



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Weathering the Storms

I sat on the floor of my screen porch petting Wolf. Or was I hugging him for support? The thunder was louder and the lightning more dramatic. The eeriness seeped into my bones, metastasizing the anxiety caused by a murder and its uncertain connection to Bliss Creek. I hoped Sasha made it home before the downpour started.

What was going on? Isn't it enough that my vineyard manager (whom I believed was innocent, by the way) is the prime suspect in the murder of a white supremacist? What's the obsession with the trivial pursuit of Nazi cryptography?

My phone rang. I was going to ignore it until I felt the corners of my mouth turn up when I saw who it was.

"Hi, Zach."

"How was the bus tour?"

"Well..." I was embarrassed Zach had remembered it, even though I hadn't.

"Uh-oh. A small crowd because of the approaching storm?"

"No, it wasn't. In fact, we had an unexpectedly profitable evening. The thing is, I forgot about it and hadn't scheduled extra staff. It was just Sasha and me until I called the kids."

"Wait. You're telling me you postponed our dinner date to serve a bus tour you forgot about? Sounds like I rank low on the totem pole of importance."

I thought he was joking, but I didn't know him well enough to be sure. "In my defense, there's a murder investigation possibly implicating one of my employees."

"So, it's definitely a homicide now?"

I told him about the German Mother's Cross under Ted's body with George's fingerprints on it.

A crescendo of thunder culminated in a boom that shook the house. The lights flickered briefly, but stayed on. Wolf leaned against me, or me against him. I'm still not sure.

"And there's another thing," I continued. "The light circuit tripped during the storm, but nothing else was affected."

"Is there anything else on that circuit?"

Nothing comes to mind that could have caused it to trip.

After a pause, Zach said, "I suppose it's theoretically possible that some stray voltage overloaded something during the storm. It's something to have checked out. Did you call Sheriff Marx?"

"And tell her what, that I need an electrician?"

"Alex—"

"Maybe I should tell her it's the curse." Angst was burning me into a b**, I mean, a grump.

"Alex, stop. Are Josh or Tiff home?"

"Nope, just Wolf and me."

"Why don't I swing by? I could be there in 20 minutes."

I watched flashes of light in the sky as I contemplated Zach's offer. I sensed he was sincere, even given this early stage in our relationship. But dang it, this isn't some sappy romance novel where I'm the damsel in distress. I'm an accomplished business owner, a determined mother, and a rookie covert operative. "No, it's getting late. One or both kids should be home soon."

"Why don't you join me at the campaign event tomorrow night?"

"Zach, we haven't even been on an actual date yet. Don't you think it would be awkward having me accompany you to your fund-raiser? Especially given Bliss Creek's connection to a murder investigation? It's politically negative for a congressional candidate." We both knew I had a valid point, but I suspected he wouldn't acknowledge it. I was correct.

"I disagree, but I can tell by the tone of your voice you've decided."

"Could I ask you a few questions?"

"Sounds ominous, but go ahead."

"While looking at news articles about Ted and the problems he's had with people in Gaia, I came across one describing how he had brought a major lawsuit against you. What was that about?"

Zach paused before responding. "Are you worried that I might have had it in for him? That I am responsible for what happened to him?"

"That's not what I'm asking," I said, even though it was exactly what I was asking. "I was just surprised that I had never heard about the lawsuit."

"The suit evaporated so fast Felicity didn't even have time to write about it for the Gaia Gazette. It was an inconvenience and nothing more. And Nika has already verified that I was with the mayor during the entire parade."

Part of me felt like a schmuck for bringing this up, but part of me was relieved that Zach had an alibi. I hoped I hadn't damaged our nebulous relationship.

After we ended the call, I wondered if we would ever be a normal couple. I went through a string of bad online dates, including living with a self-centered jerk. The situation with Zach seemed different. We didn't connect through a dating app. It started off badly when his real estate development company offered to buy my property and I didn't trust (or even like) him. A close rapport developed after I administered CPR for his severe allergic reaction to multiple stings from my bees. I even thought my deceased husband, Matt, gave him the thumbs up. And Wolf, my barometer for people judging, loved the man.

Then another thought struck me. How could he be here in twenty minutes? He'd practically have to be on my property to get here so fast. Where was he calling from?



Car doors slamming and muted laughter wafted in from the driveway. The sounds jolted me from my half-sleep on a lounge chair on the porch. Truth be told, my head was hanging down with a drip of drool in the corner of my mouth. I wiped it with the back of my hand as I stood up. My joints crackled and popped so loudly the sound startled Wolf.

Josh and Tiffany entered from the mudroom after I stepped into the kitchen and locked the patio door behind me.

"You're both in good moods. I hope one of you was a designated driver."

"Mom, we each had one beer," Josh said, "and that was over two hours. We had one of our best trivia nights ever." My son and daughter high-fived each other.

"I always knew I had the two brightest students in Gaia."

"Josh was lucky to team up with Emma or he would've bombed."

"Emma?" I should have faked recognition, but I couldn't remember.

"David Sorenson's niece," Josh answered. "You met her Monday night at Casa da Mia."

"Oh, the new intern at the Visitor's Bureau? I remember her now."

"The honey operation intrigued her. Seems her college friends started a bee farm, and she wondered how many people are allergic to bee stings and need to keep an EpiPen on the ready."

"What did you tell her?"

"We told her Zach Taylor was extremely allergic, and that we had stocked auto-injectors ever since Zach had that attack earlier this year."

I searched my brain to recall any other examples. "Some June Fest visitors or food vendors might keep EpiPens for allergies. Shellfish, fish, and nuts—besides stings from bees, wasps, and yellow jackets—can trigger allergic responses. Regarding Emma, it shouldn't be a major impediment to her friends starting a honey business." Even as the words escaped my lips, I wondered how much Emma knew about the role of epinephrine in Ted's death.

"Mom?" Josh snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"Sorry, I got distracted. Back to trivia night. You said Emma was a valuable teammate?"

"She was phenomenal in most topics," Josh said. "But in the history segment, she missed some basic questions about the Holocaust. That surprised me, given her uncle's outspoken advocacy on the topic. I figured she would have been well-versed in her family history."

I smiled at my son. "Emma's a generation removed. She won't feel as close to her relatives killed in Auschwitz as her uncle is."

"It was more than that. There was something off about her tonight."

"I'm with Josh on this," Tiffany said. "Emma seemed uncomfortable when we asked her about her uncle. She asked a lot of questions about George, Ted, Franco, and even Zach Taylor. Later she seemed to know Liam Briggs when he stopped by the bar, even though she said she didn't know him." She paused, then smirked at her brother. "But she and Josh get along well."

Darn—I could swear my son blushed.

The conversation briefly paused. The gears in my brain were processing the disjointed facts about Emma. I became convinced there was more to her than being a summer intern. I kept those speculations to myself. I also became uncomfortable as I thought about Emma's questions about Zach, since he consistently keeps an Epi-Pen available. I forced my brain to shift gears. "Before you head up to your rooms, I have a couple of questions about work today. Any customers lingering around the store when you left?"

Tiffany shook her head and Josh pursed his lips before Tiff asked, "Why?"

"The lights went out in the winery, and I sort of wondered if someone turned them off in the storm cellar, maybe on a dare or a statement of dissatisfaction caused by canceling our winery tours."

"That's creepy," Tiffany said. "But so were one or two customers. I had one guy ask me about the memorial service for Ted Arnold, the schedule, location—stuff like that. He became angry when I said I didn't know and mumbled something about all the employees in on it together. Then he threw some money for his bill on the counter and stomped out. After he left, I noticed one coin was foreign and looked old. It may have been a Nazi coin like you found near the vineyard. I didn't take time to look at it. I threw it in the tip jar."

Josh elbowed his sister. "We don't have a tip jar."

"I know." She half-chuckled and half-snorted. "But some people apparently thought that's what the empty mug was for."

Note to self—revisit our policy about tipping at some point, just not now. "Getting back to that customer, have you seen him before? Can you describe him?" I knew eyewitness reports weren't always reliable. Occasionally, they could provide insights. Unfortunately, reliability decreased as time passed, making it important to draw out mental images as soon as possible.

"You think he might be the person who turned off the power to the lights?"

"I don't know. The thought crossed my mind, but it's unlikely it was someone from the bus given the elapsed time." I wiped the last bit of drool off my chin. "Back to the coin. Who left it on the counter?"

"Sorry," Tiffany said. "We were so busy..." She raised her arms in a half-shrug.

I knocked my knuckles against each other. "You just remembered a bunch of trivia in a bar game. Maybe you can recall some trivial details from earlier today."

Tiffany plopped down on a stool and leaned her elbows on the island. "Let me think. His shirt was colorful—maybe a Hawaiian print. He reminded me of a bouncer like you'd see in old detective shows on TV, except he looked like he may have been in his fifties or sixties, same as a lot of the people on the bus tour." She drummed her fingers on the counter. "He really pissed me off."

Tiffany's comment about the Hawaiian shirt reminded me about Felicity's observation about the common attire for Bulwark Boys. The men who chased us away from the rally on Ted's property had muscles, and perhaps guns, beneath their island garb.

Josh squelched Tiffany's finger drumming with his hand. "I know who you're talking about. The guy who acted like he had a stick up his—"

"Josh!"

"Well, he did, Mom. He acted as if he was in enemy territory, on some sort of reconnaissance mission." He snapped his fingers. "You know what I just remembered? He was at Luna's psychic program during June Fest. He was wearing a drab t-shirt then. That's why I didn't recognize him right away. But after Larry the Jerk almost derailed Luna's readings, I saw them leave together."



Sitting in a chair in my bedroom, I was glad I wasn't alone at home that night. Still, it increased my worry for my family's safety. Is it possible we were being targeted because the people attending Ted's rally assumed we were harboring his killers? Or were they against Bliss Creek because our employees included a Native American, a newly naturalized Nigerian American citizen, and an anti-supremacy advocate?

Another front followed the storm that had passed through hours earlier. Flashes of light preceded a distant rumbling. I got up and checked the locks on all the doors and windows. I pondered adding extra security when I would become a full-time empty-nester.

When I returned to my bedroom, the intensity of the rain increased, as did the thunder and lightning. The house foundation trembled with each boom. I glanced out the bedroom window searching for a truck silhouette as a series of bolts lit up the entire sky. There was nothing except for an echo of the sensation I experienced detecting the truck after Sasha left.

My heart pounded, a deafening roar in my ears. I hugged myself and stepped against the wall next to the glass pane, still peering out the window. Bliss Creek was miles out in the country and my home was even farther from civilization. There's no way a truck would pass by the driveway without a reason, and my observation had been well over an hour ago.

I stayed immobile until the next flash again revealed no truck in the vicinity. Had I imagined it?

After debating whether to wake Josh and Tiffany, I thought it best to check things out first. The house was dark, and I left it that way. If someone was outside, I wanted the element of surprise. With flashlight in hand, I crept down the stairs.

Step-by-step, I listened to the creaks of the old building providing the soprano notes to the bass of the ominous thunder. The whistle of the wind through the vineyard completed the symphony. Wolf padded alongside me, uncertain where we were going. I looked down at him. "I don't know why I'm here either, Big Guy. It seems like a cliched scene from a B-grade horror movie."

The rat-a-tat-tat of hail pinged against the roof. "Wolf, how is it possible that Tiffany and Josh can sleep through this?" I felt a pang of loneliness for Matt. If he were still alive, we'd be snuggling in bed, with me nudging him every so often to roll over and stop snoring. Or maybe we'd be downstairs checking the house together.

I reached the main floor. The wind was ferocious, screaming and beating its fists against the house. The rolling thunder continued its crescendos and pianissimos, as lightning reverberated across the sky. How much wind and hail damage has the vineyard suffered? Are my new (and expensive!) bee hives still intact? What about the solar panels?

After several more cracks and bellows, the storm softened into an eerie whimpering. I circled the main floor, peering out each window as I passed. No signs of life, only the storm outside. No cars, no people, no potential intruders lurking in the shadows.

With a sense of anticlimax, I returned to my bedroom. I climbed into bed and lay motionless, listening to the shifting weather. Shadowy images danced along the walls with each lightning blitz.

A tingling sixth sense coursed through my body. Something from tonight lingered in my subconscious, trying to force its way to the front of my brain.

I just couldn't figure out what it was. Maybe I'd figure it out by morning.