

Chapter Twenty-One: An Unexpected Cliff Dive

The sunrise sent glistening light through the picture window of my house. “What a week, huh, Wolf?” The dog rolled over to enjoy a belly rub before following me toward the kitchen. The steps creaked as we walked past the stairway. Wolf paused, looked up the stairwell, and wagged his tail. He gave a small whimper as he nudged my hand with his nose.

“You might see something, Wolf, but I don’t.” I yawned without restraint, circling both arms over my head and down. I hadn’t slept well. I phoned my son and my daughter, with both calls skipping straight to voicemail. I left a message saying I missed them and I loved them. I scratched behind Wolf’s ears. “Why did I call my two college kids on a Saturday morning and expect them to answer?”

But they responded. Tiffany’s text came through first. “Luv ya, too. Talk tomorrow.” A similar text from Josh reached me a half-hour later.

Then a phone call came from Chris Taylor. “Alexi, I called to explain my drunken behavior a couple of days ago.” I heard Zach in the background telling Chris to apologize for being a jackass. Chris must have covered the phone with his hand; the brotherly bickering diminished to a murmur. Then Chris returned to the line. “I’m sorry for the way I acted. What I did was wrong and bull-headed. I lost one brother and panicked about losing another. That doesn’t excuse what I did. I just wanted to explain.” In my mind’s eye I visualized Chris mouthing to Zach, ‘*satisfied?*’

“Are you at the hospital now? How is Zach doing?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m still at the hospital. My folks returned to Michigan on Thursday. I planned on driving there later that day after Zach and I finished some pastry from someone I believe is your neighbor—the one who owns the bed-and-breakfast. No question it was better than the hospital food. When Zach developed a slight headache, the doctor opted to keep him overnight, and I stuck around.”

“The person you’re referring to is Dot Harrison. Did you have time to meet her?”

“Briefly. My parents and I stopped to say goodbye to Zach as she was leaving. She offered all of us some of her pastries, but my parents wanted to get on the road. I took advantage of the free food.”

Based on Chris’s comments, I could only assume Dot’s sweets had nothing to do with Zach’s backsliding. “Zach’s fine now?”

“He’s ready to climb out his window if they don’t discharge him soon. That’s scheduled for tomorrow, so I’ll hang around Gaia at least until then.”

“What caused the relapse?”

“I wouldn’t call it a relapse; that’s too strong a term. He was on the verge of being discharged, but he mentioned having a slight headache, which kept him in the hospital. Given the uncertainty and rarity of the coma, the doctor was understandably cautious. Every test indicates my brother is back to his mundane self.”

“That’s great news. Give my best wishes to Zach.”

Then my phone died. *Note to self: recharge the phone regularly.*

As I ate my breakfast, I tried to read. My mind kept wandering to and through the suspect list we had created. My gut, my instinct, my heart knew Cathy and Sasha had nothing to do with the events of this week. I accepted that Cathy’s scratch was unrelated to the blood on Wolf’s paw, and Sasha’s ownership of a blue truck was indeed a coincidence. My daughter’s boyfriend Brendan was nothing more than Zach’s former Little Brother and was no evil menace trying to cash in on Zach’s will. Chris

loved his brother and had no reason to destroy my business. Then there is Zach. Even if my vet's theory about Zach texting himself had been accurate, Zach's coma prevented his involvement at the apiary or meadery.

That narrowed the list to Dot, Ryan, Felicity, and Hank. I'm convinced Dot didn't have the courage to develop a trap, capture bees, and throw them in Zach's car. Her admission to sending the text is a conundrum. As a flip phone user, she must have been someone's invisible hand.

Both Ryan and Dot use Ambien. Could one of them have slipped something to Wolf Sunday night after the play? Could Wolf's strange behavior (that I attributed to ghostly activity) have been an early side effect of the drug before it kicked in? Even if that were the case, I'm certain Ryan and Dot could not be the mastermind over the totality of events.

It was down to Felicity and Hank.

I turned on the local news, catching a snippet of the prior day's press conference and analysis. "Zach Taylor came out of his coma... Kept for observation another night at the hospital... Rumors of alleged vandalism at Bliss Creek Winery." Where did they get that information?

The broadcast shifted to other stories. I flipped through the competing local stations, searching for a provenance regarding the coverage of the apiary damage. Zilch.

I searched online. None of the stations' websites elaborated, even as they reported the "unconfirmed" beehive destruction. None identified a source.

I stacked my breakfast dishes in the dishwasher and swabbed the kitchen. That was my physical activity as my brain bounced between Felicity and Hank. Felicity excels at extracting information, not planting or manufacturing evidence. It's true she can be blunt when making inquiries during an investigation, challenging people to the point of discomfort. But destruction? That's not her style.

With Hank, I could check more of my virtual investigative boxes. He wanted to buy my property, especially if it bested Zach's efforts. He had gambling debts and ego-driven reasons to complete the transaction. He had access to my phone on Sunday night, either directly or through Dot. His blue truck may have been the one at the hives on Monday. The bottles in his recycling bin resembled the one in Zach's car, which was crafted into what I believe was a bee trap. And Hank had a beekeeping suit in his office. A lot of circumstantial evidence.

"Wolf, come. Let's take a walk to the beehives. Time to face that reality and get it over with." We walked along the trail, jumping over the raised tree roots and avoiding low-hanging branches.

The abnormal buzzing of the sick bees churned my insides, so I changed course, avoiding the apiary. We proceeded to the edge of the bluff instead. I sat down to watch the distant Mississippi River below.

"Beautiful morning." Hank's voice jolted me from behind.

I gasped. I would have gasped even if he hadn't been at the top of my suspect list.

"Sorry, didn't mean to surprise you. Mind if I join you?" His words were friendly, even cordial. But my people-reading radar jumped to high alert. I swallowed to work some saliva into my dry mouth.

Wolf gave a low grumble, and I threw my arm around his neck. I invited Hank to sit, but he remained standing. "What can I do for you, Hank?"

"I stopped by your house to speak with you. On my way back out, I noticed you and the dog headed this way. I had to drive the long way around to get here, but I thought I'd catch you before you returned home."

"What did you want to talk about?"

"I wondered how you were doing after everything that happened this week. We had no opportunity to chat during the open house." A phony half-smile crossed his face. Something in his voice troubled me.

"You're right, it's been a tough week, but I'm tougher." I felt torn between my instinct to escape and my urge to uncover the truth. My heart was pounding, my hands were sweating. My head was telling me one thing and my gut was telling me another.

"I heard about what happened to your bees."

My heart raced until I thought it would pound out of my chest. I considered moving to the other side of Wolf, putting the dog as a barrier between Hank and me. I stayed put, trying to figure out why my gut was telling me to stay.

"Story is you suffered some serious vandalism. It might have been an inside job," Hank said.

Was he trying to get me angry? I couldn't buckle; I had to remain calm. "Why do you say that?"

"Rumors. There are those who question how anybody but an insider could have been involved. Nobody else has access to your beehives, your ingredients, and your facilities. Sounds too convenient to blame someone else." He jiggled the keys in his pocket. Whether he calculated the sound would annoy me, I couldn't be sure.

"That's ridiculous."

He stepped toward me, causing me to flinch. Wolf growled again.

Hank raised his palms and stepped back. "You know how people talk. Some people suggest Cathy or Sasha might have it in for you because sales have been weak. They may expect to get a good severance package if you sell."

I looked around for a stick, a rock, anything I could use for protection if the need arose. Nothing within reach. "Well, those 'some people' are wrong."

"Loyalty is an admirable quality as long as it's not blind loyalty. If your employees caused what happened to Zach Taylor, and you cover it up, you look bad, too." He rubbed the palms of his hands together. "But that's not the only rumor. It's amazing how rapidly rumors can spread, and how quickly they can shutter a company."

"Is that a threat?"

"Not at all, but I've worked with many family businesses. Your two college kids are not likely to take over the winery after you, but it's still hard to embrace selling it. However, selling after something disastrous has happened makes it easier to accept. It's logical that you may be ready to give up the property if you have no choice." His smile was odd, twisted. The implication I'd harm my bee hives for a quick sale was revolting.

"Hank, why are you here?"

"I'm willing to make you a sweet offer on the property. You can pay your employees a handsome termination income. No one needs to investigate what happened to the bees or to Zach,

because that will all be water under the bridge. This will protect Cathy or Sasha from any charges of wrong-doing, and it will enable you to provide your children with a solid foundation for the future.”

Trust your gut. Those words kept floating through my mind. Hank was lying; I had to ferret out the full truth. “There are two things wrong with your offer,” I said.

“What are they?”

“First. I have no intention of selling. Second, even if I did, your proposition is all based on a lie. I can’t help but question your motives for putting so much effort into constructing that narrative. You know full well Cathy, Sasha, and I weren’t involved in any of the incidents this week. Felicity already admitted the earrings—which she left on the counter in front of you, by the way—are hers. Dot confessed to sending Zach the text message from my phone shortly before the two of you talked in the parking lot.”

“That bitch.” Hank’s mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. “Yes. she wrote the text message. I just hit the send button cuz she was too stupid to figure out how to use your phone. I told her I’d keep her little secret if she kept quiet.” He spoke with deadly precision, apparently assuming Dot had shared more with me than she did.

I had to keep him talking, redirect him, pacify him. “Did she tell you why she wanted to meet with Zach?”

“What she and Zach discussed is none of my business. I did nothing more than help a fellow businessperson with a technical issue. And that doesn’t prove your employees are innocent. Not only does Sasha have a criminal record, your wine maker and vineyard manager shared outspoken criticism of Taylor.” He’d done his research. He prepared to accuse others through innuendo.

“Why did you help Dot send the message and then delete it? No one could have connected it to Dot.” I assumed this was Hank’s handiwork, but needed him to confirm it.

“In the parking lot, Dot told me she had changed her mind. She wouldn’t meet with Zach Monday morning. I worried you might see the text and do some checking. So, I asked Ryan to delete it as soon as he got to your house.”

“Ryan? He knew about all of this? The two of you worked together to attack Zach?” I took a risk with the question, but I wanted—needed—to learn the truth. Wolf’s growl became louder.

“You are way off the mark. Ryan deleted the message. Nothing more. He was aware the stakes were high for getting a state contract with Travel Adventures. That’s where his head was at.” Hank crept one step closer, towering over me. “I want you to consider my eminently fair offer on your property. It will be good for you, your family, your employees, and the state of Wisconsin.”

Hank had avoided answering my question about Zach’s attack. If I couldn’t prove his involvement, he could continue to throw suspicion on me or the employees of Bliss Creek Winery. Or he could watch me “slip” off the bluff. A shiver snaked along my spine. A fall could be deadly. My phone sat plugged into the recharger at home, so the only support I had was an old dog, recently poisoned. Hank needed to trust I was as greedy as he was. An implicit lie seemed my safest bet. “Are you saying my land will be worth a lot of money if the state negotiates a contract with Travel Adventures? Why shouldn’t I sell directly to the state?”

“The contract depends on the state’s ability to guarantee access to all the properties of interest. They need a developer to purchase all the property in the geography of interest, so there are no surprises.” His shoulders softened, and his voice grew calmer. “I’m pleased that you grasp the larger

context and are being sensible. This will make many people rich. It would bring an influx of money into this part of the state. It would raise salaries in the recreation industry and bring in new jobs. You need me to complete the sale and I need your cooperation.”

“What if I’m not willing to sell?”

“That would be a mistake. Look at that scenery. It’s awe-inspiring now, and in the evening, when you get a perfect sunset, it’s a view to kill for. Don’t you think so?”

My gaze momentarily shifted toward the horizon, away from Hank. Big mistake. I heard a slither from behind me. With a brief turn of my head, I glimpsed a rock in his hand. I leaped toward him, Wolf right at my heels. Head down, I rammed my shoulder into his chest. “Today is not my day to die, you frickin’ jerk.”

Hank wobbled. His feet slipped on the loose stones, propelling him downward at breakneck speed. A thud and “oof” resounded when he hit a plateau. Another few feet toward the edge of the plateau and he would have plunged down a steep cliff. I froze. Was he dead? Did I kill him? Am I sure he’d had a stone and would have used it on me? Guilt washed over me again.

“Hank, are you all right?” I scrambled down the bluff toward him, grabbing at brambles to stop my slide. The branches scraped my arms and legs. “Hank, answer me.”

He didn’t move. Some blood seeped through his pants leg. Then his eyes fluttered open, and he clutched his chest. “It’s my heart. Help me, please.” He fumbled with his cell phone as his breathing became more labored.

“Hank, stay with me. I’m almost there.” I slid on my butt the last few feet battering my tailbone. I cautiously crawled across the plateau toward him. Hank’s lids drooped, his chest almost still. Kicking myself for not bringing my cell phone, I grabbed his. I called the emergency number, grateful for a signal. I told the dispatcher our location and described Hank’s escalating symptoms. CPR became necessary once more. Monday morning déjà vu.

This time, I found myself more conflicted. Hank, a narcissistic man who tried to harm me, needed my help. It was a struggle to subdue my revulsion. I wiped my bloody arms on my slacks and braced myself for the chore ahead. It was the right thing to do.

Reciting a silent prayer, I opted for hands-only CPR. My hands thrust on the center of his chest, in sync with the metronomic beat of Stayin’ Alive playing in my head. His ribs gave under the pressure. Sweat dripped from my brow, my muscles ached, and tension strangled my neck and shoulders. This man would not die in front of me.

Distant sirens preceded an ominous hiss of a turkey vulture. Shadows shifted as the sun rose higher. Press, press, press, rhythmically and vigorously. I blocked out everything except my focus on Hank.

Car doors slammed from the background. I continued pressing as paramedics descended toward me on the bluff. Hands on my shoulders guided me away from Hank. Someone yelled for a stretcher. I climbed back up, blood trickling from even more scratches on my arms. I waved off the medical staff, proclaiming I had no physical problems. After a short time that seemed an eternity, my heart rate returned to normal and I no longer trembled. Hank was in the ambulance, soon en route to the hospital. The feverish energy that had gripped me on the bluff evaporated, leaving me as hollow as a deflated balloon.

“Two developers needing CPR on your property in one week,” Nika said as she approached me. She wore skinny jeans with a tailored tunic. And make-up.

“What brought you here when you’re obviously off the clock? And apparently on a date?” Though I spoke the words, my thoughts were still reeling from the recent events. Either Hank or I or both of us could be dead now. I pushed the thought away and looked at the movement of the Mississippi River. Under other circumstances, the water’s flow would be soothing. Wolf nudged my hand, bringing my mind back to the present.

“I got a call about Hank Schmidt going off a cliff on your property. Made no sense and I had to check it out. It’s not the first time I had to bail on my husband. Want to tell me what happened?”

It took a few moments to shake the cobwebs from my brain. I summarized my interaction with Hank, along with what I had learned from Felicity and Dot, and what I had discovered at Hank’s open house. “Hank wasn’t telling me everything. Not lying outright, but lying by omission.” I looked at Hank’s cell phone, still in my hand, and realized it was password-free. I guess I’m not the only slacker. I opened his text messages. I found the one in which he asked Ryan to erase Dot’s text from my phone. I also uncovered texts to Ouyang Hongzhuan and to a couple of congressional aides. Hank guaranteed purchase of my property after “learning of” damage to my beehives and contamination of my mead. The emails preceded any public knowledge of the events.

I handed the phone to Nika. “I don’t know if this is admissible without a search warrant, but I’m willing to testify what he said in our conversation and what I read on his phone.”

“I’ll need you to make a statement. Come downtown on Monday morning. Go home and get some rest. With luck, I can salvage my weekend date with my husband.”

A cloud hid the sun, sending a chill around my shoulders. Was it a breeze or a ghostly cold spot? I guess that was subject to my personal interpretation.