

Chapter Five: *Death on Day Three*

The Fest continued to be uneventful (aside from a white supremacy rally on Saturday). We tried to encourage a family-friendly atmosphere. There were horse-drawn carriage rides around the perimeter of the village. Bike repair and maintenance workshops. Face-painting and balloons for the kids. Tourists came in all shapes and sizes, and we catered to them all. On Sunday morning, we also provided a non-denominational church service in the central agora. It has remained part of our culture, despite the dwindling attendance over the years.

The minister this year offered a prayer for peace in the village and beyond. I observed the crowd, a bit dismayed it had a smaller turnout than the white-supremacy rally the prior day.

I noticed bank president David Sorenson off to my left. He attended events like this regardless of the religious emphasis.

“Good morning, David.”

“Oh, Alexi. A pleasant morning to you, too. We’ve been lucky with the weather this weekend. And the tourist enthusiasm keeps growing and growing.”

I moved closer to him as he was talking. When I reached him, I gestured toward the Sunflower Café. “Join me for coffee at Luna’s?”

“Just briefly. My wife is at home preparing for out-of-town guests this afternoon.”

“I have about an hour before the Fest opens. As a vendor I must be open a bit earlier. We’ll keep it short.”

We sat at a window booth overlooking Main Street. Displays were being readied and awnings adjusted. A trickle of early guests arrived, most joining us at the Sunflower.

David and I chatted about the vendors, the changing demographics of the tourists, and a few village-council issues. During a lull, I redirected the conversation to explain my reason for meeting.

“What’s your opinion about the rally at Ted’s property yesterday?”

He looked surprised. “My opinion? I obviously believe white supremacy is wrong.” Then he rested his elbow on the table with arm raised to support his chin on his fist. He exhibited a decidedly professorial look. “White supremacy has many tentacles, and a bunch of ways to rationalize it.”

“What do you mean?”

“First, there is the component of slavery, race, and the Civil War. A period existed in American history where Christian theologians justified slavery from a biblical point of view. A considerable number of people had the belief that God made inferior and superior races. Despite the Civil Rights Act in the 1960s, we continued to grapple with these issues. Carrying this further, many supremacists are against nonwhite immigration and multiculturalism. They lament the perceived erosion of political and economic power. And finally, there is the dogma of religious superiority. Plenty of Christians marginalize Jewish, Muslim, and other faiths. This became most apparent during the Holocaust. The Nazis accused Jews of causing Germany’s problems—social, economic, political, and cultural. They also blamed them

for Germany's defeat in the first World War. The Nazis regarded Germans as a superior Aryan race, while viewing Jews and Gypsies as inferior and dangerous."

David took a sip of his coffee. "Perhaps it's a misconception about whether the nation's founders supported religious freedom. The Puritans, for example, came here to establish a true religious country, free from heathen influences, but not autonomy in the sense that citizens could choose their beliefs without government interference. We pursued religious liberty and equality for centuries and made progress. We are now regressing on that progress."

I rubbed my coffee mug while I absorbed everything he said. I had heard David's stories about his relatives in the Holocaust a couple times in the past, and I knew his emotions ran deep. I wondered how deep. When I was sure he had completed his thoughts, I asked, "Do you think the coast is clear now that the rally is over?"

He averted my gaze and looked out the window. "The end of the rally doesn't stop the dogmas that caused it to happen." He reached into his pocket and removed an old armband emblazoned with the Star of David. "I found this on my car windshield yesterday morning. It's a type of strap that the Nazis used to identify Jews during World War II. I've read about them in the Holocaust Museum, but this is the first one I've physically held. It seems someone determined this was more intimidating than putting a flyer under my windshield wiper. Jews and any other non-Christians are at best second-class citizens in their view. I considered entrusting it with Penelope for our museum or another one she deems suitable."

I gasped. "Maybe you should give it to the sheriff. Do you believe it met the criteria for intimidation?"

David continued, without directly answering my question. "As long as there are threats, people will defend themselves against the threats."

Even though June Fest ended early afternoon on Sunday, some vendors and tourists planned to stay on an extra night or two to go hiking, biking, or horseback riding. This is the first year Town Council encouraged that behavior by having an end-of-festival parade, rather than a beginning ceremony as in years prior. It would allow vendors to deconstruct their booths while they enjoyed the music and encourage tourists to delay their departures.

I had assigned Sasha and Cathy to the winery to accommodate any last-minute wine sales before people left town. Mariama was off until Monday. My son and daughter, Josh and Tiffany, helped George and me dismantle the booth and box things up for their return to Bliss Creek. It felt a bit like taking down Christmas decorations after the holidays.

"Have any theories about Ted's next moves now that the rally is over?" I asked George.

His body stiffened. "No." The response was curt, even for my not-at-all-chatty vineyard manager. George lifted the heavy box I'd been juggling and placed it in his truck. "Ted is high-strung even without the stress of a rally. And he has a lot of enemies."

"Do you think the Nazi artifacts mean anything?"

“My guess is they’re random. Just a bunch of reminders about the purpose of the rally.”

“You don’t think they’re intended as intimidations? The pilot’s medal near Liam’s office, the Valknut pendant outside Luna’s café, the armband on David Sorenson’s vehicle? Even the coin by the vineyard could be a subtle threat.”

“Like I said, no idea.” He apparently didn’t want to discuss it.

We continued the deconstruction in uncomfortable silence. I kept glancing at George, trying to read his mood, but couldn’t. “It looks like June Fest was successful this year despite the...um... challenges. We’ll need to do some catch-up work at the winery when we get back.”

George cleared his throat. “Cathy and I are leaving for vacation tonight. Sorry we forgot to give you notice, but we’ll only be gone a week.”

“What?”

“Something personal came up—an emergency—and we’ll take off right after everything gets unloaded.” He avoided looking at me as he opened the driver’s door. “We will explain everything when we get back.” He climbed into the truck and sped away.

I stood there in disbelief, my mind unable to comprehend what had just happened. George had a reserved demeanor, but was never unpredictable. Over the years, he always gave me advance notice before he took vacation. He always planned how to handle the vineyard and tours in his absence. This was not typical George behavior. Something was wrong.

I shifted my mental gears as Luna pulled me toward the parade.

The local marching band lined up for the late afternoon pageantry. It was an opportunity for musically inclined residents to perform for their own enjoyment alongside student musicians. Woodwinds and brass comprised the first section. The middle featured high school students sprinkling in hip-hop and contemporary popular music. The percussion section brought up the rear and had a larger size than usual for a June Fest parade. Tambourines, cymbals, bass drum and gong sets, and an electronic keyboard amped up the music. Conversations stopped when it became impossible to hear anything but the music.

Yup, this year’s marching band was loud, drowning out all other sounds for 15 minutes. When I returned to the Bliss Creek booth, sounds were diminishing, except for one.

“Yoo-hoo, Alexi.” Dot Harrison sidled over to the wine tasting area. “Just wanted to check in on your progress for our joint holiday promotion.”

I couldn’t imagine what her contributions were to ‘our’ joint marketing effort, but now was not the time to bring it up. “It’s a work in progress, Dot.”

“Maybe ya could hire a band here at June Fest to play when we have the bonfire and wine tasting. I really want my new mead to start off with a bang.”

I felt my muscles tensing. *Her* new mead was a bribe of sorts on my part. I offered to make a mead with my honey that was presumably the result of my bees getting pollen from her wildflowers. I told her I would name the temporary Christmas offering after her if she accepted my bee hives. And if

she stopped her use of chemical pesticides. “Things are looking up. There was no mead contamination caused by the poisoned bees, so it looks like we’ll have sufficient inventory for the event.”

“That’s a relief. I’ve been telling everyone about the mead being named after me because of my eco-efforts.”

My eyebrows sprang up on my forehead against my will. I restrained myself from responding with a challenge to her comment. Dot, a plump middle-aged woman with too much make-up and clothes a size too small, had conveniently forgotten her efforts to ban my apiary. Yes, naming the mead after her was a camouflaged bribe, a peace offering to a neighboring business. After all, her customers, with their stellar reviews of her bed-and-breakfast, brought tourist dollars to the area. All business owners banded together for that purpose.

Dot either didn’t see my reaction or ignored it as she continued. “I understand Ted Arnold had a bit of a row with the owner of that new Mexican restaurant on Friday. Did ya hear about it?”

“I was there.” I began filling the last boxes to show Dot how busy I was.

“He’s always stirring the pot. Just before the parade started. I saw him arguing with your intern.”

That got my attention. Mariama was a postdoctoral scholar at UW-Madison. Originally from Africa, she had just become a naturalized citizen. She was a former intern and now an employee. “With Mariama? Where?”

“Of course, Mariama. I just told ya that. Anyway, he was yelling, and she was crying.”

“What was it about?”

“Well, ya know, I’m not an eavesdropper. And I had to really pay attention to understand her foreign accent. But I saw him grab her arm and say she shouldn’t tell anyone. Then the band started playing and I couldn’t hear any more.”

“Did you see anyone else?”

Dot pursed her lips. “As Mariama left, I saw George grab Ted by the shoulder. Couldn’t hear him, but I could tell he was angry. He stuck some small trinket into Ted’s hand. Don’t know what it was, since right then my friend, Sally, waved at me and I joined her for the parade.”

A scream pierced the air, causing all heads to turn toward the alley behind the Hotel Celestine. People began running in that direction. Someone yelled, “I think he’s dead.” Nika was kneeling next to the remains of a man by the time I reached the edge of the alley. Her deputy snapped pictures of the ground by the victim’s outstretched arm, then began herding people back to Main Street. I looked over his shoulder at the body.

It was Ted Arnold.