



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# *Tension in Two Families*

I had an all-staff meeting when we flipped the entry sign to CLOSED. Sasha, Cathy, my son and daughter, and I huddled around one of the tasting room tables. Two people were absent: George, who was not yet out on bail; and Mariama, who was still on the lam.

The first item on the agenda was reviving the winery tours. Josh assured me he could handle the vineyard maintenance and customer tours in George's absence. Tiffany offered to help in the tasting bar and the winery operations, as needed. We agreed to reopen the tours on Monday, with or without George.

Next item was a tipping policy. That generated more discussion. Customers often tipped tour guides at tourism venues, and servers in hospitality, but it was never a practice we adopted. Tipping might not fit the brand image I wanted to convey. I tabled the decision for another day.

Unfortunately, I didn't even know myself what brand image I wanted. "Over the years, we've invested a lot of time and energy in our wine, and the bottle and labels we put them in. But we haven't been as focused on our business brand, Bliss Creek Winery as a whole. What do customers think of us? Are we going in the right direction?"

My questions yielded several seconds of silence, until Cathy spoke, an edge to her voice. "Are you worried that having a vineyard manager involved in a murder investigation might damage your brand? Should George and I pack it up right now?"

"No, no. That's not what I was thinking. With all of us teasing about the angel curse, it made me think about the history of the property. I wondered if we might build on the narrative of Bliss Creek. People always remember an unusual story."

Josh and Tiffany showed interest, but Cathy and Sasha appeared more skeptical.

I continued. "Most people who visit Bliss Creek won't develop the expertise to distinguish nuances of taste the way Cathy does. But they'll remember a satisfying experience, a positive emotion, a memorable story."

More silence.

"George believed our customers expect authenticity and social responsibility," I said. "That's why he pushed the solar project and local ingredients as a guiding principle. He wanted us to prove our commitment to being a sustainable company."

Josh gave a slight cough. "Mom, that's so boring. I mean, we do it and I believe in it. I really do. We're just not giving wine drinkers something to remember us by."

"So, we need a change?" I asked.

Josh and Tiffany shared a look that I interpreted to mean the two of them had discussed this privately. Tiffany nodded slightly to Josh to continue. "The beehives were a good idea. Many people are interested in honeybees, and customers perk up when we talk about using that honey for the mead. You're right about people getting pulled into a story."

"Maybe we can craft an appealing narrative," Tiffany added. "Josh and I were talking about what we could learn from craft beers. You know, how they find creative ways to connect with customers. This could be kinda fun." Tiffany shook her head when Josh opened his mouth, and she floated her palms down in a hold-it motion. I looked from daughter to son to be sure they had finished.

"What do the two of you think?" I asked Cathy and Sasha.

Cathy shrugged. "It's probably a good idea to divert attention away from the murder. I wouldn't want people dressing up as murderer George Westbrook for Halloween." A ragged exhale followed her long inhale.

"Cathy..." I couldn't think of a response to her comment, so I let it pass. A complaining Cathy was inconsistent with her normal personality.

We all shifted our attention to Sasha. She avoided all our eyes before she spoke. "I don't want to sound superstitious, but are we tempting the curse by writing about it? We had joked about it right before the fire in the vineyard. And it wasn't too many days later they arrested George."

"The curse had nothing to do with the fire or the murder," Josh said, barely moderating his tone of voice. He jolted up, knocking over his chair. "Mom, you keep asking if Tiff or I might someday take over the winery. We need to have some input into that and know that we can all make a decent living from it." He cracked his finger knuckles and stormed out the front door.

My heart was pounding. Josh had raised a topic I knew I'd have to discuss with my children. I just didn't expect it to happen in front of Cathy and Sasha. Or anyone else.

Tiffany leaned down to right his chair. "Sorry about that. I should've warned you, Mom. Josh is grumpy because Emma wants to hold off on dating so she can spend time with her family."

"Why is he so upset? He just met her." I wondered if my daughter was exaggerating.

"Yup, three dates in three days and he's hooked. I don't believe in love at first sight, but if I did, Josh would be the poster boy for it."

My Mama-bear instinct kicked in. Was my son being scammed by an imposter? I didn't tell Tiffany that Felicity believed Emma was not David Sorenson's niece. I didn't know if it was a concern or not. Maybe she's a distant relative they simply refer to as a niece. My son is an adult and I can't meddle in his love life. I had to tamp down my emotions about my family and focus on the difficult situation we were all facing.

"I guess we got off-topic," I said. "Let's delay our future planning for another day. For now, our priority is figuring out who murdered Ted Arnold and disproving Agent Gavin Thielker's accusation against George."



Tiffany, Wolf, and I walked home together after Sasha and Cathy left. The sunset glowed on the horizon. We walked past lilies I had planted alongside the travel driveway when my children were toddlers. I breathed in the sweet aroma. "Know what your dad said when he smelled those flowers?"

"What?"

"That they reminded him of being in a funeral home. So, I'd smack him in the gut, even though he had a point."

I kicked a pebble, listening to it plop several feet ahead of us. "I wasn't aware you and Josh felt left out in the future planning for the winery. With both of you in college, I wanted to avoid pressuring or obligating you to take over the business. You both have your own lives to live that might have nothing to do with making and selling wine and mead."

"We know that. We also know you're not ready to retire. And we're kinda wondering about you and Zach."

"What do you mean?"

Tiffany leaned over to scratch Wolf's head. "Is Zach going to have a role in Bliss Creek's future?"

I came to a sudden halt and looked at my daughter. "Whatever happens between Zach and me won't change things for you and Josh."

"Are you guys serious?"

"Darned if I know. We haven't even had an actual date yet."

Tiffany tilted her head and gave me a speculative look. "I get that. I sometimes wonder about Brendan even though we started going out over a year ago." Her boyfriend, Brendan, had a research internship at the hospital, and he'd kept me informed while Zach was in a coma. She had a faraway look on her face before she diverted her attention to a text message. "OMG, gotta go. Brendan just brought home a new puppy." She sped toward the garage.

"Bye," I said to the empty air, experiencing a moment of motherhood melancholy. "It was great talking to you."



After my adult children left, my phone buzzed, interrupting my train of thought. It was Luna.

"Have you started supper yet?" she asked.

"Not even on my radar."

"Good. Let's grab a meal at Casa da Mia."

"Mexican twice in one week?"

Luna took a few moments to respond. "I... I just feel we should be there tonight."

Having learned to not question her instincts, I segued to another topic. "Could we meet behind Hotel Celestine?"

"Are you hoping to find murder clues the feds missed?"

"Not exactly. I'm hoping *you* can. See you in twenty."

Luna was already waiting for me at the mouth of the alley where the crime scene markings were barely visible.

"Feel anything?" I asked my psychic friend.

Luna closed her eyes and took slow, deep breaths. "You know this isn't something I can do on command," she said without opening her eyes.

"Hush. Just try."

The sounds of tourists floated through Gaia. Car doors slammed, laughter percolated. A slight breeze tickled my arms. Disjointed conversations from restaurant patio diners reached our ears. I smelled bacon, probably from Burger Cove. My stomach growled.

"Anything?" I prompted.

"Not much." Luna opened her eyes. "I sense anger, perhaps hatred, but it's amorphous. My gift isn't as strong as what some other people have. Sorry."

"Could we try one more thing? Let's sit on that bench." I pointed to the park across the alley.

As soon as we sat down, Luna smiled. "There's a distinctly unique feeling here. It's lighter, not quite happiness. Hope, maybe?"

"This is the bench where Mariama talked with Ted. She showed him the picture he was in with her mother. From what she told me, hope is the correct emotion. She thought Ted might accept that she was his daughter. I haven't heard from or seen her since Monday, and that worries me. Especially since Dot Harrison saw them together right before Ted's murder."

"Are you worried she might have done something to Ted?"

"My gut says no, especially since you said that feelings of hope emerged when you sat on the bench."

Luna closed her eyes again. "I feel no negative emotions here." Then she focused her gaze on me. "From a police procedure perspective, you know my empathic sensations are irrelevant."

"I know. I'm just wrestling with the presumption that Mariama would have inherited Ted's property if he didn't change his will. Any red-blooded prosecutor could use that as a motive."

"I'm sure Nika and Agent Thielker are well-aware of that."

"That's what worries me."



Mia Espinoza waited on us when we sat down at Casa da Mia. She appeared more uncomfortably pregnant than she had when we ate at the restaurant a few days earlier.

"Is everything okay?" I asked her.

"Franco had to meet with a supplier today and he will be gone until tomorrow. I'm not due for a couple of weeks, but I started having those false labor pains." She scrunched her face, whether in concentration or pain, I wasn't sure. "What are they called?"

"Braxton Hicks?" I offered. "Do you need help?"

"My mother is in the kitchen, and I won't be serving any more customers today. I'll close up here as soon as everyone finishes their meals. Then I'll go home and put my feet up. I'll be fine. But if I can suggest the fish tacos to you, that would help. Someone canceled a takeout order after we had already made it, and I would need to throw the food out otherwise. And that would save my mother from making another order. It's on the house."

"Perfect," I said. "We planned to order that, anyway. In fact, I'll walk you to the counter and bring them back to the table myself, *after* I pay for them."

After returning with the food, I realized I was famished. Apparently, my recent trauma had done nothing to diminish my appetite.

Luna took a bite of her taco, then licked the sauce off her finger before it dribbled down. "David Sorenson was at the Sunflower today for lunch with his wife and niece."

"Oh?"

"I wonder if she really is his niece. Or even related."

That made me straighten up. "Why do you say that?"

"Partly gut. She was evasive when I threw her a few softball questions about the family. David jumped in with answers."

Chewing my taco, I let the words sink in before I swallowed. "Felicity has suspicions, too. She couldn't find any record of a niece when she did a backgrounder for an article about her." I wiped my chin with the back of one hand as I grabbed for a napkin with the other. "Josh and Tiff think she knows Liam Briggs better than she lets on. Is it coincidental she started around the time of Ted's murder?"

Looking over Luna's shoulder, I saw Mia frantically beckoning me. There was panic in her eyes. Luna and I rushed over.

"My water broke and I'm in labor," she whispered with tears in her eyes. "Franco is gone and I have a restaurant half-filled with customers."

"I'll take you to the hospital," I said.

"But what about...?" She swept her arm toward the dining room.

Luna gave her a hug. "Sweetie, from one food establishment owner to another, I'm sure I can help your mother button things up. Let Alex take care of you." She looked at me. "Why don't you bring your car to the door? I'll call the hospital and then try to reach Franco."

I ran to the parking lot two blocks away to retrieve my car. My side ached, and a cramp snaked up my calf, but I made it in record time. When I started the car, the still-present *check engine* light made me curse myself for not getting it fixed sooner. I patted the steering wheel. "Don't crap out on me now. Mia needs you."

Luna was bracing Mia as I pulled up. After helping her into the car, she said, "I'll call LifeCare Hospital to be sure they know the situation when you get there."

I nodded, then offered a silent prayer. The last time I was at LifeCare was after Zach's bee-sting-induced coma. And I hadn't faced an emergency delivery since my time on the police force decades ago. '*You can handle it, Alex*,' I coached myself.

Mia's eyes were closed, and sweat dripped down her face. The pain was visible. Her moans grew to near screams.

"Hang in there, Mia. We're almost at the hospital. Breathe." I reached over and squeezed her hand. It felt clammy.

She emitted a strident Spanish curse as I turned onto the hospital driveway. My car screeched and stopped working. With control, I coasted it to the emergency entrance. A nurse came out with a wheelchair. When Mia collapsed after exiting the car, the nurse called for a gurney. "The baby is coming NOW!" she shouted. They whisked Mia into the emergency ward.

I stood next to my dead car, wondering what to do with it. A couple of good Samaritans in the hospital saw my dilemma and helped me push the car into a designated parking spot.

Less than 20 minutes later, I entered the building. Reception filled me in on Mia's location and informed me she was in the middle of giving birth.

"When may I see her?" I asked a nurse.

"I don't know. She's been asking for Alex. I assume that's her husband."

"Her husband is Franco. He's out of town. I'm Alex. I brought her in."

"Ah, she barely made it in time."

"Is she okay?"

Just then, we heard the cry of a baby.

"Let me check." The nurse entered a screened cubicle where Mia's emergency delivery had taken place. "Yes, mother and son are doing fine. You can let her know you're here."

I tiptoed toward the bed where Mia lay, eyes closed. "Mia?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Alex, they said everything is okay. Is that true?"

I nodded.

"Does Franco know?"

"Luna said she'd call him. He'll be here as soon as he can."

"Will you stay with me until he gets here?"

I nodded again.

A nurse slid the curtains open. "We're going to move her to a maternity room. Could you please transfer to the third floor waiting area until we call you? Mrs. Espinoza put your name, her mother's, and Luna Dominic on a list of visitors. Please stop in the lobby and get a visitor's pass before going up."

I waved at Mia as they wheeled her toward the elevator.



The clock on the wall was enormous. It seemed strange to have such a visible display of time in an area where eternity stretches while people are awaiting updates on friends and family. But absent the clock, they would check their watches or phones, anyway.

I called Tiffany and Josh to let them know I'd be home late. Then I called Luna. "Mia and Franco have a son."

"Whoa, that was fast."

"Is that why you felt we needed to be at Casa da Mia tonight?"

"Sweetie, I don't know the answer to that. Sometimes I just get a feeling so strong I have to act on it."

"Did you reach Franco?"

"Yes, he'll be there in a couple of hours. Mia's mother and I just finished closing the restaurant. I'll bring her right over."

When I ended the call, a nurse came up and said Mia was ready for visitors. She was sitting in bed, nursing her son, when I stepped into the room. She was clearly exhausted and pale. I walked over to look at the newborn.

"He's beautiful," I said. "How are you feeling?"

"Happy. Relieved. I worried he was going to be born in your car."

That concern had been in my mind, too, but I didn't mention it. "Your mother is on her way here with Luna."

"I truly thank both of you. I... I wasn't sure opening a business in Gaia was a good idea, especially after Franco's fights with Ted Arnold. But now I see there are a lot of good people willing to help us."

I noticed Mia used the word fights, as in plural. I wanted to ask her about that. But this was so NOT the right time. I couldn't believe there was a link between this precious newborn's parents and a murder. "What's his name?"

"Franco and I narrowed it down to two, but now I'm thinking about a third. I must discuss it with my husband." She looked down at the child with the love that only a mother can exhibit. The baby had stopped nursing and had fallen asleep.

A nurse entered, carefully removed the dozing infant from Mia's arms, and placed him in the adjacent crib. "You could use some sleep now," she said to Mia. She motioned for me to sit in the chair beside the bed before continuing her rounds.

I settled into the chair. "I'll wait here until your mother comes."

Almost immediately, Luna appeared with Mia's mother. They both oohed over the bebé before I surrendered my chair to Mia's mother.

"It looks like you're in expert hands, now," I said. "I'll check back with you tomorrow."

Luna and I walked out to the parking garage. "Where are you parked?" she asked.

"I'm not sure *parked* is the correct term to use." I explained how my car was DOA, barely making it to the emergency room door. "Can you give me a ride?"

"Sure. I can take you back to Bliss Creek. That will give us time to discuss what happened after you left Casa da Mia."