

Chapter 5

Grumpy and I watched the glowing coals a while longer.

“When’s your next day off?” he asked. “Maybe we can put a row of firs in the back yard. What do you say?”

Nina had stepped out with a metal plate containing the marinated chicken. We exchanged glances, and before I made another promise I might not keep, she invited him inside for another beer and to help with the salad. My savior.

The chicken pieces sizzled when I slapped them down on the grill. I retrieved the photocopy of Tidwell’s autopsy from my backpack and slid a speaker next to the screen door. With Blue Öyster Cult jamming to “Don’t Fear the Reaper,” I went back to the DA.

The autopsy told the short story of a man gripped by rigor mortis who, three days earlier, had celebrated both his birth and death day. The medical examiner’s account began with an epilogue, suggesting—pending an extended toxicology screen and pathology results—that the district attorney had likely died of natural causes. He surmised a heart condition, an ischemia-induced arrhythmia, had killed him. This meant Tidwell had died of unknown causes, presumed natural, which had starved his heart of oxygen. Suffocated it. Lacking a functional pump, blood ceased to flow. With no oxygen-rich juice streaming through his blood vessels, the dominos continued to topple, knocking off organ after organ. The listed cause of death was also a default postmortem for older men who in life had battled heart disease.

The gross exam was uneventful. The outline of the human body in the file showed no abrasions, punctures, contusions or other abnormalities of the external surfaces. If the DA had been murdered, it basically left poisoning or voodoo.

The internal organs revealed nothing unexpected. His heart was slightly larger than it should have been and one of his coronary arteries was nearly occluded. He’d also gained fifteen pounds in the previous six months. These findings suggested Tidwell had likely strayed from his diet and exercise program.

The first wave of toxicology results were negative, which meant none of the commonly tested substances had contributed to his demise. Everything supported the listed cause of death and nothing hinted at what had set off the detective’s hunch.

I moved on to the laboratory tests. The values were all followed by an N, for normal, except for one. Since no one ever died from having a normal reading, I only had to worry about the H, for high, following Tidwell's digoxin concentration.

At the time of his death, his digoxin—the drug prescribed to control his arrhythmia—was 4.0 nanograms per deciliter, which was twice the upper limit of what's considered therapeutic. Dozens of non-suspicious reasons could explain this value. Ultimately, it was high, but not deadly. The medical examiner had noted this as well. Perhaps Tidwell had passed away of natural causes after all.

That would be neat. Too neat, though, for my messy world.

Nina covered the patio table with a red and white checkered cloth. "Are you about done or are you planning on turning the chicken into charcoal?"

I poked a chicken breast with a large bifurcated fork. "It's probably still pink inside."

"I'll bring the ceramic knives just in case."

"Maybe a hammer and chisel too," Grumpy said from the doorway.

Nina slapped him on the shoulder. "Good one."

I shot him the evil eye. He flipped me off and followed Nina inside. Since I'd found nothing to contradict the medical examiner, I stashed the autopsy report in my backpack.

Nina and Grumpy brought plates, utensils and the salad bowl, and we sat down at the table. A few bites into dinner I had to admit the chicken was on the desiccated end of the moisture spectrum.

"Earthlings to Dragan." Nina tapped her fork on the edge of her plate. "You've been pretty distant."

I forked a cube of Feta cheese. "I was just thinking of something."

"And what would that *something* be?"

"Something we probably shouldn't talk about right now."

"Why not?" She grabbed her wine glass. "I promise I won't bite."

"At least not until her jaw recovers from the chicken," Grumpy said before extracting an oil-soaked clump of bread from the bottom of the salad bowl and stuffing it into his gaping mouth.

Biting was the least of my concerns. I summarized my new assignment, withholding any detail that could clue her in to the victim's identity. No one spoke. No one bit. No sharp knives took to the air.

“But I don’t expect it to take up much of my time,” I added.

My words sounded oddly similar to the ones I’d used three months earlier after Eddie insisted I write up the bioterrorism preparedness protocol for the hospital—a project that remained open. Nina was contemplating far too long for it to be a good thing.

“Well, kids, it’s been wonderful.” Grumpy stood and finished his beer. “You know, I’m not the young and lively buck I used to be. If it’s all right with you, I’m going to call it a night.”

Old geezer.

Once we were alone in the kitchen loading up the dishwasher, Nina said, “Dragan, you’re busy enough as it is. Anything you add to your plate right now is just going to cut into what little time we have together. And I miss spending time with you, whether it’s a few minutes together sipping coffee or an all day hike of the Pfeifferhorn. When did we last have coffee together? For this one time, couldn’t you have just said no?”

Not wanting to mention that Eddie had me by the balls for the incident at the children’s hospital, I improvised. “You know how difficult it is for me to say no. Like...like when you wear that sexy black thing.”

Uncomfortable warmth raced to my cheeks. I might have cringed. It was a poorly timed joke, not to mention a bad one, and I regretted it instantly.

She emitted a sigh laced with anguish. “Well, Dragan, I doubt Dr. Edmondson went prancing around the ER in my nightie when he ask you for this favor.”

My heart sank. It hurt that Nina hurt. It hurt that I was so inept at this. She wanted a normal relationship. A future. I wanted that too, but I wasn’t making it happen.

Since deciding to have a baby, I’d been researching family friendly cars and looking at bigger houses in the canyons. I’d even made a few stops at a jewelry store. I thought of running my hand through her short blond hair and telling her all of this, but I wanted to surprise her about the ring at the right moment.

I’d also done little to fight off the assignments Eddie had given me at work. I feared that if I said anything, I’d probably stick my foot in my mouth again. Hell, I’d probably leave footprints halfway down my trachea.

“You have free will.” She slammed the dishwasher closed. “Use it. You’ve got to stop working yourself to the bone. And for what? That man treats you like shit. Start thinking about yourself. Then maybe you can start giving a damn about us.”

She made so much sense I didn't understand why my tongue formed a knot. By the time I managed to say "I give a damn" she was well on her way to the bedroom. I rubbed my scalp with the same intensity I had the grill earlier. Another confrontation; same result.

I strolled up Harvard under cover of large trees, the same questions as always filling my brain. *What do I want? How can I make it happen?* The answer was always the same—move from words to actions.

After a second excursion around the block, I took the tiled walkway up to the house. The new plants looked great. The decision to shun green paint had been a good one. I grabbed my lukewarm beer from the patio table, settled on the half wall and watched cars cruising along 13th East.

Transferring to one of the valley clinics or working at a smaller hospital would free up some time. Substituting long bike rides and runs with high intensity interval training would create a few more hours a week. I mulled the pros and cons a bit longer and decided I could make it work.

Two tendrils of smoke rose together and intertwined like DNA above the barbecue. "Enough. I get the message."

Through the screen door I noticed my backpack on the sofa. My mind went off on a tangent and triggered my stomach spiders to stretch out their limbs. In medical school we were taught to treat a patient's symptoms, not their laboratory numbers. Perhaps with the dead, numbers took precedence—as symptoms have, well, subsided.

While my precious juice dripped into the plastic bag at the blood clinic earlier in the day, I'd scanned the DA's medical file. I remembered that during his bi-yearly visit with his cardiologist, just two days before he keeled over, his digoxin concentration was listed at 0.25 ng/dL or half what was needed to correct his irregular heartbeat. Dr. Kessler had doubled Tidwell's dose in hopes of striking an effective level. It should have made perfect sense except it didn't.

Taken separately, the slightly high digoxin number at death and slightly low one two days earlier were not lethal. This is why the values by themselves draw little attention.

What if I intertwined them?

I bumped the beer bottle against my teeth. The science was fine, but the math was dead wrong.