



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Posers and Curses

The lustrous morning sunshine belied the unhinged tempest from the prior night. A quick glance out my bedroom window informed me the significant crack I had heard was from a tree limb crashing down. It would need to be removed with a chain saw, but from my vantage point, it was the only visible consequence of the thunderstorm.

The aroma of brewing coffee and a muffled hissing sound from the coffee pot drew me to the kitchen. Josh and Tiffany were both up and dressed, ready to inspect the property for storm damage. I made a mental note that the angel curse was just a myth and that the universe was doing me favors. After all, Wolf had unexpectedly warmed up to Dot and Felicity. And my college son and daughter had arisen before me to inspect Bliss Creek for storm damage.

Josh handed me a mug of coffee. "Morning, Mom. Given George's... unavailability... I thought I'd survey the vineyard. And Tiff's filling in for Mariama in the beehive check-up."

I was so proud of my kids. I had to take a sip of coffee to push the lump out of my throat before I could talk. "That's job one today. I'm not sure what I'll do when the two of you return to school."

I wrapped my fingers around my mug, savoring the coffee (or perhaps procrastinating?) after Tiffany and Josh left. It had been four days since Ted Arnold's murder, and less than 24 hours since George's arrest by Agent Gavin Thielker. It felt like Thielker was creating a strong case against George based on solely on circumstantial evidence. I doubted he had other suspects.

Something from last night kept nagging, but I still couldn't decipher what it was. The conversation with Zach Taylor was touching. He explained about Ted's lawsuit and verified he had an alibi for the time of the murder, hopefully putting an end to Larry's comment about skeletons in Zach's closet. Not that Larry was a credible source, but still. That might be what was troubling me.

Was the Hawaiian shirted guy an associate of Larry's? I assumed he was the one whose coins christened our tip jar.

Where has Mariama been since Monday? Why was she hiding? And who was hiding her?

Josh and Tiffany's reaction to David Sorenson's niece, Emma, raised some questions. I knew David had told everyone about his relatives being in concentration camps during WWII; it seemed improbable his supposed niece had never heard the stories. And how did she know Liam Briggs? It's not likely she would have randomly crossed paths with the founder of a solar start-up in another city.

And who was it in the truck at the foot of the driveway during the storm? Or did I dream the whole thing?

My sixth sense kept tingling, and then it hit me. The truck reminded me of the one that had run me off the road. And for reasons I can't explain, I made a mental note to re-check my inventory of auto-injectors.



As Wolf and I entered the back door of the winery, I heard sniffing. Wolf curled up in his customary position below my desk, knowing he could go no farther into the customer area. I followed the sniffles into the retail shop.

Sasha had her arm around Cathy, who had buried her head in her hands, muffling her sobs. Both heads sprang up as I entered.

Sasha spoke first. "Hey, Boss."

I walked over and added my arm around Cathy. Tears welled in my eyes as I absorbed her emotions. I was glad we had some time before opening for customers. I remained quiet, waiting for Cathy to compose herself. After several minutes, she did.

"They took George into custody yesterday, but I guess everyone knows that by now." Cathy's shoulders shook with silent sobs before she could talk again. "He hasn't had his initial hearing yet, so I don't know if the judge will set bail. Or much it will be. Or if I'll be able to afford a law... law... lawyer."

Before removing my arm from her shoulder, I gave an extra squeeze. "Cathy, you're part of the Bliss Creek family. We're behind you 100%."

She gave me a bleak smile. "I know that, but I also know your profit margin." She removed her glasses to massage her eyes. Sasha handed her a box of tissues and Cathy wiped her nose.

"What's happened so far?" I asked.

"The FBI agents found us at the Boundary Waters. They said George had threatened Ted in the past and had several affidavits to that effect. A Nazi Mother's Cross, presumably from what George's dad brought back after World War II, was under Ted's body, with George's fingerprints on it." She sniffled again, and her voice kept cracking. "He has no alibi for the time of Ted's murder, and the message in the dirt..."

Cathy put her glasses back on and pushed them up the bridge of her nose. "George was on edge when we left on vacation. Somehow, he had figured out that Ted was Mariama's father. Even though we could not have kids of our own, we viewed Tiffany and Josh, and even Mariama, as pseudo grandchildren. Last week he sorted through his father's World War II trove until he found the Mother's Cross. He wanted Ted to realize how lucky he was to have Mariama as a daughter, and that racial purity stuff was just garbage."

I ushered Sasha and Cathy toward a table. "Did George distribute any other relics in Gaia?"

"Absolutely not," Cathy whispered. "The FBI agent asked the same thing. He implied George spread the other items to distract from using the Mother's Cross when he killed Ted. George just clammed up. I know it sounds bad, but George is not violent. I'm not being naïve."

"No, you're not," Sasha said, patting Cathy's arm.

I had another problematic question to ask. "Cathy, why did you and George leave without forewarning after June Fest? You've always given me plenty of notice for your vacations." We all knew the abrupt departure was one of many pieces of circumstantial evidence pointing toward George's guilt.

Cathy straightened her shoulders with a deep, jagged inhale and avoided my eyes. "Sorry about that, uh, that spur-of-the-moment thing. Friday night, at Luna's psychic program, George recognized a couple of guys who knew him from his white supremacy days. He didn't want to have anything to do with them. He assumed if they had come for Ted's rally, they'd be gone by the time we came back a week later. He thought with us gone there would be less chance of conflict."

In the back of my mind, I wondered if one guy he recognized was Mr. Hawaiian Shirt, who was rude to Tiffany yesterday. I also wondered how George could recognize someone he hadn't seen for presumably 40 years.

"Did George think Mariama would be in danger once her relationship with Ted became public?" I asked.

Cathy pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "I don't know. He just said he wanted to protect her, to defend her."

"Did he threaten Ted when he gave him the Mother's Cross?"

Cathy wagged her head in disagreement. "No! He hinted Ted was coming to grips with the fact he had a 30-something mixed-race daughter. He told me Ted grumbled what might have been an apology of sorts."

"Anything else?"

"George is innocent." Taking another deep breath, Cathy faced me with a look of determination. "Alex, I can't afford to lose this job. It's my only source of income. And I need to get back to work for my sanity. To get my mind off all the unknowns I'm facing."

I couldn't help but feel a surge of selfish joy knowing she would return to her wine making endeavors. We'd be able to get back to the winery tours—a money-maker for us. My empathetic side felt guilty. The crunching of car tires on the gravel parking lot brought us all back to business, and my selfish side triumphed.

Sasha unlocked the front door and flipped the sign to OPEN. Cathy strode to check the fermentation process of her wines. And I struggled with the fact that the new information from Cathy strengthened, rather than weakened, the case against George.



My office was quiet when Felicity phoned me.

"How's the solar article coming along?" I asked her. Since she had just interviewed me the prior day, I wasn't expecting much progress.

"Just about done. Could I email your section to you to verify? I highlighted a few points that need confirmation."

"That was fast. I suppose you want this back yesterday?"

"That's the life of a journalist."

"Did you get a good interview with Liam Briggs? An article like this should really increase the awareness of this business."

"He has a wealth of industry knowledge and provided me with a ton of sources and statistics. But as good-looking as this guy is, he wouldn't allow me to include his photo or personal biography. The article had to be strictly business facts."

"Do you think it might have something to do with his connection to Larry Larson?"

"I thought about that. If Liam had been a white supremacist, he might not want to broadcast that information."

I powered my laptop and opened my email. "Your article just arrived." I started skimming it. I had to admit, Felicity's writing skills were exceptional. The article made it sound like I knew what I was getting into when I started my green energy journey. "Are you still delaying work on the white supremacy article as Agent Thielker—Gavin—asked you to?" I was glad she couldn't see the smirk on my face as I broached the subject.

"Yup, I've been researching solar power every moment since we talked. And before you ask, the only information I can get on the murder investigation is what the FBI has sanitized."

Her choice of the term *sanitized* intrigued me. But as Nika pointed out, I'm a nerd for words. "Can you give me an hour to verify the facts in the solar article? It looks straightforward." I cleared my throat. "It sounds as if you and Agent Thielker have gotten well-acquainted."

"There was an uncharacteristic pause before Felicity responded. "I don't know how to answer that. Sometimes he seems open and upfront with me, at least as far as is possible for FBI agents. Other times, I feel he's not who he claims to be."

"That's a pretty revealing statement coming from you."

"It's nothing to take to the bank, just a gut feel." Another uncharacteristic pause. "And, Alex? How well does Josh know Emma?"

"He just met her this week. Why?"

"I thought it would be good to include a blurb on the new intern for the Visitor's Bureau. But when I did a background check on Emma Sorenson, I came up blank. So, I checked into David Sorenson's family and guess what?"

I waited without replying.

"He has three nephews, all single. And I can't find any record of a niece."

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"The plot thickens," I said to Wolf as I pushed back in my chair and gazed out the window. "What's the answer, Big Guy?"

"Expecting your dog to solve all your problems?"

I swiveled around to see Nika leaning against the door frame, arms crossed at the elbows, a teasing smile on her face.

"Nothing else seems to work," I said. "What's up?"

"Just thought I'd check to be sure you were staying out of trouble. Based on your reckless spying on Ted's house, I don't know if I can trust you." She sat on the side chair and lowered her arms onto my desk. "I see Cathy's back at work."

"She's in limbo, hoping work will divert her attention from what's increasingly inevitable. Has anyone followed up with Franco Espinoza? He had a very visible confrontation with Ted shortly before the murder. And he gave Mia a Valknut medallion like the one we found outside Luna's café." I felt like a schmuck, indirectly throwing a murder accusation at a struggling entrepreneur with a pregnant wife. But I didn't want to miss any avenue of truth.

"He was at Casa da Mia the entire time, preparing for the expected rush at the close of June Fest. While we haven't yet verified this, we know the restaurant was well-prepared for customers after the parade. And giving his pregnant wife jewelry is hardly a criminal act."

"David Sorenson threatened Ted." Again, my schmuck feelings entered my gut. David had always been good to me, and Bliss Creek received multiple loans from David's bank, including one for the solar panels.

"A rock-solid alibi. He was with several business owners on Main Street, and he was there until after the parade finished. And before you ask, that group included Penny Carter and Zach."

"Have you heard from Mariama?"

"Not exactly. We checked Ted's will. He awkwardly left his property to Mariama's mother, but he didn't expect her to assume ownership. As I understand it, he suspected she would sell the land and receive the proceeds. Ted didn't know he had fathered a child, and that muddies the waters a bit. Mariama's not in the clear yet, but George has the most evidence against him."

"I can't believe Mariama would hurt anyone. I'm just concerned about her safety. What about Liam Briggs?"

Nika bent her elbows to raise her clasped hands up from the desk. She rested her chin on her knuckles. "No motive. I don't think his alibi holds up, but it's not up to me. It's important that I stay out of it now that the FBI is in charge. If I arrested him without incontrovertible proof, his defense attorney could claim it's because I'm your friend."

"Has Thielker questioned him?"

"Alex, I'm not privy to—"

"And did you know that Emma Sorenson apparently knows him? And that she's not David's niece? And what about Larry Larson?"

Nika sprang up, looking at her phone. "Alex, I gotta bounce. An emergency has come up."

We had been friends all our lives and I could tell she was lying. She didn't have an emergency and was simply dodging my questions. But I wasn't sure whether it was the discussion about Larry Larson, Liam Briggs, Mariama, or Emma Sorenson that she was avoiding.

She advanced toward the door, channeling TV's Detective Columbo by saying, "One more thing. Thielker asked me to take a picture of the auto-injectors in your inventory."

We retraced our steps down the hallway to the stockroom. This time I felt a sense of dread as I released the knob of the door, revealing an empty shelf. Both injectors were missing.

"This must be why the lights went out last night," I said.



There are weeks when time flies by and others when it seems at a standstill. This stretch since Ted's death had been a bit of both. It had depleted my energy and emotions. I lay my head on my desk, just for a moment...

"Mom, are you okay?" Tiffany's worried voice jolted me from near-sleep.

"I'm fine. I'm just practicing my anti-aging mini-nap. Too bad I'm still aging." Clearing my throat, I sat upright in the chair. "How are the beehives?"

"No damage that I can tell, but I wish Mariama were here to back me up on that. Josh is bracing up a few plants that were flattened by the storm. He thinks there's only minor damage to the vineyard. But..."

"But what?"

"Some vines have clean breaks, almost like someone cut them."

A lump formed in my throat. "Is he sure?"

"No, he just voiced that as a 50-50 possibility."

"What about trees?"

"One tree limb came down inside the wooded area near the warehouse."

"I saw that from my window. Anything else?"

Tiffany rolled her lips over her teeth. "Yeah. There was some damage to the warehouse roof. Liam Briggs is there now. He said he'd like to talk with you."

"Dang it, so close. I'll go see what he discovered. Could you check if Sasha needs any help? I think Cathy is in her R&D lab."

"Cathy was in the shop with Sasha when I came through. She looks, oh, I don't know, fragile."

I nodded. "She's going to need our help as much as George will." My chair creaked as I stood up, alerting my dog I was about to leave the office. He ambled to the doorway. "Okay, Wolf. You can come along."

We exited the rear door and walked along the path to the warehouse. Foreman Jose was on the roof with one of his crew. Liam, in a conversation with my son, made eye contact with me when I approached.

"Tiffany told me you needed to discuss storm damage concerns," I said.

Liam waved me over. "After we had secured the stanchions and rails to the roof, we arranged the power inverter kits to create a conductor system for the solar array."

I waited, not sure if he needed a response when I didn't understand what he was saying.

Then he pointed to a section of the roof. "See where Jose is crouched? A tree limb destroyed one of the power-inverter kits, along with a couple of shingles. Even though Jose's crew are not traditional roofers, he says they can replace the mangled shingles and then continue with the solar work. Luckily, we hadn't installed the PV modules yet, meaning the re-work will be minor."

"How much will that cost?"

"Either your insurance or mine should cover it. They'll likely duke it out until they settle."

Reflections of the angel curse flew through my brain, and I mentally slapped myself. *There is no such thing as a curse.*

"How much of a delay will this cause?"

"I may have to order another inverter kit. I'm not sure I have one in stock. But the crew can continue to work in the meantime. I'm thinking we might need to tack a day onto the original estimate."

"Everything seemed so straightforward when I signed the contract with you. Now, I'm not so sure."

Liam gave me a lopsided grin. "We built contingencies into the plan. We may not even need the extra eight hours if I have an inverter in stock. And I want to be sure I have satisfied customers for future articles in the Gazette."

Thinking about the Gazette, I recalled Felicity's comment that Liam didn't want his picture taken. And when I asked her about his connection to Larry Larson, a known white supremacist, she hedged. I suspected she had some inside information from Agent Thielker. I wanted to grill Liam about those issues, along with how well he knew Emma Sorenson. This wasn't the time or place to dig into such personal questions, but that never stopped me before.

"Liam, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Maybe."

"When we were at Habitat a couple days ago, you said you and Larry Larson enlisted after 9-11 to fight against people who didn't look like you. What exactly did you mean?"

He crossed his arms with a sigh. "That's not exactly what I said. But if you're asking if I'm a white supremacist, the answer is no. I may have felt some pressure back then, but I didn't succumb. And it doesn't define who I am now."

"What about your relationship with Larson? He interrupted a dinner we were having with Felicity and suggested—no, he demanded—that her article on white supremacy include you. He said you had a—what was the word—oh, an insightful biography. And that when we talked to you, we should say Larry sent us."

Liam grew visibly tense. "Larry Larson's viewpoints are not mine." He turned to leave.

"Could I ask one more question? How well do you know Emma Sorenson?"

He turned toward me, his face set in stone. "We've met. She's a marketing intern for the Visitor's Bureau, and I'm a local businessperson. I'm the owner of a solar installation company who's going to complete the project I committed to you. Within budget and on time."

I simply nodded and said, "I guess I just have to trust you."

But did I have enough information to trust him?