



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# *A New Workweek Begins*

**W**ith the Fest over and vendor booths dismantled, things gradually returned to normal, at least for the businesses in the village. What wasn't normal was the undercurrent of a suspicious death and the white supremacy rally. Most rally attendees had dispersed and vacated Ted's property. I wondered who had remained, and my gut told me the trouble wasn't over yet.

Monday morning arrived, time to focus on work.

My mind pivoted to the three prime projects on my to-do list. Deposit June Fest proceeds in the bank, secure beehive delivery, and survey solar panel installation.

Oh, and one more thing to be scheduled was my date with Zach. It promised to be a busy Monday.

The last item became the first when Zach phoned. "Sorry that I didn't call you last night. I was checking some property down south and didn't hear about Ted until this morning. How are you doing?"

"June Fest certainly had a frenzied close. Can't believe you got out before Nika locked everything down."

"I saw emergency vehicles arriving as I was leaving, but didn't expect it to be Ted. Why did Nika have a lockdown for a heart attack?"

"Standard practice for a death under these circumstances, when no one was present to describe what happened."

"Well, there was another purpose for my call. We have yet to confirm a time for our date. What day this week works for you?"

I could hear the smile in his voice. People have told me you could "hear" a smile, but I always discounted it. Not any more, it's a real thing; I heard it. "Thursday?"

"Uh...I have a campaign fund-raising event that night, and then again on the weekend. Wednesday?"

"I think there's a bus tour coming through, rescheduled because of the Fest. I'll have to check that out; I don't know how busy we'll be. Tonight, I'm still catching up on what I postponed during the Fest. Maybe tomorrow? Oh, wait, Tiffany and I signed up for volunteering."

There was an awkward silence. Zach knew summer was a busy time at the winery. I couldn't simply take off when I wanted. And I understood Zach's commitment to working on his campaign for Congress. But cripes sake, we've been trying to find a mutually convenient time for a month.

"Next week?" My voice quivered.

Zach's hearty laugh comforted me. "Sure. Everything important is worth waiting for. And you, Alexi, are worth waiting for. On another topic, let me know when you're going to review the integrated solar plans with Liam. I'd like to be there." The new eco-conscious real estate developer.

"Sure, it's a date. I mean, we'll go on a date, but it won't be looking at solar panels. I mean, we'll be meeting to see the installation, but it won't be a date." Son of a nutcracker. Why did I get so tongue-tied around Zach? I'm in my late 40s with two kids in college. Would we ever go on an actual date? Zach's chuckle carried over the line as we ended the call. As I set my phone down, I realized nothing came up about the Nazi relics, Mariama's revelation that Ted was her father, George's sudden disappearance, or the rally itself.

I sprinted to the new apiary site where the delivery vehicle and Mariama were waiting for me. Somehow, I "forgot" to invite Dot. I donned my beekeeper's suit and gave Sasha's suit to Mariama to wear. For the next several hours, setting up the replacement hives occupied my time, thoughts, and energy. The first time I bought beehives four years ago, I was a complete novice and made tons of mistakes. This time, Mariama provided expertise that made everything easier.

I watched my former intern. Even though Mariama was maybe 30ish, perhaps a half-dozen years older than my daughter, she had experienced a lot in her brief life. She worked hard to excel in school and to be accepted into the Ph.D. program in the United States. Even with a scholarship, she struggled to make ends meet. That didn't prevent her from sending money home to her mother in Africa. She continued to do so until her mother's death.

When we finished, Mariama and I descended the graveled alley toward the winery. She was heading for her shift at the retail wine shop and I was going next door to the warehouse.

"Did you finish telling me about Ted Arnold?" I asked.

Mariama hesitated. "The whole thing was bloody shocking. Finding out the truth, meeting him, learning what he stood for."

We continued walking. I remained silent, hoping she would disclose more and continue talking if I gave her time. It worked.

"I was probably one of the last people to see him alive."

I said nothing.

"Alexi, I had nothing to do with his death."

I stopped and put my hands on her shoulders. "I never said you did. Why would you say that?"

"I am a naturalized U.S. citizen, but just barely. The fada I did not know I had was part of a group that opposed having people like me become Americans. I have heard the talk, but I did not hate Ted. I did not even know him. He shunned me, seemed ashamed I existed. So what?" Mariama was confident about her science knowledge, yet

insecure about her status as a citizen or as the offspring of a white supremacist. "And when I found out—" She cut herself off abruptly.

"Found out what?"

"Oh, nothing, I'm just rambling."

I knew something was eating at Mariama. Intuition, gut-feel, whatever it was, I kept pushing. "Mariama, what did you find out?"

Her shoulders rose and sank with a bottomless sigh. "He has no family. At some point he named my moda in his will as beneficiary of all his property. He did not know she died."

"So, he kept tabs on your mother for a while?"

"He knew she would not move here. I guess he assumed she would sell his land and use the money for herself and possibly her family if she had one. To discover that her child—his child—lived and worked in Gaia caused him embarrassment. He told me he was going to rewrite his will."

"Rewrite in what way?"

"To change the beneficiary."

"But he died before he could do that?"

Mariama nodded. When we reached the empty customer patio, I stopped Mariama before she entered the retail shop. "Why don't you start over and tell me the entire story?"

She drifted onto a chair near the lilac bushes and broke off a blossom. The pastel purple, matching the color of her fingernails, glistened against her praline skin. She twirled the flower back and forth, side to side, in and out. "I wanted him to embrace what the photo of him and Moda conveyed."

"So, you followed him into the alley?"

"No, I was on the park bench near the hotel, listening to the band tune up before the parade. I guess I was trying to work up my courage. When he walked past, I called him over. At first, I thought he was going to ignore me, but then he came over."

Mariama plucked the petals off the lilac, one-by-one. "He looked so angry it scared me. He yelled at me to stop harassing him, to quit being a lying b—" A tear rolled down her cheek before she finished the sentence.

I removed another lilac bloom and handed it to her.

Giving me a grateful smile, she resumed culling the bud, one petal at a time. "Anyway, he looked at the photo, then at me, then back at the photo. His face softened for a moment and I thought he was going to apologize. He kept mumbling about how stupid he had been and that he cannot fix history. Then his voice hardened. He said he remembered my moda, but there was no proof that he was my fada. He refused to admit I was his daughter. He even suggested I was making up the story to get his money. He said he would rewrite his will to change the beneficiary." By that time, Mariama had dismantled the flower I had given her. She lobbed the stem to the ground.

"Then what happened?"

"He tried to grab the photo and rip it. I pushed him and ran."

"Did he fall?"

"I do not know. I did not look back. What if he fell and died because of me?"

"You don't know that. The police still haven't ruled out a death by natural causes. And it's not likely the fall backwards would have killed him. Did you see anyone else in the area? Anyone who might have been in the alley or around the corner?"

She opened her mouth as if to say something, as if she remembered something, then snapped her jaw shut. Uncertainty clouded her eyes as she shook her head and looked away.

There was no part of me that believed Mariama was guilty of harming Ted, either deliberately or accidentally. A fall would have been visible on his body, and Nike had told me it looked like a heart attack. But my brief experience as a police officer had given me a valuable lesson. While we shouldn't ignore intuition, it doesn't replace the search for facts. "Did you share this with Sheriff Marx?"

Another shake of the head.

"Mariama, that's step one. We'll talk with her this afternoon."

I sent a text to Nika that I wanted to share new information with her about the investigation.

##### (*early Monday afternoon*)

Next on my to-do list after lunch was to check the progress of the solar panel installation. Even as my feet guided me toward the warehouse, my mind struggled with what Mariama had shared. She felt like a daughter to me, especially since she had lost her own mother. But I couldn't withhold information from Nika. My brain's tug-of-war caused me to move on autopilot.

The roofing crew had been at Bliss Creek since early morning. It surprised me to see Liam at the site, talking to the foreman. With a smile, he waved me over. He introduced me to Jose, the foreman, who exchanged pleasantries before returning to work.

With my hand over my eyes to shade the sun, I looked first at the roof and next at Liam. "I wasn't expecting the CEO to check on a small project like this."

"When you're a small company, every project is significant, every customer is important." He paused for a beat. "And actually, there is a problem."

"Oh?"

Liam beckoned me toward the pile of solar modules. "See those blemishes?" He rubbed his fingers over some burn marks on the top of two of the panels. "There's been some damage, likely from fire. I noticed the charred terrain there." He pointed to the vineyard area that had succumbed to the fire George had extinguished the prior week. "Did you have a prescribed burn?"

"No, there was a fire that jumped the bike trail onto my property, but George squelched it quickly. Is the damage serious?" I stared at the black blotches. I wondered why I hadn't noticed them before.

"I don't think so. They build the components tough to withstand some extreme weather. Jose was concerned at first, but upon further inspection, we agreed performance shouldn't be affected. But..." Liam cleared his throat with a pretend cough. "This could invalidate the warranty."

"Because?"

"Because the damage occurred while the inventory was on your property—before we began the installation."

"But you just told me they're fine."

"As far as we can tell. It's just that they're not without defect."

My heart jumped into my throat. I couldn't afford another major expense right now. "What are my options?"

"Let me think." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Tell you what. I'll exchange these two units for new ones. We can't prove how this happened, and I don't want to start my new business off with a dissatisfied client. Fair?"

I nodded, but sensed an undercurrent of something I didn't understand.

Liam bent down to tie his shoe, seemingly as a distraction. Keeping his eyes on his shoe, he asked an unexpected question. "Say, did you and Felicity discover anything interesting at the RogueWave rally? She seemed determined to get it with her press pass."

"Interesting in what way?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've heard the Bulwark Boys can be quite intimidating."

I tilted my head in a question. Or was it an accusation? "How'd you know the Bulwarks were there?" I also wondered how he knew I had accompanied Felicity.

A slight but distinct blush crept across his face as he stood up and squared his shoulders. "Well, I didn't. I mean, I just assumed that." He made a show of checking his watch. "Wow, time is flying. I need to get to an appointment. Catch up with you later."

I grabbed his elbow. "Liam, level with me. What's up? What are you fishing for?"

He rubbed his eyebrows, causing the hair to tuft in all directions. He slid his elbow free from my hand. "It's..." He rubbed his lips against each other. "I was hoping to bump into Larry Larson, so I was at the rally site at Ted's house Friday morning and Sunday afternoon."

"The rally was on Saturday."

"I know. But I still thought I might catch him either before or after the rally."

"Why?"

"He's been lobbying hard against green energy. He has a strong reputation for nudging legislation in favor of fossil fuels."

I waited, still unclear why Liam thought "bumping into" Larry would be an effective strategy. Or why he considered hanging out at Ted's a workable solution.

Liam swallowed, his Adam's apple bouncing. "Larry and I were in the same fraternity. We both worked for StamCo Oil and spent a lot of time together until I left to start a solar company. We drifted apart when he became active in RogueWave. He started quoting Ted, believing his propaganda, being corrupted by him. RogueWave views sustainable energy as a conspiracy or an attack on economic growth, almost as an attack on freedom." His voice had an edge to it. Anger? Fear? Then he shook his head, allowing his voice to return to normal. "I guess I wasted several hours at the rally site on Friday morning with nothing to show for it. Didn't leave there till after lunch."

He kept talking, even as I tried to edge into the conversation. "Now I really must get moving. Scope out that literature I gave you about other potential projects and call me if you have questions."

As I watched him leave, my spine tingled. Liam had a palpable grudge against Ted. He avoided admitting to me he was at the rally on Saturday. Why?

##### (*Monday mid-afternoon*)

There was no time for me to dwell on the solar project or on Liam's behavior. I walked back to Bliss Creek's retail shop, ready to pinch hit in George and Cathy's absence. Sasha and Tiffany were serving flights of wine when I arrived. I didn't see Mariama and assumed she was replenishing inventory.

With everything under control for the moment, I slipped into my office to evaluate our fiscal performance over the weekend. A knock at the door interrupted me.

Wolf rose from his customary spot under my desk to wander over and greet Felicity. She reached down to scratch his ears. "Heard anything from Nika?"

I knew she was referring to the investigation into Ted's death. "Nada." I couldn't divulge what Nika had shared with me in confidence.

"Even though it's only been a day, I expected some new information by now. I'm up against a deadline to get the paper to print. Yes, I know most people get their news online, but I still need content. At least I can work on my story about white supremacists. George agreed to be interviewed this week about his past involvement. He said I should meet him here today. Where is he?"

"He and Cathy left for vacation last night." Hearing myself say the words reminded me the sudden departure was out of character. Especially after I learned George had committed to meet with Felicity. He always kept his promises. I again tried to reach George on his cell phone. It went straight to voice mail. Same for Cathy. Worry creased my forehead.

"Where'd he go?"

I shrugged.

"When will he be back?" Frustration crept into Felicity's voice, most likely because she was concerned about a gaping, empty section in the Gaia Gazette.

"Let's see if Sasha knows."

We left the office and stood by the wine-tasting bar. Sasha and Tiffany were still busy, and Mariama was nowhere in sight.

"Can I get you something while we're waiting?" I slipped behind a corner of the bar.

Before Felicity could answer, Dot bustled in. "Felicity, Alex, I'm glad I caught both of ya." She was out of breath, as if she had been running—an unlikely activity for the plump owner of the bed-and-breakfast. "Did ya hear about Ted Arnold's will? My friend Betty—she works for David Sorenson at the bank—told me Ted's lawyer got into a ruckus with that Larry guy over it. Ya know, the guy from the rally." She fanned her face with her hand and crumpled against the bar.

I leaned toward her. "A ruckus?"

"Lordy, yes." With a furtive glance around the room, she continued in a whisper. "Seems he believes Ted left his property to that white supremacy group."

"Seems there are a lot of conspiracy theories floating around." Nika's voice startled me.

With my focus on Dot's gossip, I failed to notice the front door chimes. "Didn't hear you enter," I said.

"I came in through the back. You really should keep that door locked." Nika greeted Felicity and Dot before turning toward me. "Got your text about wanting to talk with me. Let's use your office."

We excused ourselves and stepped into the office. Nika shut the door and sank into the side chair. "Spill."

I debated searching for Mariama before divulging her narrative to Nika, but plunged ahead. "Mariama is Ted's daughter."

Nika showed no reaction. "Go on."

"Mariama said Ted was going to deed his property to Mariama's mother. But he had second thoughts when he learned about Mariama and that she lives in Gaia. He threatened to change his will."

Nika scribbled something into her notebook. "Threatened?"

"Bad choice of words. He stated, mentioned, promised it. Whatever."

"Who did he state, mention, promise it to? Mariama?"

I nodded.

"Then I'll have to speak with her. Is she here now?"

"She's scheduled for this shift. Let me check." I poked my head out the office door and got Sasha's attention. "Could you please ask Mariama to come into the office?"

Sasha gave me a puzzled look. "Mariama told me she was feeling ill. She left. I thought she had let you know."

I stepped back into the office and faced Nika.

"I heard. You apparently have two employees who are MIA. I'm heading back to the department. I still have Mariama's phone number and will try to reach her. Call me if you hear from George. And as Dot just informed you, someone could contest Ted's will at the bank. None of that proves the cause of his death or implicates anyone. As usual, she scratched behind Wolf's ears before leaving.

I stared at her retreating figure. How was it possible that I had two associates connected to a suspicious death? And they were both missing.

I looked down at Wolf. "What do you think, Big Guy? How concerned should I be about George and Mariama in this convoluted Nazi maze? Should I investigate on my own? Reconciling the June Fest financials can wait a few days. I can't sit around and do nothing, can I?"

Wolf stretched and stood up, shaking his whole body.

"I'll take that shake of your head to mean 'no.' I agree. It's time for me to team up with Sasha and Luna to do some brainstorming."