



CHAPTER ONE

Nazi Artifacts on Day One

Smoke wafted toward my nose as I schlepped along the trail. Despite the sense of foreboding the smell gave me, I focused on keeping pace with my daughter.

Mile three. Why, oh why, did I promise my daughter I'd go running with her this morning? She's in college and I'm... older than that. "Tiffany." Huff. Huff. "Slow down." I bent at my waist with my palms on my thighs. Note to self: get back into an exercise routine.

"Mom?" Tiffany was 20 feet ahead of me on the bike/pedestrian trail, but did a U-turn back to me. She wasn't even breaking a sweat. Her chestnut ponytail swayed back and forth as she jogged in place, waiting for me.

"I'm fine. Let's head home." Our home is on the Bliss Creek Winery and Meadery property, between the vineyards and the beehives.

We resumed our jog. Before long, Tiffany came to an abrupt stop, causing me to bump into her. She pointed to dark clouds of smoke. "What's that?"

"It's coming from the direction of the warehouse." Concern wrested the aches and pains from my awareness. I rushed toward the fumes. George Westbrook, my vineyard manager, was extinguishing the remains of a fire encroaching on the warehouse. The fire-line ended just short of my not-yet-installed roof solar panels.

Tiffany and I grabbed shovels from George's utility vehicle and tossed dirt on some residual embers. "What happened?" I asked. "Did you call the fire department?"

"Got it under control," George said. "Mostly smoke now."

Scorched branches marred a small section of the vineyard. I fingered the new grape vine plantings that the fire destroyed. They were a new variety adapted for climate change. Then my eyes darted toward the warehouse. The fire stopped short of the physical structure. I sighed in relief. "The solar panels are still intact. I haven't paid for them yet. George, how did this start?"

"Don't know, Alexi; my guess is harebrained campers." (To be candid, George said something stronger than harebrained, but you get the picture.) He jerked his head toward the trail Tiffany and I had just been on. On the

other side was a black ring surrounded by beer cans and litter. "Some idiots had a drunken party and an illegal bonfire. It's been so dry the past couple of weeks, all it took was a spark. Can't fix stupid."

"Think we should notify Nika?" I asked. Nika Marx was the sheriff who had jurisdiction over the vineyards and the rest of the county, including the town of Gaia in Western Wisconsin.

"Nah. There isn't enough damage to file an insurance claim. And Nika has more pressing matters than looking at a vacated party site."

I nodded, then faced my daughter. "Tiffany, don't wait for me. You can have first dibs on the shower." She tucked in her earbuds and ran toward the house.

I returned my attention to my vineyard manager. George wore a graying ponytail pulled away from his face, accentuating his broad forehead and square jaw. He was a brawny sixty-something with a low tolerance for small talk. His knowledge of cold-weather grapes and climatic requirements had earned him a reputation as an expert in the industry. I worried another vineyard might try to lure him away from Bliss Creek. "When do you suppose the fire started?"

"My best guess is late last night. Revelers left without making sure the fire was out." He grabbed a garbage bag from his ATV and strode across the trail.

"Looks like a mess," I said as we pivoted toward the location of the prior night's bonfire.

George complained as we walked. "Every year I'm cleaning up more plastic and trash that blows in from the trail. When I started working for your folks, before the railroads converted the rails into trails, we rarely saw people on this side of the property. Trash was a rarity. You can't fix stupid."

His favorite catch-phrase.

As we tossed litter into the trash bag, I looked at the distance between the center of what had been the bonfire pit and the burned vineyards at Bliss Creek. Could a spark have reached that by accident? "George, do you think this could have been deliberate?" Call me paranoid, but about a month earlier, a developer had poisoned my bees to coerce me to sell the property. The coercion failed.

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Thought crossed my mind. If I came across some pyromaniac punks involved in arson, I'd..." His threat remained unspoken as he snapped his jaw shut.

I forced the anxious thought from my head as we continued to clear the area. "Think we need to put up a fence along the property line? To protect the vines?" The winery had 30 acres of vineyards near the bluffs along the Mississippi River. It had been unenclosed when my grandparents, and later my parents, owned the property.

"Maybe. No guarantee it would work. Like I said, you can't fix stupid."

I kicked a clod of dirt, uncovering a small metal circle. "What's this?" I picked it up and rubbed off the dirt.

"Could be a Third Reich German coin," George said. I assumed he had been looking over my shoulder, but when I glanced at him, he was staring in the distance.

"You didn't even look at it. Here." I handed it to him.

"Just as I thought. Looks like a swastika below an eagle. Never thought I'd see that around Gaia." He massaged grit from the coin. "It looks like the ones my dad brought back with him after World War II."

George's comment surprised me. He rarely mentioned his father's WWII service or his own service in Viet Nam. I vaguely recalled George saying his dad had fought in combat duty—four campaigns in the European, African, and Middle Eastern theaters. "He saw a lot of crap," George had once told me.

I pocketed the coin when George returned it to me, still wondering how he could have identified it without looking at it. "Think the person who caused the damage dropped it?"

He shrugged. "Possible. Or it could have been here for decades. But if someone dropped it last night, we could have white supremacists crashing June Fest this week." June Fest was the town's kick-off event for the summer tourist season. Held in early June, the festival drew visitors from several Midwestern states. Part art fair, part music jam, part food fest, and part hometown revival, the Fest launched the flow of tourist dollars. He massaged his neck before continuing. "RogueWave uses replicas of this coin as an entry fee to their rallies."

"RogueWave?"

"A diehard philistine group committed to what they call racial purity and to climate change denial."

"You think they're in Gaia?"

He shrugged again before closing the trash bag to head back toward the winery.

What a way to start a festival. Potential arson and white supremacy. A shiver snaked up my spine.

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By the time I got home, Tiffany and my son Josh were gone. Both would work our booth for the Fest in downtown Gaia. Each year we partnered with my friend Luna Dominic, owner of the Sunflower Café, to offer food and drink to area guests.

After a quick shower, I climbed into my 10-year-old Prius, heading toward Gaia. I called Sheriff Nika Marx as I waited for a tractor and combine to cross the highway. Nika and I were lifelong friends. She had even introduced me to my now-deceased husband and had been my maid of honor.

"On your way in?" Nika asked.

"Yeah. Tiff and Josh are already there."

"I saw them. Tiffany told me about the fire. Much damage?"

"Some crop damage, but all the buildings survived. We think a spark from an illegal bonfire at a late-night party caused it."

"On the county land by the trail? "

"Uh-huh. When George and I were picking up the litter, we found an old Nazi coin."

"Hmph."

"You don't sound surprised."

"Ted Arnold is having a rally on his property during June Fest. A RogueWave rally, shorthand for white supremacy. Totally legal if there's no violence, but I'm concerned about who might attend."

"I don't remember him doing that before."

"He hasn't, but he is this year. Do you want me to check out the fire damage?"

"No, I just thought I should let you know. I took a few pictures and will send them to you."

"Okay. Hang on to the coin for now, though it's probably nothing."

I ended the Bluetooth call as I pulled into a parking spot next to Luna's lime-green Honda Civic Coupe near the dumpster. It was a tight fit, but we wanted to leave the parking lot open for visitors. Distant shouting caught my attention as soon as I exited the driver's door. I stretched my neck to gaze toward Main Street. A commotion a couple blocks down had drawn a crowd. Tiffany manned the Bliss Creek booth as Josh and I edged toward the commotion.

Face-to-face with Franco Espinoza, owner of a new Mexican restaurant in Gaia, was Ted Arnold. His voice carried in all directions. "Show me your papers. Prove to me you got a right to be in this here great country. Otherwise, I'm gonna sic ICE on you. We don't need more foreigners in Gaia, taking jobs from hard-working citizens."

Nika pushed her way through the crowd. She stood between the two men with her palms against their chests. "Settle down, gentlemen. What's this ruckus about?"

Ted's eyes shot angry daggers at Nika. "Ruckus? Just 'cuz I'm protecting our country from being overrun by hoodlums? What are *you* doing to keep us safe?"

Nika kept looking at Ted until he diverted his gaze. "Franco, what happened?"

"Mr. Arnold was angry at my *Dia del Padre* poster. It just means *Father's Day*. He ripped it down and told me to use English. I don't want to cause any trouble. I will keep the sign down."

Nika looked at the ripped poster, which lay next to an overturned table. "Did Mr. Arnold do that?"

"Si. But it's not a problem to fix everything."

"You don't want to press charges?"

Franco shook his head before whispering, "That won't be enough to get him to stop."

Ted puffed out his chest. "Press charges? For what? Defending my right as an American? Sheriff, you might be kowtowed by immigrant sob stories, but us taxpayers aren't. I'll put this restaurant out of business and get my gun shop back into the building. Just you wait and see." He stormed off to his truck and peeled out of town.

"That guy ought to be shot." The voice of bank president David Sorenson barely reached my ears above the din. "He's always itching for a fight." His face was tense as he shook his head before walking away.

I glanced toward Nika to see if she had heard Sorenson's comment, but dispersing the crowd kept her occupied.

My eyes panned the diminishing throng of locals. Several business owners were among the observers, but one caught my attention. Penelope Carter, our museum curator, paused before sending a look of utter disdain, or perhaps even hatred, at Ted's departing truck. I recalled several instances when Ted had been critical of Penelope's displays of heroic museum figures combatting racism and genocide.

We all meandered back to our booths. Mine was a simple white awning with a solid canvas wall behind the makeshift bar counter. While the confrontation unnerved me, I was glad it occurred before the June Fest crowd arrived. George was tightening bolts on a display in the Bliss Creek booth when I returned.

"Did you catch the argument on Main Street?"

"Yup. Ted Arnold has always been an odd duck. Science denier. White supremacist. Doomsday prepper. Hard to believe the guy's former military. Retired some 25-30 years ago after being stationed in Africa."

"Did you hear David Sorenson's comment? I think he said Ted Arnold ought to be shot."

George tested the sturdiness of the supports before looking at me. "Ted and David have had run-ins." George kept constructing the booth as he talked. "When Ted owned the gun shop—the site of the current Mexican restaurant—he kept defaulting on loans until David shut off his line of credit. Ted physically threatened him many times. David's just plain fed up with the jerk."

"What about Penelope Carter? If the cliché '*if looks could kill*' was accurate, Ted would be dead now."

"Gaia's museum focuses on local historical figures no one outside of Gaia ever heard of. There's the bust of one of Sasha's distant relatives who was a code talker during WWII. There's a plaque for the person who built Luna's café as a stop on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War. Ted wanted to replace the bust with one of Hitler and the plaque with a Confederate flag. It's a never-ending saga."

"Oh, I forgot about that," I said. "Know anything about Ted's rally?"

"Not much. A buddy told me some alt-right conspiracy websites promoted it. Why it's timed with the Fest, I couldn't say. Makes no sense to me, but you can't fix stupid. They better not try to hurt anyone here, especially Mariama. I worry about her safety with a group like that around." Mariama was my new Black employee.

Josh interrupted our conversation. "Mom? Luna could use a hand repainting the street side of her building."

"Now? Why?"

"To cover up graffiti. Someone spray-painted racist comments about the building having been part of the underground railroad."

"That's awful." I followed Josh to the side of the building.

Luna, her long dark hair in a disheveled bun, was slopping paint over the foot-high racial slurs in the middle of the wall. Her smile displayed her eternal optimism and gypsy heritage. "The café will have a fresh coat of paint in time for this year's June Fest. All is good."

Josh took over the painting while Luna and I cleaned the area before tourists arrived. There was a rusty piece of metal at the base of the wall. I picked it up and showed it to Luna. "Look at this. Some sort of old pendant."

Luna glanced at the medallion before walking closer to study it. "That looks like a Valknut pendant."

"A what?"

"A Valknut. It's a symbol from Norse mythology comprising three interlocked triangles."

I traced the trilateral shapes with my finger. "Oh, I see that now. How did you know what it was?"

Luna rolled her lips over her teeth. "I've never talked about this, but I had Roma ancestors who were among the groups singled out by the Nazi regime during World War II. They escaped, although many others were part of the Holocaust. Nordic symbolism fits prominently into Nazi imagery."

Noting that Josh and I were wholly attentive, she continued. "The Valknut means '*Knot of the Slain Warrior*.' It's associated with death and destiny. I've seen pictures of archeological relics, and more recently, variations of the theme at arts and crafts shows. In fact, a vendor here at the festival sells this type of jewelry."

Luna reached for the Valknut and squeezed it in her palm with closed eyes. As the resident psychic in the community, Luna sometimes picked up energy vibes. Her eyes and hand snapped open. The medallion clinked to the ground.

I squatted to retrieve the rusty pendant. "What happened?"

Luna delayed responding for several seconds. "I sensed hatred. Strong, unfiltered hatred." She wriggled her shoulders, part shiver and part revulsion. "It was like nothing I ever felt before."

I returned to the Bliss Creek booth and showed the medallion to George. While he wasn't familiar with Nordic history, he concurred with Luna that it was likely connected to the neo-Nazis in town for the rally. "No subtlety there," he said. "Can't—"

I grinned at him. "I know. *Can't fix stupid.*"

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Crowds ballooned later in the afternoon and evening. The beer tent outside the brew pub attracted a jovially raucous crowd. The mood at the Bliss Creek booth was more measured, but it wasn't without drama.

Tourists trickled into the booths. Many looked like typical families and couples, but a few appeared to be here for Ted's rally. If I wasn't mistaken, one or two looked like federal agents. Were they here to prevent suspected violence from the rally? Were they even FBI? Felicity Anderson, the intrepid editor of our local newspaper, had just entered the booth and could likely provide the answers.