

Chapter 1

**Heaven
2040**

Death

“I quit,” I said, dripping seawater and kelp across God’s Persian rugs. They were cheap copies, and he could afford the real ones, so I didn’t understand.

My classic Chanel Little Black Dress was ruined, I didn’t know where my pearls were, and my perfectly matching shoes were probably sinking beneath an empty rescue boat somewhere in the Indian Ocean. It was the second cruise ship accident this month, and I hated everything about those incidents. The dying passengers were agitated, bruised, ocean-cold, and scared shitless. And I was upset, bruised, ocean-cold, and beyond pissed.

Out of a tiny, elegant Chanel clutch bag with a 14K gold-plated shoulder strap, I took a wet wad of 100% cotton paper that I’d been carrying around for three months and tossed it on his desk. Jesus and the Holy Spirit materialized out of nowhere, right on cue.

“Now, Death,” God said as he stood up from his desk and walked toward me with that annoying settle-down hand movement, “I’m sure we can work this out.” He looked at the other two for support. Jesus and the Holy Spirit nodded as if they were on matching puppet strings.

“What’s this about?” Jesus asked quietly, trying to lower the tension in the room. I avoided looking directly at him but noticed he was wearing bicycle racing shoes.

“If you all had been paying attention,” I said, “you’d know I’ve been asking for help for a long time.” I brushed glop and seaweed from the front and back of my dress.

The three of them faked surprised looks.

“Do you three realize that 150,000 people die every day on Earth?” I asked. “That’s two

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people every Earth-second of every day. My department has to process these poor souls, so the sorting department gets them to the correct eternity. The sorters have to check with the Sin Amalgamators.”

I started to walk around the room as I continued my speech. “The Sin Amalgamators are such prima donnas! They don’t understand why they have to get double-checked for inaccuracies, but we don’t want a good person spending their eternity in Hell because of a typo in data entry. It can go the other way, too—and we don’t want pedophiles in Heaven, either.”

God nodded. Of course, he knew the system, just not the personalities. He knew everything, but he tended to pretend that mistakes didn’t happen. My thoughts raced. The data entry angels aren’t our best. They drink too much, and they’re young. Whatever. Not my department. They just complained a lot when we slammed them with souls when the pass-through ducting got clogged. Human sin data flooded their screens like St. Mark’s Square after a Venetian winter storm. It wasn’t our fault, but we usually got blamed.

God was listening to all my thoughts.

“I see,” he said aloud.

I was thinking faster than I could speak, so I continued with my train of thought. The tricky part is checking each person’s sin history. Sins have a scaled system—one to one hundred. Murder. Rape. Drug dealing. Child molesting. Those were the hundreds. Little sins like stealing a cookie...those were ones and twos. But it all added up. Of course, the lower the number, the better off you are. But there are no lawyers up here to argue the case. Each sin is catalogued with the person’s intentions clearly indicated on their sin compiler. The formula is supposedly irrefutable in its objectivity and weighting features. That was the idea, anyway. Training for this critical task was challenging but not impossible. We had to monitor quality control like

rocket scientists. And the computers made faster mistakes, not necessarily fewer ones.

Jesus had replaced his bicycle shoes with sandals and was listening to my thoughts. He interrupted out loud, “Death, we know we have had some issues with—”

“We need more time,” I said, ignoring his interruption and shaking my head.

“Transferring souls from the earthly plane to the next one requires finesse, not brute force. In the old days, it was gentler. Now it’s hurried and, honestly, not a good experience for—”

“It’s fine.” God said. “We’ll fix it! Now...”

“Oh? That would be feasible if there weren’t so many errors! We’re extricating the wrong people. And at the wrong time. It’s embarrassing.”

The Trinity looked puzzled, which is hard to do when you’re omniscient, but whatever.

Assuming a hands-to-hips pose and talking through my nose, I playacted the scene so they’d understand. “Hello, Mrs. Jones?” I leaned over at my waist to depict a conversation with someone lying faceup on the floor.

Then I lay down on the floor, stretched out like a proper corpse, and looked up to where I had just been standing. As Mrs. Jones, I raised my head and peered into space, confused, and squinted my eyes, turning my head from left to right.

Then I stood up and looked down at the Mrs. Jones spot where I had just been on the floor. Still using that nasal voice, I said, “So, Mrs. Jones. I’m delighted to inform you that we made a colossal mistake. You’re not going to die! We are giving you your life back.” I made a drunken football-fan V with my arms. The Trinities were buying it. They were smiling.

I hopped back down and lay on the floor as the Mrs. Jones persona again. Her eyes opened wide as she shuddered and said, “Well, crap. I thought I was finally out of the rat race.”

God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit stopped grinning.

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Mrs. Jones—out.

By now, I was shivering from both rage and the ocean's pitiless chill. The oil-laced, body-part-infused seawater was starting to congeal and tighten on my skin. The muck was sticking to my arms like gum on cement. I swiped at it unsuccessfully for the full effect. It was still there.

Jesus made a face and turned to the Holy Spirit. "What *is* that?"

The Holy Spirit, equally revolted, whispered back, "I don't know. It looks like part sewage and part I-don't-know-what."

"Is that a finger over there?" Jesus asked as he almost lost his celestial cookies.

As the Holy Spirit sat down hard on a nearby chair and put his head between his legs, God put his hand over his six-feet-off-the-floor nose and said, "It smells like week-old fish guts mixed with cow manure."

"No," I said. "That's *my* smell. We have to talk about that. Without this job, I assume the decomposed cadaver odor that surrounds me will go away...?"

No responses. It was like talking to cardboard boxes. In the silence, you could almost hear the sound of the cheap rug dyes running together like wet paint on a dirty canvas.

The Holy Spirit sat up. He still looked a little green. "Do you...? Does this...?"

He didn't know what he wanted to ask, so I answered, "Yes, we do. We see this kind of thing all the time. And, yes, it does disgust us, which is why I'm out of here. We've been calling HR every day for months. All of us wonder how we were assigned this horrific job. We've all had it since the beginning of humankind."

"We know," Jesus said, shaking his head. "We've talked about it."

I didn't believe that. Not for one minute.

As Jesus was talking, some squishy thing was sliding across the back of my neck. I reached around, grabbed it, and threw a cute Nemo clownfish onto God's desk. It stared back at us through its upside eyeball and flip flopped off the desk and across the carpet. The Trinity stared at it, offering no help whatsoever, so I nodded the thing back to its ocean. I also blinked myself out of my wet clothes and into a cute Vera Wang number—my bedraggled Coco Chanel outfit and gunky-arms routine having served their purpose...I hoped.

Straightening my shoulders and raising my chin, I glowered at God and the Holy Spirit. I spared Jesus this time.

In unison, the bobblehead threesome asked, "What do you want us to do?"

"You don't have to do anything," I said, pointing to the crumpled paper on God's desk. "It's too late. I quit. It's right there."

"But—" God started.

On that note, I disappeared, leaving behind a juicy whiff of my body odor as a souvenir.

~

Eager to return to my genuine Oriental rugs, original Monet and Van Gogh paintings, and authentic Degas sculpture, I hurried toward my apartment. Jesus and the Holy Spirit caught up with me. Jesus wasn't wearing his halo for a change, but he was clothed in Heaven's garb du jour: a nubby white robe made from Tibetan yak fur and sandals fashioned from the sun-dried outer crust of abandoned honeycombs. Yay for repurposing. Ugh for style.

"Can we talk?" he asked from two steps behind me.

"Look," the Holy Ghost said, finally coming alongside me, "why don't the three of us catch a game of peewee golf and hash this over?"

I called him the Holy Ghost when I was in a mood, like today. Unlike Jesus, he dressed in

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designer clothes instead of the ubiquitous white caftan. Today, he was wearing a fitted designer top and coordinated gray pants with the most expensive walking shoes Earth offered.

“I’d enjoy that,” I said.

They both smiled.

“But I don’t have time.”

They frowned, puppet strings pulling down the corners of their mouths.

“Okay. We get it,” Jesus said, hope still shining in his eyes. “Let’s grab a quick cup of coffee.”

“Nah.” I shook my head. “I know you’re going to try to persuade me to stay. But I have to make a change. I’m going to look for another job.”

They both perked up.

“What department?” the Holy Ghost said. “We can put in a good word for you.”

“PR?” I was messing with them now.

The marionettes bobbed their heads. “Great idea!”

“Don’t get excited. I’m so tired right now I could spit. I’m going to the spa to marinate in scented Jacuzzi bubbles.” I thought for a second. “To remove my stench if I can.”

They looked at each other and shrugged.

“And don’t either of you follow me if you want to live.”

“Wouldn’t think of it.”

“Uh-uh. ’Course not.”

I dematerialized with a sparkly snap. But they always knew where I was. And God knew where everyone was.

How is it that they were all one person, but God was the top guy? Did they draw

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matchsticks? Who held the matchsticks for them? Did they ever take turns? Did we miss the Holy Spirit's turn? How did Jesus pull the crucifixion straw? Did he want a redo? Or was it three rounds of rock, paper, scissors? Wait. Was paper invented yet, or did they know of it ahead of time?

It was all way above my pay grade. And it wasn't worth the energy. I only wanted to be liked instead of being feared and despised. I wanted to have friends instead of being alone all the time. Maybe it was my body odor. Did they do that on purpose? Why? And why was I Death, after all? Why the nasty assignment of collecting souls? I'd never applied for the job, at least not that I recalled. Who would?

As I entered my apartment's foyer, I said hello to Monet's painting, *Woman with a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son*. I'd taken painting lessons from Monet before he died. And Edgar Degas, too, but I only had one of his sculptures in the apartment—his *Little Dancer*. When she greeted me in the living room, I said to her, "I have been Death for too long. I'm depressed, and I want to be happy." She got it. She was statue-trapped. If I could escape, maybe she could too.

The next few months would change everything. Free Will would invite some of us to make monstrously difficult decisions. A split second of inattention would result in the God personas having to reckon with more than their omnisciences put together could have foreseen. And the devil? Well, I didn't think in a trillion years we would clash head-on, nor did I know what a clever devil he really was. But *clever* wasn't the word. He was downright *nasty*. Moreover, human beings would think the 1300s' plague a stroll in the park, World Wars I and II as cakewalks, and the 2019 pandemic a backward look at the good old days before the devil was through with them. God created the Deathlist. My Earth friend Ariadne would market it. And

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before long...well, before long all hell broke loose, and I was going to be in the middle of it.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Here's what I want to tell you: If we knew then what we know now, God would never have played so much golf.

~

A few days later, I was preparing to leave Heaven for the south of Italy. Like an idiot, I put in one last call to God. He picked up. Without even saying hello, I said, "Not that I care, but I'm curious. What are you doing about my resignation?"

"Huh? Oh. Hi, Death. I'm on it." Silence. "Of course."

"Okay. Awesome."

I started to sign off and tell him goodbye.

"We have lots of time," God said.

This again! People in Heaven were used to having all eternity to do everything, and it always took a massive effort to create any sense of urgency up there. Forever-ness also led to excessive boredom. So we could tell when God was especially bored. He'd amuse himself by punishing and testing humans with that fabled Old Testament stuff like Noah's Ark, Job's trials, and all manner of repugnant plagues from bloody water to lice and locusts.

"Look," I said, "I told you that we were having errors on early pickups. And last month's delayed pickups were up 4% year over year." I was using accountant-speak now. "People's spirits should not be allowed to wander Earth any longer than past-due milk should be on the shelves."

Why did I care? Humans were as ungrateful as corncobs, but I had liked many of them, even though no one seemed to like me.

There was another moment of silence. The background chink-a-chink noises from God's aluminum putting practice cup stopped. I could almost hear the mechanical sound of his ginormous brain wheels engaging and his golf-distracted interest finally swiveling to focus on the conversation.

His voice brightened considerably. "Oh! So, if we fix the errors, you'll stay?"

"No. You can fix the errors if you'd like. That's up to you, sir. I was calling to say goodbye. *Goodbye.*"

Chapter 2

**Heaven
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Death

Three weeks later, the Trinity and I were seated at the table in the Dumbo Room, which is the largest of Heaven's three conference rooms. A manic, animated flying-elephant cartoon careened along the walls. This was bad enough, but a smaller version flew dizzily around and around on the coffee cups. If you picked up a mug by the handle, the circus-clown-outfitted pachyderm would come to a grateful stop while you sipped, only to be cast back to his task when you put down the mug. It was all computer graphics, but it was accurate, even down to the huffing and puffing sounds from the little elephant. Thank goodness there was an "off" button on the cup's bottom to give the guy a rest between meetings. Or maybe it was my imagination.

How did I end up here, you're asking? Well, the Holy Spirit begged me and promised he'd arrange an extra-special, front-row-seat trip to Paris for Fashion Week for me if I would attend this meeting. It was funny. I could easily go myself, but the thought of his arranging something special made both of us feel a little excited.

God still hadn't found a replacement for me. Not that I cared. The collection department

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staffers were handling the workload—though poorly, as I’d heard through the celestial tattletale grapevine.

God stood at the head of the table, almost giddy and in rare form—glowing as he often did. It became him. “Thank you for joining us, Death. Here’s my answer to all your problems.”

“You’re welcome, sir, but please don’t forget”—I paused for emphasis—“I don’t work here anymore.”

He barreled on. “I have had a special IT angel task force create a database with all of humanity’s birth dates and death dates in it. It will make your job much easier.”

Trinity Numbers Two and Three were nodding enthusiastically in unison.

It was cute. God wanted me back, although his reasons were unclear to me. “That’s very nice,” I said. God smiled until I repeated, pleasantly but slowly with full stops between each word, “Thanks. But. Remember. I. Don’t. Work. Here. Anymore.”

Then, switching gears and pretending either not to hear me or copping to selective hearing, God threw his arms wide with his full gloriousness to introduce his head IT guy, the angel named Forceps. I always wondered if they had used that birthing tool on him, and that was also why his wings were a little awkward and imbalanced. He hovered a bit lopsidedly because of the wings, endearing him to us all the more. He was on the heavy side, had brown curly hair, and wore glasses, which was silly. No one needed glasses up here, but they made him look older, nerdier, and even brighter than he already was. He stood in front of a three-dimensional whiteboard contraption, and he had a projector that pointed at a screen sort of thing floating next to it. The projector wasn’t plugged in that I could see, and the screen was one of those cool see-through things. Both the screen and the whiteboard already had crushing jumbles of numbers on them.