

### Chapter Three: Life-Care Hospital

It's rare for me to pass out during a migraine. But it happens. Like today.

As I lay on the waiting room floor, I felt the gaze of many as I slowly pried open my eyes and tried to prop myself up on a wobbly elbow. "What happened?" I asked Sasha. The whoosh of sliding glass doors opening and closing reverberated in my brain. Pungent antiseptic smells assaulted my nose and traveled to my throat. Someone was vomiting in the distance and my stomach churned in response.

"You fainted." Sasha reached down to help me up, then turned to the nurse. "She won't need smelling salts after all."

Still light-headed, I sat on a metal chair with thin padding. I had ignored an impending migraine, and the day's stress heightened its fallout. Dang it. "Where is my purse?"

"In my truck. You need your meds?"

I nodded. The sight of the Styrofoam cups with their dregs of coffee and the crushed fast-food wrappers on the coffee table brought on a wave of nausea. The sooner I absorbed the triptan, the more likely I'd calm the full-blown headache with its concurrent queasiness.

"Stay put. I'll get it." In her rush, Sasha nearly bumped into Sheriff Nika Marx. After apologizing to the sheriff, she waved at me as she mouthed, "I'll be right back." This wasn't the first time she had seen me incapacitated by a migraine.

Nika chatted with the armed guard before approaching. She and I had been friends since grade school, and had been college roommates at UW-Eau Claire. Both of us majored in criminal justice and completed Police Academy. Hers became a full-time career. Mine changed direction when my family needed me to help at the winery.

Nika collapsed on the puny love seat that matched my uncomfortable chair. Even though we were close to the same height and build, it was hard to tell when she wore her duty holster and gear. Slender, but not thin. Solid triceps and biceps—more physically fit than sexy. She'd just celebrated her 48th birthday and mine was around the corner. She scared the bejesus out of lawbreakers. But now she exhibited her compassionate side. "You don't look so good."

"Migraine," I whispered.

I buried my eyes behind my hands to block out the light. Sounds remained amplified. A mother comforted a crying baby in a language I didn't recognize. Coins clanked in a vending machine, followed by the pop and fizz of a soda can being opened. I took deep breaths, willing my body to relax and the pain to subside.

Sasha returned and handed me the purse. With eyes cracked open a sliver, I downed the medicine. I leaned against the back of the chair and allowed my lids to sink for a quick nap. A short time later, Sasha's voice penetrated my consciousness. "The doctor's coming."

We rose to greet a man who looked as young as my children. (Of course, everyone looked young to me now.) The name tag identified him as Carlson. He spoke first. "I understand you were the good Samaritans who called 9-1-1." Spooked by Nika's uniform, he stiffened into a by-the-book bureaucrat. "Is there something I should know?"

Nika relaxed her stance. "I'm just following up on this as part of my accident report. Go on."

"I'm Dr. Carlson." We exchanged names, and he continued. "As you know, the patient incurred multiple bee stings before you performed CPR. He appears to be stable."

“Can I talk to him?” Nika asked.

“He’s still unconscious. We’re trying to reach family members.”

My migraine pain dropped a smidgen and the brain fog was lessening. “Unconscious? Is that normal? What’s the expected duration of the coma?”

Dr. Carlson hesitated longer than was comfortable. “I’m afraid I can’t say anything more without violating HIPAA.”

Nika fished a card out of her pocket and handed it to him. “Please call this number when he wakes up. We’d like to ask him a couple of questions.”

Carlson nodded as he accepted the business card. “Your best bet is to leave a message at the nurse’s station. They can note it in his records. Is there anything else?” After Nika shook her head, the doctor exited the waiting area.

“What was that about?” I asked Nika. “Do you suspect it wasn’t an accident?”

She squirmed and shifted her weight. “Sorry, but I gotta ask you this. Were you aware of Taylor’s allergy?” She directed the question at both of us.

“No,” Sasha and I answered in unison. I glanced toward Sasha, remembering her cryptic whisper about my bees solving the problem with Zach Taylor. Why had she lied to the sheriff?

Nika maintained a deadpan expression, her short brown hair framing an average face. “Can you walk me through everything you were doing, leading up to finding him?”

“Are we suspects?” I knew Nika was only doing her job, but the questions still hurt.

“I’m just trying to understand the timing. Where was everyone? Why was Taylor in your parking lot so early that day? How did he get multiple bee stings when he wasn’t near the beehives?”

I summarized the events of the morning. House creaks waking me up. An unplanned trip to the vet. How we discovered Zach Taylor’s body on the ground.

Nika chewed a hangnail. “We haven’t moved his car yet.” She rubbed the finger around the area she had been chewing. “We found an empty Ambien bottle, pesticide, and several dead bees in his vehicle.”

My migraine had subsided to a dull, tolerable ache. It still hurt, but I felt functional at a slow speed. “Was he trying to kill my bees?”

“It’s hard to imagine that a person with a severe allergy to stings would have a bunch of bees in his car.” She stood up.

“Wait. There was something I didn’t understand when I searched for an Epi-Pen.” I massaged my temples, trying to bring a thought from the back of my brain to the front. Then the welt from a bee sting on my forearm reminded me. “I saw a deformed soda bottle on the floor, with an upside-down top stuffed into the bottom half. It reminded me of the homemade bee traps I’ve seen online. People who want to kill nuisance bugs cut off the top, bait the bottom with sugar, then staple the top on upside down. The funnel provides a way in, but once inside, bees become disoriented or so focused on the reward they forget about escaping.”

Nika sat back down. “Are you suggesting someone deliberately planted bees in Taylor’s car?”

“I don’t know. Sounds far-fetched.” My head throbs jumped up a notch.

“Think, Alexi, think. Could someone, theoretically, attach the top in such a way to catch bees, then detach it to release them?”

“Maybe it broke off that way.” I gazed over her shoulder, trying to create a mental picture of the back of Zach’s car. “My head hurt, and I was worried about Wolf, and I found an unconscious person in my parking lot. I wasn’t thinking straight then, and I’m still foggy now.”

“If someone knowingly exposed Taylor to trapped bees, it means aggravated assault or attempted murder. Or worse. We’ll need to explore that theory. None of my guys mentioned a strange liter bottle, but I’ll double check. Based on what you said, I’m inclined to treat this as suspicious.” She pushed herself up again. “I’ll be right back. It looks like a staff change at the nurse’s station and I want to be sure they have my number.”

Sasha searched on her phone for information on homemade bee traps, then aimed her screen toward me. “This looks like what you described. Gobs of places on the Internet teach how to make them.”

After a quick glance, I pulled her phone closer to inspect the photo. I scrolled through a few articles. “They sure are easy to put together. But I thought they were for *killing* bees rather than *moving* them.”

“Hence Nika’s uncertainty. As simple as bee traps are to assemble, no one is going to make one on a whim. Beekeepers likely know what they are, even if they never used them.”

I nodded. “Can you single out any beekeeper with a Zach Taylor animosity?”

Sasha shook her head. “Not really. I know only a couple of hobbyists.”

“Any bearing a grudge against developers?”

“Not to this extent.”

The bee trap debate ended with a tap on my shoulder. As I turned around, I had to arch my neck up to see my daughter’s 6’2” boyfriend. Brendan Peterson was a clinical lab science major with an internship at the hospital for the summer. He and my daughter Tiffany have dated for over a year. They tried to get together each weekend. “Hi, Alexi. I thought that was you. What are you doing in the emergency room?” Concern crossed his face, and the scar on his neck became more visible.

After assuring him Tiffany and I were fine, I supplied a condensed, and somewhat disjointed, version of the morning’s events.

“Zach Taylor almost died?” Bug-eyed, Brendan drew in a breath and expelled it in a whoosh.

“You know him?”

He winced and jiggled something metallic in his pocket. “He was my Big Brother when I was in middle school.” An uncomfortable silence followed. Brendan’s gaze shifted to the floor before he glanced at his watch. “I better get back to work. If I don’t complete my lab time, my grade will suffer. Hope everything works out.”

Brendan loped across the waiting room, the squeak of his shoes fading down the hallway.

“He left in a hurry,” I said to Sasha. Still hit with stabs of headache pain, I slunk further into the chair. “Weren’t you involved in Big Brothers Big Sisters?”

“Yeah. Eight to ten years ago. I didn’t know Brendan or Zach then, although I recall a rumor about some kid being in a developer’s will. The kid’s grandmother had moved him here to get away from some Chicago gang.”

“You think Brendan might be in Zach Taylor’s will?”

“I don’t know. It was a rumor.”

“Did Zach ever have kids? I mean, before he moved here.”

Sasha squeezed her left eye as she raised her right eyebrow. (Yup, the Sasha squint.) “Not that I know of. Why?”

“Just wondering who else might be in the will.” I sneezed and yanked a tissue from my purse, dislodging a sheet of paper.

“You dropped something,” Sasha said as she picked up the note. “Is that the family tree Tiffany was working on?”

Thinking about my daughter exploring my heritage brought a smile to my face. “It is. Tiffany loves anthropology and sociology and genealogy, and even gave me one of those DNA kits for Christmas. She and Brendan pitched in together for the kit. She keeps bugging me for any old documents that might be in the house.”

“What did she find out so far?”

“She got as far as my 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> great grandparents on my mother’s side. Those are her scribbled notes from her last visit home.”

Sasha examined the page she was still holding. “It looks like she got farther than that. Have you even glanced at this?”

“Hey. Gimme a break. I had to rehearse for a play, including escaping on a horse with Zach. And I had to work with a new intern at the beehives. And I had to run a winery. And—”

Sasha cut me off. “Got it. I just mean, did you notice she traced your lineage back to Salem, Massachusetts?” She pointed to one of the scribbled nodes on the family tree.

“Huh. I did *not* notice that. I’ll have to dig into it when things settle down.”

My cell’s ringtone interrupted the conversation. It was Tony, my dog’s vet. I almost dropped the phone in my haste to answer. “How’s Wolf?”

“Well, good morning to you, too.” The smile in Tony’s voice calmed my nerves. “He’s resting well. It looks like he got into some zolpidem and it knocked him out.”

“What’s zolpidem?”

“The generic drug in Ambien. You never told me you have insomnia.”

“I don’t. And never have.” Nika’s voice flashed through my mind. *We found an empty Ambien bottle, pesticide, and several dead bees.* Zach Taylor had the drug in his car.

“Wolf vomited most of what was in his system. I gave him activated charcoal to prevent further absorption, since we don’t know how much he ingested. I’d like to keep him overnight for observation.”

“How much would be lethal?” I provided a condensed version of the day’s events, ending with the discovery of the empty prescription pill container. “The bottle was empty.”

“Holy moly, you’ve had quite a day. In answer to your question, I can’t tell you the precise amount that would be deadly. But the tox screens show Wolf is not in danger at this point.”

“Thanks, Tony.” I gave a thumbs-up gesture to Sasha as relief coursed through my veins. My headache dropped another notch. I ended the call.

“Do Tiffany and Josh know about Wolf? Even though they’re in college, they both love that dog.”

“Sasha, you’ve been with me every minute. I’ve been rather busy.” I flashed my best migraine-impaired smile. (That means it hurt to smile.) “I’ll call them tonight.”

Nika returned. “You’re grinning like the Cheshire cat. What happened?”

“I talked with Tony. Wolf’s going to be okay.” The three of us high-fived. “But,” I said, pausing with a raised index finger for dramatic effect, “someone drugged Wolf. Could’ve been Taylor.” Even as I spoke the words, something told me Taylor wasn’t responsible. A little voice in my head, my gut feel, confirmed that thought.

Nika interlaced the fingers of her hands and stretched them palms down. “There’s no evidence of that. Remember, you found Taylor’s car *after* you came back from the vet, right?”

“But it’s possible.” Sasha scowled, ending with her trademark Sasha squint. “What if Taylor gave the stuff to Wolf and kept his car hidden? Taylor probably wanted Wolf out of the way so he could kill Alexi’s bees and get her to sell. That’s what the pesticide was for.”

Nika sighed, rather theatrically. “Wolf was inside the house with the door locked, wasn’t he? Let’s not jump to conclusions.” Her beeper squawked, and she stepped aside for a private conversation, muttering something ominous. She barked out a command and returned her attention to us. “Please avoid making accusations before we have the facts.” The sliding doors hissed open and shut as she left.

A janitor was collecting abandoned food and drink containers and emptying trash into his rolling cart. The clock on the wall above his head displayed the time: 12:30 p.m.

I gave Sasha a wan smile. “There’s no reason for us to stay here any longer. Time to return to Bliss Creek and salvage today’s business. Customers hate it when they find the shop closed during advertised hours of operation. Ryan’s note may have blown away by now. I didn’t put an additional note in the window when we found Zach.”

“I called Cathy while we were waiting. She assured me everything was under control and there’s no major rush for us to get back. Mariama’s helping her.”

“Thanks.” I mentally sent a note of gratitude to my wine-maker and intern. With luck, I’d be over the migraine before we returned to the winery. “Why was Mariama at the winery today?”

“Cathy and I assumed she has a flexible schedule.” She kneeled with her face right in front of mine, voice pleading. “Can we please, please stop for lunch first? I didn’t have breakfast and I’m starving. Soon the left-over trash on the tables will appeal to me.”

“That’s a big yuck. Okay, next stop, the Sunflower.” Our resident psychic owned the Sunflower Café and Bakery, Gaia’s gossip central. I was curious how much Luna had heard about the day’s events.

Besides, I was eager to get her opinion on cold drafts, steps creaking in the middle of the night, and if ghosts were real and dreams were prophetic. I also wanted to know if Luna had an ulterior motive for her selection of *The Bee Keeper’s Secret* for this month’s theater production.