

Chapter Twenty-Two: Epilogue

The waiting area outside the sheriff's office on Monday morning was quiet. I scrolled through my recharged phone, oblivious to the chaos on the screen. My arms, legs, and butt still hurt, but nothing major. Glad to be alive, I anxiously awaited answers.

Nika opened the door to her office. "Come on in, Alex." She called me Alex rather than Alexi, so everything was falling into place.

"I spoke with Hank this morning," Nika said. "He had a mild heart attack and is resting comfortably. He initially claimed you shoved him down the bluff, but changed his tune once he learned we had read his texts. Then he demanded his lawyer."

"He confessed?"

"Not exactly. But he understood the damage his texts could do to his defense. I'm sure his lawyer will try to get them thrown out."

"Any new information?"

"As Hank told you, Ryan had dollar signs in his eyes about the Travel Adventures opportunity and agreed to delete Dot's text from your phone. Deputy LaPine picked Ryan up in Madison and is questioning him about his involvement."

"I haven't wrapped my head around that piece yet. Even with all my misgivings about our relationship, I thought there was some affection between us."

"Don't beat yourself up about it. Just because the thrill of a mega-deal lured Ryan, it doesn't mean he didn't care for you—at least on some level. And he was better than a lot of the guys you dated in college."

"Hey. Gimme a break."

Nika grinned. "I asked Dot to come in and give a statement about writing the text. She did. Her story hasn't changed from what she told you. Are you going to file a complaint?"

I shook my head. "My gut suggests that she acted on impulse and didn't have any malicious intent. She doesn't seem to be the type of person to mastermind a plot to use my phone to trick Zach into a coma. She uses a flip phone, for criminy sakes. My guess is she wouldn't, and couldn't, have followed through if it hadn't been for Hank. Were you able to uncover any evidence against him?"

"I got a search warrant based on your testimony. You gave us the information we needed. We found his beekeeping suit, insect poison in his garage, and a search history of articles on constructing bee traps."

My heart sank. What a waste. "I didn't put all the pieces together till yesterday," I said. "Both Dot and Felicity had talked to Hank. I sensed they didn't trust him and needed to broadcast their innocence before he could accuse them of something. When Cathy told me that Hank had a blue truck and gambling debts, my suspicions went to high alert."

"If I'd known he was a threat to you, I would have approached things differently. Of course, I know you can take care of yourself."

I rubbed my scabs and realized how things could have turned out differently. "Was he responsible for Zach's coma?"

“We can’t prove he trapped your bees and planted them in Zach’s car; but with Mariama’s testimony about seeing a blue truck, we have substantial circumstantial evidence.”

“Just a slap and he’s off the hook.”

“We can’t get him for attempted murder, and that may not have been his intent. But he broke a bunch of other laws that we can prove. And we’ll see if the poison we found matches the goo in your apiary.”

“If it doesn’t?”

“Mariama and her professor are still investigating. With luck, we’ll have something definitive soon. I need confirmation about the match.”

“Did Hank take Felicity’s earrings?”

“He said he slipped them into his pocket, intending to return them to her. He ‘accidentally’ dropped one by the beehives.”

“Accidentally?”

“So he says, but by telling us that, he admitted he was at your apiary. He tried to backtrack, but we already recorded that.”

“What about the one in the meadery?”

“That’s a conundrum. Hank swears he doesn’t know how it got there. By then, his lawyer arrived, and he stopped talking.”

Nika’s phone rang, and she took a call that had something to do with a parade permit. My mind drifted back to the second earring. If Hank didn’t plant it in the meadery, who did? Does that make mead contamination more or less likely? Did Hank go to the meadery, or is he lying to avoid more trouble? We’ll probably never know.

When Nika finished, she turned back toward me. “Was there anything else we needed to discuss?”

“What about Wolf and the Ambien?”

“We found some doggy pill pockets—you know, those things you hide pills in to get dogs to ingest their medicine—by Hank’s bee supplies. My guess is he slipped something to Wolf Sunday after the play. You mentioned Wolf’s odd behavior that night, and this might explain it. It’s a theory at this point. But given that Hank doesn’t own a dog, the pill pockets provide a red flag.”

A knock on the door interrupted our conversation. “Here’s your statement to sign.” Nika handed me the transcript of what I said had happened on the bluff. I read it and signed it.

“By the way,” Nika said, “The hospital released Taylor this morning. The concern about a relapse appeared to be a false alarm. He still doesn’t remember what happened Monday morning, but other than that, he’s on his way to full recovery.”

“That’s great news. Am I free to go now?”

Nika nodded. She placed a hand on my shoulder. “You would have made an outstanding detective. Following up on the earrings and getting Dot’s confession changed the momentum. And the way you handled Hank broke the case wide open. Matt would have been proud.”

On a normal Monday, I'd be handling a slow stream of business at the winery—weekend crowds are larger. Instead, I had posted a sign at the end of the driveway that we were closed for the day because of a 'family emergency.' Locals knew that was code for "I-need-a-break-after-the-week-I-had." While Sasha and Cathy agreed to cover for me, I wanted to keep the local gossip vine off the property.

I took a mug of coffee out to the patio behind my house. Wolf sniffed around the yard and marked his territory more than any animal needs to. Both Josh and Tiffany called to follow up from their weekend texts. As calmly as I could, I explained the events on the bluff gingerly to avoid causing panic. They had already lost one parent in the line of duty. I convinced them I was fine, there was no further threat, and that rushing home to see me was unnecessary. Their semester jobs were nearly over and they'd be home for the summer, anyway.

I sipped my now-cold coffee and grimaced. Iced coffee was never my thing. I popped the mug into the microwave and returned to the patio. With my feet up on a lounge chair, I almost drifted to sleep when my phone rang.

It was Nika. "LaPine just reported on his interview with Ryan. He admitted deleting your phone's text, even though he knew its purpose was to catch Zach off-guard by meeting here. He swears Hank lured Zach here simply to convince him you would sell if Hank and Zach worked together. And he claims he knew nothing about Hank creating a bee trap. They'll both pay hefty fines, at minimum. Jail time and restitution rest with the judge."

"Payback is appropriate, but I wish it never happened. It doesn't seem real."

"Give yourself the day to recuperate. Reality can wait until tomorrow."

After ending the call, I looked at my phone and sighed. I scrolled through the settings and added a password. Then I called Luna. I dumped on her every tidbit of information since the last time we had spoken. "No closure on Felicity's earring in the meadery yet. Remember when I asked you if it could have been ghostly intervention? Given everything that happened, what do you think now?"

"My answer remains the same. Some things we might never confirm. This could be one of them. And knowing the answer won't change any of the hard facts. Let it go."

The answer disheartened me, but it made sense. I'll never know if Hank lied about planting the earring in the meadery, although the plugged toilet suggests that was the case. And I also can't prove it was a ghost. I tried too hard to stay attached to Matt, and I had to move on. I called Cathy to see if she verified the purity of the mead. Her own tests showed everything was okay, but she sent a few samples to an independent laboratory for a third-party review. Two weeks until results.

I reached for the rough draft of the ancestry report my daughter had worked on. Mary Smith, my ninth great-grandmother, survived false accusations of witchcraft during the Salem Witch Trials in 1692. Her vindication came at a cost to her family and friends. I wondered if Luna had been aware of this when she gave that name to my character in *The Beekeeper's Secret*.

Although documents were spotty, one court record described Mary as a beekeeper who used her knowledge of bees to cast spells and curses on her neighbors. The prosecution claimed she could forecast the future, but could she really? Luna's words came to mind. *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.* I wondered if that was the case with Mary Smith. Maybe she paid attention to things others ignored, making her appear clairvoyant. Was that ability her beekeeper's secret and had it almost cost her life?

I closed my eyes and could almost hear the whispers of accusations and the crackle of burning wood before I opened another 'news' article from 1692 about witches. The complexity of the linguistical writing style made it challenging to decipher. However, it conveyed a message about Mary Smith's enemies attempting to destroy her bee hives and placing a curse on her descendants. My grandparents had talked about a supposed family curse, but I paid little attention to it. If it related to my witch trial ancestry, that was something to explore another day.

I settled into my chair, and vowed to honor Mary Smith's memory by carrying on her tradition of beekeeping. The doorbell interrupted me once more while I closed my eyes. Should I answer it or pretend that no one is home? A video doorbell would let me see who's there without leaving my patio. With a sigh, I trudged through the house, heartened by Wolf's tail wag, confirming that he recognized the visitor. I opened the door to Zach Taylor.

"Sorry to bother you after everything you've been through," he said. Wolf greeted him without reservation, and I had to admit, my heart skipped a bit. "I hoped we could finish the conversation we started at the hospital before Dot arrived."

"Of course. Let's go out to the patio. Can I get you a cup of coffee? I made a fresh pot." *A couple of hours ago.*

"I'd appreciate that. Black."

I filled a mug on the way through the kitchen and handed it to him. "You're looking great. It's amazing how quickly you bounced back."

"The doctor said the CAT scan showed there's no brain damage. I'm moving a lot slower, but I expect to be back to normal soon." He took a sip of coffee and set the mug down. "I want to explain why I offered to buy your property, or even a part of it."

"I assumed it had something to do with the potential state contract with Travel Adventures. It surprised me you hadn't tried to get Dot's land as well."

"Alexi, I never intended to buy the land to sell to the state. My goal was to *prevent* the land from being sold to the state. I saw the boundaries of their geographic area of interest. They demanded a complete land purchase. If I bought even a part of your property, it would serve as a roadblock, preventing Travel Adventures from making the purchase."

"Why were you trying to do that?"

"Before launching the run for congress, I talked with citizens about what they deemed important. I researched critical issues locally, nationally, and internationally. Strong environmental protections rose to the top. I'm glad you opposed the sale. But I knew what would happen if you sold to Hank."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Would you have believed me?"

I felt my face blush. My brain searched for a polite answer and came up empty.

"That's okay. I see the answer in your face. My reputation precedes me. I have some hard work ahead of me to convince people I'm sincere about protecting the planet for the future. I'm convinced progress and environmental protection aren't diametrically opposed."

Wolf had laid his head on Zach's lap. Zach casually scratched the dog's neck as he talked. My gut told me this was the real Zach Taylor.

“You sound like a commercial, but I believe you. And I’m glad.”

“Describe your plans to replace your beehives,” Zach said.

I explained I would need to scrub the current location of all contaminants and find a new location for the hives. After insurance reimbursement, I’d begin reconstructing the apiary as soon as humanly possible. I also discussed the need to test the unbottled mead. Even though no one confessed to tampering with my products, I couldn’t ignore the risk. Cathy’s report notwithstanding, I had to be sure.

Zach shivered and looked over his shoulder. “Where did that draft come from?” Wolf lifted his head, looked over Zach’s shoulder, and wagged his tail. Then he lowered his head back down. I could only assume Matt approved of Zach.

“Are you going to keep your business after the election?” I asked.

“I’ll have to resolve conflict-of-interest issues if I get elected. Until then, I’ll focus on environmentally sound development practices. I want to do the right thing. I’d like to start by paying you back for saving my life. How about I buy a replacement set of hives?”

“Let me think about it.” His offer overwhelmed and disoriented me. “Can I refill your coffee?”

Zach leaned toward me. There was an attraction I hadn’t felt since Nika introduced me to Matt. I realized the feeling had been absent from my relationship with Ryan. “No thanks, but I have one more request.”

My heart fluttered. It was embarrassing at my age. “What’s that?”

“Let’s have dinner this week.”

“Like on a date?”

He laughed. “Yes, just like that. But the old-fashioned way, without a dating app. I’d like to get to know you better.”

“I’d like that,” I said. Wolf barked and wagged his tail.

My prevailing perception acknowledged Zach as a genuine, principled individual. Why had it taken me so long to accept my own instincts? Maybe Luna was right; maybe I possess an insight like my ninth great-grandmother and should learn to trust my gut. Mary Smith completed an odyssey from beekeeper to accused witch, to cursed innocent victim. While I didn’t fully understand it, I felt a kinship toward her. Maybe I’ll learn her secrets in the future. For now, I’m happy going on a date with Zach, keeping up the beekeeping tradition, and testing out my personal intuition.