



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# *The Suspect List Shortens*

**E**ven with just a few hours of sleep, I woke almost refreshed Friday morning. The mouth-watering smell of coffee lured me into Luna's kitchen, where there were already breakfast sandwiches from the café.

"Morning, Sunshine," Luna greeted me.

"Back at you. Did you get any sleep?"

"About the same as you. But there are occasional advantages to living above my bakery and café." She poured me a mug of coffee and we sat in her octagonal breakfast nook.

"Do you mind if I take care of a few things right away?" I asked as I raised my phone.

She acknowledged with a thumbs up.

My first contact was to a towing company to haul my car somewhere for repair. I ate my sandwich as I waited on hold, listening to scratchy music with a repeated message I was important and I should stay on the line. When I finally reached a person, we arranged for the car to be towed and repaired, with what I hoped was a realistic goal of being available by late afternoon.

Next, I reached out to Agent Thielker. After several rings, I expected the call to roll to voicemail and almost hung up before the FBI agent answered. "Good morning, Mrs. Mandiera. What can I do for you?"

"Just checking the status of the investigation."

Thielker's annoying pen clicking started again. "You know we have George Westbrook in custody as the prime suspect. Beyond that, I'm not at liberty to say anything."

"I see." I tried to find a pen to click into the phone, but the only writing instrument I could find on Luna's table was a pencil. "Have you determined the significance of the Nazi artifacts?"

"Why do you ask? Did—" He dropped the question abruptly, as if catching himself before divulging information he shouldn't.

"No reason, it seemed a logical question."

"Okay, then. I'll contact you if I have any news you need to know." He didn't even bother to say goodbye before ending the call.

"Well?" Luna asked.

"The guy needs customer service 101 lessons. Based on his abruptness, I assume he found out something he's not willing to share with the public."

After finishing breakfast, I pulled out my phone again. I texted Nika. *"Found a can't fix stupid note on my car at the hospital."*

She responded almost immediately. *"Where are you?"*

*"Across the street from your office, upstairs at Luna's."*

*"Be right there."*

Minutes later, Nika joined us at the table, cradling a cup of coffee from Luna. "Do you have the note with you?"

I slid it across the table to her. "Can you tell if the handwriting looks anything like the scribble near Ted's body?"

She rubbed her lower lip with her thumb and forefinger. "It's impossible to say. A scratched message in rock-hard dirt looks nothing like the printing of words on paper. We're expecting a handwriting expert today, and this additional note might shed new light on the investigation." She slipped the note into an evidence bag. "I'm not sure how to explain to Thielker why you thought it might be important enough to give to me. The precise message from the crime scene is still being withheld." She stared at the bag in her hands. "At least this is a fact in George's favor. With him in custody, he couldn't have placed the note on your car. Thielker has already suggested his next line of inquiry could focus on people with known allergies who have ready access to epinephrine."

"Like Zach?"

"Fortunately, Zach has an alibi. Thielker simply wants to maintain the perception of thoroughness, so he's expanding his line of inquiry."

"Now what?"

"I'll try to stay in the loop as much as I can, but you know the drill."

"There's one more thing."

"What did you do, Alex?" Nika scolded me.

I raised my hands in a surrender position. "Nothing. I simply failed to tell you someone turned off the lights in the winery Wednesday night by flipping the switch in the circuit breaker box."

She glared at me. "And you thought that was unimportant, why?" This time, she raised her voice a notch.

"Nika, at the time I just wanted to take a breather and forestall a migraine. I can't prove anything and it seemed small in the big scheme of things."

"Anything happen during the power outage? Was anything missing?"

"Not that I could tell. I think it was a scare tactic like the note. A message for me to stay out of the investigation."

"I'm on the clock, so I have to get back at it." Nika gulped the rest of her coffee before fixing her gaze on me. "While I'm gone, stay out of trouble." The door closed softly as her footsteps descended the stairs.

Luna stifled a yawn as she raised her arms in a morning stretch before leaning on her elbows to face me. "Let's take a fresh look at everything we discussed related to Ted's death. Have we completely ruled out suicide?"

"I wondered the same thing, but we need to start with Thielker's presumption of murder."

"Okay, someone wrote *'can't fix stupid'* near his body. The apparent cause of death was epinephrine overdose. He was clutching the German Mother's Cross shoved into his hands by George. There was no epinephrine syringe found in the alley. If Ted committed suicide, why was there no injector in the vicinity? Dot was the only witness to come forward, and the only people she identified were Mariama and George, suggesting they were the only people who would have seen or inscribed the *'can't fix stupid'* message."

"True," I said, "but what if there was someone else Dot didn't see? That person could have argued with Ted, stabbed him with a needle, and scratched out the hieroglyph. Maybe that person was angry that Mariama was Ted's daughter and considered the situation so stupid that the only fix was murder."

"Alex, even if what you're saying makes sense, we have no proof. The person you're describing could be Larry, or it could be a dozen other people. It's also possible to argue that Mariama was angry about her father's disownment, that she knew about the Mother's Cross and the message, that she has access to your auto-injectors, and that she could have even placed the note on your car."

I almost spat out the pastry I was eating. "Hey, whose side are you on? Let's reconsider the situation. One, I'd be willing to bet the winery—figuratively speaking—that Larry was involved. Two, Sasha said she saw Mariama talking with Liam and some woman right before she went off-grid, suggesting she likely had FBI intervention. And three, the auto-injectors were in stock at Bliss Creek until after Ted died."

"I agree with you, Alex, even if I am sometimes the devil with a counterargument."

"I know; it's one reason I value your input. Even though we have speculated about the FBI's role with Mariama, I am still concerned that she has been out of reach for nearly a week. I wonder whether Liam or Emma can shed some light on that."

"The same thought flowed through my head. Let me check downstairs to make sure everything is running smoothly in the café before I drive you back to the winery. With luck, we can catch Liam at the solar install."



Liam's black truck was near the warehouse where Jose and his crew were cleaning up. The installed roof panels were being inspected.

"You're right on time," Liam greeted me. "We just finished."

After reviewing the installation and scanning the bill, I asked Liam to join us at my house for coffee and to answer a few questions.

After we sat on the screen porch, Liam looked at me, then at Luna, then back at me. "Is something wrong?"

"Do you know where Mariama is?" I asked. "Sasha saw you and Emma—or whatever her name is—talking with Mariama right before she went missing."

Liam rose and sauntered toward the porch edge. "What has Nika told you?"

"Nothing," I said. "She avoided all my questions. Luna and I began putting the puzzle together, and we figured Emma is FBI, working undercover with Thielker. David must know what's going on since she's staying at his house. And we figure it has something to do with RogueWave. But we weren't sure where your role came in."

Liam returned to his chair without comment. I sat on my hands and waited. I *literally* sat on my hands to remind myself to keep my mouth shut; it was hard. Finally, I blurted out, "I just need to know Mariama is safe."

Liam nodded slowly. "She is. The FBI moved her temporarily for her own protection. That's all I can tell you."

"Do you know anything about the case against George?"

"I told you more than I should have," Liam reiterated. "I'm sorry." He stood up. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll check in next week to follow up."

As the door closed behind Liam, I turned toward Luna. "What do you think?"

"Liam is clearly under strict orders to maintain confidentiality, but I believe him. At least we know Mariama is okay."

My phone buzzed with a text from the car shop that my Prius was ready to be picked up. Luna took me back into Gaia before leaving to provide a couple of readings for her clients. The parking lot was full by the time I returned to the winery.



Scandal attracts people, like click bait on social media. Customers had heard suspicions about Ted's death and that Bliss Creek's vineyard manager was in custody. Cathy couldn't face them and remained in her wine lab. Both my kids (and Wolf) were gone for a Friday night camping trip with friends. Sasha and I fielded nosy questions as we poured flights of wine.

During a lull, I brought Sasha up to date on Mia's baby, Franco's surgery, the note on my car, and the conversation with Liam. I also mentioned that Luna and I still wondered about suicide.

"Wow," Sasha said.

"Is that all you have to say?"

Sasha didn't respond, but Cathy did as she entered the room. "It appears Liam and David are in the clear, but George is still in custody."

I looked up at my winemaker. "That's true, but we haven't given up. We know George is innocent; we just need to prove it. Can you tell us any more about the guy George recognized at Luna's psychic show last week?"

Cathy sat down, with arms defiantly crossed. "You probably know he was one of those Bulwark Boys. He never gave up the cause like George did." She air-quoted 'the cause.'

"Did George have a conversation with him?"

"Briefly. Randy—that's his name—Randy said Ted had a life insurance policy with RogueWave as the beneficiary. They expressed concern that Ted was having second thoughts."

I raised my eyebrows as I glanced at Sasha. "Second thoughts about what, 'the cause' or his insurance policy?" I air-quoted 'the cause' as Cathy had.

"I don't know. I struggled with the whole white supremacy thing too much to pay attention. I just remember George saying something about it being a good thing that Ted had finally wised up."

"Did you tell that to Nika or Agent Thielker?" I asked.

"Not to Nika. I think I told the FBI agent, and he acted like it wasn't important."

Jingles from the front door signaled the lull was over. We shifted back to customer service mode and assisted customers with their wine selections until the close of day. Even while focusing on the hubbub in the shop, my mind kept drifting back to unanswered questions about Ted's death, the FBI, and the meaning of the Nazi artifacts. I looked forward to a flash of insight during the evening lineup at the Sunflower Café.