

Chapter 2

From the University Hospital ER where I worked, I studied the approaching man with a touch of apprehension.

Gravid jowls.

Dimpled chin.

John Goodman-like.

My mind took me back to Primary Children's ER where I'd moonlighted a few hours before. I'd just finished tending to a twelve-year-old girl with a broken arm, courtesy of her dirtbag father, when said parent slipped and fell, jaw-smack against the edge of a gurney—the solid, stainless steel type with all the contraptions.

This was the tale I shared with the staff at the pediatric hospital. My swollen knuckles told a different story, but I'd kept them hidden inside my lab coat pocket.

The dirtbag's account? Forebrain, midbrain, hindbrain—all essentially mush.

Though I still had misgivings about my conduct, confessing to Scarlett had helped me negotiate with my conscience. After all, I'd defended an innocent girl whose arm and trust had been broken.

The man hung amber aviator sunglasses from his jacket pocket before flashing a worn Salt Lake City PD badge. A surge of Old Spice wafted by and was soon soured by a tidal wave of rank sweat. The shadows under his eyes told me that he, too, could use more sleep.

“Sergeant Davis,” he said, grasping my hand firmly. “Homicide.”

I let go as though he'd palmed razor blades and, as casually as I could, slipped my injured hand into my lab coat pocket like I had earlier at the pediatric hospital. When I'd discharged the dirtbag, the brain mush had already begun to congeal. He didn't remember the straight left to the jaw, but all other tests had come back normal.

When in a bind, deflect. I pointed to the motion-activated doors. “Let's get some air.”

I'd covered all my bases. No witnesses? Check. Housekeeping confirmed the floor was wet? Check. Why did it matter? People slipped all the time.

We left the bactericidal smell of chlorhexidine for the nippy outdoors, and drones of pain for the relaxing chirps of a ruby-crowned kinglet perched on a frontier elm. Respiratory therapists crowded in front of an idling ambulance to smoke cigarettes.

The detective ambled down the walkway while incessantly scratching a patch of red skin on the side of his neck. When we reached a black Chevy Impala parked illegally behind the ambulance, he placed a hand on the roof. "Listen, I've got a situation."

"You know what, Sergeant? When someone walks into the ER with a situation, more often than not I end up shooting penicillin into one of their butt cheeks. Somehow, I doubt that's why you're here."

I folded my arms across my chest and kept quiet, not wanting to add anything incriminating.

He shifted his bulk from one leg to the other. "Three nights ago, Roland Tidwell died."

The detective was spinning a different story, one that made no mention of bandaged knuckles or unconscious fathers in pediatric hospitals. I sat on the ambulance's rear bumper and leaned against the back doors. Except for a brief excursion to fertility and blood clinics, I'd been cooped up at work for the past forty-eight hours with no access to TV and done little internet surfing on my smartphone other than glance at hockey scores.

"And that involves me how?"

"Listen, I'm suspicious of his death. Not that he died, you understand? Anybody can die." He poked my chest with a stout finger. "Because this is a high-profile case, the medical examiner's office jumped on it quickly. The preliminary report suggests our DA died of a heart attack. It's just too neat, too convenient."

"That's quite a hunch," I said, rubbing my sternum. "Do you have anything to back it up?"

"Nothing that wouldn't cause a political Civil War. I'd like to move with caution and have a few facts before I pull the trigger. That's where you come in."

He kneaded his thighs as if red ants were marching up his legs. I got the impression that had the detective's spiel been on paper, all the good stuff would have been blacked out. I pushed off the bumper. "Can't help you, Sergeant. I fear you've wasted your time."

"Hold your mules, Doc. I'd like to get a second opinion. If this thing is what I think it is, then someone at the ME's office has—"

"Fucked up?"

His eyebrows collided. Mid-thigh, I noticed, embossed lines of Mormon undergarments pushed through his trousers. On a typical day, I would have tested the waters before going *au naturel* with my vocabulary, but today's circumstances had shoved me right in.

"I have a concern I'd like to share with you," I said. "The DA and my girlfriend's father, who's a well-known criminal defense lawyer, never saw eye to eye. Their relationship was quite mean spirited, to say the least. So, I'm not sure it's in my best interest to get involved in any of this."

"All I want you to do is look at the ME's report. Just look. That's it. No one has to know you're involved in any of this and then I'm out of your hair forever."

"How about the ME in Provo?"

He crossed his arms like I had a moment ago, effectively reversing our roles.

Being asked to tease out whether the ME had screwed up put me in a bind. Although I didn't know him personally, we were both physicians and by extension shared a professional relationship.

Then again, he'd apparently found nothing suspicious during the autopsy, so I presumed my review of his report wouldn't be time-consuming and I could promptly return to the other things I had no time to do either. Best thing, Nina and her father would never have to know.

"I make no promises, but I'll give it a quick look."

"You can do a whole lot better than that, Doc."

"What are you talking about?"

"Dr. Edmondson promised meticulous."

My boss typically insisted on handling police matters and he'd recently promised to cut back my hours. Damn Edmondson. I considered it a hobby of his to delegate such tasks over to me. I should be used to it by now, but he had me grinding my molars.

"I keep telling him not to make promises I can't keep," I said, "but do you think he listens?"

The detective reached into the back seat of the Impala, apparently not listening either, and came out with two folders.

"This is a copy of the preliminary autopsy and this one's my notes. Dr. Edmondson will get you our DA's medical file. So, that's everything you need to get started." He displayed rows of ivory-white teeth and pulled a card out of his jacket

pocket. “If you have any questions—rain or shine, day or night—call me. Use the number I circled in red and ask for Chester. That’s me, okay? It’s important you only talk to me. No one else. Got that?”

Holding on to the corners of his card as if it had been soaked in urine, I said, “Understood, Chester,” while thinking, How the hell am I going to get out of this?