

[CHAPTER ONE]

IT'S AMAZING HOW fast your life can change in the blink of an eye. One moment, you're a young police officer on his first day on the job, eager and ready to prove yourself and serve your community. You've just bought your first home, you're engaged to your longtime girlfriend, and you're even thinking about children. Oh, and your dad was just recently confirmed to the Supreme Court, too, which is pretty cool as well.

But then you lose all that because of one idiot who robbed a bank and decided to take you on a high-speed chase down a crowded highway during rush hour. And then you get into a car crash due to the actions of said idiot and die. And that's that.

Everything you had. Gone. In the blink of an eye. And there's nothing you can do about it.

Now, of course, I don't *know* that I am dead. If I was really dead, would I be able to think any of this? I was taught about heaven and hell and all that in Sunday school when I was a kid, but I am not sure how much of that I ever really believed.

And if I *was* dead ... was this heaven or hell?

The place I stood in was a pure white ... well, nothingness. For as far as the eye could see, it was just empty nothingness. No ground. No sky. No buildings or people or animals. Hell, there wasn't even any wind. It was pure emptiness. It was also eerily quiet and had no discernible scent that I could smell.

But the freakiest thing? *I* didn't have a body, either.

When I looked down at myself, I saw nothing. I didn't see my freshly-cleaned, brand new police officer uniform. I didn't see the scar on my left palm I got when I cut my hand when I was cutting some apples when I was thirteen. I didn't see my shiny police shoes or my holstered gun. I saw nothing. Nothing at all.

Again, I wondered ... was this heaven? Or hell? Or maybe it was that purgatory place that Catholics believed in. I was raised Baptist, so purgatory wasn't part of my theology, but maybe the Baptists were wrong and the Catholics were right. That would annoy my grandpa, who was a staunch Baptist minister who didn't care much for the Catholic Church, for sure.

"Don't worry, Nyle," said a voice behind me I did not recognize. "You aren't in heaven, hell, or even purgatory. You aren't even dead."

I whirled around—although it felt more like turning a camera around than actually moving like a human being—to see who had spoken. Sitting behind a desk directly across from me, as if he was supposed to be there, was an Arab man I had never seen before. He wore a fine blue suit which did not have a single crease or stain anywhere. His short beard was extremely well-trimmed, putting my old goatee to shame, and he wore thick sunglasses, although I wasn't sure why he needed them because it wasn't that bright in here. Then again, I didn't see the sun, stars, or any sort of artificial light, which made me wonder how I was seeing anything at all.

"Who are you?" I said. "And how do you know my name?"

The man smiled. "I know everything about you, Nyle Maxwell. Or should I say, Nyle Maxwell II, son of Nyle Maxwell I, a fine Texas judge who was recently confirmed to the Supreme Court after Justice Peterson's untimely death. You are twenty-five-years-old, an inhabitant of Cane, Texas, where you recently started working for the Cane City Police Department, and you are engaged to Sally DeLeon, also of Cane, Texas, a registered nurse, who you have been dat-

ing for two years now. She was quite relieved when you finally asked her to marry you, I heard.”

I bit my lower lip. Privacy wasn’t really a thing nowadays, thanks to the way the Internet penetrated nearly every facet of our lives, but I found the way this man rattled off my every detail—even down to how Sally felt about me finally proposing to her—unnerving, to say the least, especially since I had never even seen him before. “I see you’ve done your homework.”

The man raised a folder off his desk with my name, ‘NYLE MAXWELL,’ stamped across it. “Oh, I was never a very good student in school. One of my fellow agents did most of the footwork on you, although considering how much you and your fiancée used social media, I doubt it took him long to collect all of the pertinent information. And more. Much, much more.”

I reached out with a hand toward the folder, but stopped when I realized that I had a body now. I looked down and saw that I looked much the same way I did when the car crashed, which was a very odd feeling.

“Sorry about that,” said the man as he lowered my folder down onto his desk. “I have been informed that there are still some issues with the body-scanning process, which means that sometimes the mind is uploaded before the system finishes scanning the body. I’ve been told that being a disembodied mind is very ... disturbing, and potentially traumatic.”

“Disturbing, yes,” I said, feeling my body just to make sure it was real. “Traumatic ... guess I’ll find out. I’m pretty tough. I can handle things most other people can’t.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Confidence is a good quality to have, but there is a special abode in hell for the arrogant.”

“So I take it this *isn’t* hell?” I said, looking around at the white void in which we stood. “Explains the absence of fire and brimstone and red, horned demons poking the damned with pitchforks.”

“As I said, this is neither heaven nor hell,” said the man, “but it *is* an afterlife. Or *your* afterlife, anyway, if you choose to make it that.”

I looked directly at the man. “Forgive me for my rudeness, but I find it a little unfair how you know everything about me—down to the color of my underwear, probably—but I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Charles,” said the man simply. “Charles Omar. I am an agent from the Department of Virtual Reality, assigned to help you and about five others smoothly make the transition from the real world to this one.”

I frowned. I’d heard about the Department of Virtual Reality, of course. Established 14 years ago in 2029 by President Michael Crane, the Department of Virtual Reality enforced the law in the realm of VR, which had exploded in popularity in America and abroad with the release of VRMMORPGs like Capes Online and others. I only knew this because Sally was a big political junkie and she had a tendency to rant to me about whatever the current political hot topic of the day was, although I couldn’t give a darn about any of it myself.

“What do you mean by ‘transition’ there, Chuck?” I said. “Do you mind if I call you Chuck?”

Charles’ left eye twitched slightly. “No, I don’t. As for what I mean, I think it is time I told you exactly what happened to you.”

“I know what happened to me,” I said, resting my hands on my belt. “I was driving down the highway trying to catch that idiot Bryce Cunningham and then we got into a huge car wreck because he slammed into me and then we crashed into a fuel truck and ... well, after that, I don’t

know what happened. I assumed I died, but given how I'm talking to you, I think that's probably not a safe assumption to make."

"It is not," Chuck agreed. "You are correct on the other details, however. On the morning of Tuesday, the second of January, two thousand and forty-three, at exactly ten o'clock in the morning, you went on a high-speed chase to capture the wanted criminal Bryce Cunningham, who had robbed Cane First National Bank that same day. You chased Mr. Cunningham for approximately ten minutes and thirty-one seconds before the two of you crashed into an automated fuel truck, killing both of you, as well as killing about a dozen other people on the busy highway at the same time."

I grimaced. "Oh. I didn't know that."

Chuck waved off my concern. "It is not relevant to this discussion. Anyway, both of you technically were 'killed,' or at least your bodies were, but human beings, I hope you understand, are more than just our bodies. We have souls. Minds. Things which separate us from animals."

I cracked a grin. "I don't know. My dog, Joey, was pretty smart, although the only words he seemed to understand were 'walk' and 'food.'"

Chuck continued as if I hadn't said a word. "Allow me to welcome you to your second chance at life, to a second life, you might say. No longer will you live with a flesh-and-blood physical body. Instead, you will dwell in virtual reality. I welcome you to Project Second Life, where those who died prematurely get a second chance at life itself."

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