



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

New Evidence Emerges

Nika and I returned to my office. Her smile conveyed the same relief I experienced. "That provides some consolation. Do you keep the back door and stockroom locked?"

"We both know the answer to that," I said. "The doors are open during normal business hours, since we are always in and out."

"That's another security policy to add to Bliss Creek's future plans."

Wolf padded to the office door, tail wagging. "Looks like he hears Josh or Tiff," I conjectured. I was wrong. It wasn't my son or daughter.

The clickety-clack of high heels on the hallway floor preceded Felicity's arrival. "Knock, knock." Her knuckles rapped the air alongside her ear before she reached down to stroke Wolf's head.

Nika raised her eyebrows in surprise. She knew Felicity wasn't overtly pet friendly. I hadn't yet told her about the alternate universe.

"I assume you already heard about the message near Ted's body," Felicity said, glancing at Nika. She stepped inside the office and leaned against the desk. She tugged her form-fitting sleeveless shirt over her narrow waist. An intricate Chinese calligraphy tattoo peaked out on her shoulder. "Before you say anything, Nika, my sources are confidential."

"In that case, my job here is done. Gotta get back to work." Nika gave the dog a last pat.

Felicity walked to the office door and stuck her head out into the hallway.

"Are you making sure Nika is out of earshot?" I asked.

"Not exactly," she said as she closed the door. "Nika just surprised me. I figured Ted's situation would tie her up for a while. The whole vibe around town is weird. And I still am under a crunch to get a paper out."

"As you always say, that's the newspaper business."

"Alex, I've been following up on some leads for my white supremacy article, and I... um... I'm anxious."

This wasn't the Felicity I knew over the past few years. *Foolhardy?* Often. *In-your-face?* Most of the time. *Scared?* Rarely. "What's up?"

Felicity massaged her forehead. "I came across some archived articles about Liam Briggs and Larry Larson. They were apparently active in some group that was a predecessor to RogueWave. I didn't find any arrest records for either of them. That wasn't true for others in the organization. The two guys who were here with Larry for the rally had prior records of violent crimes."

"Are you afraid that Larry or Liam might be dangerous? "

"I wouldn't say afraid. I just think we should let the experts handle things. We need to trust them. Everything seems under control right now and we should leave it that way."

Raised voices from the retail shop carried down the hallway. When I opened the door, I heard Nika roar, "She did what?"

Within moments, Nika burst into the office and stomped over to me. "What the fraggle rock did you do this morning?"

"Uh, took a sunrise stroll?"

"Alexi, this is serious. Why were you spying on Ted Arnold's property?"

I knew she was upset since she called me Alexi rather than Alex. So much for my thinking she was always unflappable.

Nika was still talking. "You went alone to the home of what we consider a murder victim, with a RogueWave member still there. What were you thinking?"

"It seemed—"

"And Sasha said someone followed you last night?" When I didn't answer immediately, she prompted me. "Well?"

"I... I don't know for sure if I was being followed. It was just a gut feel."

Nika sighed. "Start at the beginning."

I closed my eyes in thought. "After leaving Habitat, I stopped at the supermarket and the drugstore." My eyes flashed open. "That's right. I saw a black truck pull into both parking lots after me. I can't swear it was the same truck. It may have been a coincidence due to, um, *continuous partial attention*."

"Cut that out!"

"What?"

"Using some fancy academic term to skirt the issue. Just tell me what happened."

"I saw headlights in my rearview mirror that were higher than car lights. They kept getting closer, tailgating me. I thought the jerk wanted to pass, so I slowed down. He slowed down and didn't pass. I assumed it was because we were in a no-passing lane. Then the lights seemed to approach me too fast. I pulled onto the shoulder and veered into the field. My car jerked to a stop, and my head tapped the steering wheel. The next few seconds, I saw stars."

"You should have your head examined, literally," Nika said. "You could've had a concussion. Don't skirt the issues."

Averting her eyes, I remained silent for a second. She was right, but doggone, I wasn't ready to admit it, yet. "In my defense, I presumed it was a migraine. I just wanted to get home. I didn't pass out, there's no bump on my

forehead, my car didn't get hit. I had stepped on my brakes, and the car stopped abruptly when the front tires hit some rocks."

Nika glared at me and I glared back. We were at a stand-off until Felicity broke the stalemate. "Now, kids, unless you play nicely together, you'll both get a time out."

That brought a grin to my face. "Been there, done that. In third grade."

Nika enveloped me in a bear hug. Even though we were about the same height and build, it's unequivocal she had more muscle than I did. "Don't take any more stupid chances, I mean it. You have enough to do running the best damn winery and meadery in the state."

I gave Nika a mock salute as she exited the office. I knew she was concerned, and I knew she would always be my friend. Then I turned to Felicity. "What were you saying about your white supremacy investigation?"

"I guess I would just echo what Nika said. We all need to stay out of it. I'm going to delay my investigation for a while. Gavin asked me to hold off on it until he wraps up Ted's murder investigation. I need to replace the white supremacy article with a different in-depth story."

Gavin, huh? Not Agent Thielker? "What do you need from me?"

"Could I interview you about your solar project? There are a few other local businesses going green, and I think I can make a series out of your stories. It would be good PR for the winery."

"How can I turn that down?"

"Do you mind if I record it and then take some pictures?"

As I agreed, I turned off my phone out of courtesy.

"In full disclosure," Felicity continued, "the series will include information on both the pros and cons of solar projects. I'll cover hazardous materials used in manufacturing and potential waste from batteries."

"Fair enough."

We seated ourselves on opposite sides of my desk, and Felicity turned on her recorder. "Tell me how Bliss Creek Winery got started on the solar path."

"George Westbrook, my vineyard manager, gave the initial push. He noted a trend toward sustainable products from sustainable companies." My voice cracked as I remembered everything George meant to the business. I cleared my throat and continued. "He'd already established name recognition for environmentally sound grape-growing practices. This was the next step on the path to sustainability."

"How are you incorporating solar?"

"We're starting with panels on the warehouse roof. Sothic Solar is handling the project. We have a lot of electricity needs from irrigation pumps to fermentation equipment to refrigeration to air conditioning. That's a sizeable chunk of our operating costs. Liam Briggs, Sothic's owner, estimates the roof panels will offset more than a quarter of our energy expenses. In fact, some of his models calculated savings of 50 to 60%."

"Have you run into any resistance? Some people have protested that solar projects replace fertile farm land with unsightly structures. Others think it will cause utility prices to skyrocket."

"We aren't planning to put up any free-standing solar arrays at this point. The roof will look different, but it's a warehouse, and it'll cut our use of fossil fuels. To me, that's a good thing. My biggest concern right now is the regular cleaning and maintenance of the roof panels." *That was another task George volunteered to address.*

"Any future projects planned?"

"Depends on the current job results. But yes, I'm considering..." I pulled my desk draw open and grabbed my cheat sheet on solar. "I'm considering a building-integrated-photovoltaic-technology project." I tapped the paper in front of me, the paper on which I had written the term. "I almost didn't say that after Nika's comment about me using fancy words."

Felicity smirked. "I like the term. It'll be an impressive addition to the article if I can have a definition."

"It refers to designing solar into the architecture prior to construction. For example, Liam gave me a rough sketch of an expanded wine tasting deck with a solar panel awning. The solar aspect would be invisible to most of our customers."

"Could I see the sketch?"

"Sure, but I want to check with Sothic Solar before allowing it to be published in the Gaia Gazette."

"Any other observations?"

"This is boring but important stuff. The warehouse has a south orientation, its roof has the right pitch and lack of protrusions, and there is no shade over the roof. All those things were considerations in the decision to invest in solar roof panels. I'm also trying to understand the value and cost of geothermal and heat pumps. I think that's part of the future for Wisconsin businesses, but I'm still learning."

Felicity turned off the recorder. "That's an impressive start. I'll gather background research after I leave and get back to you with more questions. I'll let you see the interview before I print it. Could I take pictures of the installation process?"

As she was about to stand up, I placed my hand over hers. "Wait, now it's my turn to ask some questions. Why didn't you write a new business feature article about Sothic Solar? You publish a regular column promoting new businesses, even before they open their doors. Sothic Solar started almost a year ago, but it was clear from your interaction with Liam at June Fest that the two of you didn't know each other."

"We had never met *in person*, although we had communicated through email. He asked me not to write about his company. Or at least not promote his name. The odd push came from the bank. I knew Liam had gotten a loan there. David Sorenson told me there were some 'legal' issues about the loan demanding confidentiality. He asked me to delay drafting the new-business article until after they settled the legal stuff. It didn't seem to be newsworthy, and I let it drop." She collected her material and stood up. "Maybe I made the incorrect decision not pursuing that, but at the time it made sense."

"Perhaps," I said. But her explanation didn't convince me. Why did Liam Briggs launch a solar company in Gaia but avoid the publicity afforded a new start-up? There were a *lot* of issues being skirted here.

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Alone again in my office (except for Wolf), I followed Nika's advice to refocus on the winery operations. I spread Liam's sketch of the proposed wine tasting deck in front of me. The architecture followed the Prairie design of the original structures. I still remember hearing my grandfather remark the buildings were a "most distinctive blending of craft and function." And I recall there being an influence from Frank Lloyd Wright, whose Taliesin was also in the Driftless region of Wisconsin.

The expansive windows in the original buildings allowed for ample natural light. The large central chimneys in both the house and retail area created a cozy atmosphere in winter. Wood, brick, and stone integrated simply and tastefully.

I loved these old buildings and their history. A homesteader named Hans Engel built the villa in the 1880s. He became distraught when his daughter and her beau jumped from the bluff to their death after not being allowed to marry. He wagered—and lost—the property while gambling on a Mississippi riverboat. Or so the myth goes.

My great-grandfather won the bet. He farmed the land and planted fruit crops and vineyards for a winery. One setback followed another up to the Prohibition—and word spread that the young couple who had killed themselves haunted the land. Since *Engel* translates to *angel*, residents referred to it as the angel curse. My son and daughter had joked about it right before June Fest.

After Prohibition, my grandfather resurrected the winery. He erected additional buildings, maintaining the Prairie architecture. My parents continued with extensions to the wine cellar and added outdoor seating. They understood the value of the location. A major section of the property provided a sweeping view of the majestic Mississippi River bluffs. On clear days, Minnesota was visible across the expanse.

I carried the sketch outside to envision the view from the proposed addition. As I raised the sketch, I noticed what appeared to be a shallow watermark. It contained a shape that looked familiar, but I couldn't quite make it out.

I went back inside to see if Sasha could figure it out. She had just finished serving guests on the patio.

"What do you think this is?" I asked Sasha, as I pointed to the mark on the document.

She lifted it toward the light. "It seems to be an indentation from something pressed against it. Maybe if we rub it with the side of a lead pencil, we could see it better."

"Hmm. I don't want to do that directly onto the sketch." Then I snapped my fingers. "I know. I might still have some thin tracing paper from when the kids were small. I'm going home to find it. Tiffany should be here soon to give you a break for lunch. Text me if you need help before then."

I clicked my tongue to call Wolf to accompany me back to the house. "Where do you think I put that box of arts-and-crafts supplies?" I asked him.

Yeah, I know he can't answer me. And I know my children are adults and I should have decluttered long ago. I will, someday, maybe.

My first stop was the junk closet. Some people have junk drawers; I have a junk closet. The third box contained what I was looking for. I placed a tissue on the sketch and brushed a lead pencil over it. An image slowly appeared.

Wings? An angel, perhaps? No, a bird, a very specific bird. A Nazi-style national eagle on the blueprint from Liam Briggs and Sothic Solar.