

Chapter 1

“You should be dead,” the ER nurse stated as she adjusted something on my IV. She was more husky than fat, with too much eye makeup, and hair that had been dyed a nasty shade of reddish orange. When I didn’t immediately respond she glanced my way, as if to assure herself that I really was awake and aware. “You realize that, right?” she demanded. “You’re pretty damn lucky to be alive.”

“Um. . . okay,” I muttered. Beneath the sheet I ran a hand over my stomach, frowned. “Have I been in a coma or something?” I asked.

Her thin lips pinched together. “A coma? No. You were brought in a few hours ago.” She paused, set her hands on her hips. “You *overdosed*.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face, shook my head. “No, I was in a car accident,” I insisted. “I remember being injured.” Didn’t I? “I was bleeding,” I added, less certain as I ran my hand over the unbroken skin of my stomach again.

She gave a dismissive snort. “There’s not a scratch on you. You must have hallucinated it.” Her eyes narrowed with contempt and disapproval. I didn’t care. I was used to seeing that when people looked at me.

Glass and blood and metal. A broken body beside me. Teeth and hunger. Gobbets of flesh ripped away....

Cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck. How could that have been a hallucination? Hallucinations were strange and hazy and jumbled. I knew. I’d had a few.

Making an annoyed noise in the back of her throat, she snagged the chart from the end of the bed. “Unknown white female. Hmmm. Do you remember your name, sweetheart?” She flicked her eyes back up to me and gave me a sugary-bitchy smile that didn’t have an ounce of true concern in it.

“Yeah, I know my damn name,” I snarled. “It’s Angel Crawford.” I wanted to add, *And you can write it down with the pencil that’s stuck up your ass*, but I managed to hold it back. I knew that nurses had the power to make your life suck worse than it already did, and it was clear that this bitch considered me to be one step away from starring in my own loser reality show. Screw her. I was at least *two* steps away.

The nurse gave a sniff as if she didn’t truly believe I was smart or sober enough to know who I was. “Let’s see what all was in your system—THC, hydrocodone, alprazolam, oxycodone....” She rattled off a couple of other drug names that sounded long and scary while I scowled blackly at her. After she finished she gave me a look full of smug satisfaction, hung the chart back up and left the room in a pompous waddle before I could respond. Good thing too, because what I wanted to say to her would have been too much even for a Jerry Springer special.

My anger withered as soon as she was gone, overwhelmed by my confusion and sick fear. I lifted the sheet up to see for myself—again—that I was uninjured.

I struggled to make sense of it. I remembered the blood. Lots of it. There’d been some sort of long gash across my stomach, and I had a nauseating memory of seeing the jagged end of white bone poking from my thigh, blood pumping out and all over. But now there was nothing out of place. No scrapes, no bruises. Just perfectly normal flesh all over. A coma could explain that, right? A couple of months or so, enough time for me to heal up.

Except that I didn’t have any scars, either.

Sighing, I dropped my head back to the pillow. I hadn't been in a coma. The nurse wasn't lying or messing with my head.

No, I was simply a loser.

Overdose. Great. Well, this was a new low for me, and it didn't help that it was totally believable. The only possibly shocking aspect was that it hadn't happened sooner. I didn't remember taking as many drugs as the bitch nurse had said, but the fact that I was in the ER was proof enough that I obviously had. The nurse hadn't gone and altered my lab results either. I did that all by myself, the old-fashioned way.

Weary depression rolled over me as I stared at the speckled tile of the ceiling. Beyond the door I could hear the frenzy of a stretcher being wheeled by and voices raised in brief concern. I knew what would happen next. Some social worker or psychologist would come in and tell me I needed rehab or counseling or some crap like that, which was a stupid suggestion since I didn't have money or insurance. Or worse, I'd get a 72-hour commitment for "psychiatric evaluation," since I was clearly a danger to myself, and I'd probably end up in some nasty charity ward. There was no way I was gonna put up with that. I felt perfectly fine now and more than ready to get the hell out of here.

I kicked the sheet away and slid off the bed. The tile was smooth and cold against my bare feet. I needed shoes and clothes. I was wearing the stupid hospital gown, and my own clothes were so covered with blood that I'd draw all sorts of attention if I tried to walk out in them.

I shook my head. No, the blood had been a hallucination.

There was no sign of my clothes in the room. No closets—only one cabinet and an intimidating variety of medical equipment. I started to move toward the cabinet, remembering the IV a step before I accidentally yanked it out of my arm, then spent a couple of seconds trying to decide if I could carry the bag out with me instead of pulling the needle out. Needles freaked me out, but leaving it in would probably be worse than removing it myself. Hell, that was the only reason I'd never gone for the harder drugs like heroin or meth. Too chickenshit to stick a needle into me to get that kind of high. Pills were easy. Plus I could tell myself that I wasn't a real druggie.

Except that now I'd almost killed myself just as dead as if I'd ODeD on heroin.

Pushing that unpleasant thought out of my mind, I peeled off the tape on my arm then clenched my teeth and pulled the needle out. I braced myself against the wave of nausea that always hit me whenever I saw blood—especially my own—but to my relief it didn't hurt at all, and I didn't feel sick. A tiny bead of blood welled up from the puncture site, and I wiped it away with the hem of my gown before I even remembered that I was supposed to be nauseated by it.

Maybe that's why I'd hallucinated about being covered in blood? There wasn't much that would freak me out more than that.

The door to the room opened again, startling me, and I dropped the IV line with a guilty flush as a different nurse walked in. She was a lot younger than the other one—maybe in her early twenties or so, with sleek blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and the sort of fresh no-makeup look I wished I could pull off. I looked like death without makeup, and while my hair was blonde as well, it was that way because I dyed it myself, which meant it was a frizzy, damaged mess.

Her eyes flicked to the discarded IV, but she didn't seem to be upset that I'd removed it. "I wanted to make sure you were awake and decent," she said with a smile

that was kinder than I expected. “There are a couple of detectives here who want to talk to you.”

A frisson of terror shot through me. “Wh-why?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew. They were here to take me to jail. My probation officer had found out about the drug use and my probation was being revoked. Or they wanted me to squeal about where I got my drugs.

I must have gone pale because she closed the door and gave me a reassuring smile. “They only want to talk to you. You’re going to be fine. Here,” she said, gently but firmly pushing me back to sit on the bed. She didn’t make me lie back down—simply pulled the bed sheet around so that my lower body and bare feet were covered. “That’s better. I know I can’t talk to anyone with any sort of authority if I’m half-naked,” she said with a wink.

Her unexpected niceness had me a little off-balance, especially after the open hostility of the previous nurse. “Where are my other clothes?”

“You, uh, weren’t wearing any when you were brought in.”

Oh, shit. I swallowed hard. “Did they take them off in the ambulance?” Surely it wouldn’t be as bad as if I’d—

“The cops found you on the side of the road...naked.” Her face twisted in embarrassed sympathy.

My throat tightened. “Was I—I mean, had I been...?” I couldn’t say the word.

Her eyes widened. “No!” She shook her head emphatically. “No, the doctor, um, checked. You weren’t assaulted.”

I scrubbed at my face and fought the urge to cry. Overdose *and* naked on the side of the road. This kept getting better and better. And not even the victim of a crime, just a stupid drugged-out skank.

The nurse made a concerned noise in her throat, reached out and gave my upper arms a firm rub. “Relax now. Everything’s going to be fine. These detectives want to have a word with you, then you’ll be ready to get out of here.” She turned and left before I could form any sort of coherent response.

Right. Everything’s going to be fine, I thought with a sour laugh. She didn’t know. She couldn’t possibly understand why I was freaking.

I didn’t have to stew in my panic for long. No sooner had the door swung shut behind the blonde nurse than it opened again and two detectives walked in. But they weren’t probation officers or narcotics detectives. That threw me. At least I was pretty sure they weren’t narcs. Those guys usually went around in jeans and T-shirts, but these two were in dress shirts and ties. The first one in was a burly guy—at least six feet tall and stocky with a bit of a pudge working around his middle, blondish brown hair, and a scruffy-looking mustache. The second detective wasn’t as tall, but he was big in a muscled way. No pudge on him. I could tell he worked out, and hard. He had dark hair, dark eyes, and an equally dark expression on his face. Both had guns, badges, and handcuffs on their belts.

In other words, they intimidated the ever-living shit out of me simply by walking into the room.

“Ms. Crawford,” the burly one began, “I’m Detective Ben Roth and this is Detective Mike Abadie.” He cocked his head toward the dark-haired detective. “We’re

with the Saint Edwards Parish Sheriff's Office, and we'd appreciate it if you could take a couple of minutes to answer some questions for us."

"Do I need a lawyer?" I blurted. The two men exchanged a quick glance. Oh, great. Nice way to start. Now I sounded guilty as all hell.

"That's completely up to you, Ms. Crawford," Detective Roth said. "But we're only here to see if you might have witnessed anything that could help us solve a crime. You're not under any sort of suspicion at this time." His expression remained serious but his eyes were kind. At least, I wanted to believe that. The other detective looked like he had a permanent scowl on his face. Maybe they were about to play good cop bad cop on me. It would probably work, too. I always fell for that psychological shit. Especially when I was confused and stressed. Like right now.

I gripped the sheet in my hands. "Uh, sure. What...um, what crime?"

Detective Abadie cleared his throat. "You were found on Sweet Bayou Road right off Highway 180" His lips pressed together and I could see the same derision in his eyes that I'd seen in the red-haired nurse's. Maybe he didn't know why I was in here, 'cause of privacy laws or whatever, but he sure as hell had his suspicions.

"Okay," I said, doing my damndest to not hunch under his gaze. "If you say so."

"At about the same time," he continued, eyes hard and flat, "a body was found a few miles further down Sweet Bayou Road. It had been decapitated."

"Wh-what?" I said, staring at him in horror.

"Decapitated. It means that his head was chopped off," he explained, tone thoroughly patronizing.

A sudden burst of anger managed to burn away a good portion of the panic and fear that had been controlling me up until then. "I know what 'decapitated' means," I replied with a scowl. "But I don't know anything about this. *I* sure as hell didn't do it!" The two men exchanged another quick glance and a sliver of the fear came back. "You don't think I did it, do you?"

Detective Roth shook his head firmly. "You're not a suspect at this time, Ms. Crawford. However, right now you're the only possible witness we have. Anything you can remember might be useful."

I swallowed. *At this time*. He kept saying that. In other words I sure as shit hadn't been ruled out, even though I knew there was no way I would have chopped some guy's head off—no matter how high I might have been.

So why did I remember blood...?

I took a shaking breath. No. There was no way. I wasn't a killer. "Sweet Bayou Road?" I asked, stalling for time to get my thoughts into something other than a jumbled mess.

"That's where you were found," Detective Roth said patiently. "What do you remember?"

"I...don't know." Sweet Bayou Road was only about five minutes down the highway from where I lived, but there wasn't a whole lot on it. A few fishing camps near the end, and the rest of it was several miles of desolate and twisty road through the marsh. "I mean, I was at Pillar's Bar with my boyfriend. We had a fight and..." I rubbed my eyes, odd flashes of the hallucination swimming through my head.

Blood and pain...I thought I was dying. No, I died. But then I was hungry. Starving-to-death hungry....

I took an unsteady breath. “Then I was out on the road, and there was an ambulance.”

I was arguing with the paramedics after they got me into the ambulance, begging for something to eat because I was so damn hungry. Maybe that’s why I didn’t walk into the stupid white light. Maybe I knew they wouldn’t have anything to eat down that way.

“I must have passed out.” I looked up at the two men. “Then I woke up here. Sorry.”

No pain. No hunger. No clue.

Detective Abadie let out an exasperated snort. “Why were you out there?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess I was trying to walk home.” Walking home from the bar would definitely rank as one of the more boneheaded things I’d done in my life. In other words, totally believable. And somewhere along the way I’d decided to strip naked. That must have been one helluva high.

Detective Roth tugged a hand through his hair, clearly frustrated. “I need you to think real hard, Angel. Did you see anyone? Any cars? Someone walking along the road?”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, hunching my shoulders. “I didn’t see anyone.”

Fatigue and disappointment etched itself across Detective Roth’s face. “All right, Miss Crawford. If you think of anything else—anything at all—please give me a call.” He pulled out a business card and handed it to me.

“Yeah, sure thing,” I said, obediently taking the card.

A sour expression twisted Detective Abadie’s mouth. “C’mon, Ben,” he muttered. “We’re wasting our time.” He turned and stalked out. I couldn’t even get annoyed at his reaction. I *had* been a waste of their time.

Detective Roth let out a low sigh but gave me a tired smile. “I appreciate your talking to us, Miss Crawford,” he said. “I hope you get to feeling better.” Then he too was out the door, and I was alone in the room once again.

Wrung out and depressed, I dropped the card into the wastebasket.. This day couldn’t get much worse.

The blonde nurse entered again, this time carrying a cooler and a large paper grocery bag which she set on the bed beside me. “This was left at the nurse’s station for you,” she said, smiling brightly. “Looks like you won’t have to go home in a hospital gown after all! I’ll go get your paperwork ready, and as soon as you’re dressed you should be able to get out of here.”

She was out of the room with the door closing behind her before I had a chance to respond.

I stared at the closed door in confusion then looked over at the stuff on the bed. The cooler was one of those mini plastic things, big enough to hold a six-pack of beer. I opened it to find six bottles of Frappuccino. At least that’s what I thought it was at first. It was the same type of bottle as those kind of coffee drinks, and the contents were brown and opaque, but there were no labels on the bottles, and there was also some sort of pinkish lumpy sediment at the bottom.

What the hell?

I checked the bag with the clothes next. A pair of exercise-type pants, a sports bra, underwear, a plain blue T-shirt and some flip-flops—all stuff that could be bought if you weren’t sure of someone’s size. I was skinny with no tits and no muscle tone. As long as

the pants had a drawstring at the waist, I was probably good to go. At the bottom of the bag was an envelope and a twenty dollar bill with a little sticky note that had “cab fare” neatly printed on it.

Again, what the hell? My first reaction was to get pissed. I didn’t need anyone else’s help. I took care of myself because, frankly, depending on someone else meant standing outside an empty, locked elementary school at six p.m. and telling Mrs. Robichaux that no, really, my mom would be here any minute and I didn’t need a ride while a) Kerrie Robichaux, who gets 100s on her spelling tests is looking out the car window at me in a way that I’m pretty sure says, *Don’t you even think about getting your trashy ass in the back seat of this nice car*, and b) Mom is again conveniently forgetting I exist because her life was so much fucking better before she got saddled with a kid and had to do boring things like pick me up from school and make sure I had clean clothes and socks that matched. I took care of myself because I figured out that it was better when she didn’t remember I was around. And even after she was gone I took care of myself, because Dad couldn’t handle being a dad, and instead sat on a bar stool at Kaster’s remembering when his life was simple and his wife was fun and he had his job on the oil rig.

Except right now I was naked—well, not counting the hospital gown. And I couldn’t take care of that without help, though I was damned if I could figure out who’d bother getting clothes and cab fare for me. The only person who came to mind was my sort of boyfriend, Randy, but I couldn’t see him giving me money for a cab when he could come and get me. Plus, he knew my size.

I ripped open the envelope and read the letter. Then I read it again, because it didn’t make any sense the first time through.

Angel—

Take good care of the contents of the cooler because it should get you through the next couple of weeks. It’s very important that you drink one bottle every other day, starting tomorrow, or you’ll start to feel very sick. Be sure to shake it up well before you drink it.

There’s a job waiting for you at the Coroner’s Office. They have an opening for a van driver, and the arrangements have already been made. Go to the office at 9 a.m. tomorrow to fill out the paperwork and start work.

Now, here’s the deal: You will take this job, and you will hold it for at least one month. If you quit, or are fired before one month is out, your probation officer will be informed that there were drugs in your system when you were brought to the ER, and you’ll go to jail for violating your probation. And if you go to jail, you’ll probably die there within a few weeks. This isn’t a threat. It’s a warning. I’d explain, but there’s no way you’d believe me. You’ll understand eventually.

Good luck.

Hey, look, I thought with a miserable laugh, *this day just got worse*.

I stared down at the letter in confusion and disbelief. My mom had gone to prison when I was twelve and died while still incarcerated, on the day I turned sixteen. That was a little over five years ago. Then last year I’d been more of a moron than usual and had

bought a nearly new Toyota Prius for five hundred dollars from some guy Randy knew. A week later I was pulled over and arrested for possession of stolen property. Yeah, my “bargain” of a car had been jacked a couple of weeks earlier in New Orleans. But the seriously sucky part was that I’d kinda suspected that it hadn’t been legit but went ahead and gave the guy the money for it anyway, too excited about what a great deal I was getting, and convinced that I wouldn’t get caught. Moron. I’d spent two days scared shitless in a holding cell before I could find someone to bail me out, and had been lucky as hell to get a three-year suspended sentence and probation.

I read the letter again, hand shaking. I thought I’d dodged a bullet with that visit from the two detectives, but here was another one right behind it, ready to flatten me. I didn’t want to go back to jail, and I didn’t want to end up like my mom and die there. But why would I die within weeks? What was that all about? Maybe someone who had a grudge against me was in jail already? I’d pissed off plenty of people in my life, but as far as I knew there wasn’t anyone who hated me enough to want to kill me.

I turned the letter over, searching for any clue as to who had sent it. It was printed on plain white paper and the envelope was an ordinary white envelope. No signature. No postmark. None of this made any sense. I couldn’t think of a single person who’d bother finding me a job, much less threaten me with jail to make sure I kept it.

Why jail? Why not rehab?

Because jail’s a bigger threat, I realized. Rehab would suck, but jail.... Whoever sent this stuff had to know that jail scared the shit out of me.

I read the letter one more time, then took a deep breath and started getting dressed while my thoughts continued to tumble. It wasn’t as if I’d set out to be a loser. I didn’t wake up every morning and say, “Hey, how can I screw my life up today?” But the universe sure seemed to be rigged against me, and most of the time it didn’t seem to matter how hard I tried since I was obviously never going to catch a break.

Except. Except this letter wasn’t a couple of hardass cops questioning me about something I didn’t know shit about. This was someone holding a big whopping threat over my head, who also seemed to be crazy enough to give the slightest crap about me—and give me that break I kept saying I wanted. Me. Loser girl. If this job was for real and I didn’t at least give it a shot I’d be right back at being a Grade A Screwup. But who the hell would do this for me?

I had a feeling the only way I was going to find out would be to take the stupid job.

Drive a van for a month. How hard could that be?

Chapter 2

I made it home from the hospital and obediently set my alarm for 7:30 a.m. This was my chance to turn things around, to not be a complete screwup.

My alarm went off at 7:30. I slapped the snooze and rolled over.

I woke up again at 9:15.

Crap!

I took the fastest shower of my life, yanked on jeans that I hoped were clean, grabbed the first T-shirt I could find that didn't show my navel or have something obnoxious printed on it. Great. I had a job handed to me, and I screwed it up the first day. That I didn't understand why I supposedly had this job was beside the point. If it paid real money and didn't involve me getting naked, I was willing to give it a shot. Besides, I'd been doing some thinking. I was a huge fan of all those crime scene shows on TV, so I knew that coroners did forensics and that kind of stuff, and carried all their equipment around in big vans or Hummers—which most likely needed drivers, right? In other words, there was a really good chance that this job could be exceedingly cool.

But hell, anything's better than working a minimum wage job at Bayou Burger, I thought as I pulled the shirt over my head and raked my fingers through the frizzy mess of my hair.

I lost several precious minutes in a frantic search for my purse. I had a vague memory of having it when I went to the bar the other night, which meant I had zero idea where it had ended up. Hell, I didn't even know where *I* had ended up, other than the ER. Oh yeah, and naked on the side of the highway.

I finally dug the spare keys to my battered little Honda out of the bowl on top of my dresser, then ran for the front door. At least my dad wasn't up yet. Not that I expected him to be any time before noon. That was fine with me because it meant I didn't have to try to explain to him where I'd been or what had happened. He probably had no idea I'd even been in the hospital. Again, I had no problem with that.

I hit the door at a run, then turned around and ran right back to snag one of the stupid drinks from the little fridge in my room. It usually only held beer, but I hadn't wanted to put the drink-stuff in the kitchen fridge and risk my dad drinking one or throwing them out by mistake. I knew he wouldn't believe me if I told him they were medicine. At least that's what I assumed they were. In fact he'd probably be more likely to throw them out if I said that. He got drunk damn near every night, but he acted as if I was a serial killer if he found a joint or pills in my room.

I remembered to shake the bottle, then opened it and gave it a dubious sniff. There was a faint coffee-chocolate smell, but beneath that there was a tang of something I couldn't quite place—nutty or meaty, with a faintly metallic edge. "Whatever," I muttered. I'd consumed disgusting crap before.

It was thick, with a texture that reminded me of tapioca. I had a split-second desire to gag and spew it all out, then it suddenly shifted to a craving for *more*. I didn't think I'd be able to drink the whole thing, but before I realized it I was shaking the bottle to get the last few strange tapioca-like chunks out.

I lowered the bottle slowly as an energizing warmth spread through me—kinda like a shot of Everclear, but without the getting drunk part. I felt awake, alive. The only thing that kept me from slugging down another was the fear that I might overdose on it, and I sure as shit didn't want to end up back in the hospital.

I dropped the empty bottle in the trash can and glanced at the clock: 9:30.

“Crap!”

I ran for the door.

#

The St. Edwards Parish Coroner's Office was in Tucker Point—about twenty minutes from my house. Despite a couple of wrong turns, I managed to make it there before ten and by some miracle still managed to get the job. I didn't have to interview or anything, which was a relief since I was a pro at tanking interviews. The human resources lady had apparently been expecting me because she pulled out a folder with my name on it and plopped down a big stack of paperwork for me to fill out. That I could handle. I was pretty darn good at filling out employment forms. It was the whole bit about *keeping* a job that I wasn't so great at.

Unfortunately, the human resources lady didn't know anything about how I'd managed to get hired and gave me a funny look when I asked her about it. I finally shut my mouth and concentrated on filling out the million forms in front of me. The last thing I wanted was for her to realize I didn't deserve this job.

Once I finished with the paperwork the lady turned me over to a guy named Nick Galatas who was supposedly going to train me as a van driver. Nick was a couple of inches taller than me, though that didn't mean much since I was only five foot three if I really stretched. He had dark brown hair and green eyes, and would have probably been kinda good-looking except for the fact that he seemed to have a permanent smirk on his face.

“You're going to be partnered with a death investigator,” he informed me over his shoulder as he led the way through the building that housed the Coroner's Office. It was a new building and everyone seemed to be really proud of it, but to my disappointment it didn't look anything like the forensics shows I watched on TV. Instead it seemed like any other government office—over air-conditioned, low-key colors, boring posters, generic office furniture. There were a few doors that required a key card to enter, with impressive names like “Toxicology” and “DNA.” But I was again disappointed on discovering that the labs weren't full of nifty chrome and cool blue and pink lighting. Total letdown.

“Twice a week you'll be on call for a twenty-four-hour period,” Nick continued. “Otherwise you'll be working mostly the morning shift. That's when I have *class*,” he said, making it sound like he had an appointment to see the frickin' pope.

“Okay,” I said with a shrug. I didn't really care what shift I worked. They all sucked equally as far as I was concerned.

“I'm pre-med,” he added smugly.

“Okay.” I said again. I didn't shrug this time, but his jaw tightened a bit as if he was annoyed that I wasn't displaying the proper amazement at his accomplishment.

“And I'm next in line to be promoted to death investigator.” The look he gave me was nothing short of a challenge, and I had to fight to not roll my eyes. What, he expected me to start crowing about my own accomplishments so he could top them? He'd be waiting a long time for that.

“Cool,” I replied, forcing my face into a smile. I didn’t even know what a death investigator was, though I assumed it had something to do with investigating death. But Nick sure as hell didn’t need to worry about me horning in on his position. I only had to get through a month of this.

We came to the end of a long hall, stopping in front of another locked door. Nick glanced at me as he pulled out his key card. “Here we are,” he announced. “You’re going to be spending a lot of time here.”

I registered the word on the door. *Morgue*. A sick, sinking feeling began tugging at my insides. “I will?” I said, hoping my voice didn’t betray my sudden unease.

The smug smile returned. “Well, yeah. Your job is to pick up bodies and bring them here to the morgue.”

Van driver. *Oh, Angel, you moron. What the hell did you think the coroner needed a van for?*

One month. I took a slow deep breath. That’s all I had to do. “Oh. Okay,” I said as calmly as I could manage. I was totally *not* okay, but damn, I didn’t want Nick to see it.

He swiped the card and pulled the door open, stepped through and gestured for me to follow. I hesitated half a second but forced myself forward.

The smell hit me first. I’d expected a putrid and nasty rotting-flesh smell, but instead the air held a confusing mix of antiseptic cleanser, blood, and another odor that I couldn’t immediately place. A second later recognition smacked into me, and I realized it was the stench of the stuff used to preserve dead things, like the frog I had to dissect when I took Biology in high school.

Except, I never did dissect the frog. I was so grossed out and freaked at the smell and the mere *thought* of cutting into the thing and seeing its insides and guts and organs and everything, that I threw up all over the floor of the Biology lab. The teacher yelled at me, the other kids laughed, I started crying, then I threw my books down into that puddle of puke and marched out of the classroom and out a side door of the school. About a week later a social worker came to the house because, even though I was sixteen and old enough to drop out of school if I wanted, there were still procedures and shit. I don’t think Dad even knew I’d stopped going to school until the social worker showed up, disgust in her eyes and a fake-caring smile on her pinched face as she minced across the flattened beer cans in our driveway. But Dad didn’t make me go back to school, just told the lady I was going through a lot ‘cause my mom had killed herself a couple of months ago, even though I wasn’t “going through” anything and was totally fine. He was the one being all grieving and stuff, and I think he simply didn’t have the energy to get into it with me. So I told the lady Biology and high school were useless crap, I was going to get a job, and I was never coming back to school.

And I didn’t.

Yeah, I sure showed them.

I stopped in the doorway of the morgue and clenched my jaw shut in preparation for the heave of nausea that I knew would hit me any second now. All I could think about was that frog and me throwing up all over the tile.

“You okay?” Nick asked, except I could tell he didn’t really want me to be okay. He wasn’t even bothering to hide his smirk, and it was obvious he wanted me to lose it because then he’d be able to feel even more superior. Like all the kids who pointed and laughed when I lost it in Biology.

Jerk. I took a cautious breath, surprised and relieved to discover that my stomach was apparently on my side and was going to behave, at least for the moment. I slowly unclenched my jaw and returned his smirk with one of my own. “I’m fine,” I replied as I stepped in and allowed the door to close behind me.

Disappointment flickered briefly in his eyes which only strengthened my desire to not wimp out in front of him.

The morgue was mostly what I’d expected—cold and vaguely creepy, like I’d seen in the movies. The walls and floor were off-white, but in a shade that made me wonder if it was the original color or if they’d somehow been stained by the strange and gross smells—kinda like the way the nicotine-yellow walls in my dad’s bedroom had once been beige.

The tour continued as Nick showed me the procedure for logging bodies in and out and took me into the cooler where the bodies were stored. I’d expected a wall full of little doors with the slide-out tables that held the bodies, but instead it was simply a giant walk-in cooler—like you’d find in a restaurant or liquor store—with some big shelves on the wall and about half a dozen stretchers lined up beside them. The shelves were empty, but three of the stretchers had black body bags on them.

Dead people. I backed out of the room as quickly as I could without looking like a total weenie. I was sweating from the stress of waiting for my stomach to wake up and realize what was going on. Any second now I was going to heave and puke all over the floor—or perhaps all over Nick. That would be fine with me.

The next room he took me to held hundreds of plastic containers full of tissue samples, floating in a sickly, brown soup—formalin, as he informed me rather pompously. But still not a whisper of nausea. I could hardly believe it. I even got queasy if I saw someone spit on the sidewalk, and don’t *ever* ask me to change a diaper.

Finally, Nick brought me into the room where the autopsies were performed—the cutting room, he called it. I tried to avoid looking directly at anything in there. Metal tables. Drains in the floor. Lots of really scary tools and equipment. Yeah, I had the basic gist of it. I didn’t need to see it up close and personal.

Nick started pointing things out in the cutting room, blathering on about the duties and the responsibilities and the procedures, with this cocky air about him as if he was the damn coroner. I’d almost tuned him out when I heard him say, “When you’re assisting the pathologist during autopsies, you’ll need to—”

“Whoa!” I jerked my hand up to stop him. “Wait, what?” I asked as sick horror shot through me. “You mean, like when the bodies get cut open?”

Delight lit his face. “Yes, you’ll be helping with the autopsies. You didn’t *know* that?”

I couldn’t speak for several seconds. There was no way I’d be able to do this. I couldn’t even handle the thought of a frog getting cut. How the hell was I supposed to be all right when it was *people*? What kind of vicious joke was it to put me in a job like this? Maybe that’s all this was—a big whopping practical joke. Take the loser girl with the weak stomach and no nerves and put her where she’s guaranteed to make an ass of herself. And threaten her with jail and death to make sure she plays along.

Except, why would anyone go through all that trouble just to play a trick on *me*?

“It’s cool. I’ll be fine,” I somehow managed to say. I wouldn’t be, but I wasn’t going to let him see it. He’d enjoy it far too much if I walked out right now. I didn’t have

a whole lot of self-respect going for me, but this was as good a time as any to pretend that I did.

Besides, I wasn't going to go to jail just because Nick was a prick.

"Good to know," he said, smirk stretching to a grin. "Because we have one scheduled to begin in about twenty minutes. Might as well get you suited up so you can start learning the ropes!"

Chapter 3

Three hours ago I was in bed, I thought miserably. I should have stayed there.

I was decked out in a blue plastic smock, a paper apron over that, latex gloves that made my hands sweat, and little paper bootie-things over my shoes.

Lying on the metal table in front of me was a middle-aged man decked out in absolutely nothing at all. A *dead* man. Buck-ass naked with his little shriveled junk right there for everyone to see.

Standing on the other side of the table was another middle-aged man, but thankfully he was quite alive and fully dressed. Dr. Leblanc was the parish's forensic pathologist and performed all of the autopsies. I'd always assumed that the coroner was the one who did them, and was even dumb enough to tell Nick that it would be cool to meet the coroner. Of course he then took way too much pleasure in telling me that the coroner was an elected official who hired people to do the investigations and the autopsies and stuff like that. It made sense once it was explained to me—kinda like the way the sheriff hired deputies to do police work. Still, it annoyed me that I'd given Nick such an easy shot at showing how much smarter he was than me.

Dr. Leblanc was probably in his early fifties or so—average height and weight with a bit of flab at his waist, hair a thinning mix of blond and grey, and eyes a light blue. My first impression was that he looked more like a high school history teacher than someone who cut open dead bodies. Not that I had a lot of experience to draw on since, as far as I knew, I'd never met a pathologist before. For that matter I'd only ever known two high school history teachers. My freshman year I'd had Mrs. Pruitt, a nasty old hag who gave tests full of essay questions and who'd marked off points for misspelled words. I'd failed her class since I couldn't spell for crap—even though I knew the answers. I had to repeat it the next year and got Mr. Landry who looked a little bit like Dr. Leblanc in that they were both middle-aged white males. Mr. Landry was a whole lot cooler than Mrs. Pruitt, and I actually did really well in his class, getting A's and B's on the tests.

But then the whole thing with the frog in Biology happened, and I dropped out before finishing the semester. Yet another shining moment in the life of Angel Crawford.

"This your first time seeing an autopsy?" Dr. Leblanc asked, jerking me out of my brief pity party as he peered down at the body and made notes on a clipboard.

"First time seeing a dead body at all," I admitted sheepishly. I heard Nick give a low snort of derision, and I could feel my face beginning to heat.

"Really?" Dr. Leblanc said, and to my surprise his expression was one of approval. "I'm impressed that you're handling all of this so calmly." His eyes crinkled in a smile. "Nick here lost his breakfast his first day in the morgue."

I had to resist the urge to grin as Nick went white then sullen. "I had a stomach virus," he muttered. Dr. Leblanc gave me a little wink that Nick couldn't see, then quickly returned to his examination of the body.

My tension faded to a more reasonable level. At least if I did end up puking, it wouldn't be the end of the world.

“So, uh, how do most people get jobs doing this?” I asked, trying to make it sound oh-so-casual and *not* full of my maddening curiosity as to how the hell I’d landed this bizarre gig.

Dr. Leblanc shrugged. “Usually people simply come in and apply. It’s a good start for someone interested in forensics or pathology.” He gave a nod toward Nick who gave a proud smile. “But sometimes, the coroner tells me, he’s hired someone—usually as a favor for one of his political cronies or supporters.” His eyes flicked back to me briefly before dropping back to his clipboard. “You came pretty highly recommended.”

I struggled to control the *are-you-kidding-me?* look I knew was on my face. Highly recommended? Me? How the hell would any of the coroner’s political buddies even know who I was?

I could feel Nick’s eyes on me, no doubt trying to figure out what special connections I had.

Dude, if you figure it out, let me know, I thought. I’m as baffled as you are.

Dr. Leblanc finally put his clipboard aside and picked up a scalpel. He gave me an encouraging smile. “It helps if you try to look at this as ‘interesting’ instead of ‘disgusting.’ And if you do have to pass out, please do so out of the way. Also, all puke goes in the garbage can, please.” His eyes flashed with humor, and I found myself grinning.

“Deal,” I said.

I did my best to keep Dr. Leblanc’s advice of “interesting versus disgusting” in mind as I watched the procedure, but there were some parts that *were* disgusting, no matter how much I attempted to convince myself otherwise. In particular, the search through the stomach contents was unspeakably nasty, but I was a bit encouraged to see that Dr. Leblanc’s face was twisted in a grimace as well. Apparently some things were always gross.

Yet, shockingly, I still hadn’t barfed. Not even the slightest desire to gag. It was almost surreal. I was the chick with the weakest stomach in the whole damn world, but here I was looking inside a damn body with the organs and guts and blood, and I was...hungry? I blinked in surprise as my stomach gave a little nudge that clearly wasn’t nausea. What the hell? Okay, so I hadn’t eaten any breakfast other than that coffee-drink thingy, but this was still a bizarre time to have a healthy appetite.

“Angel, come look at this,” Dr. Leblanc abruptly said, holding the dead guy’s heart in one hand and gesturing me over with the scalpel in his other. I obediently moved to his side, absurdly reminded of a movie where an evil priest ripped people’s hearts out with his bare hands. “That’s how he died,” he continued, using the tip of the scalpel to point to a slice he’d made in a small blood vessel on the outside of the heart. “See the blockage?”

I stared at the tiny yellow glob of what I assumed was fat or cholesterol or whatever the heck it was that blocked blood vessels. “That? But, it’s so small!”

He nodded then set the heart down on the white plastic cutting board in front of him. “I know. A bit humbling to think that something that looks so minor could have dropped this guy like a stone. He never had a chance.”

I stepped back as Dr. Leblanc finished his examination of the heart. And if I’d died from that overdose they’d be doing all of this to me. For the first time today I could

taste bile, though it had nothing to do with anything I was seeing or smelling. If I'd died it would be me naked on the cold metal table, sliced open from throat to crotch....

I straightened, eyes narrowing. I knew what was going on. Highly recommended, my ass. This whole job had obviously been arranged so that I could get a little more appreciation for the life I'd managed to screw up so well. Work in a morgue instead of going through stupid rehab. Now *that* was a scenario that made sense. I found myself smiling smugly, stupidly pleased that I'd figured it out. *That's cool. I can play this game.* Hell, so far this was still a thousand times less annoying than rehab. A month of this and then I'd be home free. And this was even a paying job.

I watched as Dr. Leblanc removed the organs to weigh and examine them. *Is he in on it?* I wondered idly. Did he know I was really a pill-head loser? *He probably doesn't*, I decided. *There's no way he'd be so nice to me if he knew.*

Dr. Leblanc dropped a fist-sized kidney-shaped thing into a large plastic bag between the dead guy's legs then picked up a towel and wiped his gloved hands. "Almost done," he said to me with a smile. He turned and gave a nod to Nick. "You can do the head now."

Nick stepped up to the table. "At least this body has one. We cut two yesterday and neither had a head. First one was that murder that was all over the news." He flicked a glance at me. "You heard about that one?"

I responded with only a nod. I wasn't about to let him know that I'd been questioned about it.

"And then we had one come in who'd been in an MVA—motor vehicle accident. The victim was so mangled it took our guys half an hour to find the head, and when they did, it had apparently been squished by a passing car. They ended up bringing the pieces of skull back in a paper bag." He gave a snort of amusement, and I simply stared at him. How could he be so casual about describing something so awful?

"Now pay attention," he ordered me. "You'll be doing this pretty soon."

Resisting the urge to flip him off, I watched in sickly fascinated horror as he took a scalpel and made a cut from ear to ear over the top of the corpse's head. Once the cut was made he set the scalpel aside, then dug his fingers between scalp and skull to peel the scalp back on top and bottom, exposing the entire top of the skull.

And I *still* didn't have even a whisper of nausea.

Unbelievable.

Next he pulled a mask and a face shield on. "You probably want to put a mask on," he said as he plugged in what I suddenly realized was a bone saw. "This kicks up a lot of bone dust, and you don't want to breathe it in."

I hurriedly yanked a mask on as he started the saw, quickly realizing that Nick hadn't been exaggerating. By the time he finished making a cut around the top of the head there was a fine film of pinkish-white dust covering the area around him. I tried not to think about the fact that I probably had bone dust in my hair. I planned on taking an *epic* shower after this day was done.

He set the saw aside and picked up a T-shaped tool with a chiseled bottom. "These are called skullcrackers," he said with a grin that was almost genuine. "Swear to god, that's their official name in the catalog." He jammed the chiseled end into the cut made by the saw and gave the skullcracker a sharp twist to pry the cut wider. I cringed involuntarily at the sound of breaking bone as the tool lived up to its name.

Nick stuck his fingers in the widened gap and pulled. The top of the skull came off with a tearing, sucking sound, and suddenly there before me were the grey and pink convolutions of a brain.

“There ya go,” he said with a silly little flourish as he pulled his mask and face shield off. “Your first time seeing a real live brain.” Then he sniggered. “Real dead brain, that is.”

I followed his lead and pulled my mask off, then froze. All of a sudden it seemed as if I could smell the brain, and not in a *oh-how-gross* way, but as if someone had taken the lid off a pot of gumbo to let the aroma fill the room. And I *knew* it was the brain that smelled so utterly enticing—knew it with every single cell of my being.

What the *hell* was wrong with me?

To my shock and horror my mouth began to water and my stomach gave a loud growl—loud enough for the others to hear. Both of them turned to look at me and Dr. Leblanc gave a laugh. “Okay, you’re officially the toughest morgue tech who’s ever worked here if you can still be hungry during an autopsy!”

I gave a weak laugh in answer as I struggled to hide my confusion. Yeah, that’s all it was. I was just starving.

So why did I have the horrifying urge to grab a handful of that pink and grey mass and shove it into my mouth like movie popcorn?

A shiver crawled down my back. I was being stupid. I’d skipped breakfast, that’s all, and was probably still recovering from my dumb overdose. There was no possible way that I really wanted to eat the brain. It had to be some sort of flashback to that whole crazy hallucination.

Fortunately, Nick seemed to be oblivious to my anxiety. He picked up a scalpel. “The rest is easy. Slice the spinal cord where it connects to the base of the brain—” he said, somehow shoving the brain aside and sticking the scalpel in and around. “—and you’re good to go.” He set the scalpel aside and tipped the brain out into his hands, cradling it carefully.

He turned to me with naked challenge in his eyes. “Want to hold it?”

I froze for several seconds. I did *not* want to hold it, but there was no way I could admit it was because I was afraid I’d start hallucinating and crave it again.

I saw the smirk begin to form on his face. *Oh, hell no.* I was *not* going to let him win this one. Even Dr. Leblanc was watching to see what I was going to do. *It’s a stupid little initiation, that’s all. I can do this.*

I stepped forward and stuck my hands out, meeting the challenge in Nick’s eyes with my own. He grinned, placed the thing in my hands. It was slippery and a little mushy—a bit heavier than I expected it to be. *I’m holding a brain in my hands. Holy shit.* An unfamiliar sense of pride began to trickle through me. I’d risen to the challenge. It was a stupid and gross challenge, but I’d done it.

“You can go ahead and put it in the scale,” he said.

I set it carefully in the scale and stepped back. Dr. Leblanc gave me another sly wink, then peered at the numbers on the scale and wrote them on his clipboard. I smiled, absurdly pleased with myself.

Then I quickly grabbed a towel and wiped my hands off before I could give in to the insane urge to lick my fingers.