



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Assembling the Cryptogram

Stressed by my call with Nika, I almost missed the entry door chimes heralding customers. Then more chimes, and more customers. Bliss Creek was filling up. This was unusual for a Wednesday afternoon. A quick glance at the parking lot confirmed my suspicion. A bus!

I slapped my forehead and hung my head in embarrassment. This was the tour rescheduled because of June Fest. "I'll get reinforcements," I said to Sasha, as I called my son and daughter. Josh, who had been working in the vineyard, arrived within minutes. Tiffany came moments later.

Snippets of conversations wafted through the air from the tour group.

"The game went into overtime and I thought we were toast."

"No, no, no. It's *I* before *E* except after *C*."

"It'll be an outdoor wedding in September."

Then one subdued conversation caught my attention. "I heard a new employee knocked off a guy for hosting a free speech rally on his property. Isn't that a First-Amendment right?"

Without appearing too obvious, I tried to discern the speaker. The bus contained people of all sizes and ages, though leaning toward older. I couldn't tell who made the comment. How do rumors like this get started? Social media?

"Alexi." Sasha beckoned me from the wine-tasting bar. People had lined up for their wine flights and I had to focus on my guests.

Pasting on my customer service smile, I gave my marketing spiel. "Bliss Creek Winery and Meadery is in the Driftless Region of Wisconsin. We have the most rugged and picturesque landscapes because of our proximity to the Mississippi River. We also have more traditional grape wine than in other regions of the state."

I set a placemat in front of each customer. The mat contained spaces to rate each wine sampled. Then I refilled the counter baskets with crackers.

"What's that for?" asked a cherubic woman with a dragon tattoo on her neck.

As I contemplated requesting her ID, the bus driver strolled past, whispering, "I verified everyone is of legal drinking age."

I gave the driver a slight nod before addressing the customer's question. "The crackers are for cleansing your palate, sort of resetting your mouth to experience the wine more fully."

The woman tried to be inconspicuous as she spit her gum into a napkin. "How do we start?"

"There are three flights to choose from: red wines, white wines, and meads. All flights cost the same. Within each flight, you can choose up to five choices from the list."

"Do you have any non-alcoholic wines in the mix?" a sixty-something gentleman asked.

"That's not a real thing," a woman I assumed to be his wife said to him. Then she turned toward me with a fling of her graying ponytail. "Is it?" She phrased it as a dare, more than as a question.

"Of course, it's real," the man retorted, a slight irritation in his voice. "Remember your cousin gave your aunt non-alcoholic wine when she became belligerent?"

"She was not belligerent!"

"How do you make non-alcoholic wine?" another customer asked as she moved between the arguing couple. "Wouldn't that be just grape juice?"

A murmur of chuckles arose from the group as I began my response. "That's a common question we hear." *And Cathy, my wine maker, is the go-to person for intelligent explanations*, I thought. *I just muddle through*. "Dealcoholized wine starts from fermented wine that goes through an additional process of removing the alcohol."

"It can't taste the same," the pony-tailed woman argued.

I placed two bottles on the counter. "It's true that some tannins and floral aromas will be different. But the industry has changed substantially in the past few years. While Bliss Creek hasn't yet perfected its own proprietary versions, we carry two brands." I lifted the bottle of red wine. "We have an NA Cabernet Sauvignon from California that can be one of your choices for the red flight." Then I put it down and pointed toward the second option. "We also have a Riesling for a white wine pick."

Mrs. Ponytail snatched the bottles from the counter. "These so-called wines are non-alcoholic? Is that what NA means?"

I nodded as I gently removed the bottles from her hands and placed them on the back counter, out of her reach. "Okay. Which flight would each of you like?"

As I poured the requested samples, my mind drifted back to George and Cathy Westbrook, my vineyard manager accused of murder and my wine maker trying to hire a lawyer to fight it. And now someone thinks Mariama, my primary beekeeper, is also a suspect. Maybe the legend of the angel curse on this property is true.

The rest of the afternoon sped by as customers sipped, sampled, and spent money on wine and mead. By the time they reboarded the bus, we shared a collective sigh of exhaustion.

"Was that tour group more demanding than normal?" asked Tiffany. "Or was it just my imagination?"

Her brother grimaced. "They were a bunch of—"

"Josh." I cut him off. "I'm sure they felt disappointed there were no vineyard and wine-making tours scheduled this week."

"They knew that when they signed up," he grumbled. "Or at least they should have. That's why they got a bunch of discounts."

Sasha put her arms around Josh and Tiffany. "Maybe we're a bit disgruntled, too. We're all worried about George."

She was right. None of us was at our best. I felt like I was trying to prepare answers for a critical final exam when I didn't know what the subject was, and when I had no time to study. "Let's clean up and call it quits. I'll reconcile the accounts in the morning."

Sasha gave my son and daughter one poignant squeeze as she looked at me. "Why don't you let Tiff and Josh take off? You and I can finish up here."

They offered little (actually no) resistance to the suggestion and were out the door.

After sweeping, mopping, dusting, dish-washing, and straightening inventory, Sasha and I wrapped up the chores. I reached toward a couple of aprons to throw in the laundry. "Mariama and Cathy won't be using these for a while. Might as well wash them."

As I raised them off the hook, I noticed something in the pocket of one of them. I pulled it out.

It was a crumpled page of a print-out from what appeared to be a Nazi auction site. I spread the page on the counter, ironing out the wrinkles with my fingers. Sasha peered over my shoulder and pointed at one picture. "That looks like a cross with a swastika."

"I agree. Do you know who wore the apron last?" My bigger unspoken question was WHY the paper was in the pocket.

"No, but the date on the print-out is from last week."

"This photo doesn't look like any of the relics I gave to Thielker. What's the description?"

Sasha read the summary.

'The Cross of Honor of the German Mother was for Reichsdeutsche mothers who exhibited probity and exemplary motherhood.'

"What do you suppose that means?" Sasha asked.

"Hmm. It seems 'exemplary motherhood' comes with a prerequisite. Both parents of the children must be *deutschblütig*, of German blood-heredity, and genetically fit."

"I wonder if that was what Nika found under Ted's body. It's smaller than I thought it would be. Easy to hide in a pocket or palm of the hand."

"Would that suggest someone knew Ted fathered a Black child?"

"Could this be what Dot saw George thrusting at Ted? If so, it's more ammunition against George. Let me snap a picture of that and send it to Nika." I texted the photo to Nika. Seeing Sasha's confused squint, I elaborated. "There was a Nazi relic under 'Ted' but I don't know what it was. Let's see what Nika has to say about this. Agent Thielker told me that whatever the relic was, it had George's fingerprints all over it."

Sasha rubbed her biceps with her hands. "You're scaring me. George couldn't hurt anyone."

"What if he was protecting Mariama?"

"From her own father?"

"We haven't seen her since Monday. And after 'Ted's confrontation with Franco, George remarked on his concern for her safety."

"I admit it's odd they are both gone, but we may be overreacting. Let's look at the other relics to figure out if there was any meaning between each item and the recipient."

"Good idea." I moved the whiteboard closer to the wine bar and penned '*Nazi Cryptogram*' at the top. "Thielker referred to all the Nazi items as cryptography, and Penny alluded to it when she found the Enigma rotor at the museum."

"Are you thinking these represent coded messages?"

"Sounds crazy, but so does having a white supremacy rally in Gaia. I think I'll list things chronologically."

- Third Reich coin in ashes by the vineyard
- Valknut medallion by Sunflower Café
- Pilot's medal by Sothic Solar office

- Jewish Armband
- Enigma rotor at museum

My phone dinged an incoming text from Nika. I held up the print-out from the auction site. "Nika confirms this was the artifact under Ted's body." I added a line on the whiteboard.

- Mother's Cross under Ted's body

"Let's think about each one. I took pictures of everything I had and we can match them with online images to learn more about them." I darted into the office and returned with my laptop. I began scanning for Nazi artifacts, comparing them with the pictures on my phone. "This looks like the coin from the vineyard area. It appears to be a 2 Reichsmark silver coin with Hindenburg and National Eagle, both from 1939, when World War II started."

"Are they worth anything?"

"There are some collectible versions—mostly gold—that could be worth \$1,000 or more each. The one we found is probably worth less than \$20, not significant from a financial perspective."

I kept scrolling. "Hey, this is interesting. You can buy Nazi coins like this on Amazon for about the same price."

"Seriously? Are they replicas?"

"Some are. George suggested the replicas were entry tokens for Ted's rally. Perhaps a rally goer dropped one by the bonfire ring we found on Friday. No, that can't be right since Thielker said the one I gave him was older, likely from World War II. Here's the description."

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party minted this Third Reich coin during their efforts to transform Germany into a totalitarian dictatorship.

"Wow, that's blunt. The coin is unquestionably a symbol of the Third Reich, but we don't know whether the timing is recent. Maybe you unearthed a long-forgotten antiquity. After all, the RogueWave rally used replicas, not original coins. Let's keep going. What about the Valknut medallion?"

I shifted my attention to my laptop. I couldn't find any overt link between Nazism and Old Norse imagery. However, there was some perception of the Germanic Nordic race as an all-white monolithic culture. Variations of Norse symbols were among those used currently by white supremacists. Then I found something. "Okay, maybe this sheds some light on the topic."

The three interlocking triangles of the Valknut connote life, death, and eternity, along with a willingness to sacrifice. The Nazis distorted Norse symbols, such as the Valknut, for WWII propaganda. White supremacists continue to abuse the Valknut and other symbols as cryptic substitutes for the swastika.

"Did I tell you what happened when we found the medallion on the ground by The Sunflower when we were cleaning the graffiti before June Fest? I handed it to Luna, and she cast it down as if it burned her. Then remember when she gave Larry Larson that psychic reading Friday night at June Fest? She reacted the same way to him as she did to the Valknut."

"When we were at Casa da Mia on Monday, Luna appeared intrigued by the medallion Mia was wearing. It was a Valknut, wasn't it?"

I nodded. "I asked myself about that, too. Is it just a coincidence that Franco recently gave it to Mia? They have no connection to any of the other relics. I wonder where he got it."

I scrolled through the texts I had received from Felicity containing the rally photos until I reached one with the stick pin magnified. I showed Sasha the picture and searched for an image match. It pulled up an article about Nazi membership stick pins. I handed her my phone so she could read it.

The stickpin represented membership in the National Socialist German Workers' Party, or NSDAP, a far-right political party in Germany. Active between 1920 and 1945, it spawned the ideology of Nazism.

Sasha looked at me. "That's as ominous as the coin. Didn't you say Liam Biggs was at the rally?"

"Felicity and I thought he looked like someone in one of the rally photos, but we didn't see him wearing a membership pin. As far as I know, these pins weren't among the items spread around town."

"What about the artifact Liam gave you?" Sasha asked. "You took a picture of that, didn't you?"

"It was dark then, so the photo quality isn't very good. It appears to be some sort of Luftwaffe badge. A pilot's badge, maybe." I thought back to the conversation I had with Liam at the Habitat project. "I believe he was a pilot in Afghanistan. Do you think someone was comparing his service to the Luftwaffe?"

"I'm embarrassed to admit how little I know about World War II. What was the role of the Luftwaffe?"

"Air force, mostly. Here's what Wikipedia says." I again moved my computer to allow both of us to read the background.

The Luftwaffe was deeply involved in Nazi war crimes. By the end of the war, a significant percentage of aircraft production originated in concentration camps, an industry employing tens of thousands of prisoners. The Luftwaffe's demand for labor was one of the factors that led to the deportation and murder of hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews in 1944. The Oberkommando der Luftwaffe organized Nazi human experimentation. Luftwaffe ground troops committed massacres in Italy, Greece, and Poland.

Neither of us spoke as we read the information. The only sounds we heard were the buzzing of background electricity and the occasional clink of the icemaker. Sasha broke the silence. "What about David Sorenson's Jewish armband?"

"Here is the information from the Holocaust Museum website."

Under the Nazi regime Jewish people were forced to wear identifiers such as Star of David armbands or badges. The badges were often sewn onto a person's clothing either on the arm, chest, back, or all of those places. The intention was to isolate, harass, and humiliate Jewish people, and further embedded Nazi ideology that Jewish people were different from everyone else by marking them out from the rest of the population.

After giving Sasha time to review the website, I continued. "Let's move on to the Enigma rotor. I wouldn't even know what it was if it hadn't been for Penelope. The rotor was a key component for encrypting and decrypting military messages. As I understand it, there were three or four rotors together that contacted each other in a scrambled configuration."

"So, if someone typed in A, it would encode as some other letter?"

"Something like that, and then there was some way to recode back to the original. Penelope thought Ted put the rotor in the museum near the Native American display on Code Talkers to discredit or minimize the contribution of the Navaho and Ojibwa military personnel."

"Like my cousin's grandfather."

"Exactly. But it doesn't seem likely unless he did it just before he died. This is what's on the CIA website."

During World War II, the Germans used the Enigma, a cipher machine, to develop nearly unbreakable codes for sending secret messages. The Enigma's settings offered 150,000,000,000,000,000 possible solutions, yet the Allies were eventually able to crack its code.

"When did the Allies crack the code?"

"Let's see. It appears 2023 was the 80th anniversary of the decoding of the Enigma by Allied forces, so that would be 1943. I wonder if there's any significance to those dates?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and a flash of lightning lit up the sky. Gusts of wind rattled the windows, with tree branches scratching the siding.

I tapped Sasha's hand. "You better get home before the storm gets worse."

"You're right. You can't afford to lose another employee," she said with a wink.

Before I could respond, there was a loud bang. My lights flickered. Then the power went out.

Sasha puffed up her cheeks, then slowly expelled the air. "I shouldn't say this, but maybe the angel curse is real."

That thought had again crossed my mind. Just last month, I had removed a backup generator from the budget to have money for the solar panels. "Let's hope this is a short outage. Otherwise, I'll need to drive to some big box store for an emergency generator."

Sasha pulled her phone from her pocket. "I'll check if there are any statements about the outage." Her fingers sped through several screens. "Nothing yet."

While Sasha was scrolling, I texted Josh and Tiffany to stay out of the refrigerator until the utility restored the power. That would keep the food cold longer, just in case.

Tiffany responded immediately with another text. "We're in Gaia. No power outage here."

I showed the text to Sasha. We looked out and saw the security lights on at the warehouse and other buildings on the winery property.

"That's odd," Sasha said. "It appears to be just this building. Let's check the breaker box." She reached below the counter for a flashlight.

We crept down the hallway, past the office and the storage room, to the back door. Taking one stealthy step after another, we reached the doors to the old tornado cellar, which housed the electrical service. I descended the steps slowly, checking for any unwanted visitors. It was empty. I opened the circuit breaker panel door. The lighting circuit breaker was off. I flipped it back on and we had lights.

I leaned against the wall with my hand over my throbbing heart. "How did that happen?"

"Alex, we both know the switch didn't trip itself. And we weren't using anything that would cause a power surge."

I knew she was right, but I felt too overwhelmed by the week to focus on it. "We need to get a lock on the doors, or have the circuit box moved into the building when we remodel. But really, it would be just plain stupid for someone to sneak in just to turn off the lights."

"Yup," Sasha said. "And you can't fix stupid."

I watched Sasha drive down the winery road toward the highway, right before a lightning flash illuminated the sky. During that brief explosion of light, I thought I observed a black truck creeping away from Bliss Creek. The glimpse was so ephemeral I almost convinced myself it was my imagination. Almost.