

Chapter 1

Fortunately for me, everybody dies.

The young woman on the embalming table had become something of a local celebrity by dozing off at the wheel and smashing into a tree. She had clung to life for a few days, comatose, before succumbing to her injuries. The twenty-four hour news cycle latched onto the tragedy for a day or two until something more dreadful caught their attention. She'd been a third-grade teacher. Now, for me, she'd be a day's work.

Compared to what usually came out of the teaching hospital, Chloe Maas looked pretty good. I've noticed, in my professional capacity, that doctors are competitive. They hate to lose, and that death to them means losing, so when they see failure approaching they tend to pump their patients full of every drug known to man, like a Hail Mary pass. The end result is the dearly departed looks awful for the viewing, which is *my* fault. And why not? Isn't that the role of the mortician, the whipping boy?

With Nikki's help, I slipped the remains out of the shiny white pouch the hospital staff had placed her in. I removed Chloe's hospital gown, the CVP line, the catheter, the red and white ECG electrodes, the medication, allergen, and alert bracelets, and various assorted bandages and patches, and then draped her remains with several small towels to preserve what little dignity she had left.

It was Nikki's first day. It was also her first real embalming outside of the classroom. Understandably, she was a little intimidated. I could tell by the uncertain look in her eyes. This was teachable moment.

“The fluid is in there,” I said, nodding toward the antique walnut wood hutch that looked strikingly out of place in the white tiled sterility of the preparation room. “How about you mix up the embalming solution?”

Nikki looked stunned.

I recalled the feeling; it’s a lot to take in on one’s maiden voyage. “It’s okay,” I prodded. “Make a suggestion on what we should use, and we’ll go from there.”

This seemed to settle her down. She clacked over to the fluid cabinet. I would have to tell her those spiky high heels were not the best choice of footwear for her new job.

Concocting the formalin solution is Embalming 101. Nikki would be able to do it, and doing it right would give her confidence. It would take her awhile though, so I got busy with the remains. I swabbed the eyes and facial orifices with a formaldehyde-based solution and washed the rest of her with a special soap that was poison to a broad spectrum of pathogens. I could tell Chloe had sustained some trauma, as would be expected, from the wreck. There were localized purpura and edema—bruises and swelling—on her torso and small lacerations on her head. I retracted an eyelid to insert a mortuary prosthetic called an eye cap. The eye cap keeps the eyelids convex even after the vitreous humor evaporates, rendering the eyeball flat. Flat eyes aren’t conducive for a pleasant viewing experience, or what we undertakers term the “memory picture.”

Something unusual about the eye caught my attention. I grabbed the stork light and brought it down to get a better look. I retracted the other eyelid. Same thing.

I gently pried open Chloe’s mouth. Her tongue was swollen.

I tapped the scalpel against the white porcelain table for about a minute, thinking. Then I made the usual incision, a one-inch cut on the clavicle at the sternoclavicular notch. Without the

heart pumping it is a bloodless incision. This time, instead of my standard routine to dissect out and raise the vessels, I stuck my finger in, twisted it toward the neck, and palpated. The hyoid bone was broken. My heart fluttered a little.

I pulled off the set of double gloves from my right hand, and, using the camera on my smartphone, snapped a close-up photo of Chloe's eye.

Nikki, beside me now at the embalming table, launched into her report with gusto on the chemistry of embalming fluids. A raised hand silenced her. Squinting at my phone, I checked to make sure the photo was clear. "I have to go."

Nikki was understandably surprised. Clutching plastic bottles full of a delightful spectrum of colored fluids, she was in effect, all dressed up with nowhere to go. "What should I do now?" she asked.

I didn't have time to feel sorry for her plight. I was busy stripping off my protective equipment.

"Check with Isabella. She'll give you something to do."

I was out the door ten seconds later. Before the door closed behind me, I remembered to tell her, "For God's sake, get yourself a pair of comfortable shoes."