

Chapter Six: Suspects Multiplying

From a carafe of small-batch mead, I filled two glasses. I handed one to Sasha and one to Luna. “Before I get customer input, I want your opinions.” Both sat on bar stools in the Tasting Room of Bliss Creek Winery.

Sasha sniffed the honey wine. “It smells floral. With fruity overtones.” She swirled the glass. “It has a full texture.” Letting light filter through it, she remarked, “And the clarity is exceptional.”

Luna completed the same steps before tasting it. “The body is medium-light and semi-sweet. There’s a note of pear.”

They both took another sip before Sasha declared, “This is your best batch yet. And I’ve liked all your mead. The honey you harvest yourself has a flavor distinct from the honey you buy.”

Luna nodded in agreement before looking me in the eye. “Taste testing isn’t the real reason you wanted us to come here, is it?”

Psychic ability or not, she was on target. And she knew it.

Needing time to collect my thoughts, I grabbed a bar rag and mopped the U-shaped counter. Normally cheerful and cozy, the wine-tasting room shifted to claustrophobic. “You’re right, as always.” I relayed the essence of Nika’s visit, including that I was a potential suspect. “I need to find out what happened.”

Sasha continued swishing her drink. “We know you weren’t involved, since you and I were taking Wolf to the clinic at the time of the accident this morning.”

“I suppose some could argue that you were both involved. That the two of you worked together before leaving for the vet. An allergic response can have a delayed reaction.” Luna had a blank stare as she rubbed her chin.

“Hey, whose side are you on?” Sasha asked as her fingers squeezed the glass. “Taylor wasn’t here when Alex and I left for the vet.”

Luna had simply voiced what I knew had to be discussed. “Luna’s right,” I said. “I had a public confrontation with Taylor after the play and in the winery. Both of us could have—theoretically—maneuvered a trap into his car, knowing bee stings were detrimental to him.”

Sasha looked as if I had slapped her. “Are you accusing me?”

“No.” I rubbed my temples with both hands. “I’m just saying we have no choice but to play the cards we’ve been dealt. You and I would be at the top of the suspect list. That’s simply reality.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re guilty. Lots of people could have read the article and known about his allergy.”

“I agree. But it’s vital we are honest and open with Nika.”

“Nika’s your friend. She’s law enforcement to me.”

Wow. That caught me off-guard. A few years younger than me, Sasha started working for my parents when I left for college. She was in high school then and has been with Bliss Creek ever since. I had never seen her react this way. “What do you mean? You’ve known Nika almost as long as I have.”

Sasha swallowed hard and turned away from me. I realized she had halted the discussion. The subject was momentarily but definitively finished.

Luna cleared her throat as she moved toward the whiteboard where we listed our specials. "Time to assemble our list." She picked up a marker and wrote *Monday Morning*, underlining the words. "Who was at Bliss Creek this morning? Or potentially here?"

"I didn't see anyone when I drove in," Sasha said. "Not until Alex ran up to my truck in a panic about Wolf."

"What about Cathy and George?" Luna twirled the marker around her fingers. "Do you usually see them when you arrive for work?"

Sasha settled back onto her bar stool. "I guess not. They don't usually arrive that early, but I wouldn't know if they had."

"Cathy and George worked for my grandparents. They've always said they would be here until they retired. Why would they want to hurt Zach Taylor?" I felt an obligation to defend my wine-maker and vineyard manager, causing my tone to be harsh. "Selling the property before they retired would leave them both out of a job."

"True," Luna replied softly. "This isn't a lineup of suspects. Some could be witnesses. That's why we need a complete list." She lifted the marker, but didn't append the names.

I must have glared at her because she chewed her lower lip, looking contrite as she said, "I don't believe they're guilty any more than you do. But I'm trying to think like an investigator. You know Nika's job demands it."

"How did you know about delayed allergic responses?" I realized I was acting childish by implying Luna might be a suspect because of her knowledge of allergies. I didn't honestly suspect her, but her comment grated on me.

"I did some online searching after you left this afternoon. You seemed so frazzled I thought I'd try to help." Luna placed one hand on top of mine and another on top of Sasha's. "Let's see if we can decode things Nika might miss."

With a queasy gut, I looked at Luna. She was right, and I nodded my assent.

Returning her attention to the whiteboard, Luna reiterated. "Who else was likely here early this morning?"

I gazed out the window. "This is a stretch, but maybe Mariama. She said she scooped up dead bees this morning, then backtracked to say it was a different morning. It's possible she was here. I can't be certain either way."

Luna added her name. "What about Dot Harrison?"

"Dot Harrison." I mulled over the thought. "It's no secret we're not fans of each other, but I can't imagine her getting that close to the hives."

Sasha tapped a staccato melody on the counter with her finger. "I just remembered something. The Wicked Witch of the West has a lawsuit against Taylor."

I tensed at Sasha's reference to my neighbor as a witch, even though she had earned that reputation. "Dot has a lawsuit against Zach Taylor? For what?"

"Here's the skinny. Zach sued Dot for runoff onto his properties. Can you believe that? Taylor worrying about someone else's runoff? Anyway, Dot is counter-suing or filing a complaint or something like that. She's part of the '*I-hate-Taylor*' camp. I guess even witches have their good points."

“But that doesn’t explain attacking my bees. Or using them as a weapon.”

“She hates those bees!” Sasha stood up, hands on hips in a superhero pose.

“I still don’t see her overcoming her bee phobia to do it.” I looked at Luna. “You’re a psychic. What do you think?”

“I’m not omniscient. You know that. I can’t zoom into Dot’s brain. All I can say is Dot’s opinionated and vocal. She’s the only one who can tell us how she feels about Taylor. Someone needs to ask her.”

“My bad.” I sensed I’d touched a nerve.

“Let’s focus on making the list now and cross out names after we look at everything.” Luna penned Dot’s name below Mariama.

“What about Ryan?” Sasha looked at me. “He was upstairs when we left for the clinic.”

“He was in bed. We left around 6:30 and he was at the office by 7:00. The timing is a pretty good alibi.”

“Still...” Luna added his name. Then she created a new column under the heading phone. “Who could have used your phone to send a text yesterday?”

“As I told Nika, anyone could have done that. It was on the counter.” I took a sip of the mead, savoring it even under the trying circumstances. “Cathy handed the phone to me after everyone left.” I fought through the remnants of brain fog that can remain for hours after a migraine. I hesitated. “There is something else. This morning my phone wasn’t where I remembered leaving it last night. My memory could be wonky. I was tired, and may have moved it unconsciously.”

“Think it was Ryan?” Sasha asked. “What time did he get there?”

“I guess I fell asleep around 10:30ish. So, after that. Don’t you think Zach would find it odd to get a message at midnight to meet me the next morning? If the text even exists. Besides, his arrival time is still vague.”

I took a sip, or perhaps a gulp, of mead. “Assuming my phone sent the text, the blame will fall on me or anyone in the vicinity. In that case, we should include Cathy and Ryan. The play was sold out. The winery crowd was near capacity. We can assume everyone in Gaia to be a suspect.”

“Let’s cover everyone who may have been near the counter and we can winnow it down later.” Luna added Cathy and Ryan in the second column. “Others?”

We fixated on the whiteboard. Silence prevailed until I topped off their glasses with a clink.

“Now the big one.” Luna wrote Motive at the top of the third column. “Who didn’t like Zach Taylor?”

Sasha and I both snickered.

“Okay, I get it. That would be a long list. But remember, we’re tagging people who disliked him enough to harm him.”

“Maybe someone wanted to scare him and we’re overreacting. None of these people are evil.” I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. “Taylor’s assistant could be wrong about him getting a text message. Maybe we’re making too much of a string of coincidences.” I knew that none of us believed that.

The room became quiet except for the faint ticking of an overhead clock. We sipped our mead, saying nothing. Subtle throbbing crept along the side of my head. Uh-oh. Can't risk a migraine comeback. "It's getting late and my brain is foggy. Can we sleep on it?"

Luna and Sasha drained their glasses and put them in the dishwasher. Rain tapped against the window, exploding into a percussive downpour. Wind rattled the siding, thunder rumbled in the distance, and the lights began blinking.

Sasha swabbed the counter. "We should probably head home before the storm gets worse."

Ryan drove up just as Sasha and Luna exited. He called out to have them leave the door open. After grabbing an umbrella, he jogged in. "I know the house isn't far away, but given the rain, I opted to become your taxi service."

The rain had curled Ryan's blond hair, giving him a rugged, casual look. It suited him for his sales job in his family's industrial supply company. They had customers all over the Midwest, and he frequently traveled. The time on the road had strained his marriage, resulting in a divorce five years ago. His crooked smile looked as relaxed as his damp dress shirt, and my heart skipped a beat.

I felt guilty for suspecting him. "That's really sweet of you." I snuggled next to him under the umbrella as we ran to his car. It was a comfortable fit, since he was just a few inches taller than me. He kept me dry as I climbed into the passenger's seat. By the time the car doors closed, the rain came in torrents. The garage door was opening as we pulled up to the house.

"I borrowed your opener so it would be easier for you to stay dry," he said, answering my unasked question.

He had gone into my car and removed my opener without asking. A stab of anxiety swirled through me. I took a breath to let it pass even as Ryan pulled his car into the garage and parked next to mine. He hadn't done that before. *Are we moving too fast?*

Once inside the house, I noticed a bouquet on the kitchen island. Ryan smiled. "You had a rough day. I wanted to make it better."

I returned the smile. *Was I concerned for no reason?* "That is so considerate, especially given my demerits for failing to respond to your texts."

"Don't fret. Your vet and hospital visits took precedence. And I'm proud of you." He guided me toward the table, which he had set for supper. "I bought salmon at Jake's deli. My attempt at an apology." He put a cloth napkin across his forearm and bowed slightly. "Dinner is served, madam."

"Wow, you've thought of everything."

"You deserve it."

As he squeezed my forearm, I brushed against a raw scab on his palm. I turned his hand over, caressing the wound. "What's that from?"

He snapped his fist shut. "I stabbed myself with a letter opener. Talk about embarrassing. With everything electronic now, I guess I forgot how to handle snail mail." He cleared his throat and then glanced behind himself over both shoulders. "What's with that blast of cold air? It pushed against me like a shove." Shrugging it off, he lit candles on the table and dimmed the lights. "I'd like to get things settled between us before campaign season kicks into high gear." Ryan was working part time for the governor's re-election. "I expect to have a lot of late nights in Madison."

My mouth was dry, and I swallowed a lump in my throat. *Am I ready to move this relationship up a notch?*

Ryan took a few bites, shifting in his chair. "I bumped into Hank Schmidt this morning."

"Oh?" My shoulders and back tensed up.

"He mentioned he was going to talk with you about an offer to buy your property." *Didn't Hank tell me he thought of it while talking with Dot this afternoon?*

"Humph. I turned him down."

Thunder rumbled, followed by a bright flash of lightning. Ryan gazed down as he sipped his wine. "Why's that? I thought it might be a good idea to hear him out."

"Bliss Creek Winery is not for sale."

"My impression was you didn't want to sell to Taylor. But Schmidt is a more prominent developer. He's a good guy and one of the governor's top donors."

My blood turned to ice. "Why should I care? The property is not for sale."

"Consider the potential, the freedom for you to cash in and enjoy life."

"Cash in? What the hell?" I thrust my chair from the table and hurled my napkin onto my plate. "Ryan, this is not a political decision. It's my life. And it's a decision that affects umpteen other lives." I tramped to the bay window. Darkness and rain obscured the view of the winery property. With my back to Ryan, I crossed my arms.

"I didn't mean it that way." He massaged my shoulders. "Let's not argue. I didn't mean to upset you."

I turned and searched his face. "Why does Schmidt want the property now? Abruptly? Unexpectedly?"

Ryan scanned the murky horizon over my head. "He must have his reasons."

"How does it relate to the governor's re-election?"

His arms dropped to his sides. "I didn't say that it did."

"That's what you implied."

"I just meant I've worked with him and he'd give you a fair price."

"Ryan, is our relationship healthy enough for us to live together? Why did you ignore my concerns after I heard noises last night? We both heard them. Why didn't you come downstairs to check on things when I heard Wolf? Why are you pushing me to sell?" *And why was I glad Sasha—not you—could help me get Wolf to the clinic?* That last statement stayed in my head.

"I'm not trying to push you to sell. It's an option. You're working too hard and I'm worried about you. I know I screwed up last night. That's why I arranged for dinner. That's why I picked you up so you wouldn't get wet in the rain."

I removed his hands from my shoulders. "Did you move my phone last night?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Did you move it?"

His eye twitched, a movement I considered—right or wrong—to be a sign of nervousness. “It was by the edge of your nightstand. I pushed it farther on so it wouldn’t fall.”

“You haven’t asked about Wolf since you texted me this morning.”

“I figured we’d get to that during dinner. How is he?”

“It appears he ingested some sleeping medication, like Ambien.”

“Are you now asking me if I drugged your dog? Alexi, what’s gotten into you? You know I care about you. A lot. There’s no way I’d try to hurt you. If you want to go slow, I’ll honor that.”

A small tear trickled down my cheek. “Thanks, Ryan. I don’t know what to say. Yesterday was a murky fog. I need time to think. I won’t send you back out into the storm, but I need to go to bed alone tonight. The bed in the guest room has clean sheets.”

His chest rose with a deep inhale. He nodded and walked away.

As I watched his retreating figure, another tear joined the first. My brain was confused and flooded with questions. I knew I couldn’t sort out my relationship issues without first addressing the circumstances with the bees, Zach Taylor, and the sudden interest in my property. Before going to bed, I opened my phone to determine the date of the next small business networking luncheon, a potential reservoir of local gossip. It was tomorrow. I added it to my calendar.