

Chapter 1

A sharp bang—the molar-rattling kind—jolted me conscious and made the situation starkly apparent. Dire would be an understatement. In short, I was completely and utterly fucked.

The smell of brine, the pitching motion, the suffocating blackness quickly added up to only one possible explanation: *I'm about to be buried at sea!*

One of the sailors cursed when the bottom molding of the casket collided with the launch ramp's steel frame. It was a quick utterance, a sound made by a man hurrying through an unpleasant task as quickly, and with as much dignity, as possible. My temporal lobe collected and processed the information, but I didn't really hear it. The rest of my brain had switched to survival mode. I was locked in a casket about to be tossed off the side of a ship.

The sailors collectively grunted and the casket slammed onto well-greased two-inch conveyor rollers yielding a sudden weightlessness sensation.

In seconds it would be too late.

I screamed for all I was worth. The sailors' ears were a distance of about eight inches horizontal and 30 inches vertical—a direct line of 31 inches, roughly the length of a baseball bat. Thirty-one unobstructed inches thanks to the 20 poker chip—size holes drilled into my metal tomb—per navy regs—to help it sink faster. It should've been as easy as screaming through a chain link fence. *Should've*. It didn't quite work out.

Two-hundred pounds of dead weight pressed down filling my mouth with petroleum-tasting vinyl body bag. My scream came out as a garbled sonic note, more akin to a sickly whale call, which was further knocked down by the thickness of the casket's lining—crepe fabric and polyester batting. The sailors may have heard me, had this happened in the relative quiet of the hold, but my scream couldn't conquer the ambient noise pollution. The howling wind and turbid

surf, underscored by the thrum of the four General Electric turbines propelling the ship through the ocean with over a hundred-thousand horsepower, knocked my scream down to a nothing whisper by the time it traveled the thirty-one inches.

“Ready?” a voice shouted. His voice was muffled by the respirator I knew they were wearing.

The casket rolled back fractionally, like they were going to launch it, which was unnecessary since the ramp was steeply angled.

I screamed, and screamed, trying to flail my arms, do *anything* but was effectively immobilized by the amorphous form pinning me.

“Ho!” a sailor shouted.

The ship pitched sharply, tossing my companion and I violently. Fortunately, it was enough to shift the corpse, so I could free my right arm in a desperate attempt to pound the sides, anything to attract the sailor’s attention. If the twenty-foot drop off the deck didn’t scramble my brains, I’d drown within sixty seconds.

One minute. My life expectancy.

The casket would completely submerge in under ten seconds, rapidly filling with 68-degree water, through the conveniently drilled holes. Not that I’d die of exposure. It’d be much quicker. Out of reflex, I’d hold my breath. As the casket passed five fathoms there’d be another atmosphere of pressure—another 15 pounds per square inch—pressing on the air spaces in my body. A few seconds later, as it passed ten fathoms, there would be yet another. So, if I didn’t give into my primal brain screaming for me to take a breath and fill my lungs with seawater, I’d literally be crushed to death by atmospheric pressure. By the time my tiny tomb came to rest on the sea floor I’d be buried under a crushing 120 fathoms of water.

I frantically landed a solid blow on the puffing of the lid just as a sailor shouted, “Now!”

The casket rapidly gathered speed on the ten-foot ramp span and went weightless as it took off into space. The air whistled through the casket scouring the plasticky smell, replacing it with the alkali scent of the ocean. I’ve done numerous jumps, mostly in training exercises, and it seemed intuitive that freefalling through the atmosphere would be noisy as hell. It’s the opposite. Complete silence.

The roiling waves waited patiently below, the watery maw of the Atlantic ready to gobble me up.

A strange sense of calm enveloped me. It was like God himself reached out from the heavens to calm my soul before impact—before death. And to think, the whole mess started when a couple of cowboys decided to shoot it out at the Goose Creek Reservoir, and I got sucked into assisting with their autopsies.

Chapter 2

Maggie reached her delicate hand between the ilium and pubis bones, past the muscles of the pelvic floor, inverted the scrotum and pulled the testes out through the abdominal cavity. They glistened like bloody eggs on the purple nitrile glove.

“The deputy where I did my residency liked to scare the hell out of new lab assistants when we got to this point. He’d reach in and squeeze the bladder,” she said, selecting a pair of pointed surgical scissors from an instrument array and snipping the spermatic cords. It looked like she was cutting Ramen noodles. “Most of those poor assistants had no prior lab experience, and all of the sudden they’re exposed to all this.” She made a twirling motion with the scissors over the filleted corpse. “And to top it all off the case is suddenly urinating.” Still studying the

testes, she added almost as an afterthought, “And he’d squeeze the bladder hard. Real hard. Maybe get a three-foot arc.”

“That’s an impressive stream.” I eased an apple from my pocket and polished it on my jeans, continuing to watch Maggie finish up her first case of the afternoon.

By morgue standards the pathology lab at MUSC—the Medical University of South Carolina—was typical. Institutional. Cold. Four stainless steel tables dominated the generous room. Cabinetry lined parts of the room with Draconian-looking gadgets and instruments displayed on linoleum countertops. Where there wasn’t cabinetry the walls were clad with white subway tile. The smell was typical too, putrefaction barely masked with cheaply perfumed industrial cleaners.

Maggie brought the testes up close to her face shield and examined each testicle under the intense beam of her headlamp. The headlamp, perched on her mane of rust-colored hair swept into a neat bun, was a gift from me, an impulse buy from the plumbing section at Home Depot. Satisfied, they looked okay in the macro sense, she cut a slice off of each one on a composite cutting board and placed the tissue samples in a stock jar that could’ve passed for a quart of takeout Wonton Soup from Happy Garden. Maggie stepped on a foot pedal on the floor that turned on the microphone suspended above the autopsy table.

“Testes appear normal,” she said, in a slow precise way like she was speaking to someone with a hearing problem.

Then she slipped the testes back, reverting the scrotum.

“This one poor guy, named Ramone, actually fainted his first day,” she continued. “The case was an indigent found behind the dumpster of a Vons—”

“Vons?”

“Huh?” she said, momentarily confused. “Oh, it’s a grocery store chain out West. Anyway, this guy wasn’t found for several days because he mounded newspapers and cardboard over himself at night to keep warm. It wasn’t until the staff figured out it wasn’t the dumpster producing the odor that this guy was unearthed. His appearance alone was enough to make Ramone green around the gills, but when he unexpectedly shot a stream a racehorse would envy, poor Ramone’s eyes rolled back in his head and he hit the floor. Well, his head hit the table before the rest of him hit the floor.”

“Sounds like I’d get along fine with that deputy,” I said and bit into the flesh of the apple.

Maggie looked up from her grisly work. A horrified look crossed her face. “You know you can’t eat in here!”

“Who’s going to know?” I said, crunching.

The lab was deserted. It was a Sunday afternoon.

“I am. It’s gross. I know what goes on in here.”

“I do too,” I reminded her. “This isn’t my first rodeo. And it’s not like I was rolling it around on the floor.”

Maggie couldn’t help herself but glance at the epoxied floor. Like most morgue floors, it sloped imperceptibly to drains set every eight feet. They made for easy clean up.

I took another bite and continued talking with my mouth full, “Besides, I never do the nasty on an empty stomach. It’s an old undertaker rule.”

Maggie arched her eyebrows. “The nasty?”

I crunched and swallowed. “Get your mind out of the gutter. I’m referring to anything that might upset the stomach. You want me to be your assistant today, I’m not going to shovel his organs back in and stitch him up without some insurance.”

Being that it was a Sunday, Maggie hadn't been able to find an autopsy technician, and having nothing better to do, I tagged along to help with the prosections. It was better than sitting home alone waiting for someone to kick the bucket or painting the living room. I was exhausted from all the home-improvement projects, and she had only officially moved in two days ago.

Our relationship had been a whirlwind, one I certainly hadn't seen myself in when she swept into town five months prior. My shrink said it was healthy for me to make commitments; "progress" is what she called it when I announced Maggie was moving into the apartment over the funeral home with me. We're still in that phase of the relationship where we do everything together, even autopsies.

The dual autopsies today were a rush job, ordered by the Berkeley Coroner. Two John Does. An early morning fisherman found them near the Bettis Boat put in at Goose Creek Reservoir. They weren't fresh. Based on the marbling of the skin I'd guess time of death to be 48 hours prior. Needless to say, the smell left something to be desired. Hence the apple. I took another bite.

The John Does must've had something akin to an old-fashioned shootout à la the O.K. Corral. John Doe 1, the case currently on the autopsy table had been the worse shot. He had inflicted several non-life-threatening shots on John Doe 2, mostly in the extremities, but John Doe 2 bled out before he could escape. He had been found in the underbrush about half a football field away. The responding patrolman simply had to follow the trail of blood to find John Doe 2. A gruesome Hansel and Gretel, the reason I nicknamed him Hansel.

Hansel's marksmanship was on display by the fact that the back of John Doe 1's head was missing, hence the nickname Skully. The pieces of his skull located at the scene were together in a clear plastic evidence bag with a little orange biohazard label on it. Skully was

blocked up on several body bridges on the table to allow the fluids to flow freely underneath his body where they filtered through a steel colander in the table drain to catch any evidence. A stork light illuminated his vacated thoracic and abdominal cavity—harsh light reflecting off the inner workings of a human—his organs and breastplate glistening on a side table. At this point in the autopsy, Maggie had already cut his scalp and pulled it down over his face, so she could cut off the calvaria and take a gander at his brain—or what was left of it. The point of entry for the kill shot had been Skully’s left eye. A clean shot. If the body was ever identified and claimed the family could certainly have an open casket viewing. Easy restoration job for the lucky undertaker who got the call.

Maggie labeled the stock jar, screwed the cap on and pushed the stork light up. “Well, cause is pretty straightforward, high ballistic projectile injury to brain. Otherwise, I’d say this guy was a ticking time bomb.” His liver, sitting on a side table was greasy and dimpled—signs of drug or alcohol abuse, or both, something Maggie had noted into her hanging microphone several minutes prior when she popped it out. “Based on his oral health, and general malnutrition, coupled with the substance-abuse signs, I’d say this guy lived on the street.”

“Nice clothes for a bum,” I said motioning with my head to the drying area where Skully’s bloody clothes were drying on hangers, so they could be placed in paper evidence bags. “What bum wears Lucky Brand jeans and an Armani sweatshirt that collectively cost more than my suits?”

“I’m only paid to answer the questions the bodies tell me.” Maggie held Skully’s arm up. “Look at this hand.”

I could see it clearly from my perch.

“His nails are cracked, and the cuticles are filthy, and,” she pointed to his thumb and index finger, “these calluses are indicative of drug use. Old burns from a pipe.”

“I believe you,” I said. “I’m merely commenting on the fact he’s wearing a three-hundred-dollar outfit.”

Maggie placed Skully’s arm back on the table and snapped off her gloves, dyed black with dried blood, dropped them into the biohazard bin and pulled on a fresh pair. “You about done? I’m ready to start number two.”

I hopped off the countertop. “Where can I toss this?” I asked, flashing the core. “I imagine you don’t want this getting mixed up in the evidence.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Toss it in the locker room. I don’t want the director finding food in here. She’ll have a fit.”

I saluted with the core. “Yes ma’am.” I reappeared a few minutes later wearing a Tyvek gown over my street clothes along with a face shield, booties, and surgical gloves over cut-proof mesh gloves. Ribs can be unbelievably sharp.

Maggie was already busy with the visual inspection of Hansel.

“Gowned and ready.”

She put down her clipboard where she was charting all external physical characteristics, natural and not. “Roll number one so I can get eyes on his posterior and then I’ll be done with him and you can start sewing him up.”

Before I could take a step, the morgue door flung open and a man burst in. He was wearing an odd combination of a suit with surgical mask and latex gloves. At first, I thought him to be one of my competitors, come prematurely to collect one of the John Does. The cheap suit

was a tell. That notion was dispelled quickly when he held up his hands and commanded, “Stop what you’re doing and step away!”