

I shuddered.

“Sometimes we get cadavers from the asylum, but they are often too decomposed to be of use,” Ben added. “They have a never-ending supply they are willing to give us. But we decided it wasn’t worth renting a cab and going all the way there and back, since it’s so far outside London. It’s much easier to source the cadavers closer to home.”

He stared at the woman with an odd expression.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Do you smell smoke?” he asked, still staring at the cadaver.

I furrowed my brow. “No.”

“I thought . . . never mind. Perhaps this woman was by a fire when she died.” He paused and glanced at me. “You’ll likely hear the story eventually, so I’ll just tell it to you now. My mother died in a fire, many years ago.”

I softened my face. “I’m so sorry about that, Ben. My—my mother died when I was very young, too.”

He hesitated for a moment, as if about to say more, but then shook his head. “No need to dwell on the past. Let’s get started.”

He handed me the scalpel.

“Now, perform the incision like so, not too deep, but deep enough to separate the skin and muscles to see the organs underneath.”

I made the cut while Ben watched. “Deeper.”

I pressed harder until I felt resistance, leaning into it

until the incision was successful. There was no blood. She must've been dead for several days. The smell of decomposition wafted from her. I tried not to envision how this woman used to be alive. I finished and stood back.

"We'll need a small saw to penetrate the breastbone," Ben said, handing one to me.

I bent over the woman's body again, setting the saw on the bone. Using more pressure, I pushed down until the teeth of the saw cut through the bone.

"Excellent," Ben said, taking the saw from me. "Now, let's see what's inside, shall we? You have to get your hands in there if you want to find anything."

My hands shook, not with repulsion but with anticipation shooting through my veins. What would it be like to cut into a live body like surgeons do? Like Father had?

"Now, we remove the organs. Start with the heart," Ben explained. "I'll need the anatomy book; I don't want to damage the vessels. I'll be right back." He went to the back of the room to a pile of books stacked on the floor.

But I didn't need the anatomy book. I had memorized the structure of the heart. Taking the scalpel, I made several careful cuts to sever the small veins and arteries until the organ was freed. I laid the scalpel next to the body, then lifted the heart out with ease.

The size of a large apple, it was grayish in color. No blood dripped. I turned it around to gaze at the underside. *It was beautiful.*