

Chapter Nineteen: Two Confessions

I arrived at the trailhead, finding only empty cars in the lot. Their owners likely exited for hiking or biking and wouldn't return for hours. Dot and I would be alone.

Tires crunching on gravel announced Dot's arrival. She stopped the car, hesitating as she took one step out. Her pause made me wonder whether she had second thoughts about being here. Her second step brought her completely outside her car. She hand-pressed the wrinkles out of her slacks.

We stood looking at each other like gunfighters, waiting to see who would be the first to draw a weapon.

Dot scanned the parking lot before taking a tentative step toward me. "I've come to ... to apologize."

"Oh?"

Dot shuffled from foot to foot, staring down at the gravel. She cleared her throat and began pacing. With her back to me, she kicked a stone which shot to the edge of the lot and clinked down the highway. She should have been a pro kicker.

I willed myself to empathize with her, trying to read her emotions. It was a challenge to let her continue, to be patient, to wait for her. I kept coaching myself to hold back comments or questions, but then I gave up. "What did you want to apologize for?"

She spun around to face me. "Ya won."

"I what?"

"Ya won. I tried everything to get rid of those blasted beehives. I talked to the county agent, I met with the city council, I complained to the sheriff. Everyone said ya were within your legal rights." She took a loud breath.

This time I kept quiet, not wanting to disrupt her.

"After that, I contacted Felicity. I told her I'd quadruple my advertising budget if she wrote an article on the dangers your insect operation posed. When she refused, I tried to reach out to Zach Taylor's campaign to, um..." She swallowed heavily. "Here's the apology part."

"O-k-a-y."

"I used your phone to text Zach. I thought he was more apt to show up to meet with you than with me—what with the lawsuits and all."

"So, you met with Zach Taylor Monday morning?"

"No, no, no. I chickened out. The whole idea was a stupid move on my part. I figured he would just leave if no one showed up. I texted him from your phone and nothing else."

"You have to tell Sheriff Marx."

"I can't. No one would believe me. I didn't realize my message triggered this whole mess until Felicity told me yesterday. That's the truth. That's why I visited Zach in the hospital this morning. I wanted to make things right. I didn't tell him I sent the text. I just told him we should drop both lawsuits, mine and his."

I placed my hand on Dot's arm. I sensed her fatigue, so I nodded my head toward a park bench. "Let's sit down."

Dot picked a dandelion and began shredding it. "I guess I shouldn't do this since bees like these for pollen, eh?" She tossed it on the ground and clasped her hands on her lap. "When I thought about ya naming the mead after me, and your comments about insecticides, I felt guilty. Especially after the press conference this morning."

But not guilty enough to fess up to Nika. I didn't voice that thought out loud. "What did you want to speak with Zach about? I mean, before you chickened out about wanting to meet at the winery? It sounds like you weren't ready to drop the lawsuit yet."

"I knew he was running for Congress and my lawsuit wouldn't be good for it. I was gonna tell him I'd drop the suit and contribute to his campaign if he would do something about your beehives." She avoided eye contact. "It made sense in my head on Sunday, but not so much Monday morning. Ya know I can be impulsive, but I'm an honest, law-abiding citizen. Since I didn't meet with him, I did nothin' wrong."

"Nika has to know."

Panic filled Dot's eyes. "Don't ya dare. I came to apologize to you, and to no one else. You and the sheriff are buddy-buddy, so she'll protect ya. I can't say the same for me. If ya tell her about this conversation, I'll deny it."

"Dot, I have to tell her. I'll give her the total story that you didn't follow through. If I say nothing, I'm withholding evidence."

"Whoever said confession is good for the soul is just stupid," Dot said. She heaved herself up from the bench with such vehemence she nearly toppled over. Good thing a strong cement foundation secured the bench to the ground.

"Dot, don't go yet. Why are you telling this to me? You say you sent the text, but don't want me to tell Nika. Why?"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at me as if I were an imbecile. "I just told ya, I felt guilty. Zach probably wouldn't have come without the message. Somebody else must have known about it."

I wasn't sure if she was rationalizing her behavior, or if she suspected someone else had followed up on the text. "Are you saying you know who might have been aware of the text?"

"I didn't say that. Ya can't put words into my mouth. I just wanted to come clean, is all."

"Do you know who killed my bees this morning?" My entire body sickened at the memory of the destruction.

"What?" Dot's shoulders dropped as she sank back down onto the bench. "Does that mean there'll be no mead production for my brand name?"

Yup, it's always about her.

"Dot, do you know who could have done that?"

"I've told ya everything I know. In fact, I told ya too much." Without another word, she stomped to her car and drove off.

I remained glued to the bench, struggling to piece things together. Dot admitted sending Zach the text on Sunday, but I knew in my bones she wasn't telling me everything she knew. Mariama saw a blue truck hightailing from the bluff Monday morning. Sasha and Chris have blue trucks, but so do a lot of other people. Tony found sleep medication in Wolf's system. Dot and Ryan use Ambien, which

contains the generic ingredient, but they're not the only ones who do. There was blood on Wolf's paw. Ryan and Cathy had scratches that could have dripped blood. Someone left a threatening message on Zach's website. It's possible that there's a connection, but there's no way to confirm it. Zach can't remember what happened on Monday. There was a deliberate attack on the beehives this morning. Sasha had a dream or premonition just before the events on both Monday and today.

I left the trailhead parking lot, driving on autopilot. Could premonitions be real? I took a detour on the way back to the winery to learn the answer.

If my car were a horse, it would know the way to the Sunflower Café. I was too unsettled by the day's events to face customers without a respite. My staff were more than qualified to handle customers, but I required different support to get a perspective on premonitions. Luckily, Luna was taking a mid-afternoon break at one of the patio tables when I arrived.

"I was expecting you," she said as I walked up to the table.

"You were?"

"Just a feeling. And Sasha called me."

"She told you about her dream?"

Luna nodded. "She also said you were meeting with Dot. I suspected you'd need a break before returning to the winery."

"Are premonitions real?" I settled into a chair across from her. I couldn't have imagined asking this question two weeks ago. But now I was looking for any answers I could find.

"It depends on who you ask."

"Come on, I'm asking you. I want your opinion."

Luna brought her hands together in a namaste gesture. "Some people see things that are invisible to others." She snapped the top off a nearby flower and held it up. "One person might just see this as a blossom. Others, like you, see blossom as a food source for honey bees which eventually convert them to honey."

"What does that have to do with dreams and premonitions?"

"We're continually picking up signals and clues and impressions from all around us. Then at night, our brains try to put all the puzzle pieces together into a story."

"That's not the same as predicting the future."

"A lot of knowledge of the future comes from projecting the present forward. People good at observation can speculate what's likely to happen. Sometimes that knowledge can seem like a prediction or a premonition."

"How does that explain Sasha's dreams about Matt and Wolf? Or the fire extinguisher?"

"Sasha is immersed in concerns about the winery and the beekeeping operations. Matt and Wolf represent warning signals. She didn't really predict the vandalism."

I sat back in my chair, contemplating. "So, you're saying a sixth sense—ESP—doesn't exist?"

"The opposite. It's a quality that we all possess, to varying degrees, and most people ignore it. A few can sense things others don't, even though it's not as precise and detailed as people hope it would be."

"Have you ever seen the future? Or had a vision? Or have you ever just known something without being able to explain how you knew it?"

A slow smile crossed Luna's face. "Sometimes, with jumbled images, and I don't always interpret them correctly. Let's just say I've become a very cautious psychic. I prefer to look for the invisible present, rather than stumble over the unforeseeable future."

"Are you saying you pay attention to things people tune out in the present, or to things that are just below their level of awareness? And because of that, it seems like you're predicting the future even if you're not?"

"Something like that."

My composure was returning. "Thanks. Not just for the advice, but also for letting me decompress. I think I can fake my way through serving customers for the last hour of the day."

Luna gave my arm a friendly squeeze. "Time for me to get to work, too." She turned her head over her shoulder as she moved toward the door. "Don't worry about Dot's refusal to tell Nika about sending the text to Zach. Just try to find out who saw or helped her do it."

As the door closed behind her, I realized I had mentioned nothing to her about Dot sending the text message. And no one else could have had that information.

Felicity was sipping mead at the winery when I arrived. Cathy and George had completed the last tour of the day. Sasha was finishing up with the final customers.

I sat on the chair across from Felicity. Stomach growling, I grabbed a handful of snacks from the table. "I didn't expect to see you today. I thought you'd be hanging out with the media folk. Luna noticed you didn't ask questions at the press conference."

She raised and lowered her shoulders in a s-l-o-w shrug. "At first, I thought Zach's bee stings were an accident, or at worst, a careless set of innocent circumstances. Zach knew about his allergy, and he was always vigilant about it. I wondered if there was more going on, whether there was something deliberate or sinister about what happened Monday morning."

"What makes you say that?" I asked.

"I've been doing a lot of soul-searching this week. I have a confession to make."

"Oh?" *Two confessions in one day?*

"The earring you showed me? It was mine, although I wasn't sure when I first saw it. Honest. Then I sort of remembered wearing them on Sunday. They're kind of heavy, making me sometimes take them off subconsciously and shove them in my pocket. But I can't find either of them."

"We found the second one yesterday."

"You did? Where?"

"In the meadery. I gave them both to Nika."

"Am I a suspect?"

"Not that I'm aware. Why would you think you're a suspect?"

Felicity drummed her manicured nails on the table. "Do you know who sent Zach the text?"

"Nika hasn't figured that out yet." I hedged because Dot's story needed a better resolution. Felicity had punted on my question about being a suspect, and it was my turn to punt. "Do you mind if we go back to the earrings? Try to remember when you took them off."

"I've been trying to remember."

"Let's start with Sunday. You said you thought you were wearing them. Walk through your day."

She closed her eyes. "Now I remember; I put them on in the morning. I tried on different pairs and decided these were the best match for what I was wearing. It was Sunday, so I expected to bump into a crowd at the play, and I wanted to look my best. I made a spontaneous decision to take the winery tour before the play started."

Her eyes popped open. "It was here. I was talking with Cathy during the wine tasting after the tour and I removed an earring to show her. I took the other one off and set them on the counter."

"Then what?"

She again closed her eyes for a full fifteen seconds. "That's the last thing I remember about the earrings. I must have left without picking them back up. I didn't realize I wasn't wearing them when I came back after the play."

"So, how did one end up by the hives and the other in the meadery?"

"It's as if someone wanted to frame me by planting an earring near the bees. But even if that's the case, what's the deal with the other one showing up on Thursday?"

Sasha flipped the front sign '*closed*,' before walking toward us, interrupting our conversation. "I let Wolf out a couple times while you were gone," she said as she joined us. "He's sleeping in the office now."

Cathy followed behind Sasha, then sat down next to Felicity. "Sasha told me what happened at the beehives. How bad is it?"

I recapped the situation for Felicity's and Cathy's benefit. "Mariama said there's nothing she—or anyone—can do to save them. It was a malicious, evil, cold-hearted, contemptible, toxic...act of depravity." I avoided swearing as my brain sought more civilized words to describe my intense anger. Tension gripped muscles I didn't know I had.

"When did it happen?" Felicity asked.

"It had to have been last night—afternoon at the earliest." I wanted to punch the wall. Or at least break several pencils.

"Was that before or after someone planted my earring in the meadery?"

I noted Felicity's decision to use the word planted. "There's no way to validate the exact time either happened."

"Wait a minute," Sasha said. "The plugged toilet. That could have been a diversion for someone to spray the bees. The matching earring in the meadery might have been part of that as well. The question is why."

Felicity chugged her mead and twisted a strand of hair around her finger. Not her normal composed behavior. “The earring on the ground by the beehives points a finger at me, setting me up as a suspect. But that’s not the case with the meadery, since it’s unlikely I would *accidentally* lose one on a shelf in the meadery. My guess is, someone had both in his or her possession. He or she planted the first one to frame me and lost the other one while...”

“While what?” Cathy prompted.

“While someone adulterated the mead.”

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “What do you mean?”

“I did an undercover gig in Detroit where we received a tip that someone tampered with food at a competitor’s restaurant to put them out of business.”

“They poisoned the food?” I asked.

“In this case, no. They just added vinegar, pepper and salt—stuff like that—to spoil the ingredients. The goal was not to hurt anybody, but dissuade people from eating the food.”

“Were they—did anyone---catch—caught?” Sasha’s and Cathy’s questions jumbled over each other.

“Yes, there was an apprehension. It turned out to be an inside job. The tip we received had a few gaps in the story. The vandalism had nothing to do with a competing restaurant. The disgruntled chef did it for revenge against the owners.”

“Okay, let’s relate this back to Bliss Creek Winery,” I said. “After spraying the beehives, someone may have intended to contaminate the mead. Cathy, before we serve any more unbottled mead, we have to test each batch for purity.”

With my head spinning with all the implications, I was also trying to understand Felicity’s role. I turned to her. “What made you decide to admit the earring was yours?”

Felicity tried unsuccessfully to hide her red face. “Luna showed me a picture on her phone of me at the Winter Ball. She commented on how much she liked my earrings. I read between the lines that denying that I owned them would make it look like I had something to hide.”

I smiled at Luna’s sneakiness. “Keep thinking about who might have picked up your earrings. The ability to prove your innocence—and mine—might depend on it.”

Felicity left, still concerned about being framed. I was concerned about who knew Dot had sent the text and who attacked my bees. And the second earring brought up another concern. Was my mead contaminated?