



CHAPTER NINE

Tallying the Suspects

Upon completion of clean-up duties after Monday's last customer had left, I flipped the front sign closed. As usual, Tiffany and Josh had plans to hang out with friends—even including Wolf. I shooed them on their way, leaving the door unlocked for Luna. Only Sasha and I remained in the shop.

"Got any plans?" I asked Sasha.

She shook her head. "Why?"

"I was hoping you, Luna, and I could play Nancy Drew. I already texted Luna. She's coming as soon as she finishes a psychic reading for a client."

Sasha curved her left arm over her head and leaned toward the right. She repeated the side stretch in the opposite direction. "That sounds more fun than going home to the frozen pizza I had planned. Is this about Ted?"

Before I could answer, a clatter in the office drew our attention. Sasha and I froze as we listened. The recent events murder in Gaia had everyone on edge. With my finger on my lips, I tiptoed toward the fireplace display. I grabbed a tool and crept into the hallway, progressing toward the room that should have been empty. My palms were sweaty. The office floor squeaked as if under the weight of footsteps, but the sound wasn't as loud as my heart pounding. I inched closer. A rustle of shuffling paper and a soft thud floated into the hallway. As footsteps approached, I raised the poker over my head at the office door and yelled, "Who's in there?"

Luna walked out, instinctively raising her hands when she saw my weapon. Good thing her reflexes were better than mine. "Alex! What are you doing?"

"Sorry." I lowered my arm. "I wasn't expecting you to come through the back."

"The door was open—which, I want to emphasize, is prudent to lock when the store is closed."

"Why were you in my office?"

"I returned the book you lent me. You scared the bejabbers out of me. What's up with that?"

"I guess I'm jumpy. RogueWave and their Nazi relics. And in case you haven't heard, Ted's death may have been a murder. I left the front door open for you. Besides, you're supposed to be the psychic," I teased.

I turned the deadbolt on the back door and led the way to the tasting room. Sasha and Luna plopped down on stools at the front of the bar while I went behind to pour a drink for each of us. "I might as well take advantage of two taste testers. Before I lost the beehives, I had enough honey for this Boozybody mead."

"Boozybody. Are you referring to the mead for the Christmas campaign or to Dot personally?" Sasha asked.

"A bit of both. While Dot may be a terrific bed-and-breakfast owner, she is certainly a prodigious gossip. Anyway, this is the only mead batch I could make in sufficient quantity with that honey to use for the co-promotion with Dot. Think the brand name needs an upgrade? Boozybody might not portray the right image." I grinned as I poured three glasses.

Luna took a sip. "Perfect. Not too sweet. Has a bit of a floral scent."

Sasha set her glass down, without sipping, without talking.

"Sasha?" I probed.

"Sorry, it's just that I'm struggling to make sense of what's going on. Tasting Dot's mead reminded me of her comment, the one when she said Ted might have multiple wills. If that's the case, money could be a big motive for violence."

"Let's table that for a moment." Luna stepped over to the portable whiteboard on which we list our specials. She erased the menu items and poised a marker over the blank space. "Seems we recently used this to investigate another incident at Bliss Creek. Where should we start this time?"

I lifted my glass and swirled the mead absentmindedly. "Nika thinks the Feds will have their sights on George. She said George was soon to be a person of interest, so it's personal to me. I don't want anyone to accuse falsely George of anything."

"Why would George become a person of interest?" Luna asked. "I thought there was no official cause of death, and that it may have been a heart attack."

"They apparently have more evidence than they can make public," I hedged, knowing that Nika had shared details in confidence. I suspected both Luna and Sasha knew I was withholding something, but were savvy enough to let it ride.

"Okay then, let's start with George." Luna recorded his name on the whiteboard. "What was his relationship with Ted?"

"According to Cathy, George became a white supremacist after returning from Viet Nam." Sasha said. Her squint was a sure sign she was in deep contemplation. "I still can't see it. True, that was before I started working here, but George never showed hostility toward me as a Native American."

Luna jotted down '*former white supremacist*.' "That's news to me. Did George know Ted back then? They seem to be about the same age."

"Cathy didn't mention it." I rubbed my eyes as I contemplated the question. "She just said George had become increasingly distraught by Ted's support of white nationalism, especially after finding his dad's journal from World War II."

"What was in the journal?" Luna asked me.

"As I understand it, George's dad wrote about Hitler's efforts to eliminate so-called inferiors. Something about it triggered George to rethink his own beliefs about race and respect for others."

Sasha stood with her arms crossed, palms on her biceps. It was a trademark pose she subconsciously took before reciting a Native American proverb. "One of the ten Native American commandments I learned as a kid *is to show great respect for your fellow beings*. The George I knew respected others. He wouldn't hurt anyone, including Ted."

"Why do you think George left so abruptly last night?" I asked. "That is so out of character for him. Now I'm not suggesting he'd hurt Ted. I agree with what you said, Sasha. But maybe something scared him."

"Or someone," Sasha added.

"But why wouldn't George just go to Nika if he felt threatened? He must realize skipping out like this raises suspicions. Could he be trying to shift blame away from Mariama?" I topped off the glasses, even though none of us had taken more than a sip.

Luna rolled the marker between her palms. "Why would Mariama be suspect?"

"Perhaps because of Ted's denial about being her father." I repeated what Mariama had shared about the will and beneficiary, and about Mariama's confession that she had shoved Ted near the alley. "And now we haven't been able to reach her, either."

Sasha bounced her index finger on her lips, seemingly deep in thought. "As Mariama was leaving earlier today, I saw her stop and talk with Liam. A young woman was with them, but her back was to me and I couldn't see her face."

"You don't have any idea who she was?" I asked.

Sasha shook her head.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"I didn't think it was important, and I didn't give it much attention. I assumed they were all just being polite, although..." She stopped and gazed out the window. "Although the woman gave her a note, or perhaps a business card. I got the sense both Liam and the woman were trying to convince Mariama about something. The conversation appeared intense, with Mariam hugging herself and the woman patting her shoulder. I could be wrong. They all might have been interested in the progress of the solar installation, but the more I think about it, the more I realize I should have paid more attention."

Luna, Sasha, and I all sipped our honey wine. It seemed almost choreographed, right down to the synchronous clink of glasses returning to the countertop. Then we fell silent for several seconds.

Sasha spoke first. "Do you think it's coincidence both George and Mariama are out of reach at the same time?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Could George have felt Ted, and the RogueWave, were a threat to Mariama? What if he met her today? Maybe she isn't sick."

Luna snapped her fingers in front of us. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Let's stick to facts." Luna, the psychic, was the soul of logic. She remained focused on finding concrete evidence, refusing to be distracted. "Who else didn't get along with Ted?"

I placed my glass in the sink by the dishwasher. My two friends nudged their empty glasses in my direction and I deposited them near mine. "Ted's confrontation with Franco Espinoza had a major audience. Ted threatened to turn him over to ICE. But Franco's a citizen, and it shouldn't have been an issue."

Luna added Franco Espinoza to the list. "And didn't you tell me David Sorenson made a not-so-subtle threat?"

I nodded. "I heard him say something like the guy ought to be shot. I guess Ted threatened him over some bank loan denials. And yesterday he told me there was an armband on his car's windshield like the ones Nazis forced the Jews to wear."

"That sounds intimidating." Luna tapped the marker against her lip before appending David as a suspect. "Regarding the bank loan denials, do you know what Ted wanted the money for?"

"No idea," I said. "Wait. I believe George mentioned Ted wanted to reopen his gun shop where Franco Espinoza's restaurant is now. Or at least in that general area."

"Who else?" Luna asked.

"I almost hate to mention Penelope Carter, but she has also had run-ins with Ted." I summarized the conversation we'd had the prior day. "And Liam found that Nazi pin by his office."

Luna added Penelope Carter and Liam Briggs to the growing list. "We're not being very selective, are we? It would almost be easier listing who it was NOT a suspect. And we don't even have a definitive cause of death, yet."

Sasha turned toward me. "I realize Nika has to keep some things close to the vest, but are you sure George would be a suspect if authorities assert Ted's death as a homicide?"

I nodded and pursed my lips. "The question is, who is the most likely suspect beyond a reasonable doubt?"

"We can't overlook the RogueWave rally goers," Sasha added.

Luna closed her eyes. Taking a slow breath, she placed her forehead on the bar, using her hands as a pillow.

Sasha and I exchanged nervous glances. "Luna, are you okay?" we asked simultaneously.

She raised her head as slowly as she had lowered it, but with eyes wide open. "I was just trying to remember, to recreate the feeling I had when that Larry guy joined me on stage for the psychic reading."

Sasha and I waited.

"He was angry," Luna continued. "I could feel it. Strong, negative emotions."

"I'm all for adding him to the list," I said. "And speaking of Larry Lucifer—oops, I mean Larson—it reminded me of something Liam Briggs said when he was here checking the solar panels. He told me Ted had corrupted Larry. He didn't use the word radicalized, but there was something about his body language that made me uncomfortable."

A faint rattle captured our attention. "What was that?" Sasha whispered.

"It sounded like someone trying to get into the back door." I retrieved my fireplace poker and slunk down the hallway with my back against the wall. Luna and Sasha followed. I paused, causing Luna to bump into me, and Sasha into her. I gestured for both to take a step back. "This isn't the Three Stooges," I muttered. Inch by inch, step by step, I surveyed the area, trying to spot any changes from an hour earlier when Luna had arrived. The office door

was still open, as was the restroom door. The closet-sized breakroom was dark and silent. Everything was deadly quiet.

There was just one more corner before the back door was in sight. I swallowed a big inhale and took a step away from the wall. I heaved a sigh of relief to see the deadbolt still firmly in place. I flipped on the floodlight in the back and cautiously opened the door. No one was there, except an owl asking, "Who? Who?"