CHAPTER ONE

The polite term for what I do for a living is “biohazard remediation.”

That’s what I say if anyone asks me at a dinner party. Not that I’m ever invited to dinner parties. (Megan got custody of all the friends in the divorce.) But it’s what I’d say if I *was* invited, and if someone was actually polite enough to approach me through the chemical smell of industrial-strength cleaning products that cling to my body.

Another term for what I do is *Crime and Trauma Scene Decontam­ination*. Or CTSDecon, if you want to sound cool.

Which basically means that I clean up stiffs for a living.

All the stiffs. No prejudice in my line of work.

Murder? *Check*.

Suicide? *Check*.

Murder-suicide? *Check*.

Industrial accidents? *Check*.

Decomposition after unattended death? *Check*.

Infectious disease? *Check*.

Spontaneous human combustion? *Check*. (Not that I’ve ever had one of those, but I live in hope.)

The company I work for is called LA Cleaners. (*No matter the mess, we clean for less*. That’s my boss’s tagline. He’s weirdly proud of it, con­sidering it’s a pile of shit. But then, my boss is proud of his son as well, so maybe it’s not *that* surprising.)

I’ve been stuck in this dead-end (ha-ha) job for ten years now. Not bad, considering it was only ever meant to be temporary. Something

I could do to earn cash while I figured out what to do with my life. A decade later, and here I still am.

But that’s me in a nutshell, as Megan always said. Big plans, no follow-through.

I yawn noisily and stare out the truck window. “What’s the crime scene?” I ask Jorge. I should know this. After all, it was my contact at the LAPD who gave us the job. But the call came through at three in the morning, so I didn’t stay on the phone to chat. Or to even ask what the cleanup would involve. I just swore at the guy for waking me up, gave him the office number, and told him to leave a message on the answering machine.

“Murder scene,” says Jorge, yawning. Jorge is the aforementioned boss’s son. Twenty-something, incredibly lazy, and addicted to his phone. He’s partnered with me for a bit of “work experience” before he moves on to the offices where he will, in about a year, be my boss.

I relax. Murder scenes are our most common jobs. Not too difficult. “Unattended,” adds Jorge.

Crap. Unattended deaths are my least favorite cleanups. Messy as hell. And yeah, I’m aware that it’s a bit tasteless to rank deaths by how hard it is to clean them up, but it’s my job, so what do you expect? You do anything for a long enough period of time, it tends to lose its . . . uniqueness.

What an unattended death means is that somebody kicked the bucket but hasn’t been discovered for a while. Could only be a matter of days. Could be weeks. Could even be months. But they’re all bad. It still surprises me how quickly a human being can be reduced to a leaking bag of liquefied fat and grease.

I’m not looking forward to this. And the undercooked eggs and greasy bacon I had for breakfast? Probably not the best idea.

“Hey—did you watch it?” I ask Jorge.

Jorge is attempting to drive the van while checking out his cell phone at the same time. “Watch what?”

“The movie. The one I told you about.”

“Nah, man. I tried.”

“What do you mean, you tried?”

“Couldn’t get past the beginning. Them sitting in a car talking about cheeseburgers? What’s with that?”

I stare at him in amazement. “That’s what makes it so good! That’s characterization. Two people, traveling through LA in a car. Just talking. You see how each responds. Reveals who they are.”

“Whatever, dude. It was lame.”

“You obviously have no idea what you’re talking about. You prob­ably like Adam Sandler movies.”

Jorge glances over at me with a grin. “Yeah. Sandler! He’s funny. When he goes crazy and starts screaming and beatin’ on someone? Gets me every time.”

“You’re a goddamn heathen. I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” Jorge shrugs and carries on driving. Screw him. That’s the last time I try and bridge the generation gap with movie recommendations.

The rest of the journey passes in silence until Jorge slows the van down and turns into a weed-infested parking lot.

“I think we’re here,” he says.

I look out the window. A run-down motel sits on the other side of the lot. Red doors and a fifties Art Deco look. I check the sign.

The Sleepy-Time Motel.

Charming.

It’s weird to see such a run-down place in these surroundings, hugging the base of the Santa Monica Mountains. The beach is only about ten minutes away, and there are miles of wineries over to the east. Whoever is holding onto this dump must have fended off serious offers from realtors. Which begs the question—in the name of God, why?

I sit in the sweltering heat of our van and check the motel’s website on my phone. It says the place has been here since the 1920s. It was built to house the workers who were laying down the Pacific Coast Highway, and after that it was sold off as a motel.

I squint through the bug-splattered windshield. The front face of the motel is just a generic line of rooms, punctuated with rusted ice machines. The parking lot is made up of broken asphalt, slowly melting in the morning heat.

It’s weird. No cops. No crime scene tape. No pathology vans.

“You sure this is the place?”

Jorge reluctantly lifts his eyes from his phone. He’s chewing gum. Noisily. Bastard doesn’t even share. I asked for a piece once, and he said he didn’t have any, that he doesn’t even like gum. I had stared at him for a full minute before he finally swallowed the piece he was chewing. We didn’t break eye contact once.

“Think so.”

“What did the work order say?”

Jorge doesn’t respond. Just turns back to his phone. I’m about to ask him what the hell he’s doing when my phone chimes with a message. From Jorge. Containing the work order.

“Dude, I’m right here,” I say.

He doesn’t answer. I sigh and open the message, quickly scanning the details. Yup. This is the place. Sleepy-Time Motel. Room fourteen. The preferred stopover for serial killers everywhere.

I climb out of the van, squinting against the bright light. It’s invasive. But then, that’s Los Angeles in a nutshell, isn’t it? Invasive. Unsavory.

Hell, even the sun in LA feels sleazy. A dry, groping heat that crawls into your clothes and sucks sweat from every part of your body, touching and lingering in spaces that are not meant to be touched.

I put my aviators on and cross the parking lot, checking the door numbers. Most of them are missing; all that remains are faded negative images surrounded by sun-bleached wood. I stop before room four­teen. The door might have once been painted red, but it’s now a faded salmon pink.

I reach for the door handle, then freeze before my hand touches the

metal. Here’s the thing. I trained to be a cop once, as soon as I gained my US citizenship. I maybe should’ve mentioned this before, but I was holding off, you know? Didn’t want to overwhelm you with random info. You know how it is: *Oh, hey. My name is Harry Priest, I do this for a living, but I once did that, and these are all the people in my life.* Don’t you hate that? I do.

So yeah, I’m from England originally, came out here to seek fortune and glory. And the fact that I decided to do that by trying to become a cop probably says a lot about my level of intelligence. But even though I didn’t cut it, the training has stayed with me over the past fifteen years. (Long story. Actually, not long. Pretty short. I failed the final test. And by final test I mean the mandatory—and surprise—drug test. Less said about that the better, really.)

The lack of any kind of police presence is bugging me. If the scene had been discovered last night, the forensics team should have been and gone. There should be evidence of their presence everywhere. You know, empty coffee cups, discarded donut boxes, the faint smell of des­peration and loneliness.

But there’s none of that here.

I chew my lip thoughtfully. Then I grab the bottom of my vintage *Empire Strikes Back* T-shirt and carefully use it to turn the doorknob. The door opens with a creak. . . .

And the smell hits me like a half brick wrapped in ten-day-old rancid meat that’s been left out on the stack interchange in the summer heat.

I stagger back, slapping a hand over my mouth and nose. I gag, barely managing to keep my breakfast down.

*Don’t think about the bacon and runny eggs. Seriously. Don’t think about it. What are you doing? You’re thinking about it! You idiot—*

I turn and throw up onto the asphalt. Coughing, spluttering.

I take a few deep breaths, staring down at my half-digested breakfast.

Which causes me to throw up again.

And then one more time, just in case there is anything left. (There’s not. Except bile. Lovely. I know. That’s me all over, kids. Charming as ever.)

I take a shuddering breath and straighten up. My stomach muscles feel like I’ve just done a hundred crunches, which is about ninety-seven and a half more than I’ve ever done in my life.

I glance back at the van. Jorge is approaching, his phone held out before him.

I point a shaking finger at him. “I swear to *Christ*, Jorge. You better not be recording this!”

“’Course not, man!” Jorge grins and lowers the phone. “Would I do that to you?”

*Yeah, you little bastard. You would.*

Jorge’s grin falters as he draws closer. He slows to a stop. “The hell is that smell?”

“Not really sure,” I say, turning back to the room. “But my keen detective instincts are telling me there’s something unpleasant in there.” “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.”

We approach the door cautiously, each trying to push the other ahead. I squint to let my eyes adjust to the dim interior of the room. Red curtains pulled closed, the sun shining through them with a lurid glow. Motes of light dance and spark. Flies buzz around.

Lots of flies.

“Fuck sake,” whispers Jorge.

“Yeah.”

The room looks like something has exploded in it. Something organic. That has then been left for weeks to stew.

The ground is moving. I lean forward, peering at the thick brown carpet.

Maggots. The floor is covered with them. The furniture and walls are peppered with shards of bone. The shards have ripped through the

couch. Have even shattered the screen of the old box set television bolted to the wall.

“You know what?” I say. “I don’t think the cops have been here yet.” Jorge frowns at me. “’Course they have. Why would they call us in to clean up a scene they haven’t processed?”

“You see any fingerprint dust? Any evidence markers? I’m telling you. This scene is untouched.” I take a step back from the door. “I’m going to find the manager. Don’t touch anything!”

“Come on, man. What you take me for? An amateur?”

What I take Jorge for is something I have to keep to myself. Espe­cially if I still want to have a job tomorrow. “Just . . . stay out of the room.”

I hurry along the deserted frontage, searching for the manag-er’s office. I find it through a set of unlocked glass doors. Old posters cover the dirty glass, faded in the sun and curling at the edges like dead spiders.

A little bell chimes as I push the door open. A partition with a security grille greets me. An old fan swings jerkily from left to right, pushing the turgid air around.

The office is empty.

“Hello?”

I approach the security grille and peer through. A tatty office chair. An old computer with one of those clunky CRT monitors.

I hit the bell on the counter. “Hello!”

Still no answer. What the hell is going on here?

I make my way back to the room, knocking on doors as I do so. None of the other rooms are occupied. The whole place is deserted.

As I draw closer to room fourteen I realize that Jorge is nowhere in sight. I break into a run. “Jorge?”

He’s inside the goddamn room, filming everything with his cell phone.

“What are you doing?” I shout.

“Nothing.”

“You’re contaminating the crime scene, you idiot!”

Jorge frowns at me. “You might want to tone down the invectives there, homey. Don’t want me telling the old man how you treat his favorite son, do you?”

“Just . . . get out of there. Now.”

Jorge takes his time, casting his phone one last time around the slaughterhouse before stepping past me.

As he does so, something catches my eye, the glint of something

metallic on the floor just inside the entrance. I bend down to study it. It’s a bullet. But it hasn’t been flattened, as would happen to a

normal bullet if it had hit something. Instead, it’s in pristine condition. It also looks like it’s made from silver.

I take my aviators off and prod the bullet with one of the ear hooks. Yup. Definitely looks like it’s made from silver.

“What the hell are you doing?” snaps an irritated voice.

I straighten up and turn around to find three figures standing in the parking lot. The one who had spoken is a man in his forties, hair in a buzz cut, face smoothly shaven. Military type.

“I’m trying to do my job,” I say.

The man stalks forward and grabs my hands, lifting them up and inspecting them. I yank them away. “Hey. None of that till the second date.”

Crew Cut ignores my remark, stepping around me to peer into the motel room. While he does this I study the others. One of them is a woman. Long, red-brown hair—what’s the name for that? Not red, not ginger. Auburn? Chestnut? Something like that.

The last one in the line is a guy who looks about twenty years older than me. A bit heavier around the gut, an air of arrogance clinging to him like someone who’s used to being in charge.

“Who are you?” demands the man. “I need names. Occupations.” “Harry Priest,” I say. “Crime scene cleanup and decontamination.” The man points two fingers at me, like an Elvis impersonator.

“Cool name. You’ll go far in the world. I can feel it in my blood. Remind me to take you for a drink sometime and explain about nomi­native determinism.”

“How your name determines your career? Yeah—I’m familiar with it. Doesn’t really apply here. If it did my name would have to be . . . Cleaner. Or . . . Coffin. Something like that.”

The man blinks at me, surprised.

“Your turn,” I say. “Who the hell are you?”

“Havelock Graves. ICD.”

I frown. “ICD? Never heard of you.”

“Well, shit, that just really bums me out, man,” he says, sarcasm dripping from every word. “That you, a crime scene *cleaner*, haven’t heard of the *incredibly* important organization I work for. Let me *tell* you the ways that bums me out—”

“Graves.” The auburn-haired chick. I notice she has green eyes, pale skin. Freckles. Graves looks at her, and she gives a small shake of her head.

“Yes. You’re right. No time. You and your . . .” Graves glances at Jorge leaning up against the wall, texting on his phone. “. . . friend?”

I shake my head.

“. . . associate need to clear out. We’re taking over.”

“We have a work order for crime scene decon,” I protest.

“This site hasn’t even been worked yet,” snarls Crew Cut from behind me. “I swear. If you two amateurs have compromised—”

“Hey—GI Joe,” I snap. “Why don’t you suck my dick? We know what we’re doing, okay?” I turn back to Graves. “We were given the contract to clean this scene. We’re not leaving till we speak to someone in charge.”

“*We’re* in charge,” says Crew Cut.

“So you say.”

Graves leans closer and whispers, “No, he’s right. He’s just very unpleasant. Doesn’t have much of a bedside manner. His parents divorced when he was young. They both cited him as the reason for the

separation. Don’t think he ever recovered.” He straightens up again. “This crime scene doesn’t fall under the jurisdiction of the LAPD. As I said. The ICD is in charge, and we have our own scene cleaners. Dicks.” I blink. “Did you just call us—”

“No, idiot. Keep up. Dicks. DDICS.” He spells out the initials. “Disposal Department for Interstitial Crime Scenes. Look, it’s a long, complex, *incredibly* interesting explanation, but one I’m not prepared to go into right now. Which leaves you both on the cusp of something world-shattering and amazing, quivering and red-faced but without the happy ending, I’m afraid. But that’s life. Leave now and you won’t get your license revoked.”

I stare at him, then take out my cell phone and dial my contact at the LAPD. “Mills. It’s Harry. That crime scene at the motel. You sent it our way last night?”

I listen for a moment, frowning, then hang up. Graves grins at me. It’s a really annoying grin.

“All set?” he says. “Groovy.”

“Did you seriously just say groovy?” I ask.

“Yes. It’s a wonderful word, isn’t it?”

I catch Jorge’s eye and jerk my head toward the van. I move away from the motel, Jorge following as I climb inside and slam the door shut.

“What gives? That was our scene.”

“Mills confirmed. It was handed over to them early this morning. We just never got the call.”

“So who the hell are they?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

I start the van and pull out of the parking lot. Onto the highway and back toward LA.

I look in the rearview mirror and see Graves standing in the parking lot, watching us leave.

“Dicks,” I mutter.