



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# *Everyone Has a Motive*

Sleep had been fitful on Tuesday night. *Cue the ominous music.* I kept hearing Agent Thielker's questions growing increasingly apocalyptic. My conversations at Habitat played on a continuous loop. Snippets of my drive home kept flashing through my brain as I tried to identify the truck that had been behind me on the highway. The height of the headlights suggested it was a truck, but I was so preoccupied with controlling my car I couldn't remember much else.

I stumbled out of bed before sunrise and got dressed. The bags under my eyes were too pronounced for make-up concealer to have much benefit. Yikes! No matter; there was no beauty contest where I was going.

The aroma of coffee drew me to the kitchen. Thank goodness for automatic coffee makers. After filling my travel mug, I texted Sasha to let her know I'd be a few hours late. She has frequently handled the shop solo, and we weren't likely to have a rush of customers this morning. When George and Cathy said they'd be gone on vacation, I posted a message on our website and our Facebook page that there would be no winery tours this week. I'd also printed a note for the front door and taped one on the marquee that signaled the turn from the highway onto the Bliss Creek entry road.

But what if George and Cathy couldn't come back—ever? Josh could handle the vineyard tours, while Tiffany could handle the production area—until they both returned to college in the fall. That was a worry for another day.

I penned a quick note to Josh and Tiffany and placed it visibly on the kitchen counter. The note informed them that Wolf and I had a few errands to run and would be gone for a couple of hours. They both knew what they needed to do to help Sasha in the winery.

Grabbing my coffee mug and binoculars, I called to Wolf. "You're coming with me, Big Guy. We're going on an adventure."

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The sun was fully risen by the time I pulled my car into the parking lot of a hiking/biking trailhead near Ted Arnold's property. Wolf and I trudged to the picnic table on the hill where Felicity and I had tried to observe the RogueWave rally the day before Ted's murder. I surmised Ted's death was no heart attack.

There were no guards posted at the gate to the private gravel road toward the house. No vehicles lined the drive as they had for the rally. Next to the house sat a solitary truck, which I presumed belonged to Larry.

Adjusting the binoculars, I focused on the truck. Was this the one that had followed me last night? Well, that's assuming someone had followed me, and I wasn't even sure of that. Refocusing the lenses, I scanned the front and perimeter of the property. It looked empty. No Bulwark Boys, no RogueWave members, no rally participants. Just Larry's truck. Yet the remnants of the fear I felt that day returned. I was glad Wolf was with me.

Now I know what you're thinking. What the heck am I doing spying on a likely murder victim's property? I'm trying to observe anything unusual, to look for clues. I was still worried that Agent Thielker's focus was on confirming his beliefs, rather than seeking the truth. That's the confirmation bias Nika and I had discussed.

A flash of reflected sunlight drew my attention toward a truck driving along Ted's driveway. I moved behind a bush to remain hidden if someone looked up the hill. Re-adjusting the focus, I aimed my binoculars at the driver's door. Liam stepped out of the vehicle as Larry exited the house.

They remained a wary distance from each other, squaring off in a fighting stance. Larry clenched his fists. Liam raised his palms up, pulsing them at Larry, as if trying to get him to simmer down. Both appeared to be yelling, although they were too far away for me to hear what they were saying.

I studied Liam's truck, looking for any identifiable feature to trigger a memory from last night. Nothing stood out for me. I racked my brain to remember the smallest detail, but kept drawing a blank.

After perhaps ten minutes, Liam slammed his palm on his truck hood and climbed back into the cab. I ducked lower behind the shrubs. He didn't seem to notice me as he stormed away from the house.

When I was sure Liam was gone and Larry had returned to the house, I sank onto the picnic bench. My heart was still dancing a quickstep. I breathed heavily to chill out.

Okay, I still know what you're thinking. My real-world sleuthing was no more effective than my computer sleuthing. But I was just getting started.

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On my return home, I took a detour past the warehouse to look at the solar panel installation. I stepped out of the car to chat with foreman Jose. "It looks like the job is going well," I said. Wolf sniffed the periphery of the area, lurching in various directions as he picked up a fresh scent.

"Yes, Mrs. Mandiera. Fine weather, quality materials, motivated crew. Luck has been on our side."

"Does Liam have other projects lined up for you?"

His smile diminished. It was slight, but visible. "Yes, but I think his heart is not in it."

"Oh?"

Jose nodded his head toward the crew. "They all believe Liam has been a good boss. He respected them, joked with them. Then something changed. The joking is gone."

"When did that happen?"

"About a week ago."

Just before Ted's death. Maybe it's a coincidence, maybe not.

"Liam has not been himself," Jose continued. "I think he has been working too hard. He does not want the business to fail."

I understood the effort to make a business successful, but Jose's reference to his Liam's behavior entangled my mind. "Well, I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate everything you and your crew are doing. George has been researching certification labels for sustainable management of the vineyard. And I'm hoping that his efforts, along with this solar project, will be a step toward sustainability certification for Bliss Creek."

I was babbling; Jose's comment about Liam rattled me. Could Liam's abrupt behavior change suggest Ted's death was indeed murder?

Wolf saved me from further jabbering with a nudge. "Sorry," I said. "I get excited about the topic and I ramble. I'll let you get back to your work and I'll get back to mine." As I returned to my car, I surveyed the crew's trucks, again hoping to trigger a specific memory. Still nothing, but as I said, I was just getting started.

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I parked at the house and walked the half-mile to the winery. The empty parking lot didn't bode well for my finances. I came in the back door, leaving Wolf in the office; it was as far as we allowed him in the winery. Sasha was crocheting wine cozies for the gift section of the store.

"Sorry I'm so late," I said.

"Hey, you're paying me to indulge in one of my favorite hobbies. Who am I to complain?" She blew a stray hair from her face. "How was the afternoon at Habitat?"

I told her about my conversation with Liam. "He said something about watching the twin tower destruction on 9-11 in high school. That's what made him decide to fight alongside people who, in his words, looked like him. It sounds worse when I say it out loud now than it did when he was talking."

Sasha set her project on her lap. "That's a tough call. On the one hand, what he did was brave and noble. But his words sounded so, so..." She circled her hand at the wrist as if searching for the right description to complete her sentence.

"Suspicious? One-sided? Arbitrary? Racist?"

Sasha nodded.

"That's what I thought, too. Regardless, I wonder what his connection was with Larry then and afterward." I explained my surveillance at Ted's house. "There is definitely friction between those two."

"What the heck were you doing there alone?"

"I had Wolf with me."

"Alex, you're smarter than that." She slammed her needles on the counter. "You don't want the same thing that happened to Ted to happen to you."

"We still don't know exactly what happened to Ted, and maybe I can uncover something that might help George. Everyone had a motive against Ted. There's just no firm evidence."

"Please don't go anyplace alone again. Promise."

"I promise." I crossed my fingers behind my back and thought, *I'll take Wolf with me.* "I had an interesting conversation with Penny and Norm Carter. Seems that Penny frequently felt intimidated by Ted. I looked for evidence in the Gazette archives, but found nothing concrete."

"Penny's such a sweetheart that I can't imagine a hostile bone in her body. Norm either, for that matter."

"I agree, but I kept thinking about those two conversations with Liam and the Carters before I went off the road." Oops. I hadn't intended to let that slip.

"What the...? Are you okay?"

"Absolutely fine. A truck or SUV was tailgating me, so I tried to edge over and let it pass me. You know how many curves and hills there are with no-passing lanes." After adjusting a few display racks, I straightened the front door open/close sign. Next, I polished the already-shiny counter in the wine-tasting area. "Anyway, I went too far off the shoulder and ended in the field. But I simply drove back onto the highway to get home."

Sasha's sigh was audible.

"What?" I asked.

"What do you mean, what? I know you. Whatever happened is gnawing at your brain."

I grabbed her mug. "I'll get us both some coffee." I scurried to the breakroom and leaned against the counter to collect my thoughts. Wolf's gentle snores, coming from under my desk in the office across the hall, steadied my nerves. After refilling Sasha's mug and one for me, I returned to the retail area. Sasha was pricing the cozies and arranging them in the gift aisle.

"Where's Tiffany?"

"I could tell she was worried about George. I sent her home since the shop is empty. I told her I'd call her if I needed her."

I nodded absentmindedly. "I'm increasingly convinced Ted's death wasn't a heart attack or an accident, and it's going to influence everything until there is an arrest."

The front door chimed as a middle-aged couple entered and approached the check-out area. "What's your schedule for winery tours today?"

"I'm so sorry, but there was an emergency, and we have canceled all the tours for the week." I gave Sasha a sideways glance. She knew about the announcements I had posted on our website and Facebook pages, the notice at the winery's driveway entrance, and the obtrusive sign at the front door. Apparently not enough. Note to self: I need another sign by the check-out.

"We made a special trip out here just for the tours. We wouldn't have come if we had known."

"Again, I'm sorry for the inconvenience. I'd be glad to offer you free wine tasting, and a discount on any purchases in the store."

The man and woman looked at each other and shook their heads, grumbling all the way out the door. Dissatisfied customers are the bane of small businesses.

"That went well," I deadpanned. "Let's hope we don't alienate too many others."

"Alex, we can still do some tours with Josh and Tiffany. Perhaps we could offer free tours this week just to not lose the business."

"It's already Wednesday. George and Cathy said they would be on vacation for one week. Let's hold off on that if we can."

The chimes jingled again as the door opened. This time, it was the sheriff.

"Any updates from the autopsy?" I asked her.

"Was your text about epinephrine based on a tip from Felicity?"

"Not exactly. We asked her about unusual cases she had reported on in prior jobs, and she described—"

"I wish you had told me that right away. I needed a plausible reason for requesting this, and since you didn't explain why it made sense for me to ask the examiner to check for epinephrine, I had to do some research. I finally found the case Felicity most likely told you about. Turns out Ted had heart problems, and an overdose of epinephrine could theoretically cause arrhythmia. It's not definitive, but it's a possibility. Thielker's team is searching the area for an injector. And he asked whether Bliss Creek stores epinephrine auto-injectors for emergency use."

"Now we do. We started after Zach's allergic reaction to the bee stings. We keep two in stock."

"Did you check if they're both still here?"

Nika followed me down the hallway to the stockroom. I braced myself as my hand grabbed the doorknob. If one was missing, would that implicate George?

I slowly cranked the door open and looked at the shelves. Both injectors were on the shelf. I breathed a sigh of exoneration.