

### Chapter 3

I was glancing over my shoulder at the detective when I entered the ER and ran into Dr. Elysian Fields, my colleague and childhood friend. I'm six two and he towered over me.

Broad shoulders.

Triangular torso.

A swimmer's build.

"Don't you have the day off?" he said.

The lights in the physician's lounge—where I'd been before the detective showed up—flickered. They reminded me I hadn't finished updating the hospital's preparedness protocol. "I'm working on the bioterrorism thing."

"Shit high and gaze." He snuck a glance down the hallway. "Tell the board of directors to kiss your pasty white ass. With the Olympics a distant memory, it's not as if we desperately need to upgrade. We, my child, are currently a Lilliputian speck on the just-released terrorist hit list."

Despite everything going on in the world, Elysian had a point—my project lacked a sense of urgency. In the end, this was Salt Lake City, Utah, home to the world's number one Jell-O eaters, not New York, Los Angeles or some other target-rich American city. If we were in some madman's crosshairs, it would have been back in 2002 when the city was bustling with people from all over the world, here to attend various sporting events.

His argument ignored the operative word: preparedness. And in my case: deadline. "That's not the point—"

"It's precisely the point. Go home. Spend quality time with that beautiful wife of yours."

Nina and I weren't married. He knew this. Either a rant was brewing or he was setting me up for a laugh. "Get it off your chest."

"Aren't you two procreating, trying to bring one of those minuscule sphincter-challenged humanoids into this world?"

"Sphincter-challenged?"

"The three Ps. Puke, pee and poop. Now there's a preparedness issue you need to concern yourself with."

Elysian was raising three daughters from three different mothers, so I supposed he knew what he was talking about. “I’ll keep that in mind, but right now I have other things to do.”

“This protocol you’re working on. That’s your excuse?”

“It’s been hell and our wonderful boss keeps overscheduling me. But it’s not...” I grabbed the shark tooth pendant hanging from my neck and moved to a quiet corner of the ER. “We’ve been trying to conceive for some time now and still no baby. It’s been stressful—”

“Whoa! Stop it right there. Sexual intercourse is stressful to you?”

“Being in baby-making mode, Mr. Political Correctness. Especially since, well, I can’t get the damn stick to turn blue.”

I made a mental note to check with the fertility clinic on how my little swimmers were doing—the ones I’d left them before crossing the street to confess to Scarlett.

“Are you implying you can’t get it up?” he said.

“I was talking about those sticks in pregnancy kits.” I elbow-tapped his ribcage in a good-natured way. “The ones you keep lighting up in neon each time you simply look at a woman.”

He reached around my shoulders and squeezed. “Good one, Mr. Sensitivity.”

From behind Elysian, a voice called out, “As anyone see Dr. Sakic?”

The accent indicated that it was Maurice Tremblay, our clinical pharmacist from the Université de Montréal. I peeked around Elysian. The tonsure-like hairdo confirmed it.

If I made myself visible, I knew I’d spend the next hour going over an unusual medical case instead of updating the preparedness protocol. Unfortunately, I didn’t have an escape route. I stepped out of the cover Elysian provided. “I’m here, Maurice.”

He walked over and looked up at Elysian. “What is up?”

“Excellent choice of words,” Elysian said. “I was just counseling our good doctor here on his erectile dysfunction.”

“Your ting is broken?”

Elysian laughed and then they ended up high fiving each other. I shook my head, unsure what they were amused at, and said, “What do you want, Maurice?”

“Eddie say you know what it is about.” He held out a binder that contained a stack of papers. “He say you talk to a detective. Are you in trouble?”

As the head honcho of the Emergency Department, it was not a good idea to get on Dr. Edmondson's bad side. Those of us already there referred to him as Eddie—the mummy, zombie-like character from Iron Maiden fame. I grabbed the photocopy of the dead district attorney's medical chart from Maurice.

“Which reminds me why I sought you out,” Elysian said. “There's an insidious rumor originating from the children's hospital next door about a physician moonlighting there who rendered the father of one of their patients unconscious. I'm not going to speculate as to whom that doctor might be or how the impaired cognitive state came to be, but I do believe the rumor has infiltrated the administrative offices of this department.”

I turned my back to Maurice and mouthed, “He molested her.”

“If you happen to know said doctor, you might want to warn him so he has some kind of cover to present, other than the banal ‘he molested her’ defense when his superior confronts him. Just sayin’.”

But that was exactly what the dirtbag had done.

Beyond the automatic sliding doors, Eddie was swinging his arm up and down repeatedly as if dealing with several points on a list. The detective stood in front of him motionless, chastised. Since the death of his wife in a freak car accident over the summer, Eddie had been unable to shake off his anger.

Eddie turning down a police matter had me curious. I wanted to find out why he'd volunteered me to the detective and maybe it wasn't too late to talk myself out of it.

“You remember da weird kidney patient?”

I reviewed my options: conversation about my sex life with Elysian, horseshoe kidney with Maurice or confronting Eddie and his wrath.

Thorns, stakes or fangs.

With the back of my hand, I rapped Elysian in the stomach. “See you guys later.”

I got within a few strides of Eddie when he turned abruptly from the detective and stormed past me. After a few steps, he stopped and gave me a good view of his back. “Sakic, try not to embarrass us.”

For the second time, forces beyond my control had hijacked my day and stretched my patience to breaking point. Few words can set off my emotional buttons, but embarrassment, in any of its forms is one of them. It doesn't send me ballistic like other words can, but it does get me fuming inside.

I searched for balance within. The Chinese coined the concept of the “yin and yang” to describe the conflict between opposing cosmic forces, between dark and light, evil and good. I couldn’t help thinking that, in Eddie’s case, his yin got fat off his yang.

“You do a good job on this,” he said, “and in return I’ll see if HR can tidy up some of what’s in your personnel file. How’s that?”

“I’ve had a clean slate and full privileges for the five years I’ve been here.”

This wasn’t entirely true. Moreover, Eddie knew better. He’d written me up on several occasions, but not over anything I minded kicking back in my file. But I wanted to see how he’d react.

Eddie walked over and stood sideways to avoid eye contact.

“Let me get this straight. I’m to assume that, one”—he swung his forearm down—“you’re such a model citizen that our interns and residents should mold themselves after you and two”—he swung again—“you’ve undergone this rather sudden and complete transformation, to the point where I should disregard all your past indiscretions?”

“Well, that’s really the same point made in two different ways. But that’s the gist of it.”

“I’m not the tooth fairy, Sakic.”

It was unlike Eddie to barter. He usually jumped at the chance to get his name in the papers and the death of the district attorney would get him top headlines.

After five seconds that felt infinitely longer, he said, “Sort out the detective’s mess and I’ll handle the fallout from your conduct at the children’s hospital.”

A deaf person watching Eddie’s repetitive display of stop and go, the tomahawking arm and lip service to some non-existent third party could only presume Eddie was an escaped mental patient who’d somehow gotten hold of a lab coat and decided to scalp an imaginary enemy with his bare hands.

Eddie, however, was no lunatic. He held me firmly by the gonads and could squeeze to his heart’s content. Somehow, he’d shown restraint. Too much for someone who knew about my early morning incident at the neighboring hospital. This was not the Eddie I knew. An unknown force had paralyzed his fingers and I meant to find out what it was.

“Besides that, you’ll need to cut my workload to something manageable. Let’s say under sixty hours a week like you promised. What’s more, I want you to approve my teaching appointment. Okay with you?”

I’d been seeking a teaching appointment at the College of Medicine for three years and Eddie had had my application denied each time.

When he kept me waiting for longer than I’d expected, I wondered whether I’d pushed one of his buttons or gone too far. I was scanning the ER for Elysian and Maurice, hoping I could signal them for help, when Eddie’s warm breath caught me in the face.

“Find out what happened to the district attorney and then we’ll talk. And try not to strike anyone in the process.”

I’d ventured into the land of insubordination and come out unscathed. I should have felt good about it, but my stomach spiders were reeling.