

## Chapter 4

I was pedaling my mountain bike up the driveway, running ideas on the DA's fate through my mind, when Grumpy, my next door neighbor, said, "Dragan, I've been looking all over for you."

"Damn," I said, not meaning to say it out loud.

"Is there a problem?"

Potted plants grew out of his arms. More were amassed alongside his house. I held my breath and soaked up the image. While Nina honed her gardening skills at her folks' more spacious country home, equipped with a greenhouse and an overabundance of gardening tools, I honed mine in our barren yard, equipped with a shovel and a septuagenarian.

I propped the Cannondale against the side of my house. Although I'd found nothing suspicious in the DA's file at the hospital, I planned on doing a second pass before Nina got home at five. A meticulous pass. When she arrived I wanted to devote myself to her.

The last time I spoke to Grumpy, I promised to make myself available for yard work and a barbecue on my next day off—today. I'd broken too many promises lately to break another one, and my injured wrist and knuckles felt well enough for gardening.

"I was trying to figure out what kind of marinade to make."

"Great. I'll bring the plants up and we can start working when you're done marinating." He raised a pot in my direction as if it was important to draw my attention. "By the way, I think I'm ready for one of them cold beers of yours."

I looked toward his living room window.

"Elvira's not home?"

"She's getting her hair done."

It was well known that Mr. McKinnon got, well, grumpy when he didn't have a bottle or glass in his hand when gardening. Not that he had a drinking problem, but his wife, real name Mira—a stricter Mormon than her husband—would argue that even one drink was a drink too many.

"I left you a spanking new bottle of Jack in the tree hole out back."

He stared, confused.

“The big oak tree next to your garage,” I said. “The one providing shade for half the neighborhood.”

“Oh, that one. Well, I feel like something more refreshing.”

“Sure, what do you want?”

He hesitated. Deliberated. “What’s the dark beer they advertise as ‘Can’t have just one’?”

“I think that’s for chips. You probably mean, ‘Why have just one?’”

“What’s it called?”

“Polygamy Porter.”

“Yup, that’s the one. I’ll have one of them.”

I grabbed two bottles from the fridge and shredded my skin trying to twist open what turned out not to be a twist-off cap. It was my own damn fault. I was still beating myself up for caving in to the detective and Eddie, and wasn’t paying attention. They weren’t being fully honest and I couldn’t shake a building sense of foreboding. Nina deserved my attention more than some cop with an ambitious hunch.

Only when I closed the fridge door did I notice the yellow post-it Nina had left.

*Hey Taz, thought I’d save you some time and get that marinade ready for you (it’s got red wine, spices and jalapenos, so it packs a punch). Chicken pieces have been soaking in it since yesterday so they should be pretty juicy. Check the black container, top shelf. You do remember your promise to Grumpy, right? Sure you do (is the sarcasm thing coming through?). Keep the time I saved you for us. Love ya, Red Pants.*

It’s the little things. I wrote “(((Nina)))” on a new square—added a few xs below the hugs—and stuck it on top of hers.

After putting the chicken on the counter, I stepped outside in an old pair of denims and a yellow t-shirt with a Tusker Beer logo—a souvenir from when Nina and I visited Kenya for one of my medical clinics. I balanced Grumpy’s Polygamy Porter on the windowsill. When he noticed, a smile split his face from ear to ear.

Grumpy lined up pots equidistant to one another along the stretch of dirt where I was digging holes. He stood back and gandered, then moved the plants around and repeated the process. His game of musical plants appeared complex considering all I

wanted was something to obscure the concrete patio half wall in front of my house. Green paint would have worked just fine.

I leaned an elbow on the shovel handle and looked at the photocopy of the DA's medical file, which I'd placed on the half wall for easy viewing. Except for a mild heart ailment, Roland Tidwell had an uneventful medical history. The faithful Mormon was zero for three in the common sins department: smoking, alcohol and illicit drugs. Yawn.

Heart troubles were infrequent until about three years ago. His main complaint, a heart that beat irregularly, was bothersome but not life threatening. Dr. Kessler, his cardiologist, had tried several medications in an attempt to re-establish a regular rhythm. He settled on the drug that worked best for the DA, which was derived from the foxglove plant and known as digoxin. Everything was by the book.

Tidwell's blood pressure and cholesterol were on the high side of normal, but normal nonetheless. As a precaution, Dr. Kessler prescribed a special diet and an exercise regimen the DA had promised to follow.

I found myself humming to the old song, "That's the way, uh-uhn, uh-uhn, I like it."

"Dragan," Grumpy called out, "that's quite the pigeon act you got going there with your neck. Maybe the rhythm will make you dig a little faster?"

"Sorry about that. I'll try to keep up."

I savored my Slickrock Lager while my neighbor scratched his chin.

"Is it anything I can help you with, that stuff you're looking at?"

Grumpy was a simple man who thought in linear fashion. Stepwise. Complex equations and quantum theory were not part of his world. It was a big reason I spent so many afternoons with him. Crisscrossing schematics and leaps inhabited my world. Messy.

"As soon as I have a handle on it, I'll make sure to bounce a few ideas off you. In the meantime, help yourself to another beer."

His smile returned. Whether it was the offer of a fresh brew or a chance to help me out, I couldn't tell.

I dug another hole and went back to the DA. He visited the hospital regularly to track his digoxin levels. His arrhythmia was fine until six months ago when the discomfort returned. Dr. Kessler juggled his dose and eventually re-synced his heartbeat.

By the end of my second pass, I still hadn't found anything useful. This wasn't unexpected. A medical file opened a small window into a patient's life—his medical and drug history—as documented by his doctors. Nothing more. Still, I had hoped.

I traded my shovel for an orange desert globemallow—judging by the tag hanging from it—and got down on my haunches. I pried loose a few roots clinging to the soil and shoved the plant into the ground.

“Dragan, you look frustrated. What's it about, the thing you're working on?”

“A cop wants me to look over medical stuff on a dead guy, see if someone missed something.”

“Like murder?”

“Yeah, like that, and I thought if that was the case, I'd spot it right off the bat. But I'm on my second look and I've found squat.”

“The man who died, is it a public person?”

With the DA's death likely the banner of both local papers and the lead story on the news, I should have known better.

Before I had a chance to deflect the conversation, a familiar voice did it for me.

“Hi there, sexy.”

I wiped sweat from my brow and glimpsed Nina through the foliage of the globemallow.

Swaying skirt.

Swinging briefcase.

Shoes clicking with each stride.

Watching her strut up the driveway—the way her carefree nature carried her body—I realized how much I missed spending time with her. A smile grew inside me, matching, I was sure, the one I'd plastered on my face.

“Hi back, gorgeous,” I said.

“Oh! Dragan, is that you? I didn't recognize your butt crack from down here.”

She winked at Grumpy and his face took on the color of her lipstick as he realized she'd bent the gorgeous remark to apply to him.

I stood up, hooked a thumb in a belt loop and scratched my belly. “Well, how close up do you need to be?”

“Let's just say you'd medal at the Plumbers' Olympics.”

With that, she walked over and whispered a few words in my ear and broke for the front door. What words? Let's just say naked and bed were part of the equation—plenty enough to pique my interest.

I watched her go, my heart thumping a little faster. It had to be the sexiest strut ever.

“You know what, Grumpy? I should probably wash up before we eat. What do you say we call it a day?”

“Why not? It's not like you have work on your mind anymore.”

“Good. I'll see you and Elvira at the grill in, let's say, one hour?”

“She's got Bingo with her sister and won't be able to join us. Is that a problem?”

“Only if you consider throwing a couple extra beers in the fridge a problem.”

In the shower, I gave myself the spic-and-span treatment. Nina's words were echoing in my head when she pulled the glass door open and anchored her other hand on the glossy tiles on the opposite side. A daring escape was futile.

I wrung my hair, letting my gaze slide up and down her body. “I wasn't expecting you like this until later.”

“I'm here for water conservation purposes. I'm part of the Sierra Club, remember?”

“Is that code for saying I'm irresistible?”

She hopped the water guard, and lively breasts set my head bobbing. When she noticed, she grabbed a thick fold of my stomach skin, smiled wickedly, and threatened to twist. I'd been waiting all day for a playful moment like this. I pulled her close and we kissed under a stream of warm water. My hands slid down her back and rooted themselves in gluteal flesh. Bad, bad hands.

“Uh-uh, Romeo,” she said, gently pushing me away. “Like I told you outside, I want quality time.”

“Quickies are off the menu?”

“Out!” She playfully smacked my rump, essentially putting the stud business out of business. “You've got chicken to cook and Grumpy's already out there waiting for you or a cold beer.”

I manufactured a frown.

She glided her hands seductively down to her hips. “The night's still young.”

By the time I made it to the patio, Grumpy was dousing the hot coals with lighter fluid.

“I think that’s enough, arson boy.”

I handed him a cold Polygamy Porter and wriggled the grill free of the top slot.

“Sorry about being spacey earlier.” I scrubbed charred residue off the metal mesh with an old abrasive brush. “I have so much stuff to deal with and I let this one with the cops overwhelm me. I’m considering dropping the whole thing and telling them I didn’t find anything suspicious.”

Grumpy gulped his beer and wiped the foam off on his sleeve. “Sometimes, Dragan, when you get too busy with the little things, you should be asking yourself, what big thing are you busy not doing.”

Since Nina and I had decided to have a baby, I’d subconsciously reacted by piling up my workload, by not fighting Eddie’s assignments, and this had taken a toll on our relationship. I wondered how Nina was interpreting my actions, or inactions, as the case might be.

I scrubbed harder.

“I remember the time you saved the Fragile boy’s life.” Grumpy pointed up the road with the beer bottle’s neck. “You fought the paramedics to do it.”

The Fragile kids, as they were universally referred to in the neighborhood, were injury prone. Blackie was a sleepwalker. He’d been spotted roaming the streets at night in his pajamas. A problem arose when he developed an affinity for doghouses, and consequently, dog bites. Whitie, the eldest, enjoyed shedding his clothes in public places. Red bled, Blue bruised. Their father Tony, who owned the local pet shop, brought them to my house for nicks, scrapes and bumps, and the aforementioned bites. As compensation for treating his kids, Tony stocked my aquarium with exotic fish.

Grumpy was referring to Red Fragile, the bleeder.

The previous spring, while Red rode his bike down our street, a drunk driver upended him and fractured his thighbone. I did my best to calm him while we waited for the paramedics to arrive, at which point I stepped back to let them do their thing. It quickly became clear I’d underestimated the severity of Red’s internal bleeding.

I insisted on stabilizing the bleed before the EMTs transported him to the hospital. A little pushing and shoving ensued during the insisting bit and I received a court summons from the state. For my troubles, Tony gave me a brand new aquarium.

I slid the scoured grillwork into the middle slot, still not sure why Grumpy had brought up Red.

“I’m just glad the little rascal lived to bleed another day,” I said.

“Seems to me you’ve taken an oath and you plan on honoring it through thick and thin. I don’t believe you’re as conflicted about this police thing as you think.”

“My oath covers patients while they’re alive.”

“You keep telling yourself that and someday you might actually believe it.”

“What’s the big deal?” I wiped my greasy hands on my t-shirt. “I take a little shortcut and nobody gets hurt.”

“Well, that’s definitely not like you.”

“I’m always looking to save time.”

“Not that, the part about nobody getting hurt.”