

LAST SECOND CHANCE

A STORY BY:

Kurt Holloway

legalfiction@kurtholloway.com

610-812-2501

Mailing Address:

1485 Briarwood Lane

Pottstown, Pa. 19464

Last Second Chance

In a few minutes, attorney Bill Able would talk to a dead person for only the second time in his life. He swiped his access card to the conference room, identified by “Last Chance—Authorized Only,” etched in black script letters on the unbreakable frosted glass door. The heavy lock clanked open, the lights went up, and Bill walked slowly into the eerily windowless room. The door automatically closed and locked behind him. The walls of this room were constructed with an internal steel mesh that could not be burned or cut open. He sat in one of four black leather chairs around a square glass-top table. A black-cased laptop displaying the word “Universal” on the cover was firmly secured to the table. This laptop was unique because it was preloaded with one program, “Last Chance,” developed by the technology behemoth, Universal Intelligence. The program was regarded worldwide as a revolutionary scientific and technological breakthrough. For security reasons this computer was not part of the law firm’s network, and the room was video-monitored twenty-four-hours a day. Universal Intelligence, or Universal as it was widely known, provided the security specifications to the law firms entrusted with this technology and mandated they be followed to the letter.

The New York law offices of Dexter Bates, P.C. occupied the top three floors of a twenty-three story office building in midtown Manhattan. Bill was a thirty-year-old associate in his sixth year with this prestigious firm. It was quite a compliment for Bill to be permitted to handle this interview since his boss, the very demanding and driven Jacob Stone, was out of town. At this moment, Bill was more uneasy than proud about what he was about to encounter. His jittery nerves and the twenty extra pounds he carried on his tall, formerly athletic body were making

him sweat, so he removed his dark blue pinstriped suit coat and slightly loosened his steel blue striped tie. The firm had a strict dress code, which had not yet caught up with the current fashion of bold and colorful men's socks, so today Bill wore his favorite pair, bright blue with brown and black dancing dogs. It was one way to express his fun-loving spirit otherwise stifled by the firm's rules of conformity.

As Bill turned on the computer, Gindy Harris, the always professionally-dressed, middle-aged female assistant to Mr. Stone, entered the room. Only Mr. Stone, Gindy, and Bill had access cards to the room and authorization to use the Universal laptop. Bill had not yet been entrusted with his own password, so Gindy turned the laptop away from him and entered hers. As the program began to start, she turned the machine back toward Bill, offered him one of her comforting "it'll be OK" smiles, wished him luck, and walked out. Bill watched her leave and the door close; then he heard it lock. His mind flashed to a long-ago scene of himself as a ten-year-old, watching a zombie movie at home late at night, only now he was moments away from his own encounter with the dead. Bill leaned his clean-shaven face forward, placed his blue eyes one inch from the laptop, and waited the two seconds it took for the retina scanner's green light to move from left to right. Before he was fully settled back into his chair, the screen background went black showing only the phrase, "CONNECTING WITH THE AFTERLIFE" in purple letters. A shiver jerked Bill's body.

"Hi, can anyone hear me?" asked the uncertain voice coming from the bodiless head showing on the laptop's screen.

Bill did a double-take when he saw the talking head of the firm's newest dead client, a middle-aged woman with a thin face, blue-grey eyes, and short blonde hair. When Bill read the name Jo Smith on the bio in his file, he assumed the client was a man, so the sight of a woman's head added a touch of surprise, which increased his tension. Bill stammered "Welcome to the law firm of Dexter Bates er...ah, Mrs. Smith. I am attorney Bill Able. Can you hear me clearly?"

"Yes, I hear you, but I can't see you. Can you see me?" came the reply in the tentative but clear, female voice of Jo Ellen Smith, who went by Jo.

"I see a computer-synthesized image of your face and head. I believe your image is a composite created from pictures of you captured from the internet during your life. And I am, uh, very sorry that you are...uh...dead," he said in his slight Virginian accent that became more obvious when he was anxious.

"So, I'm really dead?"

"I believe you're really, most sincerely dead." As soon as he said it, Bill couldn't believe it came out of his mouth. He quickly added, "Oh, hey, I am really sorry about that; my nerves and weird sense of humor got the best of me. It's just that I am not used to talking to dead people yet.

Usually, my boss does this. This is only my second time, so I'm really nervous. You know, like the saying about whistling past a graveyard." Damn it, Bill thought as he grimaced, put his right hand to his forehead, rolled his eyes, and slowly shook his head in embarrassment.

“That’s OK. I had a pretty sharp sense of humor when I was alive. ”

Hoping to move on, Bill asked, “Mrs. Smith, I’m curious, would you mind telling me what you see around you right now?”

“I’m sitting in a lovely park. It’s light, but there’s no sun. I’m surrounded by grass and trees, a big pond, and lots of other people just relaxing. Everything looks very real, but when I try to touch something, I feel nothing. People are friendly, but when I ask them where I am and what will happen next, they just smile and say I’ll find out soon. It’s odd, but I don’t feel anxious about not knowing what comes next. It’s just so peaceful and pleasant. Maybe it’s because I haven’t met any lawyers here.”

Bill heard the playfulness in her voice as she poked at him with that last line. “Good one. I appreciate good lawyer jokes. Are you ready to talk about your postmortem estate planning?”

“Before we start, can I ask you how we can be talking with each other since I am dead? When I was alive I heard about a program that connects the living and the dead but never understood how it was possible.”

“Well, I don’t know much about the technical side, just that Universal created this software program called Last Chance with the ability to enable live people to talk with a dead person, or more accurately, the still-living intelligence of a dead person. Universal allows lawyers like me to talk with the dead about their post-mortem estate planning.”

“How is estate planning after death possible?”

“After Universal developed the software, it hired top-level lawyers and lobbying firms and slowly, state by state, got legislation approved in forty-two states so far, to allow for post-mortem estate planning. Then they marketed the software and franchises to the legal profession. Approved law firms like ours can write a legally binding Last Chance Will and Testament for a client that directs how her assets will be distributed and also document certain other decisions. We only have a window of thirty days to do this after the person has died.”

“I don’t remember ever signing up for this.”

“It was spelled out in the three-hundred-page Terms and Conditions of OZ, the giant internet browsing and social media platform that you must have used during your life. When you hit “I accept” this was one of the services you got in exchange for the mountains of data they collected about you. Everything you posted, messaged and emailed, words and images, for decades was captured, analyzed, categorized, and saved in the cloud in a special Jo Smith file full of a million bits of your life’s personal data. OZ then partnered with Universal. I believe they share the new data created by our interview with you.”

“Ok, but if I’m dead how can Universal connect with me?”

“Well, that science is beyond my knowledge of technology, but my boss told me that Universal and OZ take all of the data collected about a person and create a duplicate brain with the same cellular construction and neural pathways as that person’s real brain. The duplicate brain is called an artificial intelligence brain. It is constantly updated with data to the moment of death. As I understand it the artificial intelligence or AI brain might be part machine and part living organism. Once a person dies his AI brain can be kept alive for only thirty days, then it too, mysteriously, ceases to function. I suspect Universal will solve that problem before long. So, Universal has connected me with your AI brain which is now legally you.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. But how do you know that the voice you’re talking with is really my artificial intelligence? Don’t you have to do some kind of verification?”

“Universal supplies all of the verification. It even convinced the ethics board of the American Bar Association that its verification is so foolproof, that a special ethics rule was written allowing postmortem planning lawyers like me to rely on it. We’re also allowed to share the information you give me during our conference with Universal. So, what do you think, Mrs. Smith are you ready to talk about your postmortem planning?”

“OK. I guess. First, you can call me Jo. Second, tell me what you look like. Maybe it will help me feel like this is somehow real.”

“Uh, well, I’m thirty years old, about six two, with a widening spare tire. My hair is light brown with two natural, unusual looking blonde streaks one in the front and one on top and I have blue eyes. Some people say I look a little like Ryan Gosling but less handsome with funny hair.”

“You’re a piece of work. That helps a little; I guess. Can my husband Randy be part of the conversation?”

“Sorry, we’re not permitted to have him here with us. It’s prohibited by our contract with Universal.”

“Wow, that’s really cold. I want to talk about that more but let’s get this planning work done.” They discussed Jo’s postmortem estate plan, and when they finished she asked, “Can I at least say a personal message to my husband and children?”

“I’m really sorry; your family is not permitted to hear or know any of our conversation other than a summary of your decisions and the legal documents we create. Is there anything else you want to tell me about your postmortem estate planning? We have to hurry. Your Last Chance plan only includes one hour of time with me, and we’ve already been talking for about fifty-five minutes.”

Jo’s face looked shocked as she said, “You mean I can only connect with the living world for one hour and it has to be with a lawyer? I want to talk to my husband and children. I’ve got so

much I want to tell them. The last few years my job kept me so busy, and as the kids got older, we've spent less time together as a family."

"I'm sorry Jo. We only have a few more minutes left."

"I need you to tell Randy, Morgan, and Jimmy that I love them all. I can't remember the last time I told them I loved them. Please tell them for me."

"I'm really sorry, but I can't."

Desperate, Jo shouted, "Randy, Morgan, Jimmy if you hear this, I love you all more than anything. I'll be with you always."

The monitor on the computer went black and then displayed, "**ALTERLIFE CONNECTION TERMINATED.**"

After his nerves settled enough, Bill wrote notes carefully outlining Jo's directions for her postmortem estate plan while thinking that she could have done better managing her life and estate planning. He wondered why people leave important feelings unsaid and legal matters undone for so long. He guessed they wouldn't if they could hear the stories that the firm's dead clients tell. The information he was given explained that she was only forty-four when she died in a traffic accident. He finished his notes, slipped on his suit jacket, and walked to Gindy's desk where she was busy with a document. As he handed her his notes and the file, he said, "It still

makes me nervous to talk to dead clients, and that got very intense at the end. Mrs. Smith really wanted to say something to her family.”

Gindy looked up at Bill and softly, almost apologetically, reminded him, “You know you cannot pass along any personal information to Mr. Smith or anyone outside the firm. It’s against policy.”

“I know, I just feel kind of sorry for her and her family,” said Bill. “Well, at least Mrs. Smith had a sense of humor. I’ve always said Mr. Stone had the sense of humor of a dead person, but now I think that may be too generous.”

Gindy slowly shook her head of stylishly cut, short, dark brown hair and smiled with her mouth and lively brown eyes and said, “Bill, one day your sense of humor is going to get you in trouble. Now get out of here and make sure you fix your tie before one of the partners sees you. And get a haircut.”

Bill chuckled, ran his fingers through his always casually combed hair, tightened his tie, and walked away. He liked Gindy. She was a cross between his professional mentor and cool older cousin. He closed the door to his small office, then plopped into his black fabric, swivel desk chair and spun to look out the tinted window facing a glass and steel office building a stone’s throw away. His office was decorated very unimaginatively, with two prints of the NYC skyline and his diplomas from the College of William and Mary and George Washington Law School hanging on the walls. It was furnished with simple black wood furniture and light grey carpet.

Looking out the window was what Bill enjoyed most about his office. It was his favorite thinking position. One of his favorite thoughts was that his little office, twenty-one stories above the street and only two floors from the top, was a measure of his success.

The next morning, the average-height, heavysset law partner, Jacob Stone, was seated in his New York office. His short, salt and pepper hair was combed meticulously and gelled in place as usual. On the left side of his wide nose he had a scar from a dog bite suffered as a young child and he was self-conscious of it. Growing up, the scar embarrassed him even more than his lack of coordination. The scar turned a blotchy pink when he spent too much time in the sun so his face remained pasty white year-round since he avoided the sun. The scar, a crooked front tooth, his intense brown eyes and bushy black eyebrows made him look slightly intimidating. He didn't like his face so, to compensate, he took great care grooming and dressing. Today he was wearing his traditional, tailor-made, dark grey, three-piece suit, white shirt, conservative red and grey striped tie, and a red pocket square.

Stone, as his partners called him, had a shrewd and calculating mind which had ever-so-carefully maneuvered him into a mid-level partner position in the firm primarily as a result of successfully negotiating the firm's deal with Universal. The firm received over ten million dollars a year from the fees paid by Universal for the data the firm collected from dead clients and then shared with Universal. The fees paid by the clients' families added a million more. At that rate, the firm would recoup what it had paid Universal for the franchise in less than five years. He was the firm's expert in "post-mortem estate planning for the newly deceased", using the Last Chance software program. The other partners had relied solely on his review and opinion of the four-

hundred-page Universal franchise contract, since no other partner wanted the mind-numbing job of reading and analyzing it. He was now earning a multi-million-dollar income. Despite his success, Stone was an unhappy man and hardly ever smiled in the office. He was not married and had no social life. His unhappy childhood drove him to prove he was no longer the wimpy kid who was bullied in school for having an ugly nose and two left feet. He had come a long way, but he was aiming higher; two floors higher to be exact, to senior partner status among the elite on the twenty-third floor.

Stone's office was twice the size of Bill's and elaborately decorated with a custom-made mahogany desk, credenza, and matching round conference table. The chairs were soft black leather. The walls were adorned with photos from around the world signed by the semi-famous photographer who had taken them. His office was located adjacent to the Last Chance conference room as required "for security," as the Universal franchise contract explained.

Stone finished reviewing the Jo Smith file and summoned Bill to his office to discuss it. At the end of their discussion Stone, impressed by Bill's work, told him, "Stick with me on these Last Chance estate planning matters, and you may become a partner in only two years - faster than any other associate in the history of the firm. This Universal franchise is a gold mine, and since none of the other partners understand the legal requirements and nuances of our contract with Universal, they don't interfere. As a partner, your compensation will be high six figures, and you'll have more responsibility and prestige. Just keep up the hard work, follow my instructions, and you'll move into my office when I move up to the twenty-third floor."

“Thank you for your confidence in me, Mr. Stone. I’d like to follow in your footsteps,” said Bill.

“I don’t think I need to remind you that you can’t discuss your Smith meeting with anyone outside this firm including her family. Universal pays us a great deal for the data we provide them about these interviews. We’re strictly prohibited from sharing the information with anyone else under our contract with Universal. By the way, Mr. Smith is coming here in two days so we can discuss and implement the estate plan revisions directed by his wife. I want you to sit in on the conference.”

“Yes sir. Thank you. I fully understand, and you can count on me.” Sensing this might be an opportune time, Bill asked for the next day off to visit his grandmother on her eighty-eighth birthday.

“I need you to review the Cortez transcript, research the issues, and prepare a detailed memo for me by tomorrow. As long as you get that done before you leave, I suppose you may have the day off.”

Bill’s spirit and shoulders drooped as he thought of the long hours the task would take, but he forced an upbeat response, “Thanks, Mr. Stone. It’ll be done.” Bill got up and left Stone’s office.

What no one in the office knew, was that as the lawyers began talking a blue light inside the Universal laptop, not visible outside its case, came on. The laptop, alone but vigilant in its locked conference room, had a very sensitive microphone and was listening to the conversation in

Stone's office. The additional data collected from all things spoken in Stone's office was routinely collected remotely and secretly by Universal.

At 1:45 AM the next morning, Bill dropped the completed Cortez memo on Gindy's desk and left the eerily quiet law offices, dimly lit by only the amber security light in the locked Last Chance conference room and red exit signs in the hallway.

By noon the next day, Bill started the subway and bus trip from his Brooklyn apartment to Grandma Naomi Able's Staten Island home. The hour-plus trip seemed to pass by quickly as Bill daydreamed of the money he would be making soon at the firm. Grandma Omi, as she was affectionately known by her grandchildren, greeted Bill at the door with a tight embrace, resting her grey-haired head on his chest, and Bill gently held her thin, short frame and leaned down to kiss her cheek. Bill was her only visitor today, the rest of the family living too far away. They walked to the living room where he sat in an old brown and tan striped fabric, overstuffed chair, and she retreated to the kitchen for food while telling him about her birthday calls and cards. As she talked, Bill gazed around the familiar room with its aging, lived-in furniture, and worn tan carpet. Its off-white walls were adorned with family pictures and grandma's cross-stitched nature scenes. Warm memories of family holiday gatherings with abundant sweets, packages, and wrapping littering the floor and the aroma of potato stuffing and turkey in the oven still lingered in every corner, picture, and piece of furniture in this room.

As they sat and talked, the conversation eventually turned to favorite family memories, as it almost always did. When she mentioned her late husband, Grandpa Seth, Bill asked about his death.

“He died thirty-one years ago. He was just sixty years old,” she answered. “Your daddy was only thirty, and you weren’t even born yet. We found out he had cancer, and then he was gone in only six months. When he got the diagnosis, he was determined to live long enough to do one thing. He wanted to make peace with our oldest son, your uncle Lenny. Those two had stopped talking ten years before over something nobody even remembered. Your grandpa wrote Lenny a letter. Then he called Lenny. They met and patched things up over some beer. Grandpa and I were so happy about that we both cried when he told me later that night. Now let’s talk about you. Tell me about your job, Billy.”

“I work hard, but I get paid really well and have enough money to have fun and chip away at my law school debt of \$200,000.” He didn’t dare tell her about talking to dead people. She’d never understand that, and she’d probably think it was just plain wrong.

“Are you happy?” she asked.

“It’s important to me to show dad how successful I am. He always wanted me to become a surgeon like him, and when I told him I wanted to go to law school he told me I was wasting my life, and he wouldn’t help pay for it. Dad never had a very high opinion of lawyers - especially after he was sued once. After I graduated from law school, dad asked how much school had

cost. When I told him, he shook his head and said, ‘So, now you’ll spend twice as long paying that off as a lawyer than you would have as a surgeon.’ Dad’s tongue has always been as sharp as his scalpel. Being able to tell him just how well things are going makes me happy.”

“What’s your mom say?”

“Mom has always been in my corner. She tells me that dad loves me. He just has trouble showing it.”

“Well, maybe you and your daddy can find some other things that you can be happy about together some day. He can be as stubborn as Lenny. I don’t know where they both got that from. Certainly not me,” she said with a smile. “Let me go get the dessert.”

After Bill was stuffed with food and stories, they hugged goodbye, and he headed back to Brooklyn. On the way, he listened to music through his earbuds, got comfortable, looked out the train window, and thought about work the next day and his future at the firm. Then he drifted off to a short nap and dreamed about Grandpa Seth.

The next day Stone and Bill met with Randy Smith in one of the firm’s tasteful but impersonally decorated conference rooms. Randy was forty-something, average size with buzz-cut, thinning hair, and brown eyes with heavy bags due to his lack of sleep. He wore causal pants and a wrinkled dress shirt. Stone offered perfunctory condolences which Randy acknowledged without affect. Bill could see in Randy’s face and hear in his voice that he was still very shaken

by his wife's sudden death. Stone explained how the postmortem updates authorized by Jo Smith would facilitate insurance funds reaching Randy faster and how other changes would reduce expenses for him. Randy responded to the information with a blank look and slight nods of his head. As Stone finished, he confirmed that Randy Smith had no more questions and headed off to Gindy's desk with the instructions for preparing paperwork for Randy's signature.

When Stone left the office, Randy looked at Bill and said, "Please call me Randy." Then he asked hopefully, "When you talked to Jo, did she give you a message for the kids and me?"

"I'm really sorry Randy, but I'm not permitted to talk about my conference with your wife other than what Mr. Stone has told you."

"But, that's crazy. Jo's family should at least get to hear what she said. Our kids, Morgan and Jimmy, are only ten and six and are having a really hard time. Can't you tell me anything I can share with them?"

Just then Stone walked into the room and said, "We're sorry, Mr. Smith, but we are forbidden from sharing your wife's actual words. We can only relay her financial and legal decisions."

Randy dropped his eyes in resignation and signed the paperwork. Polite, awkward goodbyes were exchanged, and Bill escorted him to the elevator, neither speaking. He got into the elevator and faced the door, eyes downcast. Randy looked devastated, Bill thought, as he walked back to Stone's office. He knocked on the open door and Stone nodded his permission for Bill to enter.

Bill took a seat and asked, “Mr. Stone, why does Universal forbid a spouse from being present for the conference with a decedent?”

“It’s financial. Universal has not quite figured out how to properly monetize the benefit it would give the living family. As soon as they figure that out, they’ll allow them to talk and make billions with the extra data they collect. Just think what a gold mine it will be when they can harvest data from the AI brain of a dead person as it talks with his living family. Think of the marketing opportunities,” Stone said as he simultaneously wondered how he and the firm might profit too.

“Randy Smith seems to be having a hard time,” said Bill.

“He’ll get over it eventually. They all do. Remember Bill, we’re not social workers. We’re lawyers, and we have a job to do. We help these people with what we are paid to do, nothing more; nothing less.”

“Yes, sir. Of course, you are absolutely right, sir.” As Bill returned to his office he stood at the window and looked to the street. For a moment he just watched the tiny creatures below move about, and he remembered how different life down there was before he joined Dexter Bates. But his dream was up here and beyond. He worked late again that night and didn’t get to bed until 1 AM. He was startled awake at 7AM the next morning by a text from Mr. Stone and a second from Gindy, both instructed him to come to Stone’s office immediately.

Stone had arrived at the office around 6:30 AM, reviewed the Smith file again, and was shocked to discover that the Acknowledgement and Release, purposely written in contorted legalese, had not been signed by Randy Smith. The document, when signed, was a complete release of any claim to the contents of any communications between the attorneys and Jo Smith and vested exclusive rights in Dexter Bates and Universal. What the form didn't say, but Stone knew, was that he and the firm were legally obligated to Universal to get it signed and to never disclose to anyone other than Universal the personal information gathered in conversations with the deceased. The firm's failure to get that document signed would be grounds for Universal to revoke the firm's franchise, which would result in the loss of millions in annual fees, and Stone's value to Dexter Bates would be diminished severely. Without the franchise, the other partners might "allow" Stone to resign, which really meant he'd be thrown out. His reputation would be shattered.

Bill made it to the office in forty-five minutes, having thrown on clean clothes, and dashed out the door. He went straight to Stone's office, where Gindy was waiting nervously for him at her desk. As they entered Stone's office together, he instructed them to remain standing; this would be brief. One look at Stone's face, beaded with sweat and the color of the expensive Pinot Noir he kept in his office, told them this was more than a usual tirade. Stone announced his discovery of their mistake loudly and angrily, which, along with his cold stare and pointed finger, made it clear that he blamed them. The reality, as everyone in that room knew, but did not say, was that it was Stone who took charge of overseeing Randy's signature on the various documents, and he missed the most crucial one. He finished by telling Bill, "I don't care what you have to do or say, just get Mr. Smith to sign that release today and be back here by 5 PM or don't come back."

Stone handed Gindy the file and disarrayed paperwork, and told her to put it back together immediately so Bill could get on his way. Bill made a quick trip to the men's room, splashed water on his face, ran his fingers through his hair, and went to gather the file. As Gindy handed him the file, she looked at him with an expression Bill had never seen before. There was a hint of anger in her eyes as her head, almost imperceptibly, moved from side to side. She told him that she had just talked to Randy and confirmed that Bill would be coming over to handle some important paperwork details. Then she wished him good luck. He gave her a quick nod and was gone. As he walked away, he began to worry if he would have a job by the end of the day.

Outside the office, Bill app-hailed a car for the twenty minute trip to the Smith house on Long Island. His ride pulled up to a brick Cape Cod on a street with an assortment of fifty-year-old middle-class houses. Bill got out of the car, walked slowly to the front door to collect his thoughts, took a deep breath, and rang the bell. A moment later a worn-looking Randy Smith answered the door and invited him in.

They walked into the dining room. Bill could smell that someone had made toast. For an instant, he wondered how Randy would manage as a single dad, but he forced his thoughts back to how he was going to get Randy to sign off on the release. They sat at the light wooden dining room table, which stood on an oriental area rug centered in a room decorated with colorful department store prints, except for one wall filled with framed family pictures. Bill hesitantly started the conversation, asking how Randy and the kids were doing when six-year-old Jimmy came into the room and climbed onto Randy's lap.

“Hi, you must be Jimmy,” said Bill.

“Are you the lawyer? My Dad said a lawyer was coming over to talk about Mommy. Do you know she died?” asked Jimmy.

Bill’s mind searched desperately to find the right words to say.

Mercifully a few seconds later Jimmy continued, “I really miss her. She always sang a good morning wake-up song to me. I wish she was here to do that.

Oh my God, Bill thought - how do I handle this? What do I say to this child?

Jimmy was filled with nervous energy, not understanding what the death of his mother would mean for him in the days and years ahead. He blurted out the next thought that popped into his six-year-old mind. “You don’t look like a vulture. I have pictures of them in my bird book. They’re really ugly, scary looking birds.”

Randy jumped in, “Jimmy, why would you say that to Mr. Able?”

“Because I heard Mommy tell you that lawyers are like vultures. This one doesn’t look like a vulture. He looks more like a llama. They have long faces and shaggy hair, and I don’t think they’re too bright, but they can spit really far.”

“Jimmy, that is really unkind. Say you’re sorry to Mr. Able, and please go ask your sister to help you clear the breakfast table,” said Randy.

“Sorry you look like a llama, Mr. Able,” said Jimmy as he slid off his father’s lap and walked out of the room.

Randy apologized to Bill, and Bill assured him he was not offended. Bill was chuckling to himself nervously, thinking that Jo Smith would probably be proud of her son right now. Jimmy reminded Bill of her.

Randy asked, “So, do you have the paperwork we didn’t go over yesterday?”

Bill was caught off guard by Randy’s directness. He had planned to take his time and engage in more personal conversation in the hope that it would help them bond and make his task easier. He’d been nervous all morning about asking Randy to sign the release, and meeting Jimmy only made it worse. What if Randy said no? Bill stammered as he bent to reach his briefcase on the floor next to him, “Uh, yeah, let me pull out your file.” He grabbed the large brown expandable file, turned it upright in the case, lifted its flap and was shocked by what he saw in the file. He closed his eyes for a moment to collect his thoughts. What happened with Randy today was going to make or end his career with the firm. Stone told him not to come back without the release. “Do whatever it takes to get that release signed,” were the words still ringing in his ears. This was the firm’s second chance to tie things up with the Smith family. It might very well be

the last chance. And at this moment, it was all up to Bill. He needed to figure out how to fix this, not just for the firm but for the Smith family and himself. Then he knew what he needed to do. He had to change the plan. It would be risky, but the practice of law involved analyzing risk. This was a risk that he had to take. He wasn't going to just ask Randy to sign the release; he was going to turn it into a negotiation, and Bill was already picturing the outcome. In order to get Randy to play along, Bill would say something to throw Randy off guard, something he might not like to hear. He opened his eyes, pulled the release out of the file, looked at Randy, and said, "I am really surprised you and your wife didn't do a better job of getting your estate planning in order considering how young your kids are. You're fortunate we can take care of these things now."

Randy's eyes widened in disbelief at Bill's arrogance. This guy had some nerve. First these lawyers refused to share Jo's words with him, and now this bastard was lecturing him and criticizing his dead wife about their lack of planning. As his anger bubbled to the surface, it only took a few seconds for him to unleash a verbal tirade at Bill.

About an hour later, maybe the hardest hour of his life, Bill was outside the house with the release signed and safely in his case. As he waited for his ride, he thought about how volatile and emotional his conversation with Randy had been. The gamble had paid off, but winning never came without a cost. Bill wasn't sure yet what that cost would be.

The car took him to his apartment, where he shaved and changed his clothes. Then he grabbed a fast food lunch and was back at the firm by mid-afternoon. He went straight to his office, closed

the door, walked to his window, and thought about his next step; a meeting with Stone. Bill had one more big decision to make today.

After about thirty minutes he let Gindy know he was back with the signed release. Moments later both of them were sitting in Stone's office. Bill pulled the release from his case and handed it to Mr. Stone, who could not suppress an uncharacteristic, if very brief, smile.

"Great job. How did it go?" asked Stone.

"For some reason, Randy Smith became combative with me. He seemed downright hostile and said he wouldn't sign the release unless I gave him an audio copy of my interview with his wife. So I hand-wrote an agreement that said he would sign the release in exchange for the audio copy. We both signed it. Here is the original of the agreement. He has a copy," said Bill as he handed the agreement to Mr. Stone.

Stone's face turned crimson red, which made his scar a blotchy pink. Immediately, his mind started planning legal maneuvers as he said, "You had no authority to do that. But somehow you got him to sign the release without actually giving him the interview. We'll simply refuse to give him the audio copy. If he tries to take us to court, I can think of several good arguments we can make to show your agreement with him is void and we don't have to turn it over to him."

“The thing is, Mr. Stone, the external drive audio copy of the interview was in the file. I must have accidentally left it there, so I gave it to him. We can make another copy for our file.” replied Bill nonchalantly.

Stone’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth fell open in disbelief. “You what? You can’t...had no authority...What were you thinking, you traitorous little piece of shit? We could lose the Universal franchise costing the firm hundreds of millions of dollars.”

“Only if you tell them, Mr. Stone. Our new agreement with Mr. Smith requires him to keep the entire transaction confidential. He has no intention of telling anyone. Besides, I read the Universal franchise agreement. There’s a provision in there giving you and members of the firm discretion to share information with the deceased’s family in extraordinary circumstances if we determine that failure to do so would subject Universal to legal liability. We could justify my decision on that basis. In my opinion, Universal would have been subject to liability if I hadn’t gotten Randy Smith to sign.”

“You may think you’re clever, but you’re no match for the Universal lawyers. They’d crush you and our firm. And furthermore, you’re fired. I am calling security. Wait outside with Gindy at her desk until security gets here to escort you out of the building.”

“Well, Mr. Stone, you’re a little late. Before I walked in here, I wrote my resignation effective immediately. It’s in this envelope.” Bill threw the envelope on Stone’s desk and continued,” I have no interest in continuing to work with you. People like Jo and Randy Smith and their

children deserve to be treated better than you and Universal treat them. And, if I were you, I would think long and hard before I attempted to get that audio drive back from Randy Smith. If you press this, there's no doubt Universal will find out what happened." With that Bill stood up and walked out of Stone's office and Gindy followed him.

As the security guard walked past the locked *Last Chance—Authorized Only* conference room next to Stone's office, he couldn't see the little blue light which had been glowing inside the laptop as it recorded the conversation in Stone's office. The guard walked up to Bill, and as he reached for Bill's arm, Gindy waved him off, telling him she needed to talk to Bill. As she took Bill's arm, she asked the guard to follow them but give them some space. Gindy had seniority in the office, so the guard froze. He waited until they were five steps down the hall before he followed. As Gindy and Bill walked she whispered, "You know you weren't the one who put that audio drive in the file. Why did you tell him that?"

"I thought I did. Oh well, it must have been one of the office gremlins that just make things happen," Bill replied softly.

"What made you decide to give it to Randy Smith?"

"I'm not really sure. I think it was a bunch of things. I really liked Jo Smith, and I felt sorry for her and her family. The other day my grandmother said something that I've been thinking about. She said, 'Every day we get a second chance to do something better or make something right but

one day it's our last chance, and we never know what day that's going to be.' Maybe it was what she said."

When they reached the elevator, Gindy said, "You're a good man, Bill Able. If you're ever looking for an assistant, call me."

Bill nodded and gave her a quick smile as he stepped into the elevator. Before he door closed, Gindy couldn't resist saying once more with a smile, "And get a haircut."

The door closed and took Bill down twenty-one floors to street level.

The End.