

Alice got out of her car in the prison parking lot, filled with uncertainty and feeling more than a little fearful of what she was about to encounter. She stood beside the open car door, taking in the forbidding edifice with its barbed wire and guard towers. She had never been inside a prison, and now she was going in to meet her new client, a convicted murderer. At age 33, Alice had been practicing law for almost five years, but her clients had all been corporations, her cases about matters that seemed mundane right now – pushing money from one pile to another. The cases her firm assigned her had gotten bigger over time, along with her paycheck, but the goal was always the same. Get money for the company you represent or keep your company from having to pay (or pay too much). “Bloodless,” she thought with a small, wry smile as she squinted up at the armed guard in the tower.

A few weeks earlier, Alice had been sitting in her law firm office, grinding away on the draft of a legal brief about the vagaries of insurance coverage, or some such nonsense, when her phone rang. She breathed a little sigh of relief at the excuse to put her work aside and picked it up. If she’d been expecting something equally mundane – an invite for a quick lunch with a colleague, her mom wondering why she hadn’t called recently – Alice couldn’t have been more wrong. On the other end of the line was Ben Steiner, a lawyer she hadn’t met but knew a little bit about. He ran a small nonprofit that provided legal representation for people who had been convicted of capital murder and sentenced to death. Alice figured a donation request was coming, but that was wrong too. Demand for death row lawyers in the Deep South was much larger than supply, and Ben got right to the point.

“We need you to take one of our post-conviction death penalty cases,” Ben said. Alice was taken aback. She’d only been a lawyer for five years, and she didn’t know anything about