



CHAPTER TEN

The Feds Take Over

I leaned the fireplace poker against the wall and stepped out to scan the horizon. The long shadows of dusk created caricatures of eerie figures. A rustling in the bushes sent chills down my spine. Memories of my husband flashed through my mind. Without conscious thought, I whispered, "Matt?"

Luna squeezed my shoulder. "Feeling his presence again?" She knew I had felt his presence during a prior threatening experience at Bliss Creek.

I peeled my eyes open. "No, just memories this time. Guess we should go back inside." As we moved toward the wine counter, the entry door chimed. "Dang. I didn't lock the front door."

The three of us looked at each other in confusion before returning inside. Sasha turned the deadbolt on the rear door. Luna picked up the poker.

I took a step toward the front. "Hello? We're closed for the day." My voice came out in a cracked whisper.

No response. I took another step. "Hello? Who's there?"

Footsteps sounded from the tasting room. Then a recognizable voice. "Alexi? Sasha?" Nika's words were loud and clear. "Why is your door unlocked when the sign says closed? You had me worried."

Tension evaporated from my shoulders. It was reassuring to have a sheriff as one of your best friends. Sasha and Luna followed my steps into the retail area. "I left it open for Luna and forgot to lock it. What's up?"

"I'm off the case."

"The feds took over? Since you were here just a few hours ago?"

Nika snorted. "I'm off the case. RogueWave is a threat beyond Gaia. Or so I'm told." She rolled her shoulders, a move I'd seen her use before to de-escalate her own emotions. "Guy named Gavin Thielker is the FBI agent in charge."

"Gavin Thielker," I murmured.

"Heard of him?" Nika asked.

"Sounds familiar, but I can't place it. Maybe Matt mentioned him."

"Well, he's on his way over to collect the trove of Nazi relics." She motioned to the whiteboard. "Better erase that. Thielker won't condone civvies messing in his investigation."

Luna erased her notes before turning toward Nika. "What's the status?"

"It's an active investigation."

"Come on, Nika. This is Gaia. I run a café. Alex and Sasha operate a winery. We have a right to know what's happening in our own community."

Nika straightened her duty belt and slid onto a stool. "Hmph. I guess Felicity has already cornered Thielker, so it'll be on the Gaia Gazette's website soon." Her face looked drawn, making her look ten years older than her age of 48. She likely hadn't slept since discovering Ted's body and interacting with the FBI. "We're waiting for autopsy results. We believe he wasn't alone when he died, but we didn't find any evidence of a struggle. Or even reports of noise from the area."

"What makes you think he wasn't alone?" Sasha asked.

Nika glanced at the mead glasses, momentarily avoiding the question. "Could I buy one of those?"

I poured her a glass. "It's on the house if you take part in a taste test and give me your opinion."

Sasha cleared her throat. "Well, Nika? You didn't answer my question."

"There was something in the dirt by the body."

"What was it?" Sasha asked.

"Can't tell you at this point."

An uncomfortable silence followed before Luna asked, "No one heard anything?"

"No, we figure it happened during the percussion section of the parade." Nika stifled a yawn. "Thielker's theory is that someone may have confronted Ted because they didn't like his rally. That they didn't accept it was his first amendment right to hold the rally."

"You're saying he thinks the culprit was someone against white supremacy?" Sasha asked.

"That's most of the people on the list." Luna gestured at the now-erased whiteboard. "But couldn't there just as easily have been in-fighting within RogueWave?" She tapped the eraser on her chin. "If there was no struggle, couldn't it have been a natural heart attack? Or are you thinking the autopsy might reveal poisoning or some other contributor to Ted's death?"

"We suspect someone was with him near the time of his death. That's all I can say now."

I kept rolling the agent's name through my head, trying to figure out why it sounded familiar. "How did Thielker get involved, anyway?"

Nika massaged her forehead. "Apparently Senator Don Jackson pushed for it."

"The guy Zach is running against?" I asked. "You think it's a political grab for headlines?"

"That would be my read. The FBI had prior knowledge of the white supremacy rally and had come across alarming threats of violence before Ted's death. They took over that investigation when they arrived. As I suspected, George jumped to the top of Thielker's list of suspects. And because you and I are friends, and George works for

you, I've been told there is an appearance of a conflict of interest." Her voice took on a singsong tone, mimicking the explanation to her from higher up.

The door chimes announced Gavin Thielker. He nodded at Nika. "Sheriff Marx."

She pointed her thumb toward me. "This is Alexi Mandiera, owner of Bliss Creek Winery."

Thielker wasted no time on pleasantries. "Mrs. Mandiera, I understand you collected several Nazi-related objects recently. Tell me about each one."

I explained how I got possession of all of them, ending with the most recent acquisition.

"I'd like to see all the items now. I assume most of the village had a cryptography party of handling all of them."

Choosing to ignore his snide comment, I led him to the office. My heart sank as I looked at the pile of invoices and receipts from June Fest, still needing to be recorded. Someday I hoped to have a full-time—or even a part-time—accountant. For now, I'd have to settle for dealing with most of it myself. I lifted the book Luna had returned and shuffled my pile of papers before I unburied the artifacts. I paused and looked at Agent Thielker. "How did you go from RogueWave reconnaissance to investigating Ted Arnold's suspected murder? Are you of the opinion that these relics are all connected with each other and with what may or may not be a murder?"

Thielker turned his steely eyes on me. I stared back and took stock of the man. He was mid-forties. Had a pleasant appearance, neither handsome nor unattractive; solid, but not muscular build. Perhaps an inch or two below six feet. Neither of us moved.

After what seemed an eternity, the corners of his mouth turned up. A gesture of respect, perhaps? Or was it condescension? He reached his palm-up hand across the desk to receive the three historic pieces. "Guess that's a fair question. There was a Nazi relic beneath the deceased's body, with identifiable fingerprints on it. Whether Mr. Arnold had been holding it, or someone placed it there, is one of our questions. That, plus of course, the message scrawled in the dirt as I'm sure the sheriff inappropriately shared with you. We haven't yet figured out the exact cause of death, but it's suspicious."

I wondered whether Thielker was aware I knew that the scribble stated *can't fix stupid*, but I wasn't about to ask him. And his wording confirmed to me the FBE considered Ted's death a likely homicide.

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After law enforcement had left, Luna and Sasha sat with me at a tall table near the windows. "Did you hear what Thielker said?"

They both shook their heads so tentatively I realized they were hedging. "I know you were eavesdropping."

"You're right," Sasha said, after a lull. "They found a Nazi gizmo under Ted, but we still don't know what the cryptic note said."

"I think we do." Luna leaned her elbows on the table with her chin on her clasped knuckles. "Come clean, Alex."

I looked from Luna to Sasha and back again, ending with an audible sigh. "Okay, okay. Someone scratched 'can't fix stupid' into the dirt. Nika said it was barely readable, with no concrete ability to identify handwriting."

"That explains the attention on George." Luna said. "Not only was it his catchphrase, many people heard him use it when talking about Ted."

My growling stomach entered the conversation. "I'm hungry, and exhausted. Want to grab supper downtown? Maybe at Franco and Mia's?"

Luna gave me a snarky grin with raised eyebrows. "I suspect an ulterior motive."

"Moi? I just have a hankering for authentic Mexican food."

"Uh huh," Luna said. "It has nothing to do with checking out a person who had a very visible confrontation with Ted just days before he died?"

"I may ask a few subtle questions."

"Are they even open on Mondays?" Sasha asked. "Weren't they closed one day a week?":

I pulled out my phone and scrolled to their site. "They are open today as an extension of June Fest. They gave out a few free dinner vouchers for tonight."

Casa da Mia had no empty tables. Luna, Sasha, and I got on a waiting list. I scanned the dining room for familiar faces. My son Josh was in a booth across from a young woman I didn't recognize. He waved me over. "Mom, this is Emma, David Sorenson's niece. She's here for the summer on an internship with the Visitor's Bureau." She must have been the guest David told me on Sunday he was expecting.

I smiled at the two of them. "Nice to meet you, Emma. You're the marketing intern I heard about. Welcome. I might try to get your help with a Christmas celebration I'm co-promoting with Dot Harrison's bed-and-breakfast." It still irked me to refer to it as a co-promotion when I had yet to get any real help from Dot. I shifted my attention to Josh, who was pulling out his credit card to pay the bill. "Where's your sister?" I didn't want to be an over-protective mom, but dang it, there had been a likely murder in Gaia.

"Tiff was going to hang out at the park with the rest of the gang for a while, then come home with Wolf. And before you ask, I still haven't heard from George. I left messages for both him and Cathy. I even drove to his house. Nika introduced me to some FBI agent when I got there. He acted as if I was hiding something when I said I was there to see if George was home."

My head nodded like a bobble doll and I massaged my neck. "They were at the winery, too." I decided against sharing information in front of the intern about the Nazi wartime items. "Looks like it was a pretty good meal. See you at home." I stepped aside as he and Emma exited the booth.

Sasha and Luna—now joined by Gaia's omnipresent journalist Felicity—took their seats, waiting for me to return. Felicity held up a certificate. "I won a free meal and felt sure I'd bump into someone I knew to eat with." Nodding toward the departing Josh and Emma, she continued. "I see Josh has already hooked up with the new intern. They make a cute couple."

How does she do that? How does she always know everyone in town and what they're doing? Maybe she's a better psychic than Luna. I didn't really believe that, but if anyone was *in-the-know*, it was her. "How's the white supremacy piece coming?" I asked.

"I need more first-person input. Right now, I have mostly background research."

Mia arrived to take our order. Her baby bump was increasingly noticeable. While small in stature, Mia was a force in city business meetings. "Have you decided?"

Luna elbowed me subtly as she drew my attention to Mia's necklace. "That's a fascinating pendant you're wearing," Luna said to her. "Is it a family heirloom?"

Mia's hand shifted up to caress the jewelry. "Franco gave it to me today. He said it's a Nordic Medallion. The three triangles represent the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's an amulet to protect the baby."

The medallion was almost identical to the one we found outside the café. "Mind if I check it out up close?" Luna asked. "It reminds me of my ancestry."

Mia unclasped the Valknot and handed it to Luna, who immediately passed it to me. She rubbed her palm as if it hurt, and gave me a slight nod to let me know she had felt something. She returned the jewelry to Mia with a smile.

Mia refastened the necklace before pulling out her order pad and giving us a questioning look.

"We'll need a few minutes," I said to her. "How are you feeling?"

"Very well, thank you. Franco and I are discussing how to manage the maternity. Maybe my mother can stay to help at home. The good news is while she's here, I can be sure she takes her insulin shots regularly and takes care of her allergies. We may need to hire someone to cook or serve here. We seem to work all the time and money is still tight. And..." She blushed. "Sorry, my mouth is running wild. I shouldn't complain to customers. I think it is the pregnancy."

"No need to apologize," I said. "We know what it's like to run a small business, and the first years are tough."

"That's true. Franco feels especially vulnerable because his parents came from Mexico and some people don't like that. He's had to fight against bias many times, hoping to end bad things forever. But no matter what, he is a good man." She again came to an abrupt stop. "There I go, talking too much again. I'll give you some time to decide, and will check back with you later."

When Mia was out of earshot, Sasha pretended to look at her menu as she whispered to us. "Did she seem to defend her husband too forcefully? Almost like a guilt reaction?" She turned toward Felicity. "So, Gaia knowledgeable one. What do you know about Franco's history?"

"Probably not as much as I should. I believe he and Mia were born somewhere in the United States, either Texas or Arizona. I don't know where the parents live. Anyway, they came to Gaia because Franco is Tony's cousin."

"Are you referring to Tony Zentros, Wolf's vet?" I asked.

"One and the same. That's why Franco came to Gaia." Felicity pondered the menu for a few beats before she continued. "When I penned his new-business story for the paper, I learned a few things. Before you ask what, let me preface my comments by saying these are my personal opinions as a friend. I'm not giving you factual statements as a journalist." She raised her eyebrows and one-by-one locked eyes with each of us. "Got it?"

We all nodded our acknowledgement.

"Franco experienced a multitude of challenges with his Texas restaurant. People lingered at all hours, pretending to be students, and refusing to give up their tables for paying customers, while also treating his employees with

disrespect. Supposed patrons posted horrible restaurant reviews to drive Franco out of business. He came here to Gaia to escape, and Ted seemed to make it happen all over again. The hatred between them was visceral, even before the incident on Friday. I wonder if Franco feared for his wife and baby."

"Nika most likely spoke with Franco about the altercation he had with Ted," Luna said. "Mia's bound to feel some pressure now. And speaking of pressure..." She directed our collective gaze toward Larry Larson, who strode toward us.

He grabbed an empty chair from a nearby table and swung the back of it toward us before straddling the seat. "Good to see the business class from Gaia talking a break. Did you get all the info you needed for your story, Felicity?"

Felicity leaned forward on the table, exposing more cleavage. "Larry, I told you I was just getting started. I'm trying to get multiple perspectives. It's the good journalism thing to do."

Larry caressed Felicity's hand, and I sensed she fought the urge to jerk it away. "Ah, in that case, you better have a conversation with Liam Briggs. He's like a reformed smoker who tries to get everyone to give up their cigs. You think he's above violence, don't you? I've known him a long time. His biography should be quite...insightful. Tell him Larry sent you. And while you're at it, Zach Taylor might have some skeletons in his closet. It's gonna be attack ad central this summer as the Senate race flames up." He rose, blew a kiss to Felicity, and walked to a table in a far corner of the room.

I let out a long, ragged gasp. "What was that all about? I thought you said you didn't have any first-person interviews."

Felicity appeared uncharacteristically flustered. "I said I needed more, like I told Larry. Yes, I interviewed him earlier today, briefly. It resulted from a chance meeting outside the bank."

I suspected Felicity orchestrated the 'chance meeting,' but I let it slide. "What was Larry doing at a bank in Gaia?"

"I didn't get a firm answer about that, but I learned it had something to do with an account set up for RogueWave."

Sasha's eyes grew wide, and her mouth formed a circle. "A bank account for a white supremacy group?"

"It's not that far-fetched," Felicity said. "The groups don't refer to themselves as white supremacists. In fact, several are membership organizations with by-laws and dues."

"For real?" I asked.

"For real. And I learned a few other things. The more militant groups recruit former military and law enforcement into their ranks. I don't yet know where RogueWave fits in, though I came across an interesting tidbit. It seems Larry has had several meetings with Senator Don Jackson. I suspect they shared some bones from the skeletons in Zach's closet."

"Are you suggesting they are trying to sabotage Zach's campaign?" I circled my shoulders to relieve the stifling tension I felt.

"Sabotage is a strong word. Let's just say they are on opposite sides of the campaign trail."

Mia reappeared to take our orders and then doubled back to the kitchen. In record time, she set our meals in front of us. "Enjoy," she said. As we ate, we talked about Felicity's experiences in investigative reporting.

"What was the most unusual or unexplained cause-of-death case you reported on in Detroit or anyplace else? Or maybe someplace else?" Luna asked.

Felicity rubbed her fingertips on her dinner wipe. "Give me a minute to think." She dabbed the corners of her mouth. "There was one situation where a youngish woman died from apparent cardiac arrest after an epinephrine injection. At first the medical examiner thought it was an accidental overdose or even suicide by EpiPen. Later, he learned—completely by chance—that she didn't have allergies. Her ex-boyfriend did, and he was the one with the EpiPen. In the end, he faced conviction for her murder." She again wiped her hands. "Could you pass me another napkin, please? This is sloppier than I thought."

I handed her a couple of serviettes. "Are you saying it's possible for someone to die from epinephrine?"

She raised her finger in a pause motion as she finished chewing. "Short answer, yes. I interviewed a couple of pharmacists who told me an overload of adrenaline can be deadly, especially for someone with existing heart problems."

Sasha scrolled the internet on her phone. "It's not possible to get epinephrine without a prescription, is it?"

"Not in the United States, as far as I know, unless it's for a business like a restaurant that may keep it on hand in case of customer allergies," Felicity said. "The prescription was for the ex- in this case. The medical examiner told me this wasn't something they would typically look for in an autopsy and would be easy to overlook. It was a fluke that all the pieces fell into place for this case."

"Was it considered poisoning?" I asked.

Felicity nodded. "I believe it was. The needle mark accompanied by a suicide note might have suggested the woman took her own life, even if the autopsy didn't find epinephrine. Still, a tenacious detective refused to be swayed by the poorly written and unconvincing note. And he uncovered an additional motive for a murder, enough to convince a jury. But it came close to being a perfect crime."

"Enough gloom and doom," Luna said. "Let's talk about something other than murder."

We changed the subject to lighter topics, like silly things from our childhood, birthdays that were mixed up, and funny dating mishaps. We needled each other, our friends, and ourselves, mercilessly.

For example, the time Nika's husband had a surprise birthday party for her. On the wrong day.

Or when poison ivy hives covered Felicity the day before she was to perform in a teen beauty pageant. She tried to cover the rash with make-up. It didn't work.

Luna brought up a spat in grade school when a student ground bubble gum into her hair. She tried to shampoo it out in the shower and made it worse. The only solution was a buzz cut.

Sasha's woes came from a weak jaw muscle (temporomandibular joint) that occasionally locked her mouth open. It happened during college on a date that culminated in an emergency room visit.

And my own calamities with on-line dating sounded like the theme of an old sitcom: men with comb-overs, toupees, and unsavory habits. Zach, whom I met in the real world and not online, seemed promising. Or should I say, he would if we went on an actual date.

But the thought of Zach brought up Larry's ominous innuendo. Was I oblivious to skeletons in Zach's closet, as Larry said? Zach paid for my new beehives even after his allergic reaction to stings from my bees. He's an upstanding entrepreneur running for Congress. And he's been an old-school romantic waiting for us to have our first actual date. But how well do I really know him? Where was he at the time of Ted's demise? And does he still have an EpiPen?

I couldn't stop my pinball thoughts when I got home. "What was it Felicity said about cardiac arrest after an epinephrine shot?"

I booted up the laptop and searched for epinephrine deaths. I learned they are very rare, but lethal overdoses *can* happen, particularly in patients with 'underlying organic heart disease.'

Did Ted have any heart problems? Could someone have administered an Epi-Pen shot?

"Wolf, listen to this. An epinephrine overdose can lead to complete cardiac arrest. Apparently, autopsies don't routinely look for that, but there are some reports of it being used in murder. I know it sounds implausible. Hey, here's the story Felicity mentioned about the 34-year-old woman who injected adrenaline to commit suicide."

On a whim, I texted Nika. DID AUTOPSY TEST FOR EPINEPHRINE?