

Chapter Four: *RogueWave Rally*

RogueWave's white supremacy rally at Ted Arnold's property was an invitation-only event on Saturday, the second full day of June Fest. Felicity was hoping to use her press credentials to crash the party. I took Wolf and caught up with her there. My Belgian Malinois, though retired, still possessed the keen instinct of a police dog. He provided me with a certain sense of security.

I experienced guilt about leaving my family and staff to cover both the winery on Bliss Creek property and the booth in downtown Gaia. After all, this was the kick-off weekend of the season. But my intuition told me my presence would be more useful in supporting Felicity than managing retail wine sales.

We met up on the ridge outside the fence surrounding Ted's property. Felicity had tried to enter the compound, but the imposing gatekeepers blocked her path. No press wanted. Guards at the front gate checked invitations and accepted what appeared to be metal tokens or coins before allowing anyone to enter. Felicity estimated the crowd at about three hundred. The group comprised a broad mix of ages. Some appeared to be in their 20s, some middle-aged, and a few in their sixties, mostly men. All looked like a poster for military recruitment.

I sat on the ground next to Wolf, scratching his ears as I spoke to Felicity. "Looks like a bust. We'll never get in."

"I still have a few tricks up my sleeve. Let's sit over there." She pointed to a bench just beyond the rails-to-trails bike path. The land sloped downward, making a significant portion of Ted's property visible. Felicity snapped several photos using a telephoto lens on her camera. Then she pulled out a microphone from her daypack.

"What's that for?"

"It's a long-distance mic. It should amplify their loudspeakers so we can hear today's rally more clearly."

We didn't have long to wait. Ted Arnold grabbed a microphone to speak to the crowd. "Welcome to rural Wisconsin, home of people who love this country but are feeling increasingly disrespected by those in the crime-ridden big cities. We need to have local chapters of groups like this to stand up to federal overreach. Do you know what a rogue wave is? It's an enormous ocean wave that travels against prevailing seas. That's what this group represents. We can't accept tyrannical government if we want to receive our fair share of resources."

Applause and chants erupted as Ted handed the microphone to Larry Larson, the final volunteer at last night's psychic readings. "Welcome to the Aryan resistance. It's time for us to regain our rightful status, to embrace white pride and stand up for the well-being of white people."

It was hard to decipher what people said, but occasional phrases came through.

"...Under attack ... subverting the dominant culture."

"Create incidents to justify violence..."

"Leverage unrest."

“...replacement theory...”

“We’re the true race realists.”

“...poisoning the blood of our country.”

“We must maintain abundant access to fossil fuels.”

Cheers drowned out much of what he said the next several minutes. Fists pumped into the air. Some attendees raised their arms in a Sieg Heil salute. Others shaped their hands into an OK gesture, a symbol of white supremacy.

Larry continued over the shouts of agreement. “Just to be clear, we’re not racists. We are race realists. We are simply advocates trying to stop white dispossession.”

“Do you recognize anyone?” I asked.

Felicity didn’t answer right away. She was looking at some of the magnified photos. “Look at the tokens being collected. They look like the coin you found near the vineyard.”

“Could you send that to me?”

She nodded. “Check out this guy in the back, with his hat pulled down. Look familiar to you?”

“It’s hard to tell.” I shrugged. “Not much of his face is showing.”

“Look more closely.”

I took my time. Solid, well-developed physique. Erect posture. Square jaw. “Maybe it resembles Liam Briggs?”

“Exactly what I thought, too.”

A soft growl from Wolf alerted us we were no longer alone. Two sumo wrestler-types in Hawaiian shirts with expressionless faces approached us. They maintained a distance when they heard Wolf. Sweat dampened the back of my shirt and my skin was clammy. The air seemed to suddenly become still, lacking even a hint of a breeze in the trees.

“This is a private event,” one of them said. Spotting the microphone and camera, his eyes glittered between narrowed lids and his voice lowered to a threatening level. “You don’t have any permission to record our rally, so I suggest you move along. Now.”

Even though we didn’t see any guns, my mind heard the imaginary sound of a rifle being cocked. I expected Felicity to assert some arguments about public space. Instead, she pressed on my shoulder, urging me to leave, as she quickly gathered her equipment. I could have sworn her fingers were twitching.

Yup. We didn’t need to be asked twice to vamoose.

#####

I didn’t realize how scared I had been until I reached the security of downtown Gaia. It was still Saturday morning, but it seemed like a week had passed.

The scent of coffee and pastries from the Sunflower Café soothed me. My heart rate returned to normal, and I pressed on a smile before facing customers in the Bliss Creek booth. Wolf stretched out behind the counter, and I set down a bowl of water for him. I was relieved that Sasha and Cathy had everything under control.

Cathy, my wine-maker (a.k.a. George's wife), was explaining the wine-making process to a young-looking group of four. She punctuated her animated discussion by pushing her oversized vintage glasses higher on her pert freckled nose. I glanced toward the quartet and hoped someone had carded them. Of course, everyone looked young to me now. Sasha was checking out a case of wine for a middle-aged couple while simultaneously answering a myriad of customer questions.

To my chagrin, Dot Harrison popped in. "Alexi, have ya received our hives yet?" Dot owned the bed-and-breakfast on the farmette next to Bliss Creek Winery.

Our hives? I almost snorted at her recent positive obsession with my bees. She'd been on a mission for months trying to prevent me from having them at Bliss Creek. "Not yet. It should be the day after tomorrow. When the Fest is all wrapped up. Why?"

"I thought it would be good to take pictures of me directing the delivery. To show how active I am in getting the bees situated to make honey from my wildflowers. And I've been thinking about names for my mead. How about Heavenly Harrison? Or Dot's Divine Drink? Or..." She blushed. "Or Sex in Gaia."

Whoa. Where'd that come from? Busybody Booze or Diva Dottie struck me as more appropriate names. Of course, I kept that to myself. "Let's discuss it after things settle down. I'd like to give the branding my undivided attention."

"I understand. You have an obligation to eagle-eye George till after the rally group disperses."

"Wait. What?"

"I thought ya knew." She leaned toward me and whispered, "He used to be one of them."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Maybe George and Ted were buddy-buddy at some point. Anyway, I'll keep working on names for my mead. Tata." Dot wiggled her fingers and strode away.

Darn that Dot and her drive-by mouth-shooting. The sole good thing was a lull in customers, so only Sasha and Cathy observed the confrontation.

"Wanna tell me about it?" I asked Cathy, who clearly overheard the conversation about her husband.

There was a far-away look in her eyes as she gazed over my shoulder. Normally bubbly, speaking at the speed of light, Cathy seemed to slow down to weigh each word. "When George came home from Viet Nam, he couldn't cope with all the changes happening in society. He hooked up with a group known as the Aryan Avengers, or Arave. They promised to turn culture back to the good old days. It was a pretty radical bunch of guys. I told George that wasn't the type of guy I wanted to marry."

"So, he left the group?"

“Not immediately. When his dad died, George started reading his father’s journals from his service in World War II. His dad wrote about the scourge of eugenics and the Nazi push for racial purity. His words conveyed a sense of urgency in stopping Hitler and the Axis powers. George came to realize that the values both he and his father fought for were inconsistent with the values of the Aryan Avengers.”

“Wow. Sounds like your father-in-law was quite a philosopher and historian. Did you know him well?”

“Not really. I’d met him, but he died before we got married. He struck me as a good person who really cared about others.”

I felt a bit overwhelmed. “Was George ever buddy-buddy with Ted?” I recalled George’s descriptors of Ted. Odd duck. Science denier. White supremacist. Doomsday prepper. Didn’t seem buddy-buddy to me.

“No! Unlike George, who served in active duty, Ted never saw a day of combat. George viewed Ted’s white supremacy group as a menace to society, something to eradicate by any means necessary.” She clamped her mouth shut as if considering the impact of her words. “Please don’t interpret that as a threat. I mean, George is the epitome of kindness and wouldn’t harm a soul.”

I reached out and squeezed Cathy’s narrow shoulder, the tingle of the shivers in her petite frame rippling through my hand. “We all know and love George, and I believe he took his dad’s words to heart.”

I wanted to dive deeper into the topic, but our customer lull was over. Cathy and Sasha were again serving flights of wine, answering questions, and practicing subtle low-key sales.

Felicity entered the booth, and head nodded me to an outside bench. I followed her out, and Wolf traipsed behind me.

Felicity crisscrossed her arms and rubbed her biceps. She’d always looked younger than her age, except for now. “How’re you doing? Despite all the investigative undercover reporting I’ve done, the situation this morning spooked me. I was glad you brought Wolf.” She reached into her bag and offered him a treat. She’d never done that before.

Wolf looked up at me and I patted his back. “It’s okay, Big Guy. Go for it.”

After finishing the treat, Wolf sat by Felicity’s feet and placed his head on her lap. He’d never done that before, either.

I squeezed my eyes shut, wondering whether I’d entered an alternative universe.

Felicity’s next comment snapped me back to reality. “I was doing fine until the Bulwark Boys arrived.”

“Bulwark?”

“The guys in the Hawaiian shirts. Bulwarks are a fringe anti-government group often associated with white supremacists. I worried they were packing arms. They usually are.”

My throat felt tight as I forced myself to talk. “But we’re just a little town in Wisconsin. What’s going on?”

“I still haven’t been able to figure it out. Most of the vendors at the Fest have been here before. And the rally remained isolated and non-violent. Perfectly legal. The timing could be just a coincidence.”

“Or it’s being used to justify Ted’s ideologies and the disagreements he’s had with people who don’t share his beliefs.”

“True, Ted got into fights with many people. You saw his confrontation with Franco Espinoza yesterday morning. And Franco’s not the only person in Gaia who had run-ins with Ted. Heck, he clashed with Zach over some property issues, escalating his complaints when Zach ran for Congress.” She grimaced. “Sorry to throw suspicion at the guy you’re dating.”

I didn’t remind Felicity of her own fling with Zach a year or two earlier.

Felicity’s phone buzzed, and she looked at the caller ID. “Excuse me. I have to take this.” She answered her phone and scurried away.

As she departed, I mulled over her judgment of Ted’s haters, especially her specific mention of Zach Taylor. I also wondered about George’s angst toward white supremacists; Mariama’s conflicted reunion with a long-lost father; David Sorenson’s ancestral Holocaust anger toward Nazis; and Penelope Carter’s frequent abrasive encounters with Ted. Where would violence strike first?