

Too Near the Edge

a novel

by

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Prologue

Going over the edge at the Grand Canyon doesn't allow for do-overs. Rocks are hard and nature has no airbags. In the early morning of April 15, Adam Meyer became the first canyon fatality of the year. Later in the day, his blood-spattered and torn bright yellow Marmot precip jacket led rangers to his crumpled body almost 300 feet below the rim, where one ranger vomited at the sight of Adam's crushed skull and broken neck. A rescue team sent to document the scene and remove the corpse by helicopter, noted that despite the victim's fatal injuries, his cell phone, clutched in his right hand, remained intact.

Adam had started the day with high hopes the transcendent power of nature would open his heart and calm his fears. After a fitful night's sleep, his alarm clock woke him at 5:30 am in time for sunrise over the canyon. He pulled on jeans, turtleneck, a fleece pullover, boots and his Marmot jacket. He put on his backpack—packed with food, water, and a map— grabbed his wind-proof gloves and hat, opened the cabin door and stepped out into the icy morning.

He'd arrived at the Bright Angel Lodge cabins in darkness the night before, so this would be his first view of the six-million-year-old canyon. His head overflowed with information about it—close to a mile deep, ten miles wide and 277 river-miles long. Anticipation made his gut queasy and he almost fell stepping across the slippery parking lot behind the cabins toward the rim trail. As he stood on the

edge looking down at the gigantic gorge, Adam became momentarily disoriented—like he was being sucked into the opening.

He turned his focus to the individual spires and buttes in the shadows before him and regained his equilibrium. He had, indeed, come to the right place. The awe-inspiring view more than met his expectations. As a burst of excitement and joy washed through him, he wished Sharon and Nathan could be with him to share the breathtaking sight. He loved them so much. They were the lights of his life, and he missed them. But this was not a vacation for Adam.

He'd come to the canyon to resolve an unrelenting worry. First, he looked for help at home in Boulder, Colorado—a town with more therapists and healers per square inch than ants on a discarded candy bar. But each time he got close to discussing his concerns, fear stopped him from disclosing any details. Thinking about it wore him out. Every way he explored the problem it got more complicated. Deep down, he believed he had stumbled into pure evil. Terror was eating away at his spirit.

Even worse, his anxiety was contagious. His preoccupations created distance between himself and his wife, Sharon. She'd pleaded with him to tell her what was bothering him. But he couldn't talk to her about this, despite the intimacy they shared. Now fear of losing her tormented him. He worried he'd pushed her away, and neglected Nathan, who was only eight and missed his attention. Adam needed direction in a way he never had before. He hoped to find it here.

Friends in Boulder told him about a homeopathic principle that works on desperation of the soul or spirit. The principle says you can treat an undesirable condition by choosing weather and landscape to match your mood, and immersing yourself in it for a few hours. For example, meeting bleakness with bleakness has a powerful cleansing effect.

He took the advice and decided to visit the Grand Canyon. He believed nothing but the vast space of the canyon could be a match for his huge problems and his emptiness. Perhaps the 18-mile rim walk and the view of its spires and spaces, would help him find his bearings.

Now he hiked slowly along the paved trail between Bright Angel and Maricopa Point. The rising sun began to brighten tips of pinnacles below. Gradually craggy hollows came to life. Spellbound, he gazed at the changing patterns of light and shadow, and absorbed the natural quiet of the canyon. Its magnetic energy connected him to the earth. His problems shrank in the face of the permanence and enormous size of rock formations below.

Farther along, the trail changed to an unpaved path, some sections narrow and close to the edge with no wall between the hiker and the chasm. Adam stopped to peer over a 3,000-foot precipice called The Abyss, where sheer rock walls dropped steeply to the shadowy cavern bottom. Scraggly evergreen trees clung tenaciously to hillsides, wherever they found enough sand for their roots. Countless slag heaps of fallen rocks attested to the restlessness of nature.

Standing at the rim in the early-morning hush, he began to relax. It was as if the world stopped to let him meditate.

After a few minutes scratchy noises from a ground squirrel scampering by distracted him. Then he heard soft sounds of footsteps on the path behind him. He turned to greet a fellow hiker, but saw only an empty tree-lined trail. His eyes stopped at a red and black sign immediately on his left. "Danger!" the sign proclaimed in large block letters. "Use caution near the edge," the warning continued. "People die here falling from the edge." He peeked over the edge again and shuddered. His stomach heaved as he imagined the long fall to the hard canyon bottom.

Suddenly, a hand struck the center of his back, pushing him towards the yawning canyon. "Hey!" Adam yelled. He slid across the icy path to the rim of the chasm. "Stop! Help me!" In a futile attempt to stop the fatal fall, he grabbed at a stunted bush to halt his skid toward the brink. For a brief moment, he dangled over the edge, but the branches ripped out of his hands like a kite string in the wind. "Help!" he cried, reaching into his pocket for his cell phone in a useless attempt to make one last contact.

Adam's bloodcurdling screams echoed through the canyon as he sky-dived head first toward the mighty Colorado River 5,000

feet below. He rotated in the air five or six times, slammed head-first into a rocky cliff, bounced off onto a ledge and rolled to a halt on his back.

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Three months later

When the phone rang on that scorching hot Saturday morning in July, I was sitting cross-legged on my covered front porch, gazing intently at a potted red geranium flower. I tried to let go, to let my mind drift into frictionless flow like Masuka had us doing in class yesterday. My eyes kind of crossed, and the geranium took on an impressionist tone. But I couldn't empty my mind the way I knew I should.

Pablo kept popping up in my mind's eye. I could see his thick black curly hair that I love to run my hands through, his chocolate-brown eyes, and his solid muscular shoulders. So nice. But then, I saw his scowling face from last night's argument. Why didn't he give me more respect? I wanted him to accept my work as every bit as important and significant as his own, but instead he focused on the parts he thought were flaky. Had I made a huge mistake telling him about Tyler?

I wanted to refocus, get clear. Why did I continue to let Pablo dominate my thoughts? Over the past few years, I'd spent countless hours agonizing over our relationship. Do I love him? Does he love me? Do we have a future together, or should we go our separate ways as we did once before? Oops...now I was beyond distracted.

Would I ever learn to be centered the way Masuka is? Like many meditation teachers and devotees in Boulder, Colorado, Masuka floats

through life like a wispy cloud on a summer day. Nothing ruffles her. In meditation class the week before, when Bill accused her of pretending and putting on airs, Masuka smiled gently at him and said “However you see me is what works for you now.” Bill decided he didn’t want to see her at all. He got up and stomped out. Masuka simply directed our attention back to the bamboo that was our focus, and reminded us to tenderly clear our minds of upsetting thoughts.

I wished I could be that blasé about Pablo, but I was nowhere near that. Actually the more I thought about last night, the more his reaction struck me as intolerant arrogance. My anger grew until I could almost feel steam blowing out my ears. Arghh! No way could I sit in front of this geranium anymore. Instead of peaceful calm, energy coursed through my body like an electric current. So when my cell phone rang, I jumped about a foot and dropped the phone when I tried to grab it out of my pocket.

“Cleo Sims Grief Counseling,” I answered, hoping the phone had survived.

“Hey, Cleo. I have a new client for you. You absolutely have to help my friend Sharon, whether she wants it or not.” I recognized the gravelly voice of my close friend Elisa, who had a way of being sure of what would help someone else, without giving much thought to that person’s own ideas.

“Hey, Elisa, slow down. I have enough difficult clients without taking on people who don’t want my help.”

“She does want it; she just doesn’t know it yet. Anyway, she’ll be at our party tonight so I can introduce her to you. I just wanted to make sure you’re coming.”

“Wait a minute, Elisa. Who’s Sharon? I can’t remember you mentioning her before.” Elisa can be outrageous, but that’s one of the things I love about her. She keeps me laughing. And she’s a good-hearted, caring person who has helped me over and over again when I needed someone. So I wanted to hear more about what she wanted me to do for her friend who might not want my help.

”Sharon Meyer. Her husband passed away at the Grand Canyon last April and she”

“He passed away at the Grand Canyon? What, was he fatally ill when he went there?” I interrupted, enjoying my chance to match Elisa’s outrageousness. It’s a game we play. “Did he have his hospice nurse along with him?”

“Of course not. He was hiking at the Grand Canyon and slipped off the trail where it was icy,” Elisa replied.

I sighed. “Elisa, you know how I feel about the euphemism ‘passed away,’ especially when we’re talking about a violent death. Passing away after a long battle with cancer is one thing, but when a person dies in an accident, let’s just say ‘died’ or ‘was killed’ and be done with it.” I paced wide circles in my yard as I ranted.

“OK, died, whatever,” Elisa said. “Just be there tonight, OK? Sharon needs some help, and I want you to help her. I’m not suggesting her for grief counseling, although she could use some. It’s the Contact Project I want for her.”

“I’ll be there, and if you want to introduce us, that’s fine. But she would need grief counseling if she’s going to be in the Contact Project. I’m not a medium conducting séances here. This project is a part of grief counseling.”

I knew Elisa was quite aware of this caveat, but chose to overlook it for her own reasons. Since I’d known her for almost fifteen years, I was totally on to her tricks.

“It may take some convincing to get her to do it, though.” Elisa ignored my jibes and plowed right on. “Sharon’s father is Donald Waycroft. I know you’ve heard of him. He’s a big-deal behavioral psychologist at the university. Anyway, he rejects most areas of psychology other than behaviorism as unproven, and hates parapsychology with a passion.”

“I read some of his articles in graduate school. He’s definitely a stimulus-response sort of guy. I can only imagine how he’d view my work.”

“Well that’s his problem, isn’t it? We can’t let his rigid beliefs get in the way of you helping Sharon.”

I knew it wouldn’t do my professional reputation any good to look like an ambulance chaser, or to get on the wrong side of a psy-

chology faculty member, so I was a little wary of this client referral. “Elisa, I’m not going to talk her into signing up! You know you’re not doing me any favors with a referral like this,” I said. “It’s not like I’m desperate for business.”

“Whew, honey! You’re in a mood.” Elisa barked.

“You’re right. I’m not in the best mood,” I said, thinking that I wouldn’t have gone off on Elisa that way if I hadn’t been so rattled when I picked up the phone. Even if her friend sounded like trouble for me, I should at least listen to what Elisa had to say. And Sharon very likely could benefit from grief counseling. So I took a deep Masuka-like breath and said, “Tell me a little about Sharon and her husband.”

“Adam Meyer was a web site designer,” Elisa said. “Kind of cute. Medium height, very fit, blue eyes, reddish-brown hair, big smile. You might have met him at one of my parties.”

“Elisa, that description fits half the men in Boulder,” I laughed. “I don’t remember meeting him, but you always have so many people at your parties. What was he doing at the Grand Canyon in April? Not the best weather there at that time of year.”

“It was some kind of midlife crisis thing. I don’t know all the details. He fell into the canyon and broke his neck, so he was dead when they found him. I feel terrible for Sharon. They’re just about your age—she’s 35 and he was 37—and they had only been married two years.”

“Horrible,” I said, trying not to picture the man’s battered body impaled on some rocky spire.

“The strange thing about it is that Adam was a big-time hiker. He climbed a bunch of fourteeners, belonged to the Colorado Mountain Club, and absolutely knew his way around in the mountains,” Elisa said. “Sharon said he was stressed-out and anxious about something, but it’s not like him to be careless.”

“What was bothering him? Does she know?”

“No. He wasn’t the kind of guy who shared his feelings easily. He was a good match for her—funny, sweet and very loving with Sharon and her son, Nathan. They’re outdoorsy and active, and so

was he. Adam even coached Nathan's soccer team. But he was more of a doer than a talker, so Sharon never found out what he was so upset about."

"So why are you so keen on getting her into the Contact Project?"

"It's been almost three months since Adam died. It was April 15. I remember because we were rushing our taxes to the post office when I heard. But even after all this time, Sharon isn't accepting it at all. She's convinced herself his fall wasn't an accident, even though the park rangers have investigated and told her it was. She tried to get the police to investigate, but they won't because the fall has been ruled an accident. Sharon just can't let go of it, and I'm thinking if she could contact Adam, maybe she could find some peace."

"OK, I'll plan on meeting her tonight and see if she wants to make an appointment to come in to the office and talk more. Hey, Elisa, I need to go. This drought and the watering restrictions are doing major damage to Grampa's garden. I need to go do some watering or Grampa's ghost will be tracking me down. I'll see you later."

While I watered the garden, I thought about what I would wear to the party. Sometimes, when I'm around Elisa, I end up feeling like an awkward teenager. Elisa's self-assurance is much different than Masuka's, but just as effective. She's a beautiful woman, tall and thin with thick blonde hair, layered in a casual style that always falls attractively no matter what she's been doing. She has a look of entitlement about her. Her clothes are expensive, always natural fabrics—fine wools, brilliant silks and soft cottons or linens. Her jewelry is simple but stunning—a jade or turquoise necklace or intricate sterling silver.

Don't get me wrong. I'm quite satisfied with being 5'4" tall, with medium length curly brown hair and green eyes. I really have no desire to stand out in a crowd or be a fashion plate. But Elisa sets a high standard. She's the woman other women take in and instantly envy—even though she recently turned 40. One glance at Elisa leaves most women feeling mismatched or pinned together. They check their clothes in the nearest mirror or store window, pulling and adjusting

to restore their feelings of attractiveness. Elisa is always surprised to hear she generates this reaction. In fact she refuses to believe it.

For me, that much style is usually way too time-consuming, which is why I had on old khaki shorts and a ragged Earth Day 5K tee shirt, while I pictured Elisa sitting on her deck looking gorgeous in some perfectly fitted tank top and shorts, sipping herbal iced tea and enjoying the foothills view while making her pre-party phone calls.

But I can clean up and look almost as sophisticated or sexy as she does when I want to. I felt the urge to do it for that night's party. I resolved to spend some extra time getting ready, not just to feel well-dressed next to Elisa, but also because her parties draw exciting people. Pablo would be at work, so I'd be on my own. Maybe I'd meet a cute guy who'd take my work seriously.