

Chapter 1

Sweat dribbled into my eyes and my ribs ached, but I stood my ground against the burly man in front of me. He flexed his hands as we slowly circled each other, his teeth bared in a sneer framed by a truly majestic beard.

His hand shot out to seize my sleeve. I twisted to break his grip, but he merely shifted to grab my shoulder with his other hand. Within about two seconds he spun, slammed his butt into my hips, hoisted me up and sent me flying.

I landed hard on the mat, breath whooshing out of my lungs before I remembered to slap my hand down.

“No, no, Angel, the slap is *part* of the fall.” That was my *sensei*, his voice laced with three months of frustration from trying to teach me the most basic aspects of *jiu jitsu*.

“Right,” I wheezed. “Got it.”

My brawny opponent reached down and grabbed the front of my *gi*, then hoisted me up to set me on my feet as easily as picking up a kitten.

“C’mon,” he rumbled. “Try it on me. It’s all about balance.”

All about balance, my ass. I weighed barely a hundred pounds, and Freddie easily topped three hundred. Lips drawn back in a snarl, I seized his sleeve, grabbed his shoulder with my other hand, then spun and tried to slam my scrawny ass into his groin in an attempt to copy the move he’d performed on me.

“You’re not going to get him onto your back using brute strength,” my *sensei* lectured as Freddie remained immobile. “Try a different move. Try *osoto gari*.”

I gave him a blank look, and he sighed. “‘Trip the Drunk Guy,’” he said, supplying my own nickname for the move.

“Gotcha!” Why did they have to use so many weird names for things? And yes, I knew it was Japanese, a beautiful and elegant language that wasn’t weird in the slightest, but I still had trouble with parts of the *English* language. Expecting me to remember a bunch of foreign words was asking way too much of my brain. Of course, for all I knew *osoto gari* actually meant Trip the Drunk Guy.

I adjusted my grip, yanked on Freddie’s arm to try and get his weight onto one leg, then shot my own leg forward and slammed it back into his to sweep it.

Like kicking a tree trunk.

“Pull on the arm,” *sensei* suggested, oh-so-helpfully.

“I *am*,” I growled, then added a belated, “sir.”

I continued to yank and pull and grip and kick and sweep until finally Freddie tumbled to the ground— with a perfect slap and fall— though I was pretty sure he’d simply taken pity on me.

Sensei probably suspected the same thing, but he looked more relieved than anything. Poor guy. It wasn't his fault that I wasn't exactly the best learner in the world.

After my brilliant demonstration, it was my turn to stand back and observe humongous Freddie and normal size Chance go at it. My ego recovered slightly as I watched Chance get taken down over and over, though when he fell he slapped the mat and did shit right instead of flopping like a sack of flour the way I did. About a month ago I'd snapped something in my ankle because of my horrible form, but a quick snack of brains healed the damage right up. That was one awesome thing about being a zombie. As long as I had my "protein shake" in my bag—with its super special ingredient—no one, especially my sensei, ever needed to know I was hurt.

Sensei gave the two men some critiques on form, then turned to me. "Rollouts, Angel," he instructed, gesturing to the length of the mat. "Both sides, back and forth twice, then you're done."

"Yes, sir!" I said with a cheerful grin, then proceeded to throw myself at the mat in the most spaztastic rolls any *jiu jitsu* dojo had ever seen.

I wasn't sure, but I think *sensei* might have wept a little.
"Cherry red face."

The skin parted beneath my scalpel as I let out a soft snort of derision. "Oh, please. Give me a hard one. Carbon monoxide poisoning."

Dr. Leblanc smiled from where he leaned against the counter. Fifty-something, with thinning grey-blond hair, glasses perched halfway down his nose, and more flab than muscle around his middle, he wouldn't stand out in a crowd, but I didn't care about that one little bit. The pathologist for the St. Edwards Parish Coroner's Office was one of my all-time favorite people in the world, mostly because he seemed to have absolute faith that I was capable of all sorts of great things. I didn't always believe him, but I sure tried my best to live up to his expectations. Barely an hour earlier I'd been spazzing my way through *jiu jitsu*, and one of the reasons I hadn't given up weeks ago was because, shortly after I started training, Dr. Leblanc had remarked that he would be honored if I would invite him to attend my belt ceremony once I earned my yellow belt. *Honored*. Before I was turned into a zombie, I'd been a drug addicted high school dropout with a felony conviction who couldn't hold a job. And Dr. Leblanc couldn't have cared less about any of that.

"All right," Dr. Leblanc said, "let's stick with the carbon monoxide subject." He tipped his head back as he contemplated my next challenge. "Your decedent has second and third degree burns over ninety percent of his body. No evidence of other trauma. Tox scan comes back clean. Carboxyhemoglobin level is five percent. How does that level corroborate your decedent's death by fire?"

I drew the scalpel down the woman's abdomen to finish the Y-incision as I thought. "It doesn't," I said after a moment. "Poor dude probably got himself killed, and the murderer tried to use the fire to cover it up."

"Are you sure?" He leveled a stern look at me.

"Yes," I said, with mock-seriousness. "Well, not about the murder part," I amended, "but about the dead-before-the-fire-started part. With only five percent on the . . ." I faltered. I knew what the damn test measured, but I had a hell of a time spouting off the word. "With a carboxy-hemidoodamajigger level of only five percent, there's no way he was alive when the fire started, otherwise it'd be way higher from breathing carbon monoxide." The hamster raced on its wheel in my head. "Could be he died of a heart attack and dropped a cigarette onto a pile of news-

papers. Five percent would be pretty normal in a smoker.” I shrugged. “Murder or accident, dude didn’t die from the fire or its smoke.”

His smile returned. “I should probably say I’m impressed, but the truth is, I’m not.”

“Huh?”

“To be impressed I’d have to be surprised by how well you’ve absorbed the material,” he said. “And I’m not surprised at all.”

Flushing with pleasure, I returned my attention to the body and finished separating skin and flesh from ribs. “I still have a long way to go.” I set the scalpel aside and picked up the big pruning shears—the same kind I used to snip branches at my house. Not that I actually did much in the way of yard maintenance besides shoving a lawnmower around every few weeks.

“But every piece of knowledge is one more step down that long path,” he replied. He watched me snip through ribs to remove the triangle-shaped section, then pushed off the counter to step forward and peer into the chest cavity. “And one day you will look at that long path and find only a few steps left.”

“Keep being so wise, and I’m going to start calling you Most Honorable Master Leblanc,” I teased as I wiped down the shears. “You’d look awesome with a long white beard and moustache to twirl.”

He laughed. “I suppose I do sound a bit pompous.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” I said with a grin. “Just don’t ask me to punch through boards or anything.”

“I can promise you that’s not likely to happen,” he replied, then picked up a scalpel and began his examination of the throat, chest, and abdomen.

Funny thing was that I *had* punched through boards before—not all that long ago, in fact. A flash flood had washed my house away this past summer, and with my dad and me trapped in the attic, I’d punched and kicked my way through the plywood and tar paper and shingles to give us a way out.

Nobody knew about that, though, except my dad. It wasn’t the sort of thing any normal person could do, and especially not one like me—barely a hundred pounds of skinny bitch who sure as hell didn’t look tough enough to break a toothpick, much less rip through a roof.

Then again, I wasn’t normal. Not one bit.

I moved to the end of the table and began work on the young woman’s head. Mid-twenties, pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. Sarah Lynn Harper. The name didn’t ring a bell, but I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling I’d seen her before, when she was alive.

Scalpel in hand, I made a slice from ear to ear on top of her head, then peeled the scalp back to expose her skull. Trading scalpel for bone saw, I cut a neat circle all the way around, like a bowl cut gone wrong, then took a chisel-like tool called a skullcracker, shoved it into the groove and twisted. The bone gave a satisfying *crack*, followed by a wet *sllrrkk* sound as I pulled the top of the skull off to expose the pink and grey convolutions of the brain.

The weird and gross music of the morgue, I thought with amusement, then took a deep breath and inhaled. The lovely scent of that brain filled me, but I resisted the urge to grab a handful and stuff it into my mouth. I wasn’t all that hungry, but *yummm*, fresh brains. I’d chow down later when there weren’t witnesses to how very *not* normal I was.

My desire to munch on brain matter wasn’t because I was crazy. No doubt there were people who’d argue that I had a mental twitch or three, but that was beside the point. About a year ago I woke up in the ER with memories of horrible injuries yet not a scratch on me. I soon discovered that an anonymous benefactor had arranged for me to get a job with the Coroner’s Office, and I’d been harvesting brains out of body bags ever since. I wanted the brains—hell, *needed* the

brains— because I was host to a truly bizarre parasite. As long as I ate a brain every week and a half or so, I was fine. The parasite stayed happy, and would even fix me up if I got hurt or sick, though that required more brain-fuel. However, if I didn't give my parasite enough brains, I'd start to fall apart— literally. Not only would I rot, but I'd lose my ability to think clearly and, worst of all, I'd get hungry. Really hungry. Hungry enough to kill for the brains I needed.

Fortunately, my job as a morgue tech kept me well stocked on brains. No need for any murderous rampages today.

The creak of the door jerked me out of my thoughts, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Allen Prejean, the Coroner's Office Chief Investigator, step into the cutting room, a clipboard in his gloved hands.

Yanking my gaze away, I returned my attention to my work as he and Dr. Leblanc exchanged pleasantries. Allen didn't like me. He'd made that very clear from day one by giving me everything from crap schedules to undisguised sneers and offhand comments about work ethics and unsavory lifestyles. There were plenty of people who didn't like me or who saw only what they expected to see— high school dropout, former felon, and recovering drug addict. In other words, a loser. Most of the time I had no problem blowing it off when I got the stink-eye. In the past year I'd worked my ass off to leave my loser self behind, and if there were some people who couldn't see it, well, screw 'em.

Allen's barely hidden contempt hadn't really bothered me until last summer when I'd accidentally sliced my hand open right here in the morgue. If Dr. Leblanc hadn't been in the room it wouldn't have been a big deal, but I couldn't exactly say, "Don't worry, Doc. I'll slurp down a baggie of brains and my zombie parasite will have me fixed up in no time!" I was forced to play it out like a normal person. To save me the hassle and paperwork of the emergency room, Allen stitched it up— and not only was he vaguely decent to me while he did so, but he let slip that he tended to use his vacation time to go on Doctors Without Borders missions. Admirable shit. And in a flash I went from not giving a rat's ass that he hated me to being bugged by it.

That's his problem, I told myself for the billionth time. So what if he and I weren't BFFs? He couldn't fire me without cause, and I did my damndest not to give him any.

I removed the brain and set it on the scale while Allen peered at the body. A few seconds later he made a mark on his clipboard, then turned away to inspect the body bag Sarah Lynn had occupied. Checking up on me, I knew. Several months ago there'd been a stink about missing jewelry, and ever since then Allen had instituted spot checks like this one to make sure personal property was removed and properly logged.

Keeping my face expressionless, I continued my work. He had yet to ding me for a single screwup, real or imagined, and I intended to keep it that way. Head down, do my work, don't make waves. Be a good little Angel.

"Allen, did you hear Angel's news?" Dr. Leblanc suddenly asked as he set a kidney on the scale. I dutifully recorded the weight on the white board on the wall behind him, while I wondered what the hell the pathologist was talking about.

Allen's eyes narrowed ever so faintly. "News?" His gaze swung to me, and I noted a hint of curiosity in his eyes. Probably wondering if it was something he could add to his Angel Shitlist.

Dr. Leblanc removed the kidney from the scale and began to section it. "Angel passed her GED last week," he announced with a broad smile. "The sky's the limit for her now."

Yep, I'd finally managed to scrape out a passing grade on the GED— after hours and hours of free tutoring from my coworker, Nick, along with quite a few more hours of not-free tutoring that focused on my recently diagnosed dyslexia.

I braced myself for some sort of eye roll or dismissive snort from Allen, but he managed to force a smile— for Dr. Leblanc’s benefit, no doubt. “Congrats, Angel,” he said with as much enthusiasm as a garden slug. “You’ll be heading off to college soon then, I take it?”

Heat crawled up my face at his tone and the unspoken *No fucking way will you make it through a real school. This is as far as you’ll ever go in life.*

“Actually, I’m going to register for a couple of classes at Tucker Point Community College next term,” I shot back before my brain could engage itself. Crap. I’d toyed with the idea and even made it as far as checking out the college website, but I’d been too . . . well, okay, I’d been too chicken to do anything more. I’d passed the GED by the skin of my teeth— by one damn point, to be exact— and only managed that because I was allowed extra time because of my dyslexia. How the hell could I make it through *college*?

Yet I’d gone and said it, which meant that now I was stuck. No way would I give Allen the satisfaction of being right about me, and no way would I disappoint Dr. Leblanc, not with that proud smile on his face.

“Sounds good, Angel,” Allen commented without so much as a glance my way. He made another note on his clipboard, gave Dr. Leblanc a slight nod, and then departed without another word.

The pathologist removed the woman’s heart, weighed it, and set it on his cutting board. “I suppose I don’t need to suggest that you get in there and show everyone what you’re made of?”

I snorted, forced the fierce smile Dr. Leblanc expected from me. “Nah. Got that covered.”

Shit. Looked like I was going to college.

“Now isn’t that interesting,” Dr. Leblanc murmured, frowning down at the sectioned heart.

I peered over at the abnormally thickened wall of her left ventricle. “Ventricular hypertrophy?” We saw it all the time in cases of heart disease and high blood pressure, but hardly ever in someone this young. And certainly not where there was barely any space in the ventricle at all.

“I think we can be more specific,” he said. “Cardiomegaly, young, signs of pulmonary edema, asymmetric septal and ventricular hypertrophy.” He ran the probe over the septum in the cross section. “See?”

Not only did I see, but I actually understood everything he’d said. Hot damn! Of course it helped that I was almost positive we’d seen this once before in an autopsy—

Oh, shit. We had seen this before, and now I knew why the woman looked familiar. She’d been one of the extras— a zombie cheerleader— for a movie that had been filmed in the area this past summer: *High School Zombie Apocalypse!!* Another female extra, Brenda Barnes, had died from the very same condition.

“We had a case like this a few months ago,” I said around the sudden chill that gripped my throat.

“Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy,” he said, expression turning grave. “Two cases in a short span of time, and this one just as perplexing as the first.”

An echocardiogram from a few months prior to Brenda Barnes’s death had shown no sign of the heart condition, yet she’d died of it all the same. After quite a bit of frustrated puzzling, Dr. Leblanc had finally decided that either there’d been a mixup in medical records or a mistake was made in the echo.

Unfortunately, I had another theory. Several months ago Saberton Corporation was busy performing pseudo-zombie experimentation. They needed a large group of test subjects, and the movie extras fit the bill perfectly. Makeup hid side effects of rot, and behavioral issues were

chalked up to acting like, well, zombies. And, of course, none of the extras knew they were part of an unethical, horrible, and utterly evil experiment to test fake brains and who knew what else.

But maybe Sarah Lynn was different and already had the heart condition? The thought that more people would die months down the road because of Saberton's bullshit made my stomach turn. "Anything in her records about it?" I asked, clinging to the slim hope.

"Nothing about any sort of heart condition in any of her records," he said, dashing my hopes to the ground and stepping on them. "And she has a *lot* of medical records. Lymphoma . . . and two months ago she went into remission." He let out a sigh.

"She traded cancer for a fatal heart problem?" I didn't like the direction of my thoughts, but I couldn't share them with Dr. Leblanc.

"It does appear to be a supremely tragic twist of fate," he said. "It's possible some aspect of her treatment contributed to the heart condition. But I'll check everything out thoroughly, especially with the similarity to the previous case."

And what if he discovers that both were extras in the movie? The thought unsettled me deeply. Would he report the link to authorities? Would they in turn dig up Saberton and its zombie research? As much as I hated the idea of the Saberton assholes getting away with murder, the last thing the zombie community needed was prying from outsiders.

He picked up a scalpel and carefully sectioned the heart while I busied myself with sewing up the incision. As much as I liked Dr. Leblanc, all I wanted right now was to get away so I could process this crap.