



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# *The Enigma Machine and the Code Talkers*

**A**fter Nika left, I replayed our conversation in my mind. Everything she said clarified that my vineyard manager was on his way to becoming a person of interest in the FBI's murder investigation.

Person of interest. While not a suspect per se, to be a person of interest came darn close.

Were there any clues I was missing from the Nazi relics? Do they have anything to do with Ted's death, or are they simply symptoms of bullying and intimidation?

Wolf barked as the doorbell rang. I opened the door to greet Penelope Carter. I invited her onto the screen porch, where she claimed the chair just vacated by Nika.

"Alexi, I understand through the grapevine that you have become the keeper of the Nazi relics," she said. "I have another for you to add to your stockpile." She handed me a disk with cryptic markings I couldn't identify. It was about four inches in diameter, with dents attesting to decades of aging.

"What's this?" I asked.

"It took me a bit of research, but I believe it's an Enigma machine rotor."

"Okay...what's an Enigma machine? And what's a rotor?"

Penelope showed me a picture on her phone. "Here's a picture of the machine."

"It looks like an old-fashioned typewriter of sorts."

She nodded. "An Enigma machine was a cipher device used by the Germans for encryption and decryption during World War II. All branches of the German military used it. The rotors were key components that made it work."

She scrolled through more pictures before turning her phone back toward me. "And this is what the original rotors looked like inside the machine." She pointed to the chunky cylinder I was holding. "Although it's worn, you can still see the letters along the curved surface. When the rotors were side-by-side, they performed a simple substitution encryption. The gear-like teeth along the edge enabled the discs to connect with each other, so that each letter converted into something different. I found that near an exhibit honoring local Native Americans serving in that conflict."

"Is that significant?"

Penelope picked up a piece of Southwestern pottery from my end table, examining it as she talked. "Did you ever see the movie *Windtalkers*?"

I shook my head.

"It was based on the true story of Navajo code talkers during World War II." She situated the pottery back down and turned to face me. "In it, two Navajo marines used their native language to transmit coded messages that the Japanese couldn't decipher. While most of the portrayal was on Navajo contributions in Japan, many tribes served in the North African, European and Pacific Theaters. Thousands of Ojibwe members were code talkers, including one of Sasha's ancestors."

"Now I'm even more confused. Start at the beginning."

Penelope retrieved the spiral disk from me and swirled it in her hands. "When I was getting the museum ready for visitors this morning, I noticed the door was open a crack. It didn't look like a break-in, so I assumed I had simply been careless last night. The museum is closed on Sundays unless we have an event in town. I assumed I messed up because the schedule was different. Anyway, some displays near the storeroom where we keep emergency supplies looked cockeyed and when I straightened them, I noticed the rotor on the floor. It took me a while to figure out what it was."

"Why didn't you call the sheriff?"

Several seconds passed before Penelope responded. "Ted had threatened the museum in the past, and I was sure he had been the person responsible for this, um, this act of intimidation. I may have called him and left a rather nasty voicemail message on his phone." She escalated the rotation of the disk. "I was afraid to draw attention to the museum and to me by contacting Nika."

"Why?"

"Because of what happened to Ted! You don't believe it was a heart attack, do you?"

"Are you saying you threatened him on the phone?"

"Not in so many words, but some could interpret it that way. I told him that if he thought the Enigma rotor was proof of Nazi intelligence and superiority, he was mistaken. I said he was just trying to taunt me and would someday get what was coming to him."

"Then why are you giving this to me? If Nika believes these items are part of the investigation, I have to give them to her."

"I don't really know." Penelope stood up and looked out onto the vineyard. "I felt guilty doing nothing. Maybe it's a stall technique on my part. Maybe the relics have nothing to do with Ted's death, and this would highlight the angst between Ted and me for no reason."

"Go back to your comment about the Enigma machine and Sasha's ancestral code-talkers. How are they related?"

"Years ago, I studied World War II military intelligence as part of my master's thesis. The concept of using indigenous languages to encrypt communications fascinated me. President Reagan declared August 14 *Navajo*

*Code Talkers Day* in 1982. Clinton awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the original 29 Code Talkers in 2000. Then the second Bush presented medals to Code Talkers in 2001. The military used them in both the Pacific and European theaters to transmit military information in their native languages, which the enemies couldn't understand."

"I don't see the connection to the Enigma machines."

"It's not a direct connection, it's more of an analogy. The Code Talkers transmitted secure communications within the Allied military, primarily in the Pacific Theater. The Enigma machine was a German encryption device used to code and decode strategic messages. The British worked to decode the messages at Bletchley Park. While the two operations served different functions, the connection is cryptography."

"Penny, I guess I understand what you're saying, but I'm struggling to see how it pertains to what happened today."

"I need to share one more piece of more recent history. When I learned the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the patent for the Enigma machine was 2018, it gave me a push to understand both types of encryptions. I discovered Sasha had an ancestor who was a Code Talker, spurring me to create an exhibit about it."

"But I still don't see how Ted fits in."

"Ted always wanted to rewrite history. He denied the existence of the Holocaust and tried to quash any mention of it in the museum. He wanted me to feature the Enigma machine as an example of Nazi ingenuity and avoid any mention of Native American Code Talkers. He accused me—and the museum board—of one-sided propaganda. Remember that retired farmer in southeastern Wisconsin who built a shrine to Adolf Hitler a couple of decades ago? Ted wanted me to add some of his ideas to our museum here."

"I'm guessing the two of you didn't see eye-to-eye on that."

"That's a mild statement. I can't fathom his ideology, but I'm even more concerned about RogueWave. I recently saw a PBS documentary called *Nazi Town USA*. The basic premise was that Nazi sympathizers found a foothold on American soil after the Great Depression."

"Was that the German American Bund? I remember reading about their Camp Hindenburg near Milwaukee, in Grafton, I believe."

"That's right. There were kids' summer camps centered on Nazi ideology, and they pushed to return the United States into a racially pure country with one dominant religion. That movement never completely evaporated, and the parallels between past and present scare me."

We both momentarily surrendered the conversation to the nocturnal ambience outside the screen porch. The rhythmic chorus of crickets created a soothing, steady backdrop to the fluttering of moths against the screen and the quick rustle of small animals in the underbrush. A gentle breeze carried with it the faint scent of pine, grapes, and fresh earth. I waited for Penelope to continue.

"Did you know that Henry Ford published a weekly newspaper in the early 1900s that was a mass-production antisemitic propaganda engine? And were you aware that Charles Lindbergh actively campaigned for protecting the white race, and he received a medal from the commander of the German Luftwaffe on behalf of Adolf Hitler?"

Many well-known Americans at the time expressed admiration for Nazi dogma." Penny's voice rose an octave higher. Her posture became more rigid and her jaw muscles clenched. "Yes, that was a century ago, but the persistent threat of authoritarianism remains. We cannot overstate the dangers of demagogic leaders and their enablers. Ted wanted to create what he called a unified reich and—"

"Penny," I interrupted, slowly depressing my palms in a calm-down motion. "I understand you are worried and scared about the future, especially with the presence of RogueWave in Gaia. But it's important we don't let the fear of the unknown overshadow the present. Did Ted ever threaten you?"

"He threatened to burn my place down several times. Somehow, I never took him literally. I assumed he was venting his anger, insinuating he wanted to 'burn' the reputation of the of the museum." Her fingers signaled air quotes around the second use of the word burn. "Although Ted's threats irritated and fatigued me, I had nothing to do with Ted's death. Thanks for being a sounding board. I realize now I should have just given this to Nika, consequences be damned."

I reached out and squeezed her hand. "I can't predict what will happen to my stash of Nazi items. I will add this Enigma rotor, but anything else is beyond my control."

Penelope was fighting back tears as she jerked a quick nod. "I understand." She abruptly pushed up from the chair. "Thanks again for hearing me out. I feel better after talking with you." Then she paused. "One more thing crossed my mind. I was at Luna's psychic readings Friday night when the nasty guy volunteered to have his fortune read. He said something about deciphering a cryptic code. What if that group was telegraphing ideas, threats, and coded warnings through Nazi relics?"

"Are you suggesting RogueWave was sending specific messages to specific individuals?"

"Oh, I don't know. It sounds far-fetched, but Ted had played mind games with me in the past."

We walked to the front door, and I watched as she backed out of the driveway, past the winery, and onto the highway. After closing the door, I turned to Wolf.

"That was bizarre. I can't imagine Penny doing anything to hurt Ted, but I also never imagined she'd drop in to hand me a Nazi relic."

I retreated to the kitchen and grabbed a notepad to capture my thoughts. I scratched my dog under his chin. "Should I start with the fire on Friday?" Wolf cocked his head. I took that as a sign of assent. I began writing.

- *Illegal bonfire along trail. Third Reich coin in the embers. Coincidence? I don't think so.*
- *Fight between Franco and Ted. How much did Ted provoke Franco? Was there a Nazi item anywhere around?*
- *Why did George leave on vacation so suddenly?*
- *Were David Sorenson or Penelope Carter more hostile than aloof observers? Any significance of the armband and Enigma rotor?*
- *What motivated Penelope to stop by my house on a Sunday night? Did she know Nika had just left?*

- *Why was Liam at the rally? Is the pilot's medal symbolic?*
- *What made Luna drop the Valknut medallion as if it burned her hand?*
- *How conflicted was Mariama after discovering her father was a white supremacist?*
- *Big question: How did Ted die??? Official stance or not, it wasn't suicide. Who would scribble 'can't fix stupid' next to a dead body? Could Ted have done it himself? If so, why?*

Wolf ran to the door just before I heard a car pull into the driveway. Josh and Tiffany were home. I folded my notes around the rotor and shoved everything in my pocket.