



CHAPTER THREE

Psychic Drama

It took my brain a few moments to process the notion that the organizer of a white supremacy rally was the parent of a Black daughter. "Ted Arnold is your father? How did that happen? I mean..."

Mariama slipped her backpack off and stored it behind the counter. "I know what you mean. It is ironic. He met my moda while stationed in Africa. When she became pregnant, he disputed he was my fada. They split up. There was minimal contact after he returned to the States."

The silence in the booth stood in sharp contrast to the cacophony surrounding us on Main Street. The paradox pulled me deep into thought. A band at the burger joint on Main Street played Lee Greenwood's *Proud to be an American*. I mutely lip-synched the lyrics. I looked at my Native American store manager, my Gypsy business friend, and my Nigerian American employee. And I smiled. No one said anything until after the music stopped.

I cleared my throat. "Did you know who Ted was—and that he lived here—when you became my intern?"

"No." Mariama tucked her shirt into the snug waistband of what appeared to be second-hand capris. "At least not right away. It was a coincidence I enrolled at university here."

"How did you find out?"

Mariama reached behind the counter and pulled a zip-lock bag from her backpack. She removed an old snapshot of a beautiful ebony-toned woman next to a clean-cut fair-haired Caucasian male in uniform. After placing it on the counter, she gently, lovingly straightened the edges of the photo. "That was Mama."

I gazed at the couple in the photo and gasped. "Is that Ted Arnold?" The past 30ish years had changed him, but I could still discern the crooked eyebrows and narrow nose.

Mariama flipped the picture to its backside. There was an inked date and name, smudged and blurry from time. "I have been carrying this with me for the past several months. Since my moda died." She turned the picture back over and grew silent for a few moments. "She gave this to me and said the man was my fada."

"Wait, I thought you just told us Ted disputed his paternity. But this is him, isn't it?" I reached my palm toward the photo. "May I?"

Mariama deposited the snapshot into my hand. I studied the man's face, with Sasha and Luna each looking over one of my shoulders.

"Yes, that is Ted Arnold. Mama was in the final stages of hospice when she gave me the photo. During our conversations, she had a habit of trailing off and leaving sentences hanging in the air. I figured out his name from the writing on the back. It was not until I read an article in the Gaia Gazette that I wondered whether the Snapshot Ted Arnold was the same person as the Gaia Ted Arnold."

"So, you approached him about it?" I asked.

Mariama retrieved the photo and enshrined it back in the zip-lock bag. "I told him I would bring this photo to show him before June Fest. At first, he became belligerent, but then he said I reminded him of my moda. We met every day since then, and even though I felt I was making more of an effort than he was, his attitude toward me seemed to soften. I sensed conflicting emotions."

Luna reached out and squeezed Mariama's hand. "That must be tough, sweetie. Was that when he told you about his plans for the rally?"

"Not exactly. I overheard him talking on his cell phone. He fidgeted with his hands, his agitation palpable. Yelling that he had everything under control. That he had arranged for several back-ups from the RogueWave to be sure nothing prevented the rally from happening."

"We can continue this later," I said, curtailing the conversation. Customers arrived for happy hour. Earlier patrons had trickled into June Fest; this surge was the lake behind the dam, ready to party into the night.

It was clear we didn't have the complete story about Mariama's interaction with Ted, as I could hear the strain in her voice as she talked. My gut sensed a haunting premonition of hate and violence, yet the details remained elusive.

(*Friday late afternoon*)

With Mariama and Sasha manning the booth, Luna and I seized the opportunity to escape and explore the June Fest vendors.

"What's your take on Mariama being Ted's daughter?" Luna asked me when we were out of earshot of the Bliss Creek booth.

"Caught me off-guard. Did she seem evasive to you? It felt like I had to probe for answers two or three times."

"Hard to say. She may just have been processing everything."

Attendance had swelled into congested throngs. From our vantage point, the vendors were doing well. Bed-and-breakfast owner Dot Harrison was handing out samples of her breakfast pastries while collecting submissions to a drawing for a free weekend getaway. Franco Espinoza from Casa da Mia offered half-price margaritas plus a drawing for a free dinner for two. Artists displayed their creativity, along with reduced event-pricing. Music, laughter, and energy filled every corner of Gaia.

Luna and I finished our June Fest circuit and returned to the Sunflower Café and Bakery. Tonight's schedule called for the Bliss Creek booth to close early and transfer our products to the Sunflower. Though mainly catering to breakfast and lunch crowds, the café occasionally transformed into a venue for evening shows. Tonight was an

example. Guests could savor Bliss Creek wine and nibble on light meals. The June Fest soiree was being held on a make-shift stage on the patio. The main event, sandwiched between music from local bands, was a series of psychic readings. After closing the booth, Tiffany, Josh, and Sasha geared up for the night's entertainment. George and his wife, Cathy, were in camp chairs near the parking lot. Mariama was conspicuously absent. People filled all the tables, and a group gathered on the lawn in their camping chairs.

The warm-up act was a local band that provided a mixed genre of music. After they exited the stage, Luna emerged from the cafe in full Gypsy costume with beads, patchwork designs, and a Bohemian style headscarf. She opened her arms wide with a slight bow as she climbed on the stage to occupy one of two chairs in the middle. She invited a series of volunteers to sit across from her, each time providing a light-hearted, often humorous, impromptu reading. I knew Luna was good at reading people, watching body language and facial expressions to guide her comments. People consistently returned to their seats with a smile on their faces and a spring in their steps.

A 40ish man oozing a negativity I could sense from several tables away answered Luna's call for a final volunteer. When Luna placed her hands over his, she displayed the same visceral reaction she had when I handed her the Valknot pendant. She jerked her hands away. Quickly recovering, she took a deep breath and pasted a smile on her face as she looked at him. "You are facing some serious challenges in your life right now. Up is down, strong is weak, and love is—" She faltered and swallowed deeply. "Love is the antidote you need to move forward."

The sardonic patron gave her an inscrutable smile. "Maybe the antidote is more like a puzzle, or perhaps a cryptogram. Survival depends on deciphering the code." He walked off the stage and departed from the patio.

While Mr. Nasty exited, I couldn't help but notice George's actions - his eyes locked onto his wife, and he tilted his head in a silent understanding. Cathy's gaze followed his head tilt. It took me a moment to realize what had caught their attention - a man with a gray ponytail trailed behind Mr. Nasty. Right after that, George and Cathy folded their chairs and left.

Redirecting my attention to the stage, I could sense Luna's unease. I wanted to shift back to more a more positive ambiance, and I stood up. "Luna, could you take time for one additional volunteer?"

She nodded, her faltering smile making her gratitude obvious.

A bubbly twenty-something bounded up to the stage. She had a wisp of a braid, dyed blue, and an angel tattoo from her left shoulder to her elbow. "This psychic stuff is straight fire, and you are so fierce, really killing it. Let's ignore your last potato and get good vibes only."

The crowd roared with laughter. Luna regained her composure and provided a jovial reading to end the session. She thanked the audience for their participation and encouraged everyone to sample Bliss Creek wine and mead before leaving. Upon receiving a standing ovation, Luna relinquished the stage to the next band.

After changing back to her street clothes, Luna joined us at our table.

"What was that all about?" I asked, referring to the not-so-final volunteer.

Her face became troubled, a rare look for my optimistic friend. "I honestly don't know. I always try to pick up on something positive, but I couldn't tap into anything except negative emotions."

Felicity, the intrepid editor of the Gaia Gazette, sashayed over. "I see you met Larry Larson."

"Larry Larson?" Luna asked.

"One of the RogueWave group here for the rally. He's the jerk who was supposed to be your last reading. Intense, huh? I had interviewed him and then did a bit of digging. I got a look at the permit for the rally and he's apparently a back-up administrator in the event anything happens to Ted."

I scooped my chair over to make space for her to join us. "You mentioned him earlier, right? What can you tell us?"

"I'm still tracking down leads. I was hoping to learn something here tonight, but I keep running into dead ends." She examined her professionally manicured hands. "Darn. Another chip. *Qué será, será.*" She looked back at us. "Anyway, I'm still trying to determine whether there is a connection between the Fest and the rally. Whoever said small towns are boring for reporters?" She set her half-empty glass on the table.

Sasha leaned closer so she wouldn't have to shout. "Let's get back to Larry. What do you know about him?"

Felicity sipped her mead and swirled it in her mouth before responding. "Not a lot. It's almost as if he deliberately has gone off-grid to hide his tracks. He had some connection with the oil industry and pushed to expand drilling rights on federal land. His online presence faded after that." Her mead sloshed over the top of her glass when her arm got bumped by someone behind her.

"Sorry. Are you okay? Can I replace that drink for you?" Liam Briggs, CEO of Sothic Solar, jerked his elbow back toward his body's outdoorsy, rugged physique. Being an intelligent, attractive business owner, Liam was one of the most eligible 40-something bachelors in Gaia. And he was a newcomer.

Felicity tilted her head and looked at him with bedroom eyes. "No problem. Nothing seems to have spilled on me." She raked her hand slowly down the front of her chest.

Subtle.

Liam turned his head toward me, although his eyes took longer to shift away from Felicity. "Alexi, I just wanted to say hi to my best winery client."

"And your only winery client," I added with a grin. I introduced him to everyone at the table before inviting him to join us.

"Thanks, but I was looking for Sheriff Marx. I have something to give her."

"She's swamped with a rally overlapping June-Fest," I said. "Do you want me to pass anything along to her?"

With a thoughtful expression, he tapped his finger on his chin, trying to decide. "Sure. Could you give her this?" He handed me an old Nazi medal. It appeared to have been part of a military lapel pin, with evidence of a clump of rusty solder on the back.

My fingers skimmed the indentations and protrusions in the metal. I felt the wings, body, and feathers of an eagle below a swastika. "Another Nazi relic. Where did you find it?" I floated it toward Luna. Her brief headshake let me know she didn't want to touch it.

"Wait. What do you mean by another?" Liam rubbed his chin, a frown creasing his forehead.

"It's the third item today," I said. "At least two appear to be Nazi relics."

"I guess it's a good idea to make sure the sheriff gets it, then. I almost tossed it in the trash when I found it outside my office. But I thought about the rally and wondered. Let me snap a picture of it and see if I can find out anything about it online." After he returned his phone to his pocket, his smile returned. "Now I better get moving. I want to meet as many solar prospects as I can while they're in a good mood after drinking Bliss Creek wine. Nice meeting you all." Felicity appeared to be the target of his last statement.

Felicity watched him stop at tables as he crossed the patio, then she returned her focus to us. "What do you suppose is the significance of these items?"

I laid the three on the table. "All appear to be old, conceivably from about the time of World War II." I pointed to each one as I spoke. "This one, according to George, is a Third Reich German coin. This next one appears to be a Valknot pendant that may have nothing to do with the Nazis. And the one from Liam is apparently a war medal." Then, on a whim, I followed Liam's example and snapped photos of the items with my phone, "just in case these are all clues we need to decipher."

"There has to be some connection to RogueWave," Sasha said. "Don't you find it odd that the rally is being held on private property rather than in the middle of the village? I thought the purpose of these events was to make a visible statement and recruit new supporters? Am I missing something?"

"Good questions. Time to dig up some dirt." Felicity slapped her press badge on the table. "Guess I'll be covering a rally tomorrow."