



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# *More Conspiracy Theories*

*A New Day is Dawning.* That was the song playing in my head when I opened my eyes Tuesday morning. I had been dreaming about Zach. I smiled as I propped up on my elbows. It was an early summer Wisconsin morning, cleansing and invigorating. The air was comfortably warm, with new growth sprouting everywhere. Suddenly there was thumping, rhythmic thumping on the floor by my bed.

It was the sound of Wolf's tail wagging.

"Morning, Big Guy." I sat up and stretched. "I suppose Josh and Tiffany are sleeping and you need to get out." Wolf nudged my arm, in what I assume was his response. I dressed quickly and headed toward the kitchen with Wolf behind. I opened the back door to let him out to relieve himself, and I followed to clean up his piles. Back inside, I refilled his food and water bowls.

Next, it was time for my human breakfast, starting with coffee. I made a full pot and poured myself a mug. Wolf cleaned his dish and lay down at my feet.

"Well, Big Guy, did you keep my kids out of trouble last night? And why do I still refer to two college-aged adults as kids?" I chortled. "Guess I always will."

Wolf perked his ears toward me and tilted his head.

"You're an expert judge of character. Do you think Zach is the person he appears to be?"

Tiffany strolled in rocking an oversized tee, with her hair in full-on bedhead mode. "Morning, Mom. Talking to Wolf again?" She scratched the dog behind his ears. "Any coffee?"

I thumbed toward the coffeemaker. She poured herself a mug—black now that she was "adulting." She raised the pot toward me in a self-explanatory question. I nodded my assent to have her refill my mug.

As she blew on the hot liquid, Tiffany raised her eyes to me. "I know we both signed up to volunteer at Habitat for Humanity this afternoon. But that was before we knew George, Cathy, and Mariama would be gone. If it's okay with you, I'll stick around here and you go alone. You need a break from the winery, and one of my friends agreed to take my place at Habitat so they aren't short a volunteer."

My daughter was becoming a responsible adult. My heart swelled. "That's a great idea. Sasha was totally fine with going solo, assuming we canceled all the tours. But I really like the idea of having two people in the shop. I'll meet you over there later this morning. I want to take a quick check on the bee hives before we open."

I downed the rest of my coffee, ate some fruit, and headed to the apiary with Wolf in tow. After a 15-minute perusal, I heard a car crunching on the gravel road. It was Dot.

"Yoo-hoo," she called as she exited her car. "I saw ya alone up here and thought it would be a good time to have a chat about my mead."

*How did she know I was here? Did she have binoculars aimed at my property?* "Don't you have to attend to your guests?"

"Only one couple stayed on after June Fest and they went hiking at least an hour ago. The other two said they were concerned about staying when we have what seems to be an unsolved murder in Gaia. Do ya think it was one of those outsiders here for the rally?"

I shrugged. *Perhaps we all hoped the locals were innocent.*

"My friend Betty—the one I told ya works at the bank—said that group has an account there. What do ya suppose that means?"

"I don't know."

"Betty also said Larry told her he was planning on sticking around Gaia for a while to take care of unfinished business. It got me to thinking." She looked over her shoulder before whispering, "Ya know, everyone tells me I'd make a badass private eye." She looked over her other shoulder. "Anyways, it got me to wondering about Larry. Maybe he's Ted's son, and that's why he wants the property. What do ya think?"

I rolled the idea around in my head. The speculation was no crazier than Mariama being Ted's daughter. I'd just hate to consider them siblings. "I don't know what to say. What made the idea pop into your head?"

Dot raised her hand and started ticking off her arguments on her fingers. "One, Ted was in his late 60s and Larry's forty, give-or-take. So, ages make sense. Two, there is a strong family resemblance. The squinty eyes and big ears. Three, that would explain why Larry wanted to contest the will, like I told ya the other day. And four, I heard Larry say Ted was—excuse my language—a hell of a father. Or was it a father from hell? Anyways, it could make sense. Right?" She reached down and gave Wolf a quick belly rub.

Dot petting Wolf? First Felicity, and now Dot. I almost looked around for a dimensional time warp. I again seemed to be in an alternative universe.

"Will ya look at the time? Gotta go. We'll need to catch up on the holiday promotion another time." Dot almost sprinted back to her car. It made me wonder whether the only reason she stopped by was to pass along her "private eye" speculations.

My fingers waved a half-hearted good-bye toward Dot's back as she vacated the apiary. I looked at Wolf. "What just happened?" He cocked his head, almost as if wondering the same thing.

With Dot gone, I could again hear the bees buzzing. The new apiary was alive with possibilities. I had more bees and should be able to increase my mead production. Maybe by next year's June Fest.

Returning to the winery buildings, I walked past the in-progress solar panel installation. Foreman Jose was arguing with one of the crew. Although most of the words were indecipherable, a comment from one of them leaped out at me. "You can't trust Liam Briggs right now."

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The rest of the morning flew by. Sasha and Tiffany handled customers, allowing me to check the wine vats and pay some bills. A call from Zach interrupted my concentration.

Zach's voice sounded like a broadcaster, smooth and sexy. "Thought I'd call you. We haven't talked since..."

"Since yesterday?" I prompted.

"Was it just yesterday? Oh, that's right. You said volunteering would keep you and Tiffany tied up today. Is this a bad time to talk?"

"No, it's fine. I'm heading out in a half hour to help at a Habitat for Humanity site. Tiff's going to stay here to help Sasha, since Cathy and Mariama are unavailable."

"Why is that?"

I realized Zach and I hadn't discussed all the weekend events in our last call. I told him about Mariama's revelation that Ted is her father; about George and Cathy's impulsive vacation; about the Nazi relics; and about Agent Gavin Thielker taking the investigative lead from Nika. I neglected to mention Larry's convoluted comment about Zach. My intuition still told me that Zach was a good person. I hoped it was right.

"Why aren't you taking a break instead of volunteering?"

"It crossed my mind, but I try to always keep my commitments. And I knew if I didn't keep busy, I'd obsess about everything. This is actually a good way for me to decompress."

"You're tough, I respect that. But guess what? My fund-raising event for Saturday got rescheduled. Can we confirm a date for that night?"

"That'd be great. What time?"

"Pick you up at six o'clock?"

"It's a date." I felt my face crack into a full-blown smile as I ended the call. Maybe this time the date would happen.

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I checked in at Habitat and they put me on painting duty. The drywall had been prepared for priming after being mudded and sanded. A volunteer was edging the ceiling and wall borders with a brush. As he completed one section, he turned to look at me. "Alexi," a surprised Liam said.

I grabbed a roller and dipped it in the paint pan. "Hi, Liam. Didn't expect to see you here. Do you volunteer at Habitat very often?"

"I've worked on a dozen or more houses."

"Wow. This is just my second time. How'd you get so involved?"

Liam looked at the ceiling. "It was part of my military reserve service."

"Like the National Guard?"

"Sort of. AmeriCorps had a partnership with Habitat that allowed reservists to make extended commitments. I did more of the framing and construction rather than painting." He gave a wink. "Although that's important, too."

I did some quick mental math. "You must have enlisted pretty young."

Liam nodded. "Right after high school. I joined under the National Call to Service program. It was part of the 2003 Defense Authorization Bill. It allowed a shorter-term active duty followed by service back in the states. Since I had been involved with infrastructure in Afghanistan, building houses seemed a good fit."

"That sounds like pretty mature thinking for someone in high school."

Liam sighed. "Does it? I still remember hearing the news when the first plane hit the twin towers on 9-11. They wheeled a television into my math class. Larry Larson sat across from me. We talked about it for the rest of the year. We knew a lot of kids who were enlisting. They were people who looked like us, about the same age; we were ready to fight. My parents encouraged me to focus on a shorter mandatory enlistment. I became a pilot. Everything just sort of happened." He set his brush down and pressed his hands against his lower back, stretching his shoulders.

This was the most Liam had ever shared with me. I was hoping he'd continue his autobiography. I craved to dig deeper and said that '*Larry sent me.*' I didn't. At least not directly. "Then you and Larry finished college and worked for Stamco?"

He looked at me with eyebrows drawn together in a question. "Larry was a couple of years younger. It was a fluke we were in the same fraternity and worked for the same company." His tone was brusque, but civil. "Sorry if I gave you the wrong impression yesterday."

I wasn't sure what impression he thought he gave me, but I let it pass. "Would solar work on this house?"

He stepped back to look for paint drips. "Probably. In the future, I'd like to donate that. But for now, my physical labor will have to suffice."

"How did you get started in the solar industry?"

"Mostly fate. I graduated with a degree in engineering. Didn't know what my next steps would be when I got employed by Stamco except for a good salary, good pension. Then I got recruited away by a couple of start-ups, and eventually took over Sothic Solar. It was pure luck that I was in the right place at the right time."

"I doubt it was merely good luck."

Liam shrugged as he began picking up the paint and tools. "I finished the priming in this room, and it's as much as I committed to today. I'll stop by to check on your installation later this week." Liam left, and I moved to the next room, which was ready to paint over the primed walls.

Another set of volunteers—Penelope and Norm Carter—were actively painting. Perhaps I'd have a chance for more sleuthing.

"Penny, Norm, it's good to see you. Where can I best use my limited skills?" I asked.

"Hi, Alex, do you mind edging that last wall? It's the most tedious part of painting," Penelope said.

"Sure." I opened the ladder and brushed carefully along the corner of the ceiling. I wrestled with how to ask more questions about the Enigma rotor without sounding accusatory. "The FBI took over the investigation of

Ted's death from Nika. Agent Gavin Thielker collected the Nazi items I collected, including the encryption thing you gave me."

Norm stopped painting and looked at his wife. "What? Did you receive another threat from Ted? Why didn't you tell me?"

"It was nothing," Penny said. "There was no threat this time. Just a piece of a machine the Germans had used to code and decode messages."

Two words from Penny's response caught my attention. "This time?" I asked. "What other threats did you receive?"

Penny set her paint roller in the tray before answering. "Maybe '*threat*' is too strong a word, but I often felt intimidated by Ted whenever he came into the museum. He said I was trying to rewrite history by including photos of Native Americans and minorities in various displays. He said it diminished the greatness of our Christian nation. He—" She shook her head, then refilled her roller with paint and propelled it across the wall.

No one said anything as I moved the ladder a foot to reach another section near the ceiling. The sound of volunteers in other parts of the property almost drowned out the soft swish of bristles and the rubbing of the rollers on the drywall.

"Did you give Nika the Enigma rotor?" Penelope asked me.

"I gave everything to Agent Thielker."

"Sounds like they have revised their assumption of heart attack. Have you heard anything about suspects?"

"Nothing concrete. Do you have any theories?"

Penelope and Norm exchanged a glance. "I heard David Sorenson kind of make a comment that might or might not be a threat," Penelope said.

"When was that?"

"Right after Ted and Franco argued."

"Did you tell Sheriff Marx?"

"It was just a mumbled comment, maybe nothing. We've known David for decades, haven't we, Norm?" Her husband nodded before she continued. "I can't believe he'd hurt anyone. It's just that the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of concentration camps dredged up some harsh memories for him. His grandparents told him stories of relatives killed in Auschwitz. Whenever he met some Holocaust deniers—like Ted—he became angry. I don't blame him." She pushed her roller into the paint pan a bit too forcefully and splattered her arm. She wiped it with a shop rag. "Now I'm not accusing David of anything, but I worry someone else might."

"Did anyone else hear David?"

"I don't think so. That's why I didn't want to bring it up to the sheriff."

I debated mentioning that I may have heard David's disquieting remark, but I, too, couldn't be sure I heard him correctly. Maybe I just wanted to convince myself he hadn't said it. I shifted to Penelope and Norm's long affiliation with Gaia. "Did you know Ted very well?"

Norm spoke this time. "Years ago, I went fishing with him. I think we even had him over for a cook-out once." He eyeballed his wife for confirmation. She nodded for him to continue. "Didn't really get to know him. I sometimes wondered how he paid his bills. He seemed like a hermit."

"What about George Westbrook? Did you know if he and Ted got along?"

Penelope wiped a spot of paint off her nose. "I think you know the answer is no. He didn't agree with Ted's worldview. George is a rock-solid citizen of Gaia."

With my back toward Penelope, I tried to be as casual as possible as I asked her about her own dislike of Ted. "How threatened did you feel by Ted?"

Even though she was not in my line of sight, I felt her tension rise. "Ted was never willing to tell the truth about the past. He wanted us to live with a distorted view of segregation and discrimination. I love being an American citizen, and I'm proud of the many heroes from Gaia, but we can't couch American history as an uninterrupted pageantry of greatness. We can honor the past at the same time we learn from it. But we can't allow evil from the past, whether originating in the United States or elsewhere, to seep into the present. That's why honest history is so profoundly important. We can't delude ourselves into believing we are incapable of evil."

Norm cleared his throat, and Penelope stopped talking for a moment. Then she whispered, "Sorry, I get carried away sometimes."

I turned around and smiled at her. "You don't need to apologize. I appreciate your wealth of historical knowledge. In fact, I'd like to talk with you about some of the Nazi relics that have turned up in Gaia recently. Maybe you could shed light on what they mean."

"I would love that. Send me a text and we can set something up."

"Later this week."

"That would be lovely."

We completed the paint assignment and cleaned up. I climbed into my car, looking forward to a hot shower, a healthy meal, and a glass of Bliss Creek wine. After a quick stop at the store, I drove along the country highway and I noticed a truck speeding up behind me, coming closer and closer. I pulled onto the shoulder to let it pass, but did so too quickly and lost control. My car skidded off the road and hit something solid. Then everything went black