrated workers scrambled to gather the tablets scattered across the floor, hoping to reunite them with their owners. They reached out to snatch their devices back, struggling against desperate hands that tried to grab anything within reach. In the midst of the havoc, one worker impulsively pressed a giant red button on the wall labeled, "Do Not Push."

A blaring alarm filled the air, deafening and insistent. The sound cut through the chaos, dropping everyone to the floor in shock. Half of the employees winced in pain, clutching their heads and curling into fetal positions as they rocked back and forth. The others scrambled for cover, glancing around for the source of the noise and what it signified.

Evelyn ducked instinctively, recognizing that the alarm meant trouble, and it wouldn't bode well for Ronni.

## **EIGHT**

*Boyd, Derwey, Screwem, & Howe*

A loud whistle sliced through the commotion, and a wall materialized from nowhere, slicing the oversized room in half. Ronni—and the few others who weren't hiding their faces in fear—gaped at an ivory door that crackled to life within the strange barrier. Sparks flew from both sides, sounding like claps of thunder, as the door blazed upward until it met at the top with a heavy thud. Ronni barely spotted the shiny brass doorknob before the door swung open with a forceful push, revealing a tall man who strode into the madness.

His dominant silhouette, dressed sharply in a light blue three-piece suit and a crisp tie, drew every eye in the room. Some looked on with fear, while others were simply captivated by his presence as he strode confidently to the center of the disruption. Not a single strand of gray hair shifted as he marched toward the source of the trouble. His eyes, usually the vibrant blue of a clear summer sky, darkened to the wild blue of an approaching storm, fierce and unforgiving. They scanned

the room, as if possessing the ability to uncover the guilty party with just a single glance.

"What is going on here?" he thundered, his voice echoing. "In five thousand years, this has never happened. Ever! Control yourselves. You're acting like unruly children! Who is responsible for this outrageous behavior?"

Evelyn cleared her throat, stepping forward and tugging Ronni along with her. "I apologize for the disturbance, Mr. Boyd. This is Ronni," she said, extending the clipboard toward him. "She isn't in the appointment book for today. It might be that ridiculous program the technical crew recently installed. Goodness, I had fifteen whole minutes with no entries at all! I checked and checked. Nothing. Just blank spaces. Zilch. Then she—"

"Evelyn," he interjected, casting a stern gaze at the tablet. "Stop rambling and get to the point."

Evelyn lowered her chin, her voice trembling. "I'm sorry, sir. This morning has already been chaotic. Ronni is having difficulties with the entire process. I tried to explain it to her, but she is stubborn and refuses to listen to reason."

With the culprit identified, all eyes turned to the task at hand—restoring order. The few lucky souls who had managed to grab their tablets began rounding up the frenzied crowd, guiding them back to their cubbyholes. Those in charge assigned lower-level employees the overwhelming job of sifting through the enormous pile of electronics, returning lost items to their anxious owners who were tethered to their desk computers, grappling with the outdated methods.

Confused and frustrated, Ronni aimlessly pointed at the tablet that Boyd held. Some workers had risked their lives to guard it, protecting it as if it were something truly valuable. "What's so interesting about that thing? Do you folks not see the huge mistake happening right now? It's like that movie... what was it called?" She snapped her fingers, hoping the sound might jog her memory. Her mind scoured through titles until it landed on the one with the angel on the cover.

Boyd glared at her, his brow furrowing deeper. "Now see here—"

"The one about how Heaven Has To Wait, or something! They made two of those." Ronni's excitement bubbled over. "It's hard to choose which one I liked more. The remake had me laughing nonstop, but the original one had more heart, you know?" She tapped her chest for emphasis, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "It hit you right in the feels. Anyway, if this is like that movie, hurry up and send me back. I want to forget this whole mess—make me think it's just a bad dream."

Mr. Boyd glanced over the lengthy list again, returning it to Evelyn with a curt nod, his gaze now fixed on Ronni. "I'm sure."

"See what I've been dealing with all morning?" Evelyn's hands twisted in worry. "Thanks to that new IT system, it showed I had fifteen minutes of free time. I thought it was just a fluke—"

"Calm yourself, Evelyn." Boyd's tone softened slightly, but still held authority. He motioned toward the group of new arrivals, their expressions filled with confusion. "No one is blaming you. Go collect your next appointment. I'll handle the technical issues after I deal with this," he shot Ronni a pointed look. This mess will disrupt our timing and ruin our numbers. I'll have to call for extra help to get us back on track."

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir." Evelyn turned to Ronni, offering a forced smile, her relief evident. "Good luck, dear. Mr. Boyd will make sure you're taken care of." With that, she hurried away to greet the next group, her upbeat demeanor returning.

Ronni couldn't help but think the woman resembled a hungry snake preparing to strike, and the promise of Boyd's care felt icy and hollow. A shiver crept down her spine, as if frozen cubes were rattling around in her core.

Still eyeing her with displeasure, Mr. Boyd assessed Ronni with a critical gaze. "Yes, I'll see that Veronica gets to her proper station."

"It's Ronni," she interjected, a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice. She didn't like him, and he clearly didn't like her either.

"Whatever," he snapped, rolling his eyes. He turned sharply on his heel and headed toward the door. "Follow me." He pushed the door open, motioning for her to enter. "Come on. I don't

have time for this. You've stirred up enough trouble already, disrupting my busy day. You've pushed everyone back, and it's only your first day. Let's avoid any more chaos."

She opened her mouth to protest just as he pointed to a wall that seemed to appear out of nowhere. Her thoughts vanished like smoke, leaving only the unsettling weight of the situation. Ronni clamped her mouth shut, emotions swirling as she quickly nodded, inching closer to the mysterious wall and peeking inside first.

Ronni stepped into the office, and her eyes widened. Bright colors danced around the room, making it feel lively. A warm and fuzzy feeling wrapped around her heart as she looked at the sturdy brown bookcase filled with neatly stacked files, the sleek black leather couch inviting her to sit, and the solid desk with papers scattered across it. The walls glowed softly with a yellowish-white hue, creating a space that felt friendly and safe.

In front of her stood Donald Boyd, the president of recruiting for BDSHKAF. His name was proudly displayed on a shiny gold degree that hung on the wall, letters bold against the frame.

She settled into the chair, her fingers nervously tapping the arms. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I didn't! It was all just a matter of reflexes, I think."

Boyd's steely gaze remained fixed on her as he shut the door with a firm click. "Reflexes?"

"Yes! When someone tells you you're dead, you freak out a bit," she blurted, her voice slightly higher with the weight of her words. "I can't believe no one else has ever done that."

"Never in all the time I've been here," Boyd replied without a hint of a smile.

"That's weird," she responded, squinting as if she had just opened her eyes to bright sunlight. Her finger jabbed toward the gold-framed certificate. "What does BDSHKAF mean? I can't figure it out. Then again, I've been told I have a bit of a dirty mind." A grin stretched across her face, trying to lighten the serious vibe in the room.

Boyd continued his task, moving around the desk to sit at the computer, his expression as serious as ever. "This is Boyd, Dewey, Screwem, and Howe Karma Accounting Firm. We deal in bad karma." His fingers flew across the keyboard, eyes glued to the computer screen.

Ronni couldn't help but think that he must not know how to smile at all, seeing no change in his serious demeanor. "So, I was right, dirty," she murmured, knowing she needed to keep the mood light despite the weight of the moment. Ronni met Boyd's intense stare with a mix of confusion and curiosity. "Is that a real accounting firm? It sounds terrible. Wait, did you say karma?"

"Yes," Boyd replied, his voice steady.

"Like, actual karma?"

"One in the same."

"I thought karma came right after doing something bad."

"Contrary to the song, there's no such thing as instant karma. At first, we had no karma at all. The wicked thrived while the good suffered. Sodom and Gomorrah fell because we let people act however they wanted. We didn't see how easily they welcomed evil in—money and power lure people in. Bullshit walks, but power talks. We needed rules amid the disorder. The only way to make people think twice about getting rich from doing bad things was to create a system of punishment and reward."

"A punishment and reward system?" Ronni furrowed her brow, trying to understand.

"Yes. We found some problems at the start, but it worked."

"What kind of problems?"

"If someone committed even a small sin, like stealing a piece of fruit, a bolt of lightning would strike them right on the head—bam! They would drop dead on the spot."

"A bolt of lightning for stealing fruit? That sounds harsh."

"Yes. The sixth commandment states thou shalt not steal. Some think it only refers to kidnapping, while others believe it means taking anything that isn't yours. It covers both, just at different

levels. Stealing is stealing, no matter what it is—whether it's property, cheating someone, embezzling, committing fraud, tax evasion, votes, relationships, or vandalism. Theft comes in many forms."

"A lightning strike for taking fruit? Wow. I can't imagine the punishment for murder!"

"It took several deaths to polish the rules. Because of that, every level has its own punishment. We've eased things quite a bit."

"I hope so," Ronni muttered, her eyes wide.

Boyd leaned back in his chair, which creaked slightly as he shifted his weight. "Nowadays, with delays, investigations, and the slow crawl of legal processes, it's more like eventual karma. We keep adding names to the list of people who will eventually get what they deserve. We've been stuck in this legal mess for longer than you can imagine. I'm right in the thick of it."

"That sounds pretty cruel," Ronni said, her voice wavering.

"It all hangs on which side of karma you fall on. But in your case, you need to face some truths. You are dead. I am dead. Everyone else in that room is dead."

Ronni shook her head vigorously, disbelief dancing in her eyes. "I keep hearing that, but I don't feel dead!"

"No one ever does. Believe me. There's a lot more to this world than what you see. Good and evil have battled over souls like yours since the dawn of time, and it's a fierce struggle that shifts every day. Every action is either good or bad; there's no gray area. People don't understand the consequences until it's far too late."

Huffing out an annoyed breath, Ronni pushed her hair behind her ear. "They should talk about this in church. It might bring in more people."

"I'll put it in the suggestion box. You shouldn't be surprised—people don't live forever."

"True, but wouldn't I know? Wouldn't I feel it?"

"Why would you? Do you need proof?"

"Proof? Is this where you become the ghost of my past, present, and future and show me my life's highlights?"

"No. This isn't some made-up Christmas story. It's the reality you face."

"Then how are you going to prove any of this ridiculous tale to me?"

"Instead of just telling you, I'm going to show you."

"Okay. Hit me with your best shot, Sherlock."

## NINE

### *Proof*

A small smirk curved his lips, showing that he remembered how to do this. With a quick motion, he reached up, yanked at his hair, and with a sudden movement, his head came off. His mouth, once filled with perfect white teeth that his dentist would proudly display in an advertisement, now revealed sharp, pointy fangs. Thick, gooey strands of saliva dripped down, hanging like shoelaces ready to snap.

Splat! A thick, gooey glob of slime hovered ominously over the surface of his desk. It splashed down onto the keyboard, oozing in glistening droplets that splattered everywhere, painting the keys with a bright, messy coating. He stretched out his arm, fingers dripping with the sticky substance, and brought the mess dangerously close to Ronni's face, almost brushing her nose. His wide eyes bulged like marbles, filled with excitement and mischief.

"How's this for proof?" The words came out in an eerie, jumbled voice, sounding like a chorus of twenty different people speaking at once, each tone shrilling and booming.

Ronni's heart raced, pounding wildly in her chest as her own eyes widened in shock. Her instincts kicked in, and she scrambled to escape the icky horror before her. But her legs felt like jelly, trembling and unsteady. In a frantic rush, she pushed away from the desk, losing her balance. She tipped backward in her chair, crashing painfully onto her spine with a loud thud that echoed in the room.

Ronni's eyes widened as she sensed the slimy substance creeping closer. She felt a shiver run down her spine as she ducked and twisted, moving with surprising speed. Her heart raced in her chest. The goopy, green-gray mucous splattered against the wooden floor, leaving a wet, glistening puddle that slowly pooled. The sound of it hitting the ground echoed in the quiet room, a wet thud that made her stomach churn.

Meanwhile, Ronni's movements were quick and sharp, like a dancer avoiding a misplaced foot. She narrowly escaped the horrible mess that oozed from Boyd's fingers, but she couldn't shake the feeling of unease that hung in the air.

The flexible arm stretched unnaturally, extending farther than any human's should. It pressed the grotesque, oozing head closer to her. Ronni shuffled backward until her back hit the cold, hard wall, a shiver of fear running down her spine. Her heart raced, and she squirmed. "What the fuck?! Get away from me!"

A thick, green mist escaped from the head, a smell like decay washing over her. It felt as if a thousand rotten things crowded around her face. "Can someone alive rip off their fucking head and talk to you with it?" it croaked, its voice raspy and haunting.

The stench overwhelmed her, twisting in her stomach. Ronni gagged, the taste of bile rising in her throat. With a frantic motion, she waved the repulsive head back, her voice rising in desperation. "Get away from me!" she yelled, the panic fueling her scream as she fought to escape the nightmare closing in around her.

The head vanished, along with the dark, thick juices that had dripped from every orifice, before seamlessly melding back into the rest of his body. The office, once again, looked neat and orderly, save for the chair tipped over on its side, a stark reminder that the fear she felt was all too real.

"Very well. Now, where were we?" His fingers danced across the keyboard, their movements smooth and practiced, glancing back at the glowing screen filled with numbers and words.

Ronni stayed on the ground, her heart racing as she fought to pull herself together. Her stomach churned like a storm at sea,

wild and turbulent, while her legs trembled uncontrollably to stand beneath her. She leaned against the cool wall for stability, taking deep breaths to calm the chaos inside her.

She righted the fallen chair, gripping its back with white-knuckled fingers, determined not to collapse again. "Wow! Talk about beyond fucking creepy! But that doesn't prove a damn thing! I ate hard-boiled eggs before bed, and they always gave me the worst nightmares! That's all this is—one fucked-up, horrible nightmare! By the way, a tic-tac wouldn't kill you. You got some rank-ass breath!"

"I see." He rolled his eyes, picking up the large, red telephone resting on his desk.

"Calling the caped crusader? You should tell him to bring me a drink. I'm parched."

Boyd disregarded her quip and pressed the phone to his ear. "Cassidy. I'm sending one your way that isn't like the rest. It looks like a referral to your team." He typed steadily on his computer, occasionally glancing at Ronni. Shaking his head, he continued, "No. Higher up... much higher... no clue as to why we got her. It could be a glitch in the system, but let's not take that chance. Mhm. A bit of a handful already. She caused a mess up here that will take more than half the afternoon to fix... Oh? ... No, I didn't have it on. What time did that happen? ... Hm. That could be the reason. Keep checking, then get back to me. I'll look into it on my end. However, I'm calling you because the referral mentions Jaclyn Howard. I see from the quarterly audit that she hasn't trained anyone, so this one is hers... Regardless, it's her responsibility. Make it happen." He hung up the phone with a sharp click.

"Okay, tell me something, Mr. Smarty Pants."

"If I can."

"If I'm dead like you claim, how did I die?"

"That will be explained once you reach your correct station."

"That information above your pay grade, huh? Everyone worries about getting me to the right place, but no one is answering my questions!"

"Soon."

"This is utter bullshit! I still say it's nothing more than a horrible, fucking nightmare."

He shook his head, exhaling in frustration. "If that's easier for you to believe, then sure. You're having a horrible nightmare. None of this is real. Just go with that."

"Whew! Thank God! You had me worried there for a minute. Now, if I could just make myself wake the hell up!"

"Sorry, we don't do miracles on this floor."

## TEN

### *Green, Yellow, Red!*

Nap time—those blissful moments when one drifts into a deep, invigorating sleep. Jaclyn "Jax" Howard bitterly missed those days. She longed for the times when she sank into slumber, only to awaken feeling as if centuries had slipped by in a matter of moments. In her hectic life, her schedule rarely allowed her any chance to rest. Naps had become fleeting snippets of sleep, just enough to keep her mind sharp after enduring the exhaustion of being awake for far too long. If she had known how chaotic her afterlife would be, she would have cherished those peaceful hours much more.

In this new realm, work seemed to stretch on endlessly. Tasks piled up like a thick blanket of autumn leaves, vibrant reds and yellows blending together, each day blurring into the next without a single moment to pause and breathe. The burden of managing a relentless list of duties pressed down on her chest, heavy and unyielding. But what more could she do? She was dead.

Not in that cute and sexy—albeit frightening—way of vampires, those enchanting creatures who seduce their victims, coaxing them from life into a trance. No, Jax was deader than a doorknob, truly gone. A sterile report marked her fate: autopsy, organs donated, funeral. Now, she rested six feet under, trapped in a casket covered in dark, dry soil, surrounded by tall weeds that clawed at her forgotten grave, choking out the past. Above her, fat maggots crawled over her decaying remains, feasting on the remnants of her once vibrant body. Time had passed, and they had stripped her of every last

trace of life, leaving her a hollow shell. She was, without a doubt, dead.

People grew dumber and dumber, common sense becoming a rare commodity. Observing their foolish decisions and capturing the ensuing chaos transformed Jax into an expert in her field. Each misstep of the inattentive added to her mix of frustration and amusement. Her role involved holding them accountable, making sure their stupidity did not go unpunished. Witnessing their baffling choices and the consequences that followed became a demanding job. All the while, Jax remained stuck in a world where she never received a moment of reprieve—a world filled with the echoes of her former life, now just a distant memory.

Jax sat at her desk, surrounded by a gamer's paradise. The powerful desktop tower hummed softly, creating a comforting backdrop, while three massive 30-inch monitors illuminated the dim room with vibrant colors, displaying chaotic lines of code and an array of open windows. The sleek, black keyboard clicked rhythmically under her fingers. She typed furiously, her brows furrowed in concentration, digging through the digital chaos to uncover the reasons behind the sudden upheaval that turned her world upside down. With the Assumption of Mary just a week away, she expected a lull in activity, but the unexpected turmoil served as a harsh reminder of how unpredictable life could be.

Jax snatched her phone, pressing the buttons with urgency as her mind raced. "What the hell is going on down there? Are you all running drills and didn't let the rest of us know? Clients are popping up in my files that I didn't even know existed! I have to be in court on the same day in two different courtrooms! That can't be possible. Please tell me this is a glitch, and you are fixing it!" Her voice sliced through the tension, sharp and filled with frustration.

"We are looking into the problem. The system will return online as soon as we find the issue," a voice replied, calm and distant, like a lifeline slipping further away.

Jax clenched her jaw, irritation boiling beneath her determination. "So, are all these clients going to just vanish from my files when you do? I picked up one thousand new

clients in five minutes! This is fucking insane! I don't even know where to begin with half of this!"

"We are looking into the problem. As soon as we find the issue—"

With a swift motion, Jax slammed the phone down, the thud echoing like a gunshot in the silence. "Worthless idiots!" she exclaimed, her face flushing red with anger as she turned back to her glowing screens, ready to tackle the mess head-on.

Opening the Karma company site, her periwinkle-blue eyes widened in disbelief. The screen glowed with an astonishing number of new clients demanding her attention. A cold chill raced down her spine, icy fingers wrapping around her heart. An invisible weight pressed down on her skull, clouding her thoughts and making it difficult to think straight.

In the mere moments she had spent on the phone, the number of people in her lineup surged to fifteen hundred. The count kept climbing with each tick of the clock, a relentless reminder of her growing burden. If these new contracts translated to a bigger paycheck, she would have felt elation as if she struck gold in the lottery. But instead, dread settled heavily in her stomach.

Her eyes bulged as she opened her daily schedule. Her heartbeat thudded loudly in her ears like a war drum. Four court cases loomed ahead, all set to occur at the same time, leaving her feeling utterly unprepared. Panic bubbled up inside her chest, threatening to spill over.

"Four? This can't be real! I'm talented, but I'm not flipping God!"

She ran a shaky hand through her champagne-blonde hair, pushing her bangs back into place. The rest of her hair cascaded down her back, shimmering under the harsh office lights. Jax took a deep breath, fixing her icy stare on the three monitors in front of her. "Not possible," she muttered, doubt creeping into her mind.

Without wasting any time, her fingers danced across the keyboard, darting quickly between different sites. In the top right corner of her screen, numbers pinged like a pinball machine, lighting up with each new client—each one adding

to her spiraling anxiety. "What in the hell is going on down there?!"

Jax took a deep breath, panic clawing at her insides. The flickering lights and shrill alerts blared from her screen, drowning her in a wave of turmoil. She stole a glance at the clock above the door. August 7, 2022. Nearly eight in the morning. A long day loomed ahead.

Busy didn't even begin to cover what lay before her. The frantic tasks swirled in her mind, demanding her complete focus. A single mistake, a wrong person filed in the wrong case, could send everything spiraling into disaster. She stared at five different windows on her main screen, trying to sift through the invasion of new cases while juggling the older ones. Each case was marked with color-coded urgency.

Red screamed for attention—urgent and critical.

Yellow cautioned her—needs her eye soon.

Green whispered of things that could wait—still necessary but less pressing.

Appointments bled into one another on her schedule, each marked in bright red, creating a glaring reminder of her looming deadlines. It felt like a mountain of impossible tasks. Jax grimaced, knowing she couldn't clone herself to be in two places at once. The avalanche of red cases loomed over her, far outnumbering the yellow and green. This madness was more than she could manage, even in the frantic world of Karma.

## **ELEVEN**

### *Double-Booking*

Jax felt the weight of commotion press on her chest as she clicked through a surge of emails. Her fingers twitched, a nervous dance against the keyboard. The morning air hung heavy in the office, and a sharp knock on the door jolted her focus. She fixed her icy blue gaze on the solid wood, wishing the visitor would sense the tension and turn back. With a reluctant sigh, she shifted her eyes from the screen, anxiety prickling at her skin.

"Enter, but only if you absolutely must." The caution in her voice sliced through the air, sharp as glass, revealing her frayed nerves.

William Cassidy sauntered into the office, his trademark grin brightening his ruggedly handsome face. "Jax! How is my most wonderful, brilliant, beautiful accountant?" His voice flowed with charm, as if he could light up the room with just a word.

In a different time, she might have responded with a playful smile. Cassidy's tousled blonde hair and captivating gray-green eyes brought a flicker of warmth. She imagined teasing him, letting her fingers glide through those silky locks, ensnaring him with her playful banter. Men seemed to fall for her spell without fail.

But that fantasy faded quickly. Frustration churned beneath her calm exterior. Cassidy's habit of piling more work on her desk created a whirlwind of stress. Annoyance twisted her features as she shot back, "Oh, cut the crap, Cassidy. Are you double-booking me now? Are you insane?"

He halted mid-stride, surprise flashing across his face as if she had sprouted another head. "Double-booking? Who? When?"

"Stop playing dumb. You're the only one who ever dumps work on me. You handed me fifteen," she gestured toward the glowing counter on her screen, "no, seventeen hundred new clients, some with court dates on the same day, and the number keeps climbing!"

"Jax, that wasn't me."

"Then who was it?"

"I think it has something to do with the IT Department. I've been on the phone with them all morning, hearing the same story over and over."

Jax rolled her eyes, disbelief washing over her like cold water. "Yeah, I know. We're working on it."

"The courts are a disaster. I've got back-to-back hearings, and cases keep piling up like a house of cards. I can't argue a case without knowing the basics," he sighed, running his hand through his bangs, smoothing them into place with practiced ease. "We all got hit, not just you."

Jax huffed, her frustration painted across her face. "Fine. You're off the hook about that, but I'm still swamped." She gestured to her chaotic desk, a mountain of papers teetering like an unstable tower. "The world went wild and tossed everything out of whack. I have to sort through all this new stuff and file it properly before I can even start my usual work, and those have deadlines I can't possibly meet." With a glare sharp enough to cut glass, she turned back to the glowing monitor. "Cut the cutesy shit and get to the point."

Cassidy maintained his smile, buffing his nails on his shirt like a peacock showing off its feathers. "You think I'm cute."

Unimpressed, Jax shot him a look that could freeze fire. "Cassidy."

"Fine. The judges are canceling all hearings until we can get this straight." He stepped closer to her cluttered desk, the weight of his words settling heavily in the air. Papers and coffee cups surrounded her like a chaotic fortress. "It's going to be one of those days. We're all just as busy as you are."

"And yet," she tilted her head back, her long lashes framing eyes that sparkled with disbelief. "You take the time to come and bother me. How sweet." In her mind, red flags shot up like lights on a racing car's dashboard. "Hold up a minute!"

He halted mid-step, confusion knitting his brows together. "What's wrong?"

"Since when don't you know what the hell's going on?"

"What do you mean?" He raised an eyebrow, astonishment clear on his face.

"Hell, you know when someone farts in their office two floors down, but you don't know what happened with the overload of clients?"

"Gross. True, but gross." He shrugged his broad shoulders, a nervous chuckle escaping as he stepped closer. "Nope. I have no clue. I'm too busy to check."

"You didn't get any emails?"

Cassidy scrunched his face as if he just bitten into a sour lemon. "Not about this. The only email I received was from the clerk

saying the court is not in session today or tomorrow. They're supposed to inform me when they are resuming and told me to get my files in order. Maybe we had some rare cosmic event causing this madness? Maybe a full-blood moon mingling with a blue moon or something, and the magical power finally reached Earth? I dunno, but it's ridiculous."

Feeling he wouldn't leave until she uncovered the reason for his visit, Jax leaned back in her chair, rocking slightly while crossing her arms tightly over her chest. "Wrong. I'm just as busy as you, but I took five minutes to double-check everything. I called court officials, contacted the IT Department, and rescheduled appointments. No full moon, blue moon, or red moon. Nothing strange in the air at all. The man on the moon is silent as all get out, and no planets are out of whack. No alien space invaders with a ray to change people's attitudes. No weird holiday rituals. No Nibiru, Planet Nine, or other mysterious celestial bodies. Nothing! Not a damn thing happened to explain why we got hit with an insane number of new clients to try within seconds! The United States elected a female president a while ago. Sounds like a big mistake. Bitches be crazy, but stranger things have happened, but maybe?"

Cassidy stopped as if the weight of her words tangled his thoughts. His brows furrowed in contemplation. "I doubt that would do it."

"Well, it didn't look like a normal election. People screamed about it being stolen, not like the norm. It stirred up a storm of bad karma already. After an investigation, they found she didn't win by proper means. By the people, for the people, to the people, or however that phrase goes. They discovered signs of fraudulent voting, with hackers tampering with votes or something. I can barely keep up with the craziness of Americans nowadays. It's like someone knocked common sense out of them when they were babies."

"I still don't see how that would unleash all this karma."

"You don't?" She turned her screen toward him, exposing a chaotic scene. Flames roared at the edges of crumbling buildings while an unruly mob surged through the streets, smashing windows and unsettling the dusty calm. Figures clashed in violent brawls, and others lay sprawled on the

ground, lifeless. The frenzied crowd kicked at their bodies, indifferent to the chaos around them. "That would unleash exactly the shit we're looking at right now. Look at all the evilness!"

Cassidy stepped closer, his eyes widening in disbelief as he absorbed the turmoil on the screen. "Holy cow! What brought that on?"

"I haven't done the research yet, but everything seems tied to the election and the threat of a reversal. People march angrily, feeling like the government controls their lives. New rules and laws for their lives dropped like bombs, with no proper steps followed. Just that alone sparked protests everywhere. They raised taxes too high. People quit their jobs, struggling to make ends meet. It's a mess. The protests started off peacefully enough, but within hours, everything spiraled into this."

"When did it start?" Cassidy asked, fingers twitching at his sides.

"All these new videos showing violence popped up just a few hours before our system went haywire, dumping new cases into my queue. I never saw anything like it."

"Hm. Maybe. You might have something."

Jax pulled up a picture of an elderly woman, jabbing a finger at her with a smirk. "I figured it sounded like a winner because she surely doesn't look like one. She reminds me of an old cartoon villain." After scanning the image, she turned the monitor back around and closed the tab. "I guess it's too much to hope that good karma took a hit too?"

With a slow shake of his head, Cassidy shot her a knowing look. "Nope. No good karma over there either. It's dead. No ringing phones. No massive downloads. Nothing."

"Can I put in a transfer?"

He shoved his hands deep into his pockets and swayed gently, balancing on his feet. "No. They're just sitting around, bored. Most are wrapped up in some computer game called Hell's Warriors of Brimstone or something."

"Never heard of it."

"Me neither until recently. All the kids are buzzing about it. One of the newbies found it. It's like a D&D game with skills, missions, and magic. They're getting hooked. If I had time, I might check it out."

"Still no clue. Do you think these protests caused all this chaos down here?"

"I don't know," he admitted, scratching the back of his neck and glancing away.

"Something caused this. Evil must've slipped through some crack in the gates and unleashed all this chaos. Whatever happened crashed my system twice! The electricity flickered, reminding me of a storm rolling in, threatening to plunge my house into darkness. My system locked up hard. I had to cold boot it to get the damn thing to shut off. Each time it came back online, it looked like the crash shifted many clients to mine! I picked up seventeen hundred new cases in one morning. One morning! It reminded me of that day in late April in nineteen-ninety-two, but we didn't get this many! Ridiculous! Usually, I might get a total of twenty, maybe, but nothing like this!"

"You're preaching to the choir; we all got the same thing!"

"Good! Then I shouldn't need to spell it out how busy I am. I don't have a moment to scratch my ass, much less engage in chit-chat. I'm buried in piles of cases and untangling this mess, so please, get to the reason for your visit."

"Okay, straight to the point!"

The fierce look on her face spoke volumes, ready to wreak havoc. She waved him on. "Down and dirty, just how I like it."

"I'll have to remember that!" he teased, a playful grin spreading across his face.

As the smile lingered, Jax glared at him, her expression sharp enough to cut ice. The two locked gazes for a brief moment, tension crackling in the air between them.

Finally, Jax rolled her eyes. "Cassidy. The point. Please."

## TWELVE

### *A Glitch*

Cassidy let out a frustrated breath as he crossed the room, finally settling on the edge of Jax's messy desk. Papers and files shuffled beneath him, but he ignored them. "Don't shoot the messenger," he warned, his tone light, yet an underlying seriousness tinged his voice.

Jax continued to stare at him, her brow knitted tightly in confusion. "What do you mean?"

He leaned back slightly, arms crossing firmly over his chest. "Well, since you're mad busy, you aren't going to like this."

With a quick touch of her fingers, Jax pushed aside her blond hair, her face still marred by a scowl. "Why would this be different from any other time you drop by?"

Cassidy shot her a flat-faced grimace before shifting gears back into work mode. "We have an insane number of recruits coming in."

Jax's eyes widened, and she winced at the news, her frustration intense. "Ouch! That can only mean the protests turned horrendous. Not good. Then again, we can use them after last night. It's going to take too long to get these cases under control, but that's for the recruiting department. Why are you telling me?"

"Yeah, about that." He hesitated, then leaned over and typed on her keyboard. The screen flickered to life, revealing a photo of a striking woman with fluffy red hair and a bright smile.

Jax glanced from the screen back to Cassidy, her brow still furrowed. "Cute, but I still don't get why this is my problem."

Sitting up straight, Cassidy pointed firmly at the screen. "Veronica Lewis."

When he fell silent, her gaze locked onto Cassidy with an intense glare. She plastered a bright, artificial smile on her face, clearly forced. "Congratulations! It's a girl!" Her eyes rolled dramatically, and her breath came in sharp gasps as she released a slow exhale to tame her growing frustration. "Is there more?"

Cassidy stood tall, overseeing a crew of nineteen employees who tackled their tasks with focused intensity. Jax made the number twenty. She often corrected him over the smallest

mistakes, and he sometimes questioned the office's hierarchy. The news Boyd shared with him would likely send her into a frenzy, demanding his head on a stick. Despite her ability to cross the line, Cassidy found her attractive, a trait that kept him from escalating matters. Jax danced along the thin line of insubordination, but he chose to overlook it. Cassidy disliked upsetting her, but he knew they had important matters to discuss. "She's one of the recruits from this morning. A head-on collision, the result of a peaceful protest turning chaotic."

Wide-eyed and uninterested, Jax fixed her gaze on him. "That just proves my point. Fascinating. It just shows how dangerous peaceful protests can be." She groaned, annoyance bubbling up inside her. "I mentioned the mountain of work on my plate and how I can't spare time for idle chit-chat, right? Get to the point! Why are you telling me all this? Is there a case I need to research? I know it's not one of mine. Her name doesn't even sound familiar." She cast her eyes up to the ceiling tiles, huffing in frustration as she shook her head. "Maybe, after last night, it could be one of the newbies I haven't met yet. Is that it? Is she one of my new cases?"

"Not exactly."

"Wait. You're right. She can't be if she's already here." Jax's irritation peaked, and she leaned forward, fire blazing in her light eyes. "Cassidy! Stop beating around the bush! Why are you introducing me to this person?"

"She's going to shadow you while you train her." He shifted uncomfortably, his shoulders tensing as he braced himself for her reaction.

Confusion knitted Jax's brows tightly together, deepening her frown as she bore down on him with an intense glare, as if she could force him to retract his words. "Excuse me? Are you out of your mind?! I have never trained anyone in my time here!"

"True. That's probably why the referral pointed you out for this one."

"No! I can't train anyone. First, I'm swamped with work. Second, I'm not qualified. Third, I don't want to!"

"Yes, you can. One, you're my fastest, most capable accounting agent and paralegal. Two, that's not flattery; those are the facts. You are the best person for the job!"

"That's irrelevant! If I train someone, they will slow me down! Besides, those who can't do, teach. I'm not a teacher; I'm a doer!" Jax waved her hands wildly, her voice rising as she vigorously rejected the idea. "I'm not training anyone! It's exhausting enough to keep track of every action of those living a life, a life some fool robbed me of. I have to piece together that crucial moment they snapped and did something reckless. Then I must dive into their past to determine what law they broke. Were they a minor player or a major contributor? Then comes the agonizing decision of whether we should prosecute and set up the team. It's enough to drive anyone insane. I'm not taking on the responsibility of training someone else for this crap! Pass it to someone else!"

"I would if I could, but it's out of my control."

"You're the boss; make it happen!"

Cassidy found it odd that both Boyd and Jax echoed the same message in his mind. "Can't. Third, and most important, Boyd called and personally requested you. You said it yourself, you're the only one who hasn't trained anyone."

"I have the highest number of clients!" She threw her hands up, the frustration noticeable in her voice. "That means the load is lighter for others in training! I just gained seventeen hundred more clients in one night. One night!" Her voice rose with each word, ringing through the small, cluttered office. In her mind, a sharp crack split the air like glass shattering, pulling at her thoughts and reminding her of the 75,000-megawatt lightbulb that had exploded in 1954. She imagined tiny, sparkling fragments raining down around her. Slowly, she lifted her wide, astonished eyes to meet his. "Wait! What? The big boss personally requested me? He knows my name. Is that a good thing? That can't be a good thing."

Cassidy flicked his wrist dismissively, unconcerned. "It's probably just because he checked the database. You're the only person in this whole building who hasn't trained anyone yet. But he did mention something about a higher-up request. Maybe a glitch."

"Higher up? Glitch? What kind of glitch?" Uncertainty creased her brow, her thoughts swirling.

"All of this happened during the big blackout," he explained, shrugging slightly, the tension in the room building.

She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a near whisper as if the walls might overhear. "Ah, that makes sense. But if it really is a glitch, can't you reassign her to someone else?"

"Nope. When I tried to argue, he reminded me it falls under your job description," he shot back, crossing his arms defensively.

"But I didn't choose this job!" she shot back, her voice sharp with indignation. "You forced this role on me when there were no other options available!"

"Wrong. You could've gone to the mail room. They're always hiring."

"Yeah, right! That's like choosing a bug-infested motel over a luxurious five-star hotel with all the perks!" she scoffed, rolling her eyes.

He rolled his shoulders, a grin still plastered on his face, unfazed by her outburst. "Count your blessings. Kelly has trained forty people in ten years. She gets a new trainee every three months."

"I also have triple the clients to keep me busy, so they can take their time to train! Did you express that fact to him?" Her eyes flashed with annoyance.

"He didn't ask and wasn't much up for a conversation about it," he responded casually.

"Ugh!" She stomped her foot, slapping her palm against the desk hard enough for a pen to roll off and clatter to the floor. "How am I supposed to train someone? Is there a book I can toss at her? An employee manual? A worksheet?" Her voice was tinged with desperation.

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Stop acting like a baby. It's not as complicated as you're making it. Just do what you normally do and explain your methods as you go along. Stress how important it is to investigate every action—no cutting

corners. Also, let her know what could happen if you don't include every detail. Even the tiniest action or thought can create or break a case."

She let out a deep sigh, glancing at the woman on the screen, the anxiety creeping back into her voice. "Like a broken fingernail?"

"Exactly. Like a broken fingernail," he confirmed, nodding seriously.

"How long is this going to take?" she asked, the tightness in her throat betraying her nerves.

"It could be a few days or weeks. Even the slowest could finish in a few months," he replied, his tone matter-of-fact.

She stamped her foot again, frustration spilling over like a boiling pot of water. "A few months?! This is bullshit, Cassidy!"

"Yeah, yeah. It didn't thrill me to hear I had to rile you up. Trust me. Expect delivery within an hour." As he stood and moved toward the door, he thought about his own heavy workload and how much time he had wasted trying to calm the rough waters of the Jaclyn River before it flooded them all. "Tootles."

"Yeah, thanks," she muttered, sarcasm dripping from her words.

Pausing with his hand on the door, he looked over his shoulder. "You have this uncanny way of making that sound like anything but gratitude."

"Because I'm talented," she shot back, returning her focus to the tasks looming ahead.

"Later, gorgeous," he said, stepping out, completely oblivious to the middle finger she raised behind him, irritation bubbling beneath her skin.

## THIRTEEN

### *The Drop Off*

An hour later, Cassidy strolled back to Jax's gloomy doorstep, a bright smile stretched across his face. A bewildered redhead followed closely behind him. Inside, Jax sat at her cluttered

desk, fingers dancing over the sleek, silver envelope opener. The blade caught the faint light, a glint of danger in the lit room. She had switched to digital tools not long ago, and the need for such a sharp tool baffled her until now.

Lost in her thoughts, Jax frowned at herself. Whispers of dark scenarios lurked in her mind like shadows. Why tempt fate in a place that judged harshly for such thoughts every day? The rules clung to her tightly, just as they did to everyone else. A nagging feeling crept in, whispering that karma had its eyes on her and her less-than-innocent musings. She rolled her eyes, trying to shake off the unsettling feeling. Just kidding, she thought loudly.

"Jaclyn Howard. Veronica Lewis. Your shadow while you work." Cassidy's smile sparkled, brightening his green eyes as he gestured between the two women. "Veronica, you're lucky. Jaclyn is one of my best accountants. You'll pick up a lot from her. Watch closely as she works, and ask questions whenever you're curious. This should be an easy and smooth training."

Jax paused, glancing up from her chaotic sea of spreadsheets and brightly colored sticky notes. The newcomer looked just as overwhelmed as she had felt on her very first day. It's hard to jump for joy when you learn that you'd died, unless you were asking for it, and that would lead you to a different place entirely. No doubt about it; it shook you to your very core. Dressed in ripped light-blue jeans that revealed more skin than fabric, Ronni appeared innocent, like a naive child wandering into a chaotic party filled with mischief-makers. "Call me Jax. Everyone does."

Ronni's wide green eyes darted around the busy office, soaking in the frantic energy that buzzed in the air. She must have wondered how long it would be until she awoke from this twisted nightmare. Turning to Jax, the confusion etched on her face deepened, and she nodded slowly. "Ronni."

With a playful grin, Cassidy bounced his gaze from one woman to the other. "Look at you two! Getting along swimmingly! Now it's all about how well you"—he pointed at Jax—"teach, and how well you"—he gestured toward Ronni—"learn. That's how long you'll be sharing this office and everything inside it."

Ronni's voice fell flat, illustrating the dullness on her face. "Great," she muttered, her tone almost lifeless, void of enthusiasm.

Familiar with Cassidy's silly charm, Jax rolled her eyes and threw his words back at him. "Swimmingly."

Cassidy shot Jax a knowing wink, a playful warning dancing in his expression. "Wonderful! I have to run now. You two can get to know each other better. I'm busy, busy, busy." He waved cheerfully as he headed for the door. "Play nice, ladies." By ladies, he clearly meant Jax, the one well-acquainted with the struggles of this chaotic office.

## FOURTEEN

### *The Grand Tour*

The door clicked shut, sealing the small office in a cocoon of quiet. Jax settled into her chair behind a cluttered desk, the faint echo of the latch fading into the stillness. She glanced at Ronni, who stood awkwardly in the center of the room, as though she didn't quite belong. Jax cleared her throat, a nervous smile tugging at her lips, and waved a hand toward the inviting chair. "Please, come in. You might as well relax. Let me give you the grand tour."

Ronni's gaze roamed the room, taking in the towering bookcases that lined the walls. Each one overflowed with three-ring binders, some teetering precariously to one side. Papers covered Jax's desk like fallen leaves in autumn. After a moment's hesitation, Ronni sank into the plush chair, her brows knitting together. "You mean there's more than meets the eye?"

A chuckle escaped Jax, finding an unexpected warmth in Ronni's playful sarcasm. She raised her hand in a mock salute. "Touché. As Cassidy said, we're stuck here until you learn everything about this job. You get that side." She pointed across the room to another desk, identical to hers, waiting patiently for Ronni. "When you pass your exams, you'll get your own office. For now, you'll shadow me through it all. If you have any questions, just ask. The bathroom is through that door, but you'll only need it if you eat or drink."

Ronni's eyes widened, a mix of confusion and alarm flooding her features. "If I eat or drink? Won't I die if—Ah! That's right. I forgot."

Jax nodded, a serious expression crossing her face. "Some people prefer to keep eating because they won't gain weight. You stay looking the same when you die, except for a few aging defects. No extra pounds or weird changes. And over there, in the corner, is the kitchenette. If you want to eat, you type in your choice, and the door opens. They call it the Snappy Food Dispenser or something like that. It serves five-star meals. You'll probably keep eating out of habit."

"Habit? Eat or die. That's hardly a habit. If so, it's a life-threatening one."

Jax leaned forward, her voice low and serious. "That's not the case anymore. You don't need food to survive. You're dead, remember? Things aren't all roses and rainbows in the afterlife. We have our pros and cons. No more worrying about what we eat or those annoying extra pounds that used to cling to us. I used to sweat my ass off for two days just to get rid of that Boston Crème donut I wolfed down like I hadn't eaten for days."

"So, we don't gain weight no matter what we eat?"

"Not at all. Here, eating is a choice. You can have anything you want, whenever you want. No need to read labels for toxins or strange ingredients. We're already dead. But in your mind, you'll still feel like yourself, and that never changes. Eating can help with any depression you might get." As if to illustrate her point, Jax reached for a jar filled with vibrant, colorful M&Ms. She poured a handful into her palm, the candy clinking together, and popped them into her mouth, savoring the sweetness. "Hell, I still munch on treats. It's natural."

"I'm sorry, did you say depression? About being dead? Interesting. Let's hope I don't get any suicidal thoughts."

Leaning back in her chair, Jax laughed, a genuine sound that broke the tension. "Cute. Already making jokes after death. There's hope for you yet."

Jax's gaze swept across her cluttered desk. Stacks of papers teetered precariously beside half-empty coffee cups, threatening to spill their contents at any moment. The weight

of her overwhelming workload hung heavy on her shoulders, and her thoughts raced with frantic ideas about how to speed up the training process. She leaned forward. "What did they tell you during intake? Let's start from there."

"I'm having a fucking horrible nightmare that I can't wake up from," Ronni replied, her voice thick with frustration.

Jax's eyes widened, disbelief etched on her face as her mouth hung open. "They told you that?!"

"Not word for word, but close enough."

"Who told you that? I'm going to have someone demoted for that shit!" Jax shot forward, grabbing a sticky note and a pen, ready to write down the villain's name.

"Boyd something or other. You all need to fire his ass. Unruly. Rude. Terrifying." A shudder ran through Ronni, her body tensing as the unsettling memory loomed in her mind.

"Boyd? My boss-boss? Why would he tell you some off-the-wall bullshit like that?" Jax furrowed her brows, confusion flickering across her features as she put the pen back, sliding the sticky note back to its location.

"They said I died."

"And...?" Jax tilted her head slightly, narrowing her eyes in anticipation.

"I didn't believe them. It's not possible. It's all part of one hell of a freaky ass dream, nightmare, or something." Ronni shook her head violently, disbelief coloring her voice. "So, yeah. I'm having a little difficulty with the whole situation and how I can't wake up."

"Ah! Unfortunately, this isn't a dream or a nightmare. You're dead. Everyone entering that room has problems with the fact that they're dead! Not one person has come through with an 'okay, that's fine' attitude. Hell, if I'm not mistaken, I screamed. They're supposed to explain things to you in a calm, easy manner. It makes the transition a little more comfortable."

"Calm, easy manner? Boyd tried proving it by ripping off his head and slamming it in my face with his disgusting breath. It smelled like something had died in his mouth years ago! He

had sharp, pointy fangs dripping with snot and bugged-out eyes that looked like they were about to fall out of his head! Sounds like a nightmare to me!"

Jax's eyes widened even more, nearly popping out of their sockets. "Good Lord! Donald Boyd? President of recruiting? You've got to be kidding me. He is the sweetest man! I can't see him like that."

"I wish I didn't remember him like that. No, I'm not kidding."

"Wait! Why were you talking to Boyd? You were supposed to have an agent gently explaining how you died. What happened?" Jax leaned back in her chair, more than a little curious about the events that happened in recruiting.

"Things started badly and went downhill from there. They ignored me and left me standing alone in the middle of the room after taking the people behind me! When Ms. 'I had technical difficulties' finally showed up, probably busy polishing her nails, she couldn't find my name on her damn list. That made things even worse. A bunch of shit happened with Boyd, and then he turned me over to the dreamboat. I got my hopes up. I thought for sure my nightmare had turned into porn. I always wake up right before the good part, probably because I'm happily married, but that didn't happen this time. He brought me to you. Now I'm more confused. If this is porn, you're gorgeous, but I don't swing that way. Sorry, but this has been the weirdest damn dream yet."

The unexpected compliment caught Jax off guard, and a genuine smile broke through her focused demeanor, softening her sharp features. "Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you're not dreaming, and this isn't porn."

Ronni sat on the edge of a dark, invisible ridge, her shoulders drooping as if the weight of the world pressed down on her. The frigid air clung to her skin like a heavy blanket, sapping her warmth. "Where am I?" she whispered, her voice shaking with uncertainty.

Jax tilted her head, blond hair spilling over one shoulder in soft waves. "Well, it's like they told you upstairs. You died." Her tone seemed to balance between sympathy and an unsettling normalcy, as if sharing such incredible news was routine.

Bewilderment washed over Ronni like a cold wave crashing against the shore. "I keep thinking the more I hear it, the easier it will get. It's not. So, what do you mean I died?" Her eyes widened, a desperate flicker of hope battling the despair within.

Jax gestured broadly to the vast, dark expanse surrounding them, a place both unfamiliar and unsettling. "You died—stopped breathing, your heart stopped functioning, and your body is buried six feet under in real life. I don't know how else to explain death."

"How did I die?" Ronni's voice wavered, each word laced with an urgent need for understanding.

"Let's find out." Jax cracked her knuckles loudly, the sound sharp in the stillness like a countdown to something grim.

"Let's find out?! This has to be a nightmare." Panic surged in Ronni's chest, squeezing her breath tight like a vice.

"Nope. The sooner you stop thinking of this as some weird dream or nightmare, the sooner you can realize that this is your life now." Jax crossed her arms, her stance unyielding and her gaze steady.

"Yeah, but I wasn't finished with my old life." Ronni clenched her fists, feeling a deep ache spread through her heart, a disquieting reminder of what she had lost.

"We never are. Okay." Jax glanced at her tablet, her fingers skimming across the screen, revealing a digital record that glowed in the dim light. "Interesting. You did a favor for a neighbor who had car trouble and ran to the store. You had a head-on collision caused by a traffic jam from protestors blocking the road. The other car took the corner too fast, saw the protestors blocking the road, tried to go around, and ended up going airborne, slamming into—"

"Stop!" Ronni waved her hands frantically, her face paling as images flashed in her mind. "I got the gist of it! I don't need to hear the gory details. Those fucking protestors have caused more harm than anything close to good!"

"Yeah. They've caused chaos down here, too." Jax turned her gaze away, pain flickering in her expression. "People don't realize just what they're signing up for—they soon will."

"I get people being angry and wanting their voices heard, but when they open the door to destruction, it's time to voice your opinion less violently!" Tears streamed down Ronni's cheeks, each drop a testament to her heartbreak. "What's going to happen to my kids? My husband? My family?"

"This will sound harsh, but that's no longer your concern." Jax's expression hardened, a formidable barrier rising between them.

"No longer my concern? I am a mother! It will always be my concern!" Ronni's voice climbed, echoing in the emptiness, raw with desperation.

Jax shot her a cautious look. "Good thing you're already dead. You look like you're about to have a heart attack or something."

"This can't be right! I have to be dreaming! Someone, please, wake me up!" Ronni screamed, her voice cracking, fear seeping into every syllable.

Jax winced, memories of her own past flickering through her mind like shadows. She could relate to Ronni's pain. "Look, these are the facts, written in stone, unchangeable. It happened. Trust me. I feel your pain. I, too, had issues when I came in. I truly am sorry for your loss. Being a Bad Karma Accountant Paralegal, I see more than my fair share of shit happening worldwide. You'll heal. You'll forget. We all do. Just know that those responsible will serve their time in Hell for their crimes."

Wiping her tears with trembling hands, Ronni shook her head in disbelief, her expression clouded with sorrow. "I seriously doubt I'll get used to it. I got babies that need me! I won't get over that."

"Yes, you will. There's nothing else for you to do. Time heals all wounds; you've got time to deal with it here. Don't worry. You'll be too busy with other people's crimes to deal with your issues. The world is fucked up and getting worse every day." Jax's voice remained steady, lined with a mix of understanding and blunt honesty.

Ronni sighed deeply, the sound echoing her irritation as she waved her hand at the flickering monitor. "Did they at least catch them?"

Jax closed the file with a snap, her brow wrinkling in concentration as she pulled up another document. "Not yet. Too many videos to sift through. Too much damage done. People are running wild, committing crimes without a care. Those who do get charged are released almost immediately because of activists and political games."

"Too many fucking politicians sweeping it under the carpet for their precious elections," Ronni growled, her face tightening with anger, fists clenching at her sides.

"Yeah, but they don't realize, they might be let go on Earth, but Hell is a different story. One Earth year is one Hell day. I feel your pain," Jax said, her voice lowering, sharing a moment of understanding. "My murderer slipped away on a technicality. It's a hollow feeling. Nothing we can do."

"What am I doing here?" Ronni's spirit dimmed, resignation settling over her like a heavy, cold fog. A long breath escaped her lips, carrying away the fragile hope she had held onto all morning.

Jax opened her hands wide, a bright smile cutting through the gloom. "Welcome to your hereafter job."