

Chapter Six: *Diagnosis Foreboding*

The tenor of the Fest transformed with the emergency vehicles, flashing lights, and crime scene tape just blocks from Main Street. I closed my eyes to visualize the scene in the alley. There was no blood, unlike the crime scene photos of my late husband, a police detective fatally shot in a drug bust. It was too early to confirm whether Ted had a heart attack or if something more sinister had happened.

Despite her best attempt to act nonchalant, Tiffany's exaggerated gestures betrayed her true feelings. She was 16 years old when her dad—my late husband, Matt—died, and I didn't want to dwell on Ted's death in front of her.

"Tiff, why don't you and Josh help at the winery? We're almost done here, and I can handle the last details. Take Wolf for a walk. He's probably annoyed with us for leaving him behind." Wolf had been Matt's canine partner. The dog survived the drug raid, even though my husband didn't.

Tiffany glanced toward the crime scene, a distracted look in her eyes. Without responding, she gave a jerky nod and whacked her older brother's arm. Nika's arrival delayed their exit. She had already blocked the perimeter of the town to prevent people from leaving before she interviewed them.

"Sorry, I have to do this," she said. "We need to talk with everyone in case they might have seen something."

"Was it homicide?" I asked.

The sheriff rolled her lips inward. "Nothing definitive at this point. It may have been a heart attack, but we are exploring all angles. That's standard procedure, as you learned in the police academy. Any death that occurs without a witness requires scrutiny."

I've known Nika most of my life. Her inward lip roll told me she knew more than she was divulging. "Do you suspect it may have been more than a heart attack because of what J.P. photographed?" J.P. referred to Nika's deputy, J.P. LaPine.

Nika rolled her lips in again before she said, "Alex." Her tone of voice was clear. She couldn't say anything more in public about the case and I should butt out. Then she rubbed her forehead between her eyebrows, projecting her voice downward in a hushed tone. "Call me later."

Since a large crowd had witnessed the confrontation between Ted and Franco on Friday, she skimmed over that period. After all, she was present for that. She wanted to learn anything about what had occurred later. "Did you see anything suspicious, or notice anyone talking with Mr. Arnold?"

I squirmed in my seat. I didn't want to implicate anyone, but I wanted to come clean. "Several people received apparent racist or neo-Nazi threats."

"Such as?"

"Well, I already told you about the coin near the vineyard, the military medal from Liam Briggs, and the pendant from Luna's Sunflower Café. This morning, David Sorenson found a WWII armband on his car's windshield."

"I heard about the armband. David gave it to me and we discussed it. Do you still have the other items?"

"They're in the office at the winery."

"Good. Keep them for now. I still don't know if they mean anything, but the Feds may ask for them later. Dot told me she saw Mariama and George talking with Ted just prior to the parade. Are they around?"

"Mariama didn't have a shift today, and George left on vacation." I rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands. "My guess is that other people received subtle threats from RogueWave this weekend and recognized Ted as the figurehead behind the rally," I said. "Just in case it's not a heart attack, keep that in mind you need to search for motives."

Nika tapped her pen against her notebook. "I'll add some notes on that. Even if what you're suggesting is accurate, it would be difficult to connect receiving a Nazi relic to harming Ted. Anything else?" She waited for a few moments. When there was no further response, she continued. "That's all for now." Her eyes were soft as she looked at Tiffany and Josh, her pseudo niece and nephew. "I'll walk to the car with you."

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I was restless as I moved around the house Sunday night. My son and daughter had gone out for pizza with friends and I was alone with my thoughts. Was Ted's death from natural causes, or from something nefarious?

When I reached the edge of my patience, I called the individual who was my long-time friend, my college roommate, and my maid of honor a.k.a., Sheriff Nika Marx.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"I was being considerate. I wanted to give you enough time to process the scene. And I'm guessing what you're about to tell me is not ready for public consumption."

"That's why I won't tell you anything in public. I'm at your front door. Wolf would let me in if he had a thumb."

"Be right there." I ended the call, opened the door, and led Nika to the screen porch. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

She shook her head as she sat on a lounge chair. "Alexi, when we were both at UW-Eau Claire studying criminal justice, it seemed like such a noble thing to do. Right and wrong were so clear-cut. But then I returned to Gaia and became a small-town sheriff. Everybody is familiar to everybody and sometimes it's hard to be objective."

"Okay..."

"On the surface, it appears Ted had a heart attack. There's no sign of a struggle, no weapon, no obvious evidence of anything suspicious. Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Near his left hand, there was a message, '*can't fix stupid*,' scrawled in the dirt."

"Huh?" Not my brightest response to Nika's statement. Then my heart skipped a beat. In this small town where everybody is familiar to everybody, they connect the phrase with my vineyard manager. "You can't be implying George did something to Ted!" I nearly shouted before I brought my voice back down to a normal level. "Any way to identify the handwriting?"

"It was a scribble, almost illegible. But the mere existence of the note suggests this is likely more than a heart attack. A message stating *can't fix stupid* was next to the dead body of a man who had altercations with several people, including George."

"George didn't invent that phrase. It's old, it proves nothing. It doesn't mean George is guilty of murder, for cripes' sake."

"I agree, but the optics are bad."

"The optics are bad?" I walloped my chair with the side of my fist. "That sounds like political-speak. Aren't facts more important?" I picked up a sofa pillow, debating whether to throw it across the porch or slam it to the floor. My better angel convinced me to place it down gently. Then I paced. Nika and Wolf watched me go back-and-forth, back-and-forth.

When I stopped, Nika spoke in a soft, temperate voice. "Everything is political these days. But that wasn't my point. If the FBI investigates this carefully, they will be eager to guild a case as quickly as possible. George has a trove of Nazi relics from his father. The message was George's motto. He's shared his disdain for Ted frequently. He has no alibi, and he's now gone missing."

I had to admit that was some serious circumstantial evidence. "But there's still no proof it was murder, right?"

"Alex, I'm rooting for George as much as you are. But we need to talk to him. This would have appeared a heart attack if it hadn't been for the message."

"What if Ted wrote the message as a suicide note? He might have felt remorseful for his actions and considered them stupid. Maybe he felt he couldn't fix the stupid things he had said and done in the past and that suicide was the only way out."

"I thought about that, too, but it's a stretch. Even if that were the case, we'd need to know how he took his life. Do you really believe he could have felt that much regret?"

"I admit it's hard to believe, given he promoted and spurred the RogueWave rally. But it's not impossible. I might as well tell you Felicity and I went to the rally, or tried to." The mere thought of the rally caused my hands to tighten around my sports water bottle.

"You. Did. What?"

"Felicity thought she could use her press pass to gain some insights about the group, but we couldn't get onto Ted's property."

"It was a private event on private property. Why did she think that would work?"

I shrugged, feeling embarrassment color my face. "RogueWave was trying to foment outrage with the Nazi coin, Valknut medallion, the pilot's medal, and especially the Jewish armband. We thought we could find out something at the rally."

Nika puffed an audible sigh through chipmunk cheeks. "Did you learn anything?"

"We couldn't hear much, but the tone was decidedly violent. Mostly men and very militaristic. The group considers the Aryan race to be superior, with other ethnicities 'poisoning' our society. Ted spoke first, and I couldn't judge whether he showed the type of remorse that might precede suicide. "

"Did you recognize any locals?"

"Felicity took some pictures. They were rather blurry, but one attendee may have been Liam Briggs. Then the Bulwark Boys politely asked us to leave." I rolled my eyes for effect. "What now?"

"I still need to speak with George, but I wanted to notify you first. As a friend. Where did he go on vacation?"

"He didn't tell me. He just said an emergency came up and they would be gone for about a week."

There was a pregnant pause so long it could have given birth before Nika spoke again. "The FBI came to town last week because of posted threats related to the RogueWave rally. I suspect it won't be long before they take over the investigation of Ted's death. Facts are facts, and they will be in a hurry to wrap things up. The scribbled missive is a serious dose of circumstantial evidence against George, and they will seek corroborating evidence to validate it."

"Isn't that confirmation bias?" Surprising how the term popped into my head, a long-lost memory from my college classes.

"Yup. That was the term you got wrong on the quiz way back when in college, wasn't it?"

"Don't rub it in. I remember it fully now. Confirmation bias is the tendency to process information in a way that supports one's preexisting convictions."

"You get an 'A' for that, Alex. And you're right; I'm worried that could happen here. George is a former supremacist who has been an outspoken critic of Ted; he owns a host of Nazi items his father brought back from World War II; and he uncharacteristically left Gaia right after Ted's demise. We can be certain that '*can't fix stupid*' will play prominently in the investigation. And unfortunately, that provides too many strikes against George. I really need to talk to him."

"Nika, do you trust—in your soul—George is capable of harming Ted? Or are you hoping to gather input to circumvent potential FBI confirmation bias?"

Nika looked at the floor, avoiding my question. "Be patient. I can't give you any more details. I've already told you more than I should have. You know the boundaries of doing my job." Then she raised her eyes toward me. "Do you have any idea, any idea at all, about where George might be?"

I swiveled my chair to face the screen porch wall with my back toward Nika. Wolf lay down with his paw on my foot, seeming to sense the tension. My brain knew Nika was doing what she had to do. But my heart resented her suspicion of someone who had been a friend to both of us. "He went on vacation and that's everything I know."

"Alex, are you sure? The sooner I speak with him, the sooner this whole thing can get resolved."

I swung my chair back toward Nika. "I'm telling you the truth. George didn't say where he was going and he's not answering his cell."

Nika drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair. "It's imperative I talk with him ASAP."

I took a sip from the water bottle I had forgotten I was holding. "I can make a few calls to find out if anyone knows where he is. I'll see if Josh knows anything."

I called my son. He'd worked closely with George over the years and they developed a special bond. "Josh, any clue on the whereabouts of George and Cathy this week?"

"No, his vacation departure surprised me as much as it did you. George usually gives me a serious to-do list when he goes on vacation. Especially when there are winery tours on the schedule."

"Think. It's important. Is there any place he and Cathy might use as a sanctuary?" I cringed that the word sanctuary came out, but there was no taking it back.

"Maybe Boundary Waters? They like to go off grid into the wilderness from time to time when things get stressful."

"Did George say anything about having a permit to enter there this week?"

"Not to me. But it's possible they went into the backcountry campsites that don't require a permit. Why? What's going on?"

I pondered how to tell him about my conversation with Nika, while maintaining confidentiality for information that was not yet public. "Nika is here with me now. Since she investigates any death where an individual was alone, such as the case with Ted, she's talking to all people who may have had a connection with him. George is one of those people. Nika needs to speak with him as soon as possible."

"What can I do?"

"Can you try to locate him? Contact anyone who might have some knowledge of his whereabouts."

"Will do."

Once we ended the conversation, I turned to Nika. "How sure are you that the feds will take over?"

"My guess is 90%, maybe 95%. I'm not privy to the detailed threats they are here to investigate, but the associations between Ted's death, the RogueWave rally, George's past involvement with white supremacists, and the message by Ted's body suggest links that are too significant to ignore." Nika rubbed her hands on her thighs. "I will take that drink now."

"What can I get you?"

"I doubt you have beer, so how about some of that holiday mead Dot Harrison is working on with your help?" A wink and a grin brought levity to her statement.

I gave a melodramatic head shake. Nika had been a sounding board for some of the angst I experienced when Dot tried to get rid of my beehives. And she was cognizant of the fact that Dot had yet to do anything for our supposedly joint promotion. "You're lucky I don't punch you for that."

"Assaulting a law enforcement officer would not be a good image for your business."

She was correct, but connecting the death of a white supremacist to Bliss Creek was also not good for business.