



CHAPTER TWELVE

Cyber-Sleuthing Dead Ends

Dusk had settled when I opened my eyes. My head throbbed, but I didn't know if it was from a migraine or trauma. I took stock of the situation; my arms and legs were working; the impact didn't trigger the air bag. I unbuckled my seatbelt and reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight.

Taking deliberate, measured breaths, I proceeded with careful movements, fully aware of every action. I rubbed the back of my head and found no bumps, at least not yet. I opened the door and shone a light in all directions before stepping out. Feeling no sense of foreboding, I stepped out to assess the car.

There was a small dent in the rear bumper that I was sure had been there for a while. Even if it were new, it wouldn't have been enough to push me off the road. It appeared I had no one to blame but myself.

I walked to the front. No post or wall or obstruction that I could see. I aimed the flashlight behind the car. Perhaps there was a collapsible post I had run over. Nothing. I squatted to examine for any damage below. Both tires had hit large rocks, causing an abrupt stop. While a front-end alignment was in my future, it could have been much worse.

Back behind the wheel, I leaned against the seat, eyes closed. Had I imagined that someone was following me? Had I simply over-corrected for a non-existent threat? Just in case, I locked all the doors before planning my next steps. Should I call for help? I felt fine except for my headache. Berating myself for being a wimp, I started the ignition. No rattles or suspicious bangs, no warning lights on the dashboard—except for my still-present "check engine" light. Note to self: get that fixed soon.

I reversed the car until my tires connected with the shoulder gravel, and then I pulled back onto the highway. Through the windshield and in the rearview mirror, I could see no other cars on the desolate highway. Minutes later, I saw the entry sign to Bliss Creek Winery. I drove past the winery operations to my home. With a sigh of relief, I pulled into the garage and turned off the car.

My relief was short-lived. The soft rumble of an approaching car engine drew my attention. Headlights beamed from a vehicle, advancing up the long driveway. I slammed the button to close the garage and scampered into the house.

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"Mom, what's wrong?" Tiffany's concern penetrated her voice.

"Nothing," I lied. "How was customer traffic at the store this afternoon?" I strained to look nonchalant as I moved toward the picture window to observe the driveway. My attempt at misdirection failed; I was no actor.

Tiffany's eyebrows drew together in a soft scowl. She slid her top teeth across the corner of her lower lip. "What are you looking at? Is Nika coming? She called and said she's been trying to reach you."

I pulled out my cell phone. Dang, dead battery again. I finally got into the knack of using a password, but still failed to remember to recharge it regularly. "Why did Nika call?"

The doorbell interrupted Tiffany's response. Wolf's ears perked up, and he emitted a soft growl. He plodded to the front door on full alert. I stood on my tiptoes to peek through the small window at the top. "Down, Wolf."

I opened the door for Gavin Thielker. "Agent Thielker. More questions?"

He nodded. "May I come in?"

Aware of my paint-splattered clothes and disheveled appearance, I finger-combed my hair as I stepped aside to allow him to enter. "I thought we had addressed all of your issues yesterday."

Wolf stood between Tiffany and me in protective mode. "It's okay, boy," I said to him. Then I returned my attention to the FBI agent. "This is my daughter, Tiffany."

He acknowledged her with a nod. "I'm trying to get a better understanding of where everyone was Sunday afternoon before Mr. Arnold's death. Who was in your booth when the parade started?"

I gestured toward my daughter. "Tiff was working with me. My son Josh was helping Luna Dominic, the owner of the Sunflower Café. We had some joint offerings for June Fest."

"Anyone else?"

"Dot Harrison stopped by. She owns the bed-and-breakfast down the road from here."

"What about your employees?" His steel-eyed stare unnerved me. So did the way he rapidly clicked his pen. The sound was more annoying than a dripping faucet.

"Sasha Blackstone and Mariama Pepple left to work here at the winery."

"Did they leave before the parade started?"

I nodded.

"Just prior to the murder." His eyes lifted above my head, seeming to search the house. "What about George Westbrook? I haven't been able to speak with him. Where was he during the parade?"

"He helped dismantle the booth." I looked at Tiffany. "Do you remember when he left?"

She rubbed the back of her neck, head leaning on her palm. When she brought her hand back down, it was shaking. "Everything's a blur from that afternoon. I don't know." She kneeled to rest her arm against Wolf.

I looked back at the federal detective. "We don't remember when he left, but I assure you, he's not capable of hurting Ted Arnold. None of these people are." I struggled to keep my tone civil.

Thielker continued clicking his pen. His gray eyes might have been alluring if they weren't so cold, and if it weren't so apparent that they were canvassing my home, searching for clues. "That's all for now. And again, if you hear from George, get in touch with me immediately."

I nodded as I pushed past him to open the door to let him out.

With a foot over the threshold, he turned his head over his shoulder. "One more thing. Most of those Nazi items popping up in Gaia last week are real, circa World War II. Do you know if anyone locally—besides George, of course—who might have a collection?" His tone was almost mocking.

"No." I suppressed an overwhelming urge, from my primitive brain, to slam the door against his foot. Good thing my developed brain took over. I pasted on the sweetest smile I could conjure up. "But I'm sure you have ways to find out." Then I closed the door behind him with a gentle click.

I turned back to my daughter, who was still hugging Wolf. "Tiff?" I sat on the floor next to her and wrapped my arm around her shoulder.

She wiped a tear off her cheek with the back of her hand. "I know George was angry about the white supremacy rally."

I gave Tiffany a comforting squeeze. "You've known George all your life. He worked for your grandparents before I took over the business. He's a good person."

"I know that, but so was Dad. That didn't keep him from getting shot. Bad things happen to good people. Since Dad has been gone, George has been like a grandfather to me. I don't want to lose him, too." Her tears began flowing more freely as she plopped on her rump and drew her knees to her chest. Wolf nudged her shoulder.

"Tain't gonna happen. We'll find out if anyone harmed Ted. It would be stupid for anyone to believe George could be guilty."

"But it could happen. Stupidity, I mean. As George always said, *you can't fix stupid*. I'm worried he might be in real trouble now."

I didn't want to admit it, but that was worrying me, too, especially the '*can't fix stupid*' part.

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Before getting ready for bed, I powered up my laptop to see what I could learn about my pseudo-suspects, starting with Larry Larson. Holy moly, there are tons of Larry Larsons. It took substantial winnowing and filtering to narrow down to the right person. His public biography on LinkedIn, though thin, confirmed he worked for StamCo Oil. He'd apparently joined the company upon leaving the service. There were a couple of news sources connecting him with RogueWave; none provided details. I didn't find him on Twitter (now X), and suspected he used an alias. The world of the dark web and alt-right websites remained a mystery to me, as I had no knowledge or understanding of them. And frankly, they scared me. Without more information, this was a dead-end.

I moved on to Liam Briggs. There were fewer people with the same name. Many references contained a picture, enabling a quicker match to the Liam Briggs I was looking for. Consistent with what he had shared with me while we were painting, he had been in the service and had worked at StamCo Oil. After the stint at Stamco, his public profile dried up. I couldn't find anything about him for the next five years. I wondered why he had opened his

business in Gaia. From what I could tell, he had no relatives or connections to this area. And Gaia didn't seem to be the most lucrative location for a solar business. I also realized that Felicity didn't do an in-depth article on the company as she routinely did for all new businesses. That was odd. Note to self: talk to Felicity.

Next on my list was bank president David Sorenson, one of the most upstanding citizens in town. I searched through the Gaia Gazette archives for any articles about him. There were several. He had received countless civic awards, selflessly donated to countless charities, and had never been involved in a single scandal. There were three police reports about Ted Arnold disturbing the peace at the bank. In each of those incidents, Ted had threatened David for refusing a loan or cutting off his line of credit. That squared with what George had told me. Beyond that, our bank president seemed to be the epitome of a model businessperson.

While in the Gazette archives, I segued to Penelope Carter and the museum. Most of the stories were about local events and new exhibits, although several mentioned disputes with Ted Arnold. Consistent with what Penny had shared with me, nothing suggested blatant anger or violence.

I became frustrated at my lack of success at cyber-sleuthing. Isn't the internet supposed to be all-knowing? I drummed my fingers on the antique writing desk that housed my laptop. What was it that Larry had said about Zach? That he had some skeletons in his closet. I fidgeted as I debated diving into the online life of a man who seemed to be the first good match for me since Matt died.

I typed 'Zach Taylor' in the search bar. Felicity's story about epinephrine as a murder weapon kept spinning in my head like a whirligig. Before I hit enter, my phone buzzed. It was a text from Zach.

Hey, Beautiful. It will probably be morning when you open this. Too late to call. Just want you to know I'm thinking about you. Looking forward to Saturday night.

I smiled. Maybe this time we'd have a real-world date. No fender bender or roof damage to interfere this time. Yup, this time it would work. I hoped.

My typed response was simple: *Ditto*.

Just before erasing his name from the search bar, an article with Ted Arnold's name caught my attention. I clicked on it. The article referenced a lawsuit Ted had filed against Zach. He claimed Zach had cheated him out of some land deal worth millions—enough to bankrupt Zach if settled in Ted's favor. Is it possible that Zach acted on a vendetta against Ted?

Was this the skeleton in Zach's closet? How is it possible I didn't know about it? And why had Felicity never mentioned it? Felicity was the encyclopedia of Gaia.

A creak on the floor followed by a plop let me know Wolf had curled up in his bed. I plunked down next to him, stroking his fur. "Still need your opinion, Big Guy. When I asked you before, you seemed to approve of Zach. Does he have some deep secrets I should know about?" I looked into his eyes, wishing he could share some wisdom. He simply blinked.

If there was cause for concern, Nika would know. That reminded me I hadn't gotten back to her. I texted her.

Didn't get your messages cuz phone battery died. Came home to interrogation from Thielker. Wish you still had the lead on the case. Talk to you soon.

After sending the message, I refocused on the computer. Something niggled at my brain. Why did I have such an uneasy gut feeling when Nika told me about the FBI agent taking over?

I started a search for Gavin Thielker. That's a less common name, and I hoped it wouldn't require much filtering beyond the name itself. While that was true, I found nothing on Agent Thielker. I guess I was unsurprised. Detectives and agents need to stay inconspicuous, as they may be called upon for undercover assignments. At least for now, this appeared to be another dead-end.

With some hesitancy, I googled one more name, George Westbrook. I noted his industry awards for growing cold-climate grapes. A couple of articles alluded to his service in Viet Nam, as well as his father's service in World War II. No mention of a trove of Nazi collectibles or his experience as a white supremacist. That would come out when Felicity interviewed him for the in-depth article she was writing. At first pass, I saw no red flags. I chuckled at an article which quoted him saying, "Can't fix stupid." That was George, predictable, yet unpredictable.

Completely exhausted mentally, emotionally, and physically, I climbed into bed.

Questions lingered in my head. How did Ted die? Who scrawled 'can't fix stupid' in the dirt? What Nazi relic was under Ted's body, and what might be its significance?