

## Chapter Twenty: Suspicion Narrows

Cathy and Sasha remained after Felicity left. The mood was somber. Sasha cleared her throat. "Sounded like Felicity suggested you might have employees out for revenge." I knew she was struggling to control the emotions of anger, hurt, and fear. Both sets of eyes bored into me.

"Felicity can be blunt; I discounted her comment about employees. I don't believe for one minute that either of you is out to get me, or Zach, or Felicity, or anyone else."

Funny how before this week, I never paid attention to the office clock ticking, but I heard it now. Tick, tick, tick. Annoying as a dripping faucet, and as unsettling as a rattlesnake ready to strike.

I picked a bottle up from the display of the estate pyment Cathy had referenced during her sales pitch. I rotated the bottle and held it to the light. When I returned, I realized Cathy had sold two bottles. "The risk of contamination concerns me. At least I bottled this pyment long before we found the earring."

"Do we need to take mead samples to a lab for testing?" Cathy asked.

"Maybe. I don't want to overreact or under-react. Nothing was out of place, nothing appeared disturbed in the meadery. We'll do our own testing first and decide after that. In the meantime, let's focus on the earrings. Whomever had them presumably attacked the hives and threatened the meadery. Cathy, talk about the people here on Sunday when Felicity stopped by."

"I recall Felicity sampling the wine with the other customers after the tour. Let me grab the sign-up sheet to help me refresh my memory." She walked to the cash register and scanned the names from Sunday. "Okay, this helps." She reenacted the taste testing. "A couple from Illinois on their way to Mount Rushmore stood here." She pantomimed pouring the drinks. "The three from Canada—or at least they sounded Canadian—settled here."

Cathy continued to pour the invisible wine and walked to the middle of the counter. "Felicity waved at me from the end and I walked over to her. I complimented her on her jewelry. She took off an earring and handed it to me, pointing out some unusual etchings. Then she took the other one off, complaining about their heaviness. I didn't recognize it as the same earring you showed me, although now it is plain as day."

"Did she set them on the counter?" I asked.

Cathy nodded, tapping on the counter where Felicity had placed the earrings. "Then I had to pour the second flight, so I excused myself and returned to the customers."

Sasha stood at the end of the counter. "Is this where Felicity stood? Was anyone else near her?"

"After a while, Hank Schmidt walked up," Cathy said, "and they started talking. More like arguing."

"About what?" I joined Sasha at the end of the counter and looked around. The position provided a clear view of the entire retail area and the front doors.

"They kept their voices low, but the tone sounded angry. Even across the room I noticed Felicity's clenched jaw and Hank's tense muscles."

"Then what?" I prompted.

"The Canadians called me back for the last flight of wine. When I finished pouring the customers' glasses, Felicity, Hank, and the earrings had disappeared. I assumed Felicity had taken them. And before you ask, no, I did not grab her earrings."

"The question is whether Hank or someone else picked them up. Felicity already specified she didn't," I said.

"But what if she did?" Sasha asked.

"Why would she have lied?"

"I didn't say that; I said, *what if?* While this may sound preposterous, it might have merit. Everyone knows Felicity is always on the hunt for the next big story. What bigger story is there in Gaia? An unknown assailant knocks Zach out of commission, damages your winery, tampers with your mead, and tries to frame the local news editor."

I thought back to Felicity's behavior after the TV interview between Ken Pike and Chris Taylor. She was uncharacteristically giddy when Ken mentioned finding a place for her in Madison. It would get her back on her career ladder to a top news market. "I admit she's ambitious, but I have trouble embracing her as ruthless."

"Sasha could be on to something," Cathy said. "She seemed eager to plant a seed of doubt about your own employees, a.k.a., Sasha and me."

Felicity's earlier comment bubbled through my mind. *Do we ever know what people are capable of?* "Let's build on what we already compiled and not jump to conclusions." I wheeled the whiteboard from my office. "It's a good thing we didn't erase everything from yesterday." I jotted down additional notes. "Felicity left her earrings here on Sunday. We found one earring by the beehives that night, and the other in the meadery yesterday; we're not sure how either got where they were."

I wrote the words 'sent text' beneath Dot's name. Sasha and Cathy looked confused until I continued. "She 'fessed up. Let's turn the clock back to Sunday. Cathy, think back to Dot and anyone around her. Did she talk to anyone? Try to remember every detail."

Cathy scanned the whiteboard scribbles, then looked at the names list in her hand. "Okay, Dot took the tour. She seemed preoccupied. Her behavior was even more bizarre than normal. She complained about her gut acting up, but she came back after the play was done. She was one of the last people to leave, and I noticed her waiting outside the restroom door."

"That's consistent with what she told me," I said. "Even about the restroom. She said she spotted Hank Schmidt coming out of it."

"I didn't notice. I'm surprised he came back after his run-in with Felicity. Strange neither Sasha nor I saw him, but we were both busy; I was serving tables and Sasha was ringing up customers. If Hank lingered in the restroom, he stayed out of our line-of-sight. The same applies to Felicity." Cathy and Sasha might harbor a grudge against Felicity for the near future.

"Do you think with of them witnessed Dot messing with your phone?" Sasha asked.

"It's possible." I turned back to Cathy. "Anything else you remember about Sunday afternoon?"

"Only that it was busier than normal. Wait, there was one thing. A couple squabbled in the parking lot after we closed. They had their backs to me, and I paid little attention. Now that I think about it, I bet it was Dot and Hank. The woman—Dot—pulled out her cell phone, a flip phone. I remember that because they're not as common as they used to be."

It was time to test my theory. "Did you notice their cars?"

"When they finished talking, the man—Hank—got into a truck. But I couldn't tell you anything specific about it. Why?"

I grabbed a marker from the whiteboard. "Check my logic here. Felicity argued with Hank, whom she previously identified as an informant. Then Hank argued with Dot after she used my phone to message Zach. Ryan wanted me to sell the property to Hank. Zach's political opponent is a friend of Hank's. The common denominator seems to be..." I circled Hank's name. "And there's a heck of a lot of money tied to the sale of the Mississippi River Bluff properties."

"Sasha, didn't you tell me Hank has gambling debt?" Cathy asked.

"I've heard that, but don't know if it's true," Sasha said. "He was always chasing the quick deal. And if the deal wasn't quick, he padded it to make it bigger."

Sasha and Cathy stood up to stretch, and I called it a night. "Thanks for hearing me out. It sometimes helps to think out loud."

Sasha gave me the Sasha squint. "I don't think we've cleared Felicity yet, although I can see your logic about Hank. To be safe, avoid them both."

Cathy agreed. "Call if you need anything." She bounced toward the door, then stopped. "One more thing popped into my head. Hank's truck is Superman blue, kind of like Sasha's."

Owning a blue truck is not incriminating evidence—after all, Sasha and Chris have trucks that color. I needed more proof. Perhaps I could get it at Hank's open house.

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It was after 6:30 when I pulled into Hank's new realty office. I recognized several business owners leaving, but the parking lot was still busy. Surveying the side lot, I spotted Hank's truck. Superman blue, as Cathy said, with vanity plates that read WINNER1. Is he one-upping Taylor's WINNER plate? Before I walked inside, I peered into the recycling bin. The sight of a host of green 2-liter soda bottles with the tops crudely sawn off reminded me of what I had glimpsed in Taylor's car.

Upon entering the building, I monitored the crowd, deliberating on my next step. Felicity was in deep conversation with the bank president, and I started there. "Hi Felicity, David. Looks like a good turnout."

David scanned the room as he nodded. "Hank's motto is 'always big or go home.' He was never one to miss a chance to raise his status." Then he excused himself to talk to some of this major bank clientele.

Felicity stepped closer to me and spoke in a near whisper. "I wasn't sure you'd be here. I assume you're here to look for clues."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Alexi. We're both suspicious of Hank. He had access to my earrings and to your phone to text Zach."

I knew she was trapping me to see if I knew the true sender. "What makes you say that?"

"Your phone was unguarded on the counter on Sunday after the play. He's the most likely prospect. Dot Harrison was there, but she uses a flip phone, for gosh sakes. And I'm not talking about the new Samsung Galaxy flip phones. She'd be clueless about texting on a smart phone even if her life depended on it."

Felicity's comment struck me with the force of a shovel. Forgetting my intent to safeguard Dot's secret confession, I said, "Of course, Dot would have needed help to send a text. Hank could have done that."

Felicity's smile made me realize I had swallowed her bait and helped her place suspicion on Hank. "That suggests Hank and Dot must have worked together on the text. Let's investigate further."

I looked at Felicity with both respect and trepidation. As I understood it, she had been a damn good investigative reporter in Detroit. Learning from her could be insightful. "What did you have in mind?"

"I'll distract Hank while you check out his office."

"That's trespassing."

"This is an open house. Check if his office door is open, and poke your head in. I'll make sure he doesn't see you."

Despite a dozen reasons not to follow Felicity's suggestion, my curiosity prevailed. "Don't make me regret this."

Felicity lured Hank down the hallway by pointing to something out the window. After making sure no one was observing me, I shuffled in the opposite direction, studying the wall hangings as I moved. The filing room was behind the first door; a high-speed color copier sat between oak filing cabinets. When I stepped back into the hallway, I heard Hank's voice shout, "Wait a minute!"

I froze until I saw him walk the bank president out the door. Felicity shoed me back down the hallway with her hands before she followed Hank outside. Three steps later, I found Hank's office unlocked. I stepped inside, wondering what to look for. Nothing struck me as unusual until I noticed something behind the door. It was a bee suit.

My heart started racing as I hurried back into the reception area. A swish of the front door preceded the entry of Hank, with Felicity holding onto his arm. She beckoned me over. "Hank really outdid himself with this remodel," Felicity said, patting him on the back. "Thanks for hosting the open house." Then she turned toward me. "I'll walk out with you, Alex. Can I ask you a few more questions about the article I mentioned?" We left the open house as the caterers were closing the bar and clearing the hors d'oeuvres.

"Well?" Felicity asked when we approached our cars.

"All I found was a beekeeping suit; unsure if it matters."

"It might. If nothing else, it's another piece of data that might come in handy later. What about his recycling bin? Did you notice the green soda bottles?"

I jerked my head toward Felicity. "What about them? This is a reception where they could be discards from the bar service."

"I know that," Felicity said. "But Nika's deputy told me there appeared to be a soda bottle bee trap in Zach's car. Was it the same type of bottle you saw?"

How does Felicity always wheedle information that's supposed to be confidential? "You realize I can't answer that question."

"Sorry for pushing so hard. You're concerned about Bliss Creek and I'm concerned about clearing my name. Think about all the puzzle pieces. In the meantime, be careful. Don't be alone with Hank until Nika gives the all-clear."