

Chapter Seventeen: Family Drama

Taylor stomped to the winery entrance and pounded on the door. The vibrations rattled the pictures on the wall. "Alexi! You're the one who sent that text," he slurred. "Open the door."

"What should I do?" Sasha asked. "He's drunk. I've never seen Zach so out of control."

I cracked open the door to peek over her shoulder. A blue truck, parked haphazardly, sat in the lot with the driver's door ajar. The Michigan license plate was the first tip that this Taylor was Zach's twin brother, Chris. I faced an angry man in rumpled clothing, his hair disheveled and his shirt untucked. It was a stark contrast to the impeccably polished look he had sported earlier that day for his TV interview with Ken Pike.

My heart felt like it would thump its way out of my chest as Zach's brother lumbered through the door. Was his Superman-blue truck a coincidence?

"Chris, what's going on? Why are you here?" I tried to calm my voice, but couldn't control the quiver.

"I'm here because this is your fault." His gaze fixated on me. "All your fault."

I braced against the wall to steady myself. Had Zach died? Had the crisis escalated from yellow to red?

Chris wobbled past Sasha toward me. "Zach's still in a coma because he came to talk with YOU. And you pretending to be the hero with your CPR and hiding behind your sheriff friend." With index finger and thumb shaped like a gun, eyes drawn into slits, he clicked his tongue. I jerked a chair between us, and he crumbled into it.

As Chris rambled on, I slid my phone toward me and texted Nika. "DRUNK CHRIS TAYLOR AT THE WINERY."

"WE'RE ALMOST THERE, ANN," came the quick response from Nika's phone. Who the heck is Ann?

I held Chris down on the chair with both hands and stared into his bloodshot eyes. "Chris, I can tell you're worried about your brother. Believe me, so am I, but I did not send the text to Zach."

"That journalist—what's her name, Flo or Fel-something—said it came from your phone."

"It did. I didn't send it and I'm not aware who did. That's the whole truth and nothing but the truth."

Chris glared at the three of us. "Do any of you really know Zach? He's my brother... A good guy...Doesn't deserve this." His eyes grew heavy, tears cascading down his face, and his head wobbled from side to side.

"Chris, tell us about your brother," I said. "We'd love to know him the way you do."

He stared at the ground, then slowly raised his head. "When we were kids, I was always pulling pranks on people and blaming Zach...We looked alike...We fought...I loved him...Everybody loved him." He continued to reminisce in broken sentences and no consistent train of thought. His aura shifted from anger to sadness.

What was taking Nika so long?

My cell phone buzzed with another text, this time from my daughter's boyfriend, Brendan. I reminded everyone Brendan interned at the hospital before I read the text aloud. "Zach came out of the coma two hours ago."

Chris pushed himself up, clutching the chair to stay upright. "I have to get back to the hospital." He trudged toward the door.

"You're not driving anywhere." Nika blocked the exit. "Here is someone who will take you."

Ann Taylor emerged from behind Nika. "I'm sorry. This isn't like my son. Chris has been under a lot of stress, worried Zach would never wake up. He left for a walk long before Zach's coma broke." She walked over and gave Chris a bear hug. With both hands on his face, she focused on him. "That's when I started looking for you. I worried you might come here and blame the winery and..." Her voice trickled off, suggesting there had been an implied threat.

"How is Zach?" I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Mrs. Taylor allowed a tentative smile to soften the stress-lines in her face. "He's alert. He remembers nothing since Sunday, but the doctors hope the amnesia is temporary." She braced her son up and moved toward the door, pausing. "Chris and Zach aren't just twins. They're part of triplets. Our third son died during a political protest. Chris opposed Zach getting into politics. He and Zach argued about it on Saturday, their birthday."

"Triplets?" I asked.

Ann appeared distant with a faraway look in her eyes. "Chris was the first-born, then Trevor. Zach was number three. Chris always quipped about being the oldest. Sometimes he could be a bit of a bully about it. He was always trying to be a protector of his brothers."

Luna and Sasha each moved a chair in the Taylors' direction. Ann helped Chris sit down, then dropped into a chair herself. "Thank you." She looked at me. "Chris told me about the text message, but I will still be forever grateful that you gave my Zach CPR."

"Mrs. Taylor—"

"Call me Ann."

"Ann, I don't know who sent the message. No one I know would want to harm your son—especially me. Zach and I had fun performing in the *Beekeeper's Secret* on Sunday, and the crowd's applause carried to the moon." *Okay, I know what you're thinking. The quip about having fun together was a stretch. I shoved the whiteboard further behind the counter, praying that Ann hadn't noticed it.* "So, Chris has been here all week?" I hoped to reconcile the timing. Chris had told me he arrived at the hospital late Monday, and Felicity commented she saw Chris arguing with Zach on Saturday night. Besides that, I wondered if the blue truck Chris was driving had been in the area Monday morning. How much of a bully could he be?

"Has he?" Ann tapped a finger against her temple as if trying to remember. Or was she unsure how to answer my question? "He attended a conference in Minneapolis last week and rented a car to visit Zach Saturday, hoping to catch the play, although he was a day off. It's been a long time since they rode horses together, and he probably wanted to rib his bro about his rusty riding skills. Too bad his return flight was Sunday morning. He drove back late Monday, so I guess you could say he was here all week. Zach's improvement means we leave tomorrow."

Silence filled the room until Ann stood up. "Sheriff Marx, I appreciate your help and your...flexibility. Chris and I are returning to the hospital."

Nika leaned toward me, a questioning look on her face. Somehow, I knew what she was asking me. "No, I won't be pressing charges," I whispered.

A weight lifted off my shoulders. My hand squeezed into a happy fist, but I resisted the urge to pump it into the air. Zach pulled through. My bees weren't murderers.

After the Taylors left, I flipped the sign to 'closed,' and turned toward Nika. "What did Ann mean when she thanked you for your flexibility?"

She drum-rolled her knuckles on the counter. "Ann called me when Zach came out of the coma. After I talked with Zach, Ann said she was worried about Chris. He knew Zach had received a text message to be here, and Felicity suggested it came from Bliss Creek. Ann knew he'd had a couple of drinks at the hotel bar and suspected he would try to track down the person who wanted to meet Zach. Your text came while we were heading here."

"Ah, you knew he might not have been sober when he drove here."

"I didn't see him driving, nor did I receive any complaints about it." She averted my eyes and sank into the bar stool.

"What made Felicity aware that the text originated from my phone?"

"I'm assuming there was a leak from my office. Time to clamp down on confidentiality."

"What did you learn from Zach?" I asked.

"Nothing new. As Ann said, he has amnesia, meaning no proof that what happened was deliberate. My suspicions aren't enough. Tomorrow's press conference will pose a challenge. Especially since it's now out in the open that the message asking Zach to come to Bliss Creek came from your phone."

"What are you going to say?"

"To be determined."

I walked to the business side of the bar to face Nika. "Are you on the clock, or can I pour you a glass of my super-deluxe, mystery-solving, limited-edition sample mead?" I took her nonresponse as a yes. As I lifted the carafe to pour, I bumped the earrings.

She scanned my face, the whiteboard, and the earrings. "You all been playing detective again?" She didn't wait for an answer. "That's the earring you mentioned? Why are there two?"

I explained about the one found in the meadery.

She reached over and scooped them into an evidence bag. "Yeah, I'll take that mead now."

I poured her a glass and slid it toward her. Nika rubbed her eyes, circled her shoulders, and reached for the drink.

Wolf whined at the doorway. "I better let him out. He needs to get out more now that he's older." I walked through the office and opened the rear door. A chilly breeze—or a ghostly cold spot—greeted me as my dog bounded toward the end of the mown grass. By the time he finished, I had collected my thoughts and returned to the tasting room. All eyes tracked me as I walked in.

"What? Did I miss something?"

Nika smiled for the first time since she arrived. "Just said your whiteboard notes were comparable to my own." She took a sip—or perhaps a gulp—of the mead.

I scrutinized my friend's face. "Are we on the right track?"

"Can't say. I'm still learning the facts myself." She pushed herself up, cautious with her sore leg. "Sorry that I can't be more definitive. I don't know what I don't know. The good news is Zach Taylor is alive and alert. Murder is off the table. Bad news is there's still potential for charges of attempted murder." She gave a crooked smile as she set her empty glass on the counter. "I gotta say, this limited-edition stuff is pretty good. And I always considered myself more of a beer person." The chimes sounded as she exited toward the parking lot. I locked the door behind her.

Sasha, Luna, and I returned to our half-finished glasses of mead.

"Wow," Sasha said. "This is turning into the Bliss Creek version of Murder on the Orient Express."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Lots of people, a hodgepodge of motives, and conflicting possibilities. Every time we solve one piece of the puzzle, another one pops up."

"Should we order a pizza?" Luna asked. "Or should we call it quits for now?"

Exhaustion sank into my whole body, and I didn't want to risk getting a headache. "Let's wrap it up, I'm beat. We need to hear from Zach to learn the truth. Hospital visiting hours are over tonight, but that will be my first stop tomorrow morning."

The hospital wing I walked through on Friday morning was a newer addition. Skylights in the atrium spread rays of light into every corner. But no amount of morning sunshine calmed the butterflies in my stomach. Would Zach talk to me? Would he be honest? It was time to test Luna's theory that my beekeeper's secret is an ability to read people. I had to trust my gut. And my gut told me to go for it.

I tapped on Zach's door before poking my head around the corner. Zach was the only one there. Despite being drained from a coma, wearing a hokey hospital gown, he looked great. "Are you up for a visitor?"

His dimpled smile reached his eyes. "Alexi, come in. I understand I have you to thank for my being here."

My heart sank as I first thought he was accusing me of putting him in the hospital. Then his smile registered, and I understood he meant being alive.

I couldn't come up with an appropriate response—you're welcome sounded lame—so I jerked a simple nod. "How are you?"

"The doctors expect to release me this afternoon or tomorrow at the latest." His eyes bore into me as he talked. "I'm hoping it's today so I can be at the press conference. My campaign manager is pushing for me to be there to portray health and fitness for office, et cetera, et cetera. Of course, my ribs are complaining about the CPR treatment." He gave a friendly wink.

Should I ask about his campaign? Should I apologize for hurting his ribs? I tuned in to my intuition. Zach's vibes told me he accepted me as a friend rather than a foe. I relaxed and focused on what Sasha referred to as *'the incident.'* "Why were you at Bliss Creek Monday morning?"

"I remember receiving your text to meet there at 7:00 a.m."

"I didn't send the text." My frustration at repeating myself bubbled over. "I'm thinking about having t-shirts made saying that. Or business cards blaring: ALEXI MANDIERA DID NOT TEXT ZACH TAYLOR TO MEET AT BLISS CREEK WINERY ON MONDAY MORNING." I steepled my fingers as pushed them against each other. Hard. "While the message came from my phone, I was not the sender."

Zach leaned against the pillow, closing his eyes. "I wish I could remember. I get some brief flashes of memory, but nothing concrete." He winced as he readjusted the pillow. "The doctors said I might regain those memories sometime. Or I might not. At least it's less than a week of my life." He gestured toward the chair next to the bed.

I accepted his implicit offer and sat on the chair, my arms on my thighs. "Do you believe I sent that message to you?"

He tilted his head to gaze at the ceiling. "I've been mulling that over today as I lay in this bed. You made it abundantly clear you weren't ready to sell your property. And I suspect you're not the type to change your mind so quickly. That meant you didn't want to talk to me about a real estate deal. You also don't strike me as a person prone to anger and violence."

"That doesn't answer my question."

He repositioned himself. The sound of carts rattling in the hallway mixed with the creaks of the bed. The aroma of breakfast meals being delivered to the inpatients filtered into the room from the hallway. And I waited.

"Well?" I prompted.

He gave me a Cheshire-cat grin. "No, I don't believe you sent it."

Relief flowed from my head to my toes. "That means a lot to me. I know that Nika—Sheriff Marx—confirmed my phone sent the message to yours at 5:27 on Sunday. I'm working hard to track down the sender."

"You are? Isn't that the job of law enforcement?"

"Yes, of course." I felt as warm as I would have in a sauna. "I don't want to be blamed for something I didn't do, and I sort of feel I owe it to you to find the truth."

"Owe it to me?"

I squirmed in the chair. How could I explain my motives without sounding phony or sappy, or worse yet, guilty? "My bees aren't murderers." No sooner had the words escaped my mouth than I felt like an idiot. "What I mean is, the bees couldn't do it without human intervention." The hole I was digging for myself got deeper and deeper.

Zach raised his eyebrows. "You've lost me."

"Let me start over. When I gave you CPR, every muscle in my body was working to keep you alive. Later, I wondered whether the soda bottle in your car might have been the remnants of a homemade bee trap and worried everyone would accuse me. Then when I met your parents and your brother, I realized you were the actual victim, and I wanted to help. I am embarrassed that I had been so self-centered." I felt my blush deepen and wondered whether my sweating was visible as I rambled almost incoherently. "Am I making any sense at all?"

Zach reached toward me and grazed my hand with his finger. A tingle ran through my body. "I have glimpses of you applying CPR. They're reassuring rather than depressing. And even before any of this happened, when Brendan had spoken so highly of you and your family, he biased me in your favor."

He continued caressing my finger. "And my mom took an immediate liking to you. I guess she believed saving her son was a point in your favor." He beamed. "So, in answer to your question—"

A door tap interrupted the conversation. We both turned toward a surprised Dot Harrison. "I'm sorry. Didn't see ya had a visitor." She fidgeted with her necklace as she stood in the doorway.

Zach waved her into the room. "Good of you to stop by."

"I was downright flabbergasted that bee stings could put ya into a coma." She glared at me before turning her attention back to Zach. "How ya doin'?"

I tested Luna's theory about being able to read people if I paid attention, as I had learned in my police psychology training. Dot wore beige slacks and a simple jewel-neck satin blouse and matching driving gloves. No flamboyant colors or styles. She was carrying a bag that she seemed to hide behind her back. Her face carried genuine concern, yet I picked up on an unfamiliar emotion. Guilt? Or something else? "

"Felicity told me ya were out o' the coma," Dot said. "I thought I'd pay you a visit."

"Very thoughtful of you." Zach flashed his welcoming smile.

I observed the interaction wordlessly. Cordial without being friendly. I sensed slight friction, which I attributed to the pending lawsuit, rather than the bee incident. Dot directed her animosity more toward me than toward Zach. Could she still be upset with me from yesterday?

"Alexi, would ya mind if I had a word with Zach in private?"

"Not at all." I moved toward the hall.

"Could ya close the door on your way out?"

As I exited the room, I left the door open a crack to eavesdrop. Dot opened the bag and set something on his bedside table. "This here's a plate of pastries from my inn. I thought ya might like some fresh bakery instead of the hospital food."

A shiver trickled down my spine as the door clicked shut and I moved down the hallway to return to Bliss Creek.