

chapter 1

Thursday, February 8

“Dad, I’m afraid.”

“I know, sweetheart, but I’m right here. I won’t let you go through this alone.”

Doctor Peter Croft snuggled closer to his son on the stiff hospital bed, spooning the boy’s wasted body against his own. It would be only a matter of minutes now.

“What if I fall asleep?”

“I won’t move from this spot, David. I swear.”

“Okay, Dad. ’Cause I’m really tired.”

The boy drew a ragged breath and Peter could hear the fluid that saturated his lungs, a wet crackle under the steady hiss of oxygen. Drowning him.

David adjusted the green oxygen mask on his face, rubbing at the reddened furrows the rigid plastic had dug next to his nose. Peter watched his son’s movements, the huge effort it cost him to simply raise his arm, and the terrible loathing he felt for God rose to his throat in a barely suppressed roar.

He glanced at the door to the private room, securely locked now from the inside. The drugs he would need were in his hip pocket, already mixed in a single syringe. He’d taken them from the OR days ago, when he made his decision.

“Dad?”

“Yeah, little buddy?”

“Can you tell me a story?”

“Sure,” Peter said. He came up on one elbow, leaning over his son so he could see the boy’s face. “Had a little doll, stuck it on the wall, and that’s all.”

And there it was, the tiny smile he'd hoped for. It was a 'story' his grandfather had told him, a man Peter barely remembered. Peter had used it many times on David when he was younger, glad now for the hundreds of nights he'd lain next to the little guy, coaxing him off to sleep. *Lie down with me, Dad? Just for two minutes?*

David was almost ten now, two days away from a birthday he would never see. Peter had arranged a small party for him last weekend, right here in the room, inviting a few of his closest pals from school, telling David they were doing it early this year because his best friend, Thomas, couldn't make it any other time. The kids came bearing gifts and good intentions, but when they saw David, how much he'd deteriorated in the weeks since they'd last seen him, things quickly turned awkward. With surprisingly adult grace, David let the boys off the hook, saying he was too tired to spend more than a few minutes with them. Two of them were in tears before they reached the hallway.

"A real story, Dad. Something funny."

"Okay, let me think." But his mind was a black pool of despondency, and when he reached in for something to say he came up empty.

David said, "Remember when I cut my head?"

And miraculously Peter laughed out loud. He reached over his son's shoulder to show him the index finger of his right hand. "How can I forget?"

David took his father's hand in his own, gently rubbing the unnaturally smooth pad of Peter's finger, and Peter thought of how precious those little hands were, the instruments of his son's industry and curiosity, the parts of him Peter had enjoyed most when David was a baby.

"That was pretty funny, eh, Dad?"

“It sure was.” Though neither of them thought so at the time. Four years ago David had struck his head on the edge of the coffee table and opened a small gash. Typical of scalp lacerations it had bled like crazy, and in a barely restrained panic David’s mother, Dana, had pleaded with Peter to rush him to the ER for stitches. Wanting to avoid the unpleasantness of the experience for his son, Peter had decided to deal with the problem on his own.

“You had that glue stuff in your first-aid box,” David said. “Remember?”

“Derma-Bond. Yeah, I remember.”

“You called it human glue.”

“Was I lying?”

David released a small, asthmatic chuckle. “Nope.”

Peter had calmly reassured Dana, telling her stitches were overkill, he’d have their son fixed up in a jiffy. The look she’d given him should have been enough, but by now he was on a mission.

The bio-glue was expensive stuff, and though he’d never actually used it himself, he’d heard the ER docs sing its praises. Besides, how hard could it be? He’d bought a tube of it for this very reason. So with Dana standing over him, fidgeting and huffing, and David sitting stock-still on a kitchen stool, he’d gone to work.

Now David coughed, a wracking wet hack, and Peter held him and felt tears sting his eyes. They were huddled together on a cliff-edge, clutching each other for dear life, trying not to look down.

The cough subsided and David said, “It was a pretty cool idea, though.”

“I suppose.”

Peter had squeezed a small amount of the stuff on the wound edges, coaxed them together with the tip of his finger and smiled—a little smugly—at Dana.

David was chuckling again. “You glued your finger to my head.”

Peter laughed now, too, a tear tracking warmly down one cheek. David wasn’t kidding. He *had* glued himself to his son’s head. For keeps. Like crazy glue, only worse. No matter how hard he tried, he could not free his finger. Dana’s renewed efforts to get them to the ER were met with even more vigorous resistance from Peter, who could only imagine the ribbing he’d suffer at the hands of his colleagues if he showed up at the hospital glued to his son’s head.

David said, “Get a razor blade, hon,” mimicking his dad’s deep voice, his desperate solution on that ridiculous day. “Cut us apart.”

Peter said, “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you.”

Dana got a razor all right, and she did cut them apart—but the first time David even squeaked the blade began to err on the side of Peter’s flesh, Dana’s gaze warning him that if he made so much as a peep she’d separate the two of them at the first knuckle.

David caressed his Dad’s fingertip, his weak chuckles fading. “Your fingerprint never grew back,” he said.

“Don’t imagine it ever will.”

David fell silent now, and Peter could feel the light mood slipping away as irretrievably as his son’s life.

Leukemia. A cold bullet of a word born of a nose bleed that wouldn’t stop. A month of aggressive, crippling chemo. A brief remission and then relapse. A fucking nose bleed in a kid who

only six months ago could do fifteen chin-ups and run like the wind.

So much suffering. But it would be over soon.

“Will I see Mom?” David said. “When I die?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. I hope so.”

At the urging of a counselor they’d discussed death openly in the weeks leading up to this day, but this was the first time David had asked about his mom. Dana had died a month to the day following the bio-glue fiasco, slamming face first into a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table, an aneurysm in her brain choosing that comic moment to claim her life. Peter had almost roared with laughter before he realized she wasn’t kidding. Thankfully David had slept at his cousin’s the night before. Telling him had been the hardest thing he’d ever done. Until now.

Strangely, he recalled something he’d overheard an OR nurse say when she thought he was out of earshot. His son had been diagnosed only the week before.

How much misery can one man endure?

Peter thought: *No more.*

“I love you, Dad,” David whispered. “And don’t worry, I’m not afraid anymore.”

Then he stopped breathing.

With a steady hand Peter took the syringe from his pocket, poked the needle into the plump vein in the crook of his arm and injected a lethal mix of morphine and muscle relaxant into himself. Then he tightened his grip on David’s limp body and in seconds he stopped breathing, too.

Wherever his son was going, Peter was going with him.

* * *

Peter Croft awoke in a dark, strange room, groggy and disoriented. David was spooned against his chest, trembling

uncontrollably, his cotton pjs matted with sweat. They were on a narrow bed—the top section of a child’s bunk bed, Peter realized—and as he lifted his head to speak to his son, David’s clammy hand tightened on his encircling arm.

“Shh,” David whispered, and Peter realized his son was terrified. The terror burned in his flesh like dry fire and now Peter was terrified, too. The feeling was pure and elemental, but without focus, coursing into Peter as if they shared the same skin, the same racing heart.

“David...?”

“*Shh.*”

His son’s voice was a low hiss and Peter realized that he had never experienced such utter, unmaning fear. He was paralyzed, only his eyes moving in concert with his son’s to focus on the dull brass gleam of the doorknob across the room.

The door inched open on silent hinges and Peter felt the air leave his lungs. Now a figure appeared in the doorway, its shadow long and bulking in the dim light from the hall, and Peter smelled something primal infect the homey scent of this room...the musty reek of pelt, wet with the blood of a recent kill.

Dense and faceless the shape moved, gliding toward them in the chancy light. Peter felt his son’s fingernails dig stinging crescents into the skin of his forearm. He wanted to move, to protect his son, but he was unable. His nerves had come unstrung.

He blinked sweat from his eyes and now the figure was *right there* and Peter felt his son wrenched away, replaced by twin impacts around his heart like the hooves of a raging stallion. He opened his mouth to scream David’s name and felt something snake into his throat, muting him. Far off, he heard a single, frantic word—*Clear*—then there was nothing.

* * *

Dr. Lisa Black felt her own heart race even as Peter Croft's stubbornly approached death on the pediatric bed in front of her. He had progressed from V-tach to V-fib in spite of a series of shocks and two boluses of adrenalin, and that surprised her. When she had security unlock the door, less than five minutes ago, Peter's color had still been reasonably good, his pulse irregular but strong. She should have been able to get him back with the first shock—he was healthy as a horse, a runner, slim and muscular—but his heart was behaving like that of a much older man. The exhaustion he'd suffered through the ordeal with his son, though severe, wasn't enough to explain it. Maybe it was whatever he'd given himself. As an anesthesiologist hell-bent on self destruction, his choices of lethal cocktail were many. From his totally flaccid state Lisa was betting he'd used a combination of a long-acting muscle relaxant and a narcotic or hypnotic. That would have led to an abrupt respiratory arrest followed by the arrhythmia she was currently attempting to reverse. Every instinct told her she'd reached him before irreversible harm could be done, and yet he was completely unresponsive. It was almost as if his desire to die with his son had instilled itself in his physical heart too, as if his body was simply refusing to go on.

"Give him three hundred of Amiodarone," Lisa said to the resident assisting her in the resuscitation, then charged the defib paddles and positioned them again on Peter's chest. "*Clear,*" she said and discharged the paddles. Peter's upper body arched off the bed, froze there briefly then fell flaccid again.

Lisa checked the monitor. Still in V-fib.

"Come on, Peter," she whispered. "Don't do this."

"Lidocaine?" the resident said.

“Do it.”

As the resident injected the drug Lisa glanced at David’s pale, wasted body, stretched out on a gurney where they’d lain it, the morgue crew attending to it now. Then she looked back at Peter, his shirt torn open to expose his chest, dark blood still tricking from the injection site in his arm, the discharged syringe lying next to him on the bed. She should have seen this coming, should have acted sooner. Peter had asked her to give him a few minutes alone with his son after the remote monitors went flat. As David’s physician she’d had the power to grant that wish, not an uncommon one, but her instincts had twitched at the resolute expression that had hardened Peter’s eyes when she agreed. She’d known Peter since med school, had dated him briefly early in their respective residencies, and though they’d decided they were a better fit as friends, she knew the man well. Knew how much his son meant to him. She’d been sitting at the bank of monitors at the nursing station when David’s vitals faltered then flat-lined, and had lingered there for at least two minutes, torn between her promise to her friend and the growing certainty that something terrible was going on in that room. Then a nurse had approached her on another matter, breaking the spell, and Lisa jumped out of her chair shouting, “Get security up here *now*,” then dashed down the hall to David’s door, David’s locked door, and she’d known it and had simply sat there on her backside.

Lisa refocused her attention on the resuscitation. Peter was still in V-fib.

“Okay,” she said, recharging the paddles, “I’m going to shock him again. *Clear*.”

Peter’s body bucked, the muscles in his chest bulging into tortured striations.

And the resident said, “Good job, Lisa. You got a rhythm.”

“Alright,” Lisa said, watching the morgue attendants wheel David’s sheeted form out of the room, “let’s get him to the unit.”

* * *

Consciousness came all at once, a dash of cold water in the face, and Peter sat bolt upright in his ICU bed, a violent birth from a darkness that was vast and barren. In that first instant he knew only terror, the details of his life erased by it, and he lashed out against it, ripping the IV from his arm, dislodging the tube from his throat to give voice to his scream. His first awareness was that of hands pressing him down, and overlapping voices, and though his eyes were open he could discern only shape and shadow.

“David?” he said, his voice a dry rasp, his eyes wild now, leaking pain. “*David?*”

“Peter, it’s Lisa.”

A familiar voice, silencing the others.

“Please, try to stay calm.”

The hands restraining him relaxed and he sagged back on his elbows, his gaze focusing on Lisa. She was a touchstone in the midst of his confusion and he let her words guide him the rest of the way back into the world. His last clear recollection was of trying to think of a story to tell David. The rest was a swirl of muddy water. “You’re in ICU,” Lisa was telling him, and now he could see that he was. He lay back against the pillow. “You’re going to be fine.”

“What happened? Where’s David?”

He watched Lisa turn to the other people in the room—staff members, Peter realized, concerned faces resolving into familiarity—heard her say, “Leave us.”

When they were alone Lisa sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand. In this merciful fog of amnesia and bewilderment, Peter managed a wan smile.

“Did I have an accident? There’s no pain.”

Lisa squeezed his hand. “Peter, David’s dead. He passed just over an hour ago.”

“That can’t be.” He was up on his elbows again, his eyes glazing over. “They promised to call me...I wanted to be with him.”

“You were with him, Peter.”

And even before she said it he remembered David’s last little smile, his breathless reassurance that he was no longer afraid, then the sting of the needle and his unspoken promise to his son, to follow him into the unknown, to protect him if he could. After that there was nothing.

He looked into Lisa eyes. “You said you’d leave me alone with him.”

“Peter, I—”

“You promised. You fucking *promised* and now he’s out there all alone...”

Lisa got to her feet, jerking her hand from the tightening vise of Peter’s fist.

“How dare you,” he rasped, struggling in his weakened state to climb out of bed. “You had no *right*.” Then he was over the edge, crashing to the floor beside the bed, an IV pole laden with med pumps tipping into the monitors. He continued to rail against Lisa even as the staff lifted him onto the bed, restrained him and drugged him back into oblivion.

When he was quiet Lisa fled the unit in tears. It would be months before Peter spoke to her again.