

## Chapter Two: Dual Emergencies

Ryan was lying next to me when I jolted awake in the middle of the night. I rubbed my eyes as I recalled my nightmare of a bee swarm attacking someone. A slight headache pinged and subsided. My heart rate slowly returned to normal.

The full moon cast an unearthly glow over the bedroom. I sat up and listened. Silence. Nothing else. Just an unearthly sensation echoing what Wolf and I had experienced upon arriving home last night from the shop. I sank back onto the pillow, stared out the window, and waited. Sleep eluded me. I continued to listen. I detected buzzing, but the house was far from the beehives. Perhaps it was part of a dream. Three o'clock turned to four and then five-thirty.

Wolf's muffled growl from downstairs, followed by creaks on the stairway up from the first floor, sent a shiver along my spine. "Ryan. Wake up." My elbow nudged his ribs.

"Huh?" Ryan blinked his eyes open a crack, then shut them.

"I heard something." We both listened. The wall register hummed behind the headboard.

"It's just the furnace."

"Wolf was growling."

"He does that when he's dreaming." Ryan rolled onto his other side. "There's nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep."

"I heard creaks on the steps."

Ryan's response was soft snoring.

*Go back to sleep?* Nope. I swung my legs over the side of the bed. The room was chilly. Almost frigid. *Hadn't the furnace just kicked on?* I shrugged on a robe as I advanced to the door. I stepped quietly into the hallway and waited. No footsteps, no obvious signs of an intruder. My inner voice told me I had nothing to fear. But a weapon could still be useful. I jumped across the hall into the bathroom and grabbed a plunger, smirking to myself at the absurdity. At least it was brand new. Not quite a bat, but sufficient.

I slunk down the stairs, avoiding the third and eighth steps (the known squeakers). Hiding behind each wall, I slid my arm around corners to turn lights on in every room. The house was empty. My dog was sleeping by the front door. "Wolf, looks like it's still just you and me. Probably a raccoon out there. What do you suppose, fella?"

My focus shifted outside the picture window. The murky sky lightened, casting a soft pinkish yellow tint over the winery. This was my ancestral home. My great grandfather won the property from a gambler on a Mississippi River boat in the 1800s. There were no vineyards then. Just the house. My grandparents established the vineyard, and my parents grew the business.

Now it was me. An empty-nester widow with two kids in college. Living in my great-grandparent's house. With a brand-new beau in my bedroom.

Whatever had kept me awake still had me rattled. I stepped back and bumped into Wolf. "Sorry, Big Guy." He didn't move. "What's wrong, Wolf?" I kneeled next to him. His breathing was shallow, his body trembled, and foam oozed from his mouth. He didn't twitch when I patted him. This wasn't the behavior of our former police dog. "You're definitely not okay."

Squeaks whispered from the stairway. I pivoted, expecting to spot Ryan. There was no one there. However, the frigid air from upstairs had followed me down and now enveloped me. My breath fogged as icy fingers caressed my neck, making me shiver. Just like last night.

Tires crunching over the outside gravel drew my attention. It was Sasha. *What the heck is she doing here at 6:30 in the morning?* Barefoot, I ran toward her superman-blue Chevy Colorado, wincing as I stepped on the sharp pebbles. She saw me and turned away from the shop and drove along the driveway till she reached me.

I told her about Wolf. "Can you help me get him to Tony's clinic? I'll run up and toss on my clothes."

"I'll butt the truck up to the front steps."

The sound of Sasha's truck followed me as I flew up the stairs. I flung my robe on the bed and pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt. Ryan pushed up to his elbow, his eyes barely staying open. "What's wrong?"

"Wolf isn't moving. At all. And he's foaming at the mouth. Literally. I'm taking him to the vet."

"Need help?"

*Why did his offer sound insincere to me?* "No. Sasha's here"

"Could I at least help carry him into Sasha's truck?"

"I'm already dressed and Sasha's waiting. We've got it under control."

"Remember your phone. Keep me posted about what's up. I'll be heading to the office soon and I'll call you."

"Sure." I reached for my phone on the nightstand. It was on the opposite side from where I normally set it. *How'd that happen?*

I looked at the calendar on my phone. "At least we have no scheduled tours or wine-tastings this morning. Would you please put a note on the store saying we'll be closed till after lunch?"

He nodded as I gave him a quick peck on the cheek. A crumpled Unisom wrapper from his sleeping pills lay on his nightstand. *That explains his grogginess.*

My hoodie zipped up, I met Sasha inside the front door. *Had I kept it unlocked when I ran out, or was it not locked at all?* We carried the heavy dog to her truck and sped away. I sat in the back seat after pushing Sasha's bee-suit to the side. I called the clinic as Sasha drove and got a recorded message. "You've reached Dr. Antonio Zentros. Clinic hours are 7:00 a.m. to—" Tony picked up before the message completed. "Alex, what's up?"

"Thank goodness you're there. Wolf is unresponsive. Sasha and I are on the road to your clinic."

"What do you mean by unresponsive? Was he hurt?"

I gave Tony a quick overview, stroking Wolf's head as I talked.

"Got it. We'll be ready when you get here."

Breathing easier, I ended the call and looked at Sasha in the rearview mirror. "Can't tell you how glad I was to hear you drive in. I didn't expect you early today."

Sasha scrunched her left eye closed while raising her right eyebrow. Years ago, I dubbed the expression the Sasha-squint. She did it when something confused or troubled her. "To be honest, I didn't

expect to come until later. I jolted awake at daybreak, compelled to show up early. Guess it was kismet.” Typical Sasha reasoning.

Tony was waiting for us with a pet gurney when we arrived. He helped us get Wolf inside before giving a quick scan of his eyes and appearance. “Is it possible he ingested something toxic?”

“Like poison?”

He pressed his palms on the gurney and circled his shoulders, still waking his muscles. “Or perhaps he ate something that had gone bad. Let me run some tests, so I’m speaking from data rather than speculation.” He patted my arm. “He’s getting older, but he’s tough and he’s proven he’s a fighter.”

I wiped a tear. “Thanks, Tony. Please take care of him. He already went through a lot when he tried to save Matt.” I swiped at my other eye. Matt had been my husband, a K-9 handler who died in the line of duty three years ago. Almost four. A drug dealer shot them, and Wolf barely survived. Matt didn’t. That’s when I inherited Wolf, along with a life insurance policy that was funding our kids’ college tuition.

Sasha put her arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “Nobody’s better than Tony at what he does. Let’s give him space to do his job. And you have a business to run.”

Tony gave a gentle smile. “I’ll call you as soon as I learn anything.”

“You’re in expert hands, Big Guy.” Taking a ragged breath, I scratched Wolf’s ears. “I’ll check on you later.”

Sasha and I walked out in silence. Clouds were building. The air was torpid and the humidity almost stifling. Not typical May weather in Wisconsin. Sasha pointed toward the sky where a lone eagle soared overhead. “You don’t see that every day. It means we are on notice to be courageous and to stretch our limits.” I guessed it was another Native American adage. We stopped a few moments to watch before returning to the truck.

“I hope Ryan remembered to leave a note about us opening the store later than usual.” I buckled my seatbelt and leaned against the headrest with my eyes closed.

Sasha pulled away from the clinic, onto the highway toward the winery. “It’s early yet.”

I opened one eye and looked at the clock on the dashboard. Not even 8:30. “Doesn’t seem possible. I expected it to be afternoon. Late afternoon.” A sudden twinge in my temple worried me. *Was a migraine on the way?*

My phone buzzed with a text from Ryan. “*JUST GOT OUT OF A MEETING. HOW’S WOLF?*” He had also sent an earlier text that he was in the office and thinking about me. I closed the screen without replying.

“Ryan?” Sasha asked. “How’s your latest on-line dating match going?”

“We talked about having him move in. We’re together most of the time, anyway.”

The Sasha-squint returned. “You don’t sound certain. Or even excited.”

“I’m confused.” My knuckle tapped the bottom of the passenger window. “Last night I sensed Matt like I haven’t since he died.”

After Sasha coasted to the shoulder and parked the truck, she faced me. “That’s normal with you taking the next step on a new relationship.”

I replayed the prior night's sounds and emotions in my head. "Maybe. But there was something else. The steps squeaked unmistakably like when Matt came home late. The third and the eighth steps."

"All old houses creak and groan."

"But this was different. And when I found Wolf, I sensed Matt putting his hand on my shoulder."

We lingered in companionable silence before Sasha shifted back into drive. She squeezed my forearm. "Let's circle round the vineyards and past the beehives to soothe your nerves."

The winding country highway took us to the entrance of Bliss Creek Winery. Sasha turned onto a rough trail off the entry road that led to the apiary. The potholes along the path bounced the compact truck like a carnival ride. I opened the window to smell the sweet lilac blossoms. Matt always loved the fragrance. An icy breeze settled by me, and hugged me as if Matt were next to me.

"Do you think I made a mistake getting the beehives? I feel like I'm being sucked into quicksand."

"That's why you hired the intern, right? She's working out okay, isn't she?"

"I think so. Mariama did a preliminary report on the apiary for one of her Ph.D. classes. It detailed the insecticide impact on pollinators, from people spraying too many chemicals."

"People like her?" Sasha pointed past the beehives toward a plump middle-aged woman on the next door farmette. She was dousing her flower garden with some type of spray.

"Exactly! Sometimes I want to scream at Dot Harrison: *stop poisoning my bees!* Her bed-and-breakfast is *not* more important than my honey production. And it's not more important than the planet. Her life's mission is to get rid of my beehives."

I tapped my knuckles on the dashboard. "Anyway. Back to Mariama's report. It goes beyond insecticides. She said that neo-something—I guess the layperson's term is neonics? — pose a significant impediment because they're almost ubiquitous."

"What are they?"

"As I understand it, they're chemicals used to coat plant seeds to protect them from bugs. After the plants grow, there's residue left on the pollen."

"And it kills the bees?"

"Not outright. Bees carry the toxic pollen back to the hive and then it kills the bees over extended periods of time..." My voice trailed off as I considered the report's significance for my beekeeping operation. Yup, more quicksand. And like Mary Smith in the community play, I had developed an affinity with the bees.

We continued past the hives toward the retail buildings. A red SUV was already in the parking lot. I puckered my cheeks. "What's Taylor doing here again?"

"Something's wrong." Sasha pointed to a collapsed body next to the car.

"It's Taylor!" I jumped out of the truck almost before Sasha came to a complete stop. With a sense of dread, I kneeled over the body. "Zach, wake up." I shook the developer's shoulder. His throat appeared to be thickening, and he was unconscious. I felt like I was reliving a scene from the play. There was a medical alert bracelet on his left wrist: Zach Taylor, allergic to bee stings.

Sasha kneeled next to me, calling 9-1-1. As it was ringing, she felt for a pulse with her free hand.

“Look,” I said, fingering Zach’s bracelet.

“Then he should have an EpiPen in his car.”

“I’ll check in the glove box.” As I opened the passenger door, I swatted away multiple bees. *Why was Zach’s car teeming with bees? That’s not normal.* The presence of an oddly shaped green soda bottle on the floor of the back seat barely registered with me.

Sasha waited for the 9-1-1 dispatcher as I searched for an injector. “Yes, I’ll stay on the line.” Sasha switched the phone to her other ear and pursed her lips. “Any luck?”

“No, let me check his pockets.”

“EMTs are on their way.”

“He stopped breathing.”

Sasha relayed the information to the dispatcher. “She asked if either of us know CPR.”

Reciting a silent prayer, I willed myself to remember my ancient CPR training. I tilted Zach’s head back slightly to lift his chin and again checked for breathing. Then I began pushing hard and fast on the center of his chest. His ribs gave under the pressure. I pinched his nose and delivered two rescue breaths. Then back to the compressions. Sweat dripped from my brow. My muscles ached. Tension strangled my neck and shoulders. Zach’s survival depended on me. I couldn’t give up. Press. Press. Press. Press.

Distant sirens. An ominous hiss of a turkey vulture. Sasha’s voice shifted between encouraging me and communicating with the dispatcher. Press. Press. Press. Press. Hard and fast. I blocked out everything except my focus on Zach.

Car doors slammed from the background. Press. Press. Press. Press. Hands on my shoulders guided me away from the body. Paramedics rushed in with oxygen and administered an epinephrine shot. “There’s no pulse. He’s gone into anaphylactic shock.”

Frenetic activity continued as the first-responders worked to revive Taylor. They hurled questions at us during the process. Has he had allergic reactions this bad in the past? When did we find him? What did we do? Are we related to him? Will we be following him to the hospital?

We didn’t have many answers. We agreed to follow them to the hospital, since he had no one else. Exhausted from the physical effort and emotional anxiety, I wanted to collapse. But I couldn’t. Not yet. I needed to follow through.

Helplessness washed over me. A local business owner my employees detested might die on my property. And my bees might be the killers.

Activity slowed down as someone announced, “We have a pulse.” The paramedics placed Taylor in the ambulance for the drive to LifeCare Hospital in Gaia.

I grabbed one by the arm. “Will he be okay?”

The solemn visage on the young man’s face answered before he did. “I don’t know.” With his hand on the handle, he paused before making eye contact. “But if he makes it, he’ll have you to thank.”