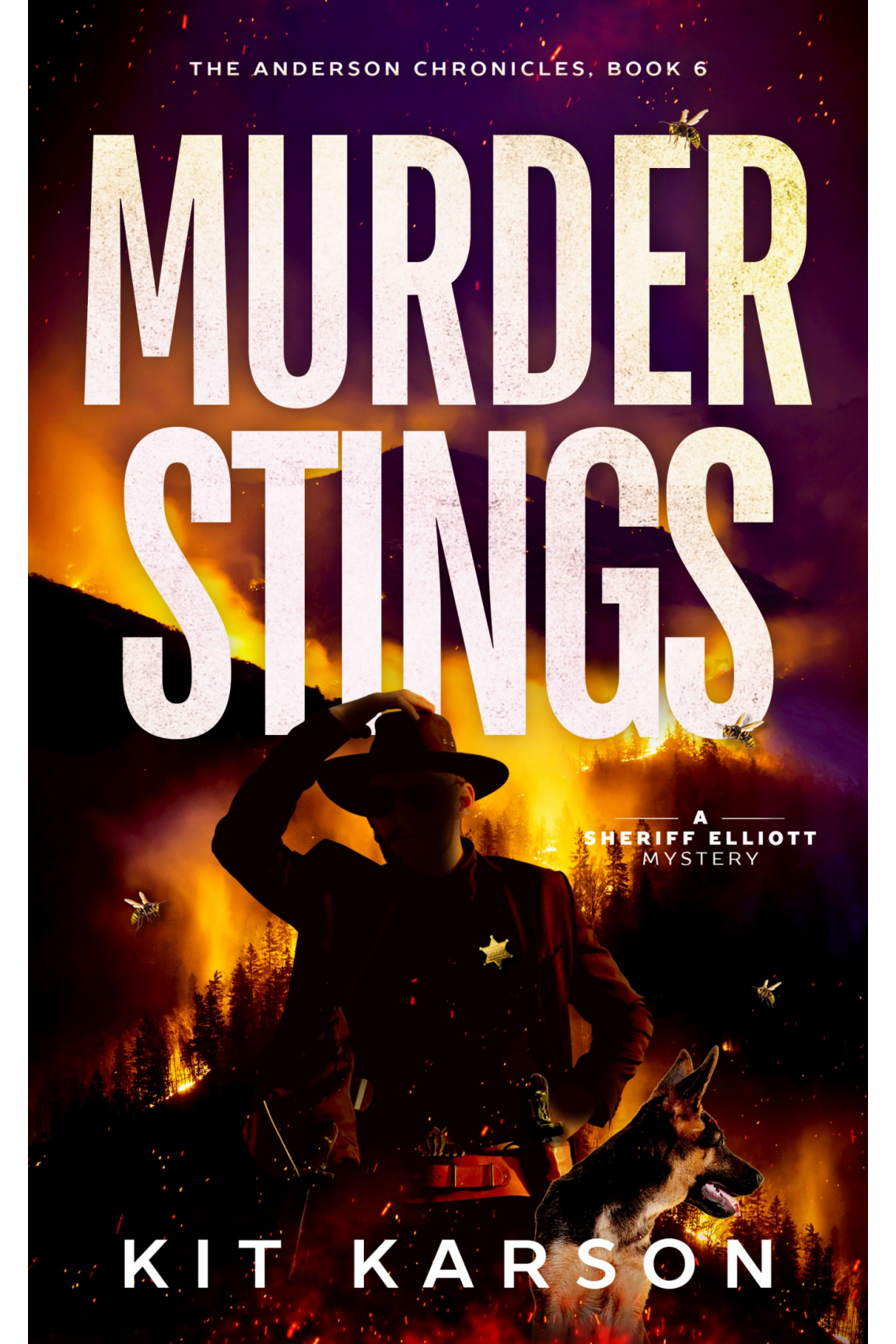


THE ANDERSON CHRONICLES, BOOK 6

MURDER STINGS



A
SHERIFF ELLIOTT
MYSTERY

KIT CARSON

THE ANDERSON CHRONICLES
BOOK 6



MURDER STINGS

KIT KARSON

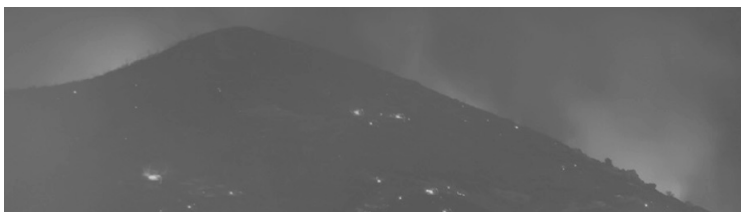
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kit_karson_books@outlook.com

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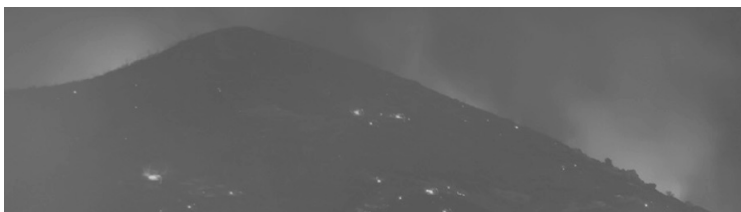
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**TO DARLENE HOGGATT AND HER
BEES**

FOR LACK OF WOOD THE FIRE GOES
OUT, AND WHERE THERE IS NO
WHISPERER, QUARRELING CEASES.
AS CHARCOAL TO HOT EMBERS AND
WOOD TO FIRE, SO IS A
QUARRELSOME MAN TO KINDLING
STRIFE.

Proverbs 26:20-21



1

FLAMES AND SMOKE rose into the distant sky as the wildfire ate every morsel in its path. Sheriff Peter Elliott lifted his binoculars and followed the trail of a water-scooping air tanker as it flew over the forest, dropping a curtain of hundreds of gallons of water into the inferno.

“What’s the status?” he asked the fire watcher.

“Twenty percent contained, but that doesn’t mean much if the conditions change.”

“So, Anderson isn’t in the clear yet?”

“Nope.”

Peter handed the binoculars back to the watcher, whistled to his dog, Zack, and hurried down the narrow metal stairway of the fire tower. Notifying and successfully evacuating the inhabitants of the sparsely populated Moonlight Mountains of Stone County took more than a few phone calls and he was at least a day’s hike out of service. He blocked the thought of flames engulfing his town, swung his pack over his shoulders, and concentrated on navigating the rocky trail.



EXPRESSIONS OF LOATHING covered the staring faces. Arrogant Mayor Kalinski relished the hostility. In his mind, inciting emotions in people who couldn't fight back signified power, and power fed Dwight Kalinski's ego. He made no effort to conceal his gloating as he stood looking over the table of scowling council members.

Historically, the mayor would only vote in the event of a tie between the six elected members of the Anderson, Montana town council. A chance discovery of centuries-old record books stored in a forgotten cupboard in the courthouse basement, followed by hours of deciphering faded ink in a spidery scrawl, led Mayor Kalinski to the discovery of an ill-conceived rule in the original town charter... a rule no living citizen of Anderson could remember being invoked, which gave the mayor, in times of emergency, the power to supersede the votes of the town council.

The issue on the table at the emergency session of the council was the upcoming Founders Day festivities. Nearby forest fires cloaked the town in a smoky haze. Residents, preparing for the possibility of an evacuation order, were busy writing lists of irreplaceable items and deciding what could be left to the fire. The more cautious of Anderson residents packed horse trailers and pickup trucks with cherished possessions. Farming equipment clogged secondary roads as ranchers moved swathers, balers, and tractors across Flint Creek to safer pastures.

"Why are we even debating this?" asked an exasperated Kirk Redding, president of the council and chief of the volunteer fire department. "A wind shift in our direction and that fire'll be on us lickety-split. We

need to concentrate on preparations to evacuate locals... the nursing home, homebound seniors, the schools. We don't have the time or manpower to worry about several hundred tourists."

"Especially if half of them are drunk," added Butch Newman, head of Search and Rescue.

Librarian Amanda Beal leaned into her microphone and spoke in her signature whisper, "Even if we manage to evacuate everyone, the loss of property will be horrific. There are irreplaceable volumes in the Montana History Room." She stopped and blinked twice. Her voice cracked amid a nervous swallow. "I... I can't imagine what I would do with nothing to come back to."

"There's only one way out of town if that fire comes barreling down on us," commented Gordon White, director of the local museum and historical society. "And it won't take much to bottleneck a two-lane highway. Add a rancher or two herding cows out of danger, and this town is a barbecue grill, and we're the weenies."

Murmurs of agreement followed. Kirk called for a vote.

The preceding four out of six council members voted to cancel the upcoming Founders Day festivities, including events planned for the following weekend, citing danger to everyone involved. The remaining two, after furtive glances at the mayor, looked down in shame as they muttered "Nay" to the query.

Emily Sprague, fifth member of the group and owner of a shop specializing in honey and honey products, tended to agree with the other council members. But, as the sole business owner in the group, she had to protect her interests. Every shopkeeper in town knew that crossing the mayor would result in unwanted harassment. Water pipes with no previous issues would be declared faulty and require lengthy shutdowns for repair. Anonymous reports of rodent infestations resulted in

public notices and inspections. And so on. Emily couldn't afford to disagree with the mayor.

Kristine Hoover, Stone County treasurer and rumored paramour of Dwight Kalinski, was in too deep when it came to the mayor. During a moment of indiscretion brought on by too many hot buttered rums consumed at a courthouse Christmas party, followed by a ride home compliments of the mayor, Kristine confessed to the slow and discreet embezzlement of county funds over the course of a decade. Dwight Kalinski, not one to waste an opportunity, put on the most charming smile he could muster, which wouldn't have charmed anyone not half blind with drink, and encouraged Kristine to tell all. Thinking she was with a kindred spirit, Kristine giggled and bragged about how the ill-gotten funds had paid for her house, her car, and several exotic vacations. Mayor Kalinski, too wily to get caught in embezzlement himself, used the information to wheedle his way into an affair with Kristine and a guaranteed vote on the town council.

Regardless of the actual vote, Kalinski, at least for the time being, had legal documents on his side. He cast his vote and declared the celebration must go on. Gathering his papers, he smirked and strode out of the room with his lackeys close behind.

"Pompous fool!" spluttered Gordon.

"What are we going to do?" asked Amanda, close to tears.

Gordon patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry about it. I'll come around after the meeting. We'll load the history collection into my truck. As soon as we get word of the wind turning, we'll haul it out of here."

"Thanks, Gordon," Amanda said and sniffed into a Kleenex.

"What's Kalinski's deal, anyway?" asked Bruce. "Why is he so hell-bent on having Founders Day?"

"Oh... you didn't hear," said Kirk.

"I've been on vacation for two weeks. Just came in last night. What did I miss?"

"Our illustrious mayor managed to get himself awarded Mayor of the Year. The governor will be here on Founders Day to present the award. Kalinski won't let a forest fire ruin his time in the spotlight."

"How on earth—" exclaimed Bruce.

"Did he get Mayor of the Year?" Kirk finished the thought for him.

"His typical tactics," said Gordon. "He bullied enough townsfolk into writing letters to the governor's office giving him credit for things he had nothing to do with and declaring him just short of sainthood."

"Mavis gave him the whole front page of the paper," added Amanda. "She had the nerve to print pictures of all kinds of town improvements, including a few Rustic Ranger Boys' Club projects. She didn't actually say so, but insinuated the mayor spearheaded everything."

"That was two weeks ago," explained Gordon. "Of course, the Rangers and their parents put up a fuss. Mavis stuck an apology and proper credits in small print at the bottom of the last page in this week's edition."

The Anderson Chronicle, the local weekly rag, tended more toward gossip than actual news. Mavis Vallee, editor in chief, was often in cahoots with the mayor in an effort to garner media attention for them both.

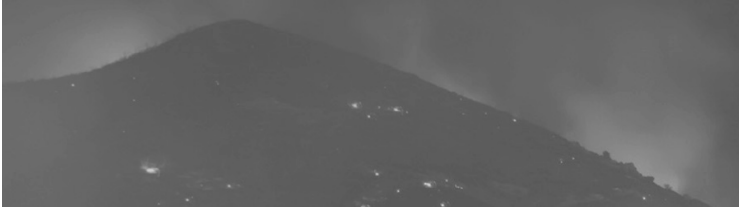
"So, what're we going to do about this situation?" asked Bruce.

"Eventually, we'll have our town attorney look at the mayor's papers."

"Do you think they're legitimate?" asked Amanda.

"They look authentic, and I don't think he faked them if that's what you mean. Devious as Kalinski is, he always stays on the right side of the law. Whether the law is valid

at this point is to be determined. Our main concerns now are Founders Day and the fire.”



2

THREE BLASTS FROM an air horn signaled the beginning of the annual Founders Day festivities, which included a parade followed by the mayor's award ceremony. All this gave a brief reprieve to shopkeepers from the endless swarm of tourists as they made their way outside to watch. Not that anyone oblivious to the forest fire danger was complaining. Tourist trade paid the bills for folks in a town that, a decade ago, was on the verge of dying.

Anderson, Montana, originally a ranching outpost, saw a century of prosperity until better roads and more reliable vehicles made it easier for townsfolk to travel to the larger community of Missoula for more abundant shopping and better prices. Local shops continued to struggle as young people left for work in the cities and the population of Anderson declined. Those remaining, many aged and infirm, weighed the cost of gas and the stress of dealing with heavy traffic in Missoula against higher prices at home. That and hometown loyalty kept their money local. A few shops held their ground until online shopping arrived. A click of a computer mouse brought every product imaginable delivered directly to a person's

doorstep. One by one, windows were boarded up and properties left abandoned. Smart money didn't invest in a dying community.

Then came the epiphany. During a typically depressing Chamber of Commerce meeting, a member hesitantly offered, "If we can't keep our shoppers here, let's bring the outside world to us."

Snorts of disbelief and outright laughter followed.

"Our homegrown youngsters won't stay, so why would strangers want to come here?" asked the then mayor, one of many business owners forced to pay taxes on an empty building.

"No, really," said the visionary, gaining confidence. "My wife drags me around the state to one town after another so we can learn about the history and imagine what famous person stayed in our room back in the day. Last weekend, we were in Butte at the Finlen Hotel. I'm looking around thinking, 'Our Clara Hotel in Anderson is as nice as this. Why isn't it full of tourists?'"

Nobody remembers who had the idea, although many later claimed credit in whispers over coffee and pie at the local diner. That day began a new era of prosperity for a dying cow town.



EMILY SPRAGUE PASSED the handles of a paper gift bag filled with jars of honey across the counter to a smiling young mother. She watched as the woman added the bag to a canvas tote slung around the handles of a baby stroller. Trailed by a preschooler licking at a dripping ice cream cone and a doting father bouncing a giggling

toddler on his shoulders, the sweet family made their way out the door.

Left alone, Emily wiped a tear from her cheek and reached for the tissue box she kept behind the counter. Tears flowed freer and more frequently these days, the heartache intensified by her upcoming birthday. Physically, she could conceive at this age, but the possibility of a disabled child increased every year after forty. Her heartache wasn't just about the babies. She longed for a family: a devoted husband and father, and children with their many activities filling her days with joy.

On cue, her brother Caleb, carrying a box filled with pint-sized jars of honey, pushed through the bead curtain separating the storeroom from the shop.

"Allergies again?" he asked as Emily blew her nose.

"Sure. Allergies."

Caleb set the box on the cheap pine table, cleverly painted to look antique, that Emily used to display products. He methodically counted the remaining jars of honey on the shelf above.

"Six," he said in his typical monotone. "Six on the shelf, ten in the box, and five in the back room."

"Twenty-one jars of honey won't get us through another week if business keeps up at this pace," sighed Emily. "We need to check the hives tonight. They may be ready to harvest."

"No," said Caleb, "my show's on tonight."

"But, Caleb, couldn't you tape it?"

"No. No. Not possible."

"Okay, I'll go by myself," said Emily, irritated. The extra time processing honey alone wasn't at the top of her 'Favorite Things To Do' list, but she knew arguing with Caleb was a lost cause.

As Caleb fussed over arranging honey jars in precise alignment, a man dressed in a wide-brimmed straw hat, fringed buckskins, and scuffed hiking sandals complete with bungee cord laces poked his head through the open doorway.

Emily laughed. "Which founder are you supposed to be?"

"The one who forgot my Founders Day outfit at home and put on what I could find in my office." He glanced at his shoes. "With the size of the crowd out there, I didn't think anyone would notice my feet. Are you going to watch the parade?" he asked.

Emily nodded toward Caleb. "I have to stay and look after the shop. If someone came in and disturbed the process, well... it would cause problems."

"Ah, I get it." He gave her a sympathetic look. "Hey, how about we all go for burgers after work?"

Emily thought of the diminishing stock of honey and her responsibility to the shop. Internally, she berated herself.

Why can't you just relax and have fun!

"I have to check the hives tonight. Would a little later be okay?"

"No problem. Seven-ish? The Silver Dollar?"

"Perfect. We'll meet you there."

The modern mountain man flashed a dimpled grin that set Emily's stomach all aflutter. He left with a wave and a banging of the door on its frame.

Nervous energy brought Emily around the counter. She hurried to the front of the store and peered into the crowd, hoping to catch a glimpse of her newfound beau.

Did he just ask me on a date? she thought.

Emily grinned and gave a little hop across the floor. Then she frowned.

But he included Caleb, so maybe not. Maybe he was just being nice.

She walked back to the sales counter and sat on a stool.

But if it is a date, then he included Caleb because he doesn't mind my weird brother hanging around. Even better.

Reality hit when she remembered him telling her earlier in the week that he was thinking about going into beekeeping and would be asking her advice.

"Oh, get a grip," she said out loud.

"What do you want me to grip?" asked Caleb.

"Nothing, never mind. I was talking to myself."

Still, she thought. He is single, and he's interested in bees... and Caleb doesn't seem to annoy him.

Emily laughed out loud. Hope renewed, she considered running after him, but discarded the idea. Yes, she was desperate, but he didn't have to know that. Instead, she walked to the door, turned the lock, and flipped the closed sign to face outward.

"Caleb, I'm going to close early today. With the parade and everything, we won't have much business."

"Sure," said Caleb. He watched Emily retrieve her purse from under the sales counter and leave through the back door. Hearing the door click shut, he dumped the remaining jars of honey back into his box and carried it through the bead curtain to the back room.



EMILY WALKED AROUND the corner of her building and into the neighboring clothing store.

Hearing the jangle of door chimes, the shopkeeper wiped her mouth on a napkin and slipped her lunch under the sales counter before standing to greet her customer.

“Well, hello, Emily. Here we are right next door, and I haven’t seen you in ages!”

“Hey, Raelynn,” said Emily, feeling less sure of herself. “I, uh, was just looking for, uh, maybe a new outfit.”

“Something for a special occasion?”

Flustered, Emily said, “Uh, no, not really. I mean, I don’t think so.”

Raelynn took in the flush of red spreading from Emily’s collar to her cheeks and grinned, “A date, maybe?” she asked.

“Not sure. I mean, I hope it is.”

“Well, let’s make him hope it is, too. And you’re in luck,” said Raelynn, clapping her hands. “The new fall selection came in yesterday. There are several pieces that will look lovely on you.”

“What are you?” she asked, giving Emily a look-over with her usual sharp eye for size. “A twelve?”

“Sounds right.”

On her own, Emily would have gone larger. She tended to wear loose clothing in dull colors. Seeing Raelynn’s excitement over the new fall designs, she pasted on a smile and followed her into the depths of the store.

Raelynn wandered racks and shelves, mulling over selections until Emily had an armload. Pointing toward a dressing room built into the back of the store, Raelynn ordered, “Try them on... and come out and let me see how they look.”

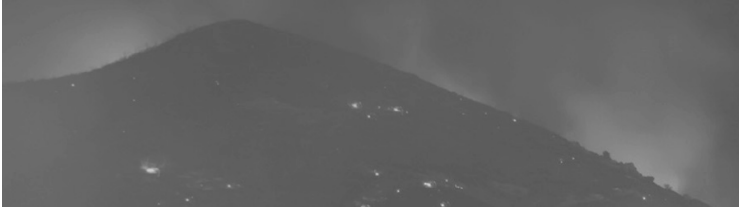
Later, several outfits approved and bill paid, Raelynn handed a tote of clothes to Emily.

“I want to hear all about your maybe date.”

Grinning, Emily saluted her fashion guru. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

During the drive to her home in the nearby town of Princeton, Emily’s mind chose delusion as it raced past dreaming of the upcoming possible first date and straight to wedding plans. Pulling into the side yard of her shabby bungalow, she grabbed the tote of new clothes, climbed out of her battered hatchback, and skipped up creaky steps, across a sagging porch, and through the front door.

Tossing the tote onto the entryway bench, she skipped through the house humming a happy tune.



3

WEST OF TOWN, between Flint Creek and the Moonlight Mountains to the north, the valley narrowed, and the soil became thin and rocky, a precursor to the rugged peaks in the distance. An abundance of stones lay scattered around boulders the size of cows, causing cattle ranchers and sheepherders alike to shun the area in favor of the lush meadows to the south.

To the delight of every honeybee in the county, a profusion of wildflowers grew from early spring into late autumn amongst these rocks. The acreage, purchased at a bargain price from a rancher who considered it throwaway ground, is where a local beekeeper chose to place their hives, and where a concerned citizen reported an abandoned car the afternoon following the Founders Day festivities.

“I don’t dare walk over there to check things out,” explained Stony Clairmont, retired sailor and recent addition to Stone County. “Those bees are madder than hornets. I heard ’em buzzing when I drove into the pasture and closed the windows right quick.”

“So, you’re worried about a car parked by the hives?” asked Travis, blond and buff clerk at the Stone County Sheriff’s office.

“Oh, I know I sound like a nosy Nellie, but that car has been there all night. From here, I can see the gate hanging open and what looks like a beekeeper’s suit lying in the grass. Could be someone’s been hurt.”

“Where exactly are you?”

Stony gave directions that Travis relayed to Deputy Angus McLeod, who gladly accepted the callout rather than finish the pile of paperwork covering his desk.

“Bees, huh? I don’t suppose we have any of those special bee-proof suits around?” asked Angus, his wiry build, intense energy, and bright-red hair a sharp contrast to big, mellow Travis.

Travis, who prided himself on keeping the office well-stocked with equipment, shook his head. “Sorry, we’ve never needed them.”

“Any ideas? Who raises bees around here?”

“I’ll call Mabel.” Travis picked up his phone, braced himself for harassment, and punched in the number.

Ancient Mabel single-handedly managed the Anderson Chamber of Commerce in a cramped office across the street from the courthouse. Decaying tomes brimming with local trade history filled dusty shelves. Cabinets held ancient files more befitting the historical society than a county office. The binders and books were unnecessary props. Mabel knew every county resident (past and present), family trees, and business dealings. Not a morsel of gossip happened in Stone County without Mabel’s knowledge.

“Stone County Chamber of Commerce. Mabel speaking.”

“Hi, Mabel. This is Travis over at the sheriff’s office.”

“Ugh. What now?”

“No time to chat today, Mabel. We have a life and death situation and we need your help.”



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