

## Chapter Eighteen: The Apiary, Friday morning

When I left the hospital, I headed toward the bluff just beyond the beehives. It was my escape whenever I wanted solitude or ‘alone time.’ I had trouble shedding my discomfort over leaving Dot with Zach. Something was brewing, and it wasn’t the mead.

The rutted access road to the hives—not much more than a logging trail—caused my car’s weak shock absorbers to work overtime. Loud cracks and groans echoed at every bump. I swerved to avoid bigger potholes on the way up the bluff. I had already tuned out the majestic, unobstructed view of the Mississippi valley. A million thoughts monopolized my brain. I needed to be alone to think.

When I reached the top, I realized I had company. Mariama leaned against her car, staring at the hives. What brought her here today? Her shoulders trembled from sobs. When I got closer, I saw her moistened face and red eyes. She wiped her cheeks with her palms when she saw me.

“Mariama, what’s wrong?”

She pulled out a tissue and dabbed her nose. “I’m at a loss at how to save your bees. Look at the hives.”

A few bees flew in drunken lines around the hives. Many more lay dead or dying on the ground. A syrupy substance oozed out of the hives and dripped to the ground. I skirted the entire perimeter of the hives. “What the frock is that?”

Mariama hiccupped. “Someone sprayed them with a thick toxic liquid. It’s bad, beyond my ability to fix.”

A single tear escaped from my eye. “Why? Why would someone do this deliberate destruction? Existing pesticides already posed a threat.” I sat on a nearby boulder. My bees were suffering, and I had no power to do anything about it. The investment in the hives was gone. The limited-edition holiday promotion had just become more limited. The profit of the mead product line was evaporating.

Several minutes elapsed with neither of us saying a word. There was a lump in my throat and a heaviness in my heart from the sad, sporadic buzzing. Heat from the mid-morning sun added further discomfort.

Suspects flashed through my head. Could this be the threat Ann Taylor had implied Chris might commit? Had Dot stopped here before driving to the hospital? Did Mariama try to —

Mariama interrupted my internal guilt-seeking discourse. “Should I see if my professor can identify the chemicals? Might that not aid in determining who is responsible? Or must the police take charge for you to submit this to insurance?”

“Good questions.” I clasped my fingers behind my neck and leaned my head against them. “I have no answers.” Trust your gut. Luna’s words echoed in my head. “Let’s walk around again to check for anything suspicious.”

“Should we have the police do that? You know, so we do not disturb the evidence.”

Was there a reason she didn’t want me to investigate? Turning toward my intern, I silently asked myself a few questions. Could Mariama have done it? Could she—or did she—plant evidence to point toward someone else? Am I alone in the country with a potential suspect? My intuition said I was safe, but it wouldn’t hurt to let Nika know where I was. “Good thinking. I’ll contact Sherriff Marx right now.”

“Wait.” Mariama grabbed a knife out of her satchel. A glint of sunlight flashed from the sharp blade when she removed the casing.

I froze. “Mariama, put the knife down.”

“What?”

“I said, put the knife down.” As I looked at Mariama’s face, though, I realized there was no ill intent. And the knife had a broad blade, more like a putty knife than one used for cutting.

“Alexi, sorry. I was going to scrape off hive residue from a dormant part, but I can do that later.” She returned the knife to its casing. “I will wait until after you call the sheriff.”

Nika answered on my first ring. “I guess you found out.”

“Found out what?”

“Zach Taylor had a relapse. His campaign scheduled him to talk briefly at the press conference this morning, but now the doctors want to monitor him overnight.”

“What do you mean, relapse?”

“As I understand it, he showed signs of a mild allergic reaction to something. The doctors pursued basic precautionary measures. I’ll check back with them after the reporters leave. What did you call me about? I have to meet with my deputy before the conference, so can it wait?”

“We’ll talk later. I’ll send you a text you can read after the press conference.” I envisioned Nika surrounded by officials, reporters, and citizens. I typed a message about the beehives and slipped the phone back into my pocket.

“Were you talking about Zach? Did something happen?” Mariama inhaled a long breath, jagged with sniffles.

“It seems his recovery took a step backward. He looked fine when I left the hospital.” The memory of Dot leaving the pastries flashed through my head.

“Is he in a coma again?”

“I don’t think so. Nika’s only comment was that doctors require him to stay for further observation. No big deal.”

Mariama hugged her bag to herself. In countless ways, she reminded me of my daughter, Tiffany. While there was no physical resemblance in hair or skin tone, they both projected a warmhearted aura with an inclination to look for silver linings.

I reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind Mariama’s ear. It was a habit I had with Tiffany, just a few years younger. The move was instinctive, and I jerked my hand back down, hoping I didn’t offend her. “I’m heading into town for the press conference. I’ll speak with Sheriff Marx when she’s done.”

We walked back toward the apiary and our cars. As I opened my door, I looked at Mariama. “Test the goo samples to see if you can figure something out.” I felt like a zombie as I drove into Gaia.

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The press conference was outside of the sheriff’s office, directly across the street from the Sunflower Café. There was a makeshift podium beneath the awning at the top of the stairs, with chairs

on the front lawn for reporters. The sun was almost directly overhead, eliminating shade in any direction, unless you were under the awning. Nika, stealing frequent glances at her watch, stood next to her deputy.

Word had already spread about Zach's partial recovery, so the press conference turned out to be a low-key affair, leaving some chairs unoccupied. Zach Taylor being alive appeared less newsworthy than his death would have been. Coverage would likely include a blurb in the papers and a snippet on the 6 o'clock news, nothing more. No live broadcast until later, after everyone learned about the relapse.

The Sunflower Café's patio gave me a perfect venue to observe the event. I plopped down at one of the high-top tables and opened the umbrella. Reporters fidgeted in their chairs, using notebooks to shield their eyes from the sun.

Nika tapped on the microphone to get started. "As most of you know, Zachary Taylor has a severe allergy to bee stings. Because of that, he succumbed to a coma Monday morning after being stung at Bliss Creek Winery. It took several days, but he came out of the coma yesterday. He had intended to join us this morning, but his doctors preferred to keep him in the hospital for another night. His family asked me to share their appreciation for the good wishes and prayers they received from the community. There's limited information, but I'll answer some questions.

The first came from a regional TV reporter. "Can you confirm the rumors that the owner of Bliss Creek Winery requested Mr. Taylor's presence near the beehives that morning?"

Nika blinked rapidly. "Not exactly. We have reason to conclude someone used a phone owned by the winery to send a text. But several individuals had access to it. We haven't confirmed the actual sender."

Nika pointed toward the audience, to the raised hand of a young man who asked, "Given the political climate we live in, is there any credence to the rumor that Mr. Taylor was a target because of his campaign policies?"

"We have no information to support that rumor." Nika pointed to another individual.

"On Monday, you suggested the incident might be suspicious. Do you have the resources to investigate this fully? Have you changed your conclusions?"

Nika kept a poker face as she replied. "We cooperate with other agencies to get the resources needed for any investigation, including this one."

A fourth reporter asked, "Can you elaborate on what caused you to consider the incident suspicious?"

"Any time a serious injury occurs without explanation or witnesses, we need to investigate. We have no final assessments yet. Now, I'll take one more question."

"What is Zach Taylor's current condition?"

"The doctors said he's stable. He came out of the coma yesterday, fully alert. He's still under hospital care until further notice. We will update you as new information becomes available." Nika pivoted from the podium and walked away amid continued shouted questions from the press.

Luna stood behind me, having watched the press conference over my shoulder. "Felicity refrained from asking questions."

"Huh?"

“You didn’t pay attention to the circus across the street, did you? I said Felicity didn’t ask any questions. That’s not like her, and it’s not like you to not be paying attention. What’s up?”

“I can’t give you the Friends-and-Family mead plan. In fact, I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that with Dot.”

“What do you mean?”

I told her about the hive devastation. “I thought someone was framing me to take the fall for hurting Taylor. Now, I’m wondering whether my business was the true target.” I felt numb.

“Alex, we’ll figure this out. And no matter what, we will all stick together till the end.”

Nika caught my eye from across the street. She held up her cell, using the thumbs-up gesture to signify she’d read my text. She’d meet me at Bliss Creek.

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Mariama hadn’t yet left the apiary when I returned. She snapped pictures with her phone and scooped samples of the liquid from the hives. “I sent some pictures to my professor, and he asked me to focus on a couple of specific areas. He offered to help us if we need it.”

“That would be terrific. One more thing you can do to help. Sheriff Marx is on her way and she might want to ask you some questions.” I sensed her discomfort about speaking with law enforcement. “Did I ever tell you she introduced me to my husband, and she stood up at my wedding? She’s one of the most honest, decent people you’ll ever meet.” Mariama’s shoulders relaxed. “If you remember anything to help find whoever did this—anything at all—I would appreciate it.”

The sound of an approaching car drew our attention. Nika got out, leaning on a cane as she limped toward us. She grimaced after every few steps.

“It looks like the leg is worse,” I said. “You haven’t been taking care of yourself.”

“I’ll take care of myself when this whole thing is behind me. Let’s focus on the vandalism here. What happened? Who discovered it?” Gruff, she is.

After I nudged her, Mariama spoke up. “I came to Bliss Creek this morning because I thought it would be a good idea to include photos in my internship report. That is when I discovered the damage.” She explained her observations before and after I’d arrived this morning. “I will try to determine what this junk is with my professor’s help.”

Nika sighed, whether from pain, exhaustion, or frustration, I couldn’t be sure. “Any idea who did this, Alexi?”

I chose my words carefully, not wanting to accuse anyone without cause. I realized I had already made that mistake several times. “I suspect someone sprayed my bees to damage Bliss Creek’s profitability. If I knew why, I might have a better grasp on who might have done it.”

Nika jotted notes and scanned the area. “Without evidence, I can’t do much. I’ll file a report and give you a copy if you need it for an insurance claim. If not, keep me posted.”

Both Nika and Mariama left, their cars generating dust plumes as they descended the dirt road to the highway. I got in my car and followed them to where a lane veered toward the retail shop.

Wolf greeted me as I opened the office door. “I’m happy to see you too, Big Guy.” I scratched behind his ears.

“That’s a sample of our new estate pyment.” Cathy’s voice carried in from the Tasting Room.

A customer's voice followed with a question. "What do you mean by estate pyment?"

"Great question. Pyment refers to mead made with the addition of grapes. And since the honey and grapes are from the Bliss Creek Winery properties, the ingredients are hyperlocal to the company's estate. Hence, estate pyment. The bottles from the preliminary batch are near the front counter. We will have additional bottles for a Christmas promotion later this year, but you get the chance to buy them now before we run out of stock." Cathy's sales pitch reminded me I hadn't yet shared the morning's events with my employees.

"Wolf, I wish you could tell me how you got the Ambien Sunday night." His tail thumped as I kneeled to rub his belly. I closed my eyes for a meditation minute, urging my brain to solve the puzzle. "My gut tells me there is a link between the beehive sabotage and the incident with Zach Taylor."

"Beehive sabotage?" Sasha's question jolted me.

"Didn't hear you come in." Hands against my thigh, I rose to a standing position. I summarized the morning as I poured myself a glass of water. "The destruction is serious."

"No, Alex, no! That's just awful." She rubbed her hands together, circling her palms over the opposite fingers. "Remember the dream I had Sunday night? The one with Matt and Wolf?"

Sasha's woeful tone of voice had carried out to the shop floor. Cathy peered down the corridor from behind the counter. I dashed to Sasha to maneuver her inside and shut the door. "I remember."

"I had a similar one last night. But this time, Matt appeared near the beehives. He kept motioning me toward them."

"To warn you about something?"

"I guess, as much as a warning can come through a dream."

I sensed an arm across my shoulders, even though Sasha and I were alone. "What else do you remember about it?"

She scrunched her eyes shut. "Let me think. Jumbled scenes. A firefighter...no, someone holding a fire extinguisher or a big canister. Wolf growling. A 'sold' sign in front of the winery." She opened her eyes. "Seemed more of a nightmare than a dream."

"A premonition?"

Sasha's eyes clouded over. "I haven't had a dream like these since high school. I dreamed my great-grandmother came to see me the night she died. I was around the age of 13 or 14. I didn't learn she died until the next day."

I waited.

"Another time I dreamed about my sister having a bicycle accident days before it happened. I saw the exact location and group of friends. No one believed me."

"I believe you."

"But my dreams never helped me change what happened."

"Maybe not, but you've given me an idea to have Mariama compare the goo she collected with foam from a commercial canister. That still wouldn't answer the question of who did it or why. But it's a start."

I texted Mariama, who immediately responded she would pass the question about commercial products to her professor. Then my eyes shifted toward an incoming text from Dot Harrison. "HAVE A CONFESSION. MEET PRIVATELY AT TRAILHEAD 1:15?"