

## Chapter 1

I wiggled my fingers. Veins on the back of my hand squirmed like worms on a rainy day. The cute phlebotomist smiled before inserting a needle into a fat one near the inside of my elbow—the antecubital fossa to be exact. Though I tried not to, I flinched.

Shortly after securing the needle with white tape, she loosened the taut strip of amber rubber circling my bicep and wild blood eagerly hurried along the clear tubing and dripped into a sterile bag, each drop destined for a more formidable opponent to tame.

She left to escort an earlier donor from the clinic—a bubbly lady who wore so much wool I half expected her to bleat—and closed the main door behind them.

Inside a small cubical office with the venetian blinds drawn closed, Scarlett’s familiar sultry voice rolled into a laugh. When I heard the muted thump of a phone being placed into its cradle, I cleared my throat.

“Excuse me,” I shouted, putting urgency in my voice. “Is blood supposed to gush out like this?”

Scarlett rushed out of her cubical—bat out of hell style—her red hair flickering flames, and clutched her chest like a mother watching a playful Great Dane knocking her toddler off balance next to a pool.

Terror transformed to worry and, when I twisted my arm to display that blood wasn’t gushing out, her face melted into relief.

“Dr. Dragon Sakic.” She leaned to one side and parked her fists on curvy hips. “I should have known better.”

DRA-gan. With a rolling “r” and a long “a,” the first syllable pronounced with a tongue depressed, say “ah,” sound. Despite many attempts, I’d never been able to outrun the fire-breathing creature.

“What’s my penance? A Hail Mary? Another pint of my life force?”

“How about you give again in fifty-six days and in another fifty-six after that.”

“Holy shit, that’s like, what, three Hail Marys?”

She crafted a little comma with her cheek before pinching my thigh. “Don’t blaspheme.”

“I just wanted to see that beautiful smile of yours. It always makes my day.”

“And you’ve made mine.” She scrutinized my arm and steadied the needle with another length of sticky tape. “Now, tell me, what hast thou done today other than give me a heart attack?”

I gave her an abridged version of the run-in I had at the children’s hospital a few hours earlier.

She rolled a stool next to me, adjusted her lab coat, and nudged her thick-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose. “If the child abuse expert didn’t think she was molested or perverted, or whatnot, why didn’t you believe him?”

“The girl told me otherwise.”

“Why you?”

“That’s an excellent question and if you don’t mind I’d like to keep it for a rainy day. For now, let’s stick to what happened after I got her to open up.”

“Still, I’m curious how you managed to do that. Do you have some special skill this specialist hasn’t been trained in?”

The window behind her framed the Wasatch Mountains. Clouds covered Summit Peak atop Mount Olympus—cotton clouds, maybe wool. But the sun shined around the edges and cast all kinds of colors down the slope: emerald on drab olive, gold on khaki, copper on russet brown. If I wasn’t careful, Scarlett’s persistence would ruffle me like westerly winds rustling nature’s quilt outside.

“It’s not like that,” I said. “I gained her trust and when Psych said she could go home as soon as her cast was set, I got a little upset. I’d just told her to be patient, that I wouldn’t abandon her. That’s when the dirtbag rushed in yelling I had some nerve.”

“What did you expect? He’s her father. By requesting a consult you basically accused him of something horrific.”

“She was holding the bedcovers so tightly I thought her cast would split.” I wriggled in the chair trying to get rid of the numbness running down my leg. “Look, she didn’t want to go back home. Her eyes begged me not to let her go.”

“And you...?”

“For a parent to abuse his own child like that—it chews my guts up. I took him to an empty room to warn him, to tell him I’d be watching, but couldn’t get a word in. Maybe my subconscious was buying time to figure something out.”

“Oh Dragan.”

“You should have seen the look in her eyes. I couldn’t let him take her away.” My hand had balled itself into a fist like it had earlier in the morning. Not wanting to

frighten her, I relaxed my fingers and worked them like I was playing the piano. “How can anyone not do whatever it takes when a child is having his dignity ripped away and trampled on?”

“His?”

“His, hers—does it matter?” I said, more harshly than I intended.

“It’s not for me to judge. I’m trying to understand.” She grasped the elastic bandage wrapped around my wrist and stretched it to cover my swollen knuckles. “What happened next?”

“I convinced her to tell one of the older nurses. She eventually let it all out—things he did to her.”

I had an impulse to tell her what the girl had said, to describe her tears, to justify myself, to sketch out this monster, but what he’d done made me sick. I bit down to keep my lips from trembling.

Scarlett, observant as ever, paused a moment to give my emotions a chance to simmer.

“What’s going to happen now?” she said.

“The nurse backed me up.”

“I meant, what’ll happen to you?”

I’d second guessed my actions. Triple, quadruple guessed. I’d speculated on the girl’s future. The problems she’d face. Her ability to trust. My own well-being hadn’t crossed my mind.

“No one saw me hit him. There are only suspicions.”

“You know, you can’t save—”

“Please, Scarlett. You know it’s not the way it is.”

“The pattern?”

Unable to look into her eyes, I turned my gaze to the window. The cloud cover was now complete, the mosaic gone, the sun missing.