

# DEATH BY THEFT

A JOSIAH REYNOLDS MYSTERY  
BOOK NINETEEN

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## Chapter One

I climbed the ladder placed under the Pin Oak tree and very carefully cut the branch holding the bee swarm—must have been over seven thousand honeybees huddled together in a ball protecting their queen. I scrambled down the ladder holding the branch with the clinging bees, but you know I'm not good at these things since my accident. Slowly I made it to the ground without falling off the ladder or dropping the branch. With my right hand, I swiped the clump of bees causing a huge mass of bees to fall into my swarm box. I shook the branch and thousands of remaining bees flew up around me and then settled on the white sheet placed under the swarm box. The honeybees marched like little soldiers into the swarm box bottom opening, each eager to be near their queen and gobble the honey I had smeared on some of the frames.

Happy that the bees were cooperating, I put the top of the swarm box back on and watched the bees go into the bottom entrance. Within an hour, all the bees would be in the box setting up housekeeping. Only then would I move the swarm box to a hive where I would install frames thick with the bees and a queen. For three days, I would keep them locked up, so to speak, in the hive before I removed grass clippings blocking the hive entrance and let them do their bee thing. At that time, I would open the top of the hive, look for the queen or signs that she was laying eggs. If I found no sign of baby bees, I would remove a frame from another hive which had a queen cell.

Happy with the successful swarm catch, I left the swarm box alone and retreated to my golf cart when my cell phone rang.

I answered, "Hello?"

"I thought you were coming to see the colt?" Shaneika Mary Todd asked.

Shaneika was my criminal lawyer. If you have to ask why I might need a criminal lawyer, then you haven't lived in these parts for long. I'm famous for stumbling over dead bodies. It's a curse.

"I was. I mean I am—but came across a swarm. Let me finish up here and I'll be over."

"Don't tarry too long. The stable employees will be letting the horses out to the pastures soon."

I looked at the swarm box. The bees were hurrying inside. "Shouldn't be too much longer. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"I'll be in the breeding barn. Comanche has a cover this morning."

“Okay. I will meet you there as soon as I can,” I replied, hanging up. I watched bees march into the swarm box and figured they would be okay. I would pick the box up later. I got in my golf cart and petted Baby, who had been waiting patiently. “I’ll get the box after we see the new colt. Don’t let me forget my bees, Baby.”

My two hundred pound English Mastiff sneezed and put his massive paw on my shoulder.

“Good boy,” I said, removing his paw and scratching him behind the ear. I started the cart and headed over to my next door neighbor’s farm to find Shaneika and visit the colt.

The farm was owned by Lady Elsmere. She and Shaneika had bred their horses, Jean Harlow and Comanche, to produce a colt which they hoped would win the Kentucky Derby. It was Lady Elsmere’s dream to win the Kentucky Derby before she died. The colt had been born a few weeks back, but Shaneika banned visitors as Jean Harlow was a skittish mother. The fact that Shaneika had invited me today meant Jean Harlow had finally calmed down.

I really wanted to see the colt and wished Lady Elsmere and Shaneika well on their path to racing glory in the Kentucky Derby, but I had grown disenchanted with horse racing. Too many accidents on the racecourse.

Yeah, I know. I’m a hypocrite. I make money boarding race horses. I catch the overflow of pregnant Thoroughbreds whose offspring are trained on Lady Elsmere’s farm. I don’t take in stallions anymore as they are too difficult and high-strung. It’s a nice income but whenever I can catch a racing official’s ear, I bring him to task about racing horses too young and the need for the Thoroughbreds’ added protections. My advice goes in one ear and out the other. Oh, well, I do what I can.

I hear the horse owners have meetings about increasing the safety in the racing industry, but there are still too many spills on the racing course. That’s why I don’t go to Keeneland Race Course during the racing season.

Baby and I reached the breeding barn and waited for Shaneika. I texted her that I was outside. I don’t like to witness live covers. I find horses’ breeding encounters to be noisy, violent, and traumatic. The mare has to be covered in protective gear as the stallion can easily harm her with his sharp hooves and teeth. I always feel sorry for the mare.

I looked up from my phone and glimpsed a groom leading Comanche to a pasture. He must be done for the day.

Shaneika came out and waved.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Very well.”

“You’re breeding Comanche too much. He can’t catch his breath. The dew is still on the grass, and you’ve got him covering a mare.”

"I need the money, Josiah."

"Too much breeding weakens a stallion."

Shaneika rolled her eyes. "That's an old wives' tale."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Before you berate me more, let's visit the colt." Shaneika's hazel eyes brightened. "He's a beauty. Black with a white star on his forehead and four white stocking feet."

"You want Baby along?"

"He visits the nursery barn on a daily basis. The mares are not bothered at all by him and even Last Chance likes to play with him."

"How does a colt play with a Mastiff?"

"Last Chance prances around Baby and tosses his head. Baby licks him. Sometimes they share a treat."

It was always a mystery to me who my dog visited during the day while I worked in the bee yard.

"How's Jean Harlow doing?"

"Much better. For a few moments, we thought Jean Harlow might reject her baby, but she came around. I'm not sure Lady Elsmere will breed her again though—as a dam, she is far too nervous."

I muttered, "I see. The horse had postpartum depression."

Shaneika gave me a playful slap before putting Baby in the back of the golf cart. "Let's go. I need to get back to my office for my first appointment."

I pushed on the pedals, and we moseyed over to the nursery. Excited, I entered the barn with Shaneika leading the way. It was still very early, and the mares were with their offspring in their stalls, quietly munching on hay. They would be let out when the grass had dried. However, kicking and neighing erupted from one stall.

Shaneika shot me a worried look. "That's Jean Harlow. I know her cry."

We both rushed to the stall. "What's wrong?" I asked, seeing Shaneika's alarmed facial expression.

Shaneika swung open the stall door and pushed a nervous Jean Harlow out of the way.

I grabbed the mare's halter and led her out into the barn aisle. She was jumpy and hard to handle, so I shouted for aid. "Can someone help us, please?"

Shaneika ran out of the stall and began checking the others frantically.

"What is wrong?" I asked again, handing Jean Harlow over to a nursery groom who led the horse back into her stall.

Shaneika screamed, "WHAT'S WRONG? WHAT'S WRONG? LAST CHANCE IS MISSING. THAT'S WHAT'S WRONG!"