



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# *Unexpected Twists*

The blaring of an ambulance siren carried into the open-air parking structure, almost drowning out our conversation. It also triggered a thought in my brain. I snapped my fingers. "You know what? My car is still in the emergency parking lot. I better leave a note that I'll move it in the morning. It shouldn't be an issue, but I want to avoid a ticket, or at least avoid having it towed."

We returned to the lobby and followed the corridor toward the emergency room. Being after visiting hours, the gift shop was closed and the volunteer greeting station was empty. The building muffled the clangs, honks, and shrieks of the rescue vehicle. There was an abrupt cessation of the siren as the ambulance reached its destination. I felt both relief and sadness at the thought of a person requiring immediate medical attention. When we exited the main foyer to the ER corridor, the door behind us locked. We had to proceed past the ER.

The sudden pandemonium of a team racing outside with a gurney thwarted our progress. The driver exited the ambulance and opened the rear doors. The EMT disconnected the patient from the vehicle monitor and assisted the transfer to the stretcher. There was a visible law enforcement presence, even though he appeared immobile. A nurse was inserting an I.V. Another was shouting vital signs. A doctor was barking commands.

The patient reached a hand toward the nurse, whispering in a voice I somehow recognized but barely heard. "Please don't let me die. My wife..."

"You're not dying on my shift," the nurse said to him. "Ain't gonna happen."

Felicity, in an uncharacteristic and unkempt ensemble of blue jeans and sweatshirt, was snapping pictures. I assumed she had been unprepared for volatile journalistic reporting at that moment.

"What happened?" I asked her.

"Road rage," she replied. "Franco Espinoza. Just checking whether this was an accident. Sorry, I can't talk now." She pushed past us and left soon after being prevented by security from going any farther.

Luna and I watched in stunned silence. I glimpsed briefly at Franco's ashen face as they wheeled him away from us. My mind drifted to his wife and new baby upstairs in the maternity ward.

I turned to Luna. "We need to go back and give Mia moral support when she finds out about Franco." Before Luna could respond, I yanked her behind a corridor wall and pointed to the driveway beyond the ambulance. "Look who's talking with Agent Thielker."

She poked her head around the corner. "Emma Sorenson."

We observed what appeared to be a serious dialog between professional colleagues. "Think she's FBI?" I asked.

"That would explain a lot, wouldn't it? And it suggests to me there's more going on than investigating George for Ted's murder."

Emma and Thielker glanced around, as if feeling eyes boring into them. Luna and I jerked back out of sight and slunk down the corridor. We were lucky to reach the locked door just as someone came through and we could slip back into the lobby. Fortunately, we still had our visitor's passes. Upon reaching the elevator, I pressed the button for the floor of the maternity ward. I nudged Luna with my elbow. "What happened at Casa da Mia after I left for the hospital?"

Luna puffed out a long breath. "Shortly after you left, and the last of the customers departed, Mia's mother and I started cleaning the restaurant. There was a loud banging on the front door, and I walked over to tell whomever it was the restaurant had closed early. It was Agent Thielker."

"What did he want?"

"He said he had to talk with Franco immediately because there was new information regarding Ted's death. I explained what had happened—that Franco was out of town and you had taken his wife to the hospital—but he acted like I was hiding something. He asked—more like demanded—I step aside and let him enter. So, that's what I did. He scared the bejabbers out of Mia's mother. She has an innate fear of authority and doesn't speak English fluently."

"Jerk face. That must have been rough on her. Then what happened?"

"Nothing. He couldn't grill either Franco or Mia. I didn't have a clue what he was after. Then he *stormed* out without so much as an apology. I locked the door behind him and saw him conferring with Emma. At first, I wasn't sure who she was, but after seeing them together here, I am sure now."

"The plot gets even thicker. Did Thielker say anything else?"

"No, but he was definitely in a hurry."

The elevator doors opened, and we progressed toward Mia's room. As we approached the doorway, we heard a muffled conversation, followed by sobs. I stopped and looked at Luna with a slight shrug. *Should we continue?* She nodded and motioned toward the door.

Nika was sitting in a chair next to the bed, holding Mia's hand. Mia's mother was standing on the opposite side of the bed, dabbing her nose with a tissue. They all looked toward the door as we entered.

Mia raised her arm toward me and waved me inside. "Alexi! You've been my guardian angel today. I'm so glad you're still here. Franco's been in an accident."

I reached out to take her hand, and she pulled me toward her in a frantic hug. Her tears moistened my shoulder as I sat on the bed next to her. After a few moments, I stood up. Luna walked to Mia's mother, wrapping her in a one-armed embrace.

Mia gazed at her newborn in the crib alongside the bed. "I hope Franco will meet his son soon."

"Franco is in surgery," Nika said as she offered me her chair. "I think Mia and her mother would appreciate it if you stayed with them until he's out. I need to get back to the station pronto."

"How bad is it?" I mouthed to her.

"He was semi-conscious when they brought him in. We'll know more soon." She nodded toward the hallway and I followed her out. "I'm going to post a deputy outside Mia's room, just in case."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I'm not at liberty to share a lot of details, but we've uncovered some credible racist threats."

"By 'we', do you mean the FBI?"

"Yes."

"Is Emma part of the agency?"

We both turned our attention toward the ding of elevator doors opening. Nika conveniently left my question unanswered and met her deputy as he emerged from the elevator. She stuck her arm in to prevent the doors from closing as she gave him instructions. Then she looked at me. "Alex, call me if anything comes up. You can head out once Franco is done with surgery." She zipped into the elevator as it shrieked its angry warning that she had kept the doors open too long.

A male nurse approached to announce Mia needed some rest. Gesturing toward the waiting room, he assured me he would inform us about Franco—as per Mia's directive—as soon as he was out of surgery.

Luna and I settled into the stiff chairs, prepared for a long night. "A week ago today, I was checking wine and mead inventory for June Fest," I said. "The next morning, the world changed."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Actually, I think I do." I looked at the wall clock, the large hands in silent motion. It was nearly midnight. Exhaustion overwhelmed me, yet I needed to figure things out. "Let's assume Emma Sorenson, or whatever her real name is, works for the FBI. They probably set up her internship cover with the Visitor's Bureau way before Ted got killed. And Thielker's involvement was likely underway as well."

"You're thinking they may have suspected there would be trouble during Ted's rally?"

"Nika said the FBI uncovered some credible racist threats, but she didn't say when or where." I returned my focus to the wall clock, not to check the time, but to steady my nerves. "George told me some alt-right websites promoted Ted's rally. If George heard about it, the FBI must have known even more about it."

"Was Ted taken out by some militant anti-white-supremacist trying to prevent the rally?"

"If that's the case, it points another finger at George as a suspect. And George had a hefty collection of Nazi artifacts that his father brought back from World War II."

"Isn't it likely Ted had a similar collection?" Luna asked.

I steepled my fingers and bounced them against my lips. "You could be right. Do you think the rally goers had access to it? Even if they did, why would they kill Ted?"

"That's the million-dollar question. Remind me what you know about the artifacts."

"Sasha and I tried to figure out any trend or pattern to the Nazi stuff." I summarized our discussion about the 2 Reichsmark silver coin, the Valknut, the pilot's medal, and the Enigma rotor.

The nurse who had briefed us earlier approached. We stood, but he shook his head to show there was no news about Franco, and then he pursued his rounds.

Luna continued the conversation as she sat back down. "Each one may have been an attempt at intimidation. The coin reminded George he had sold out; the Valknut medallion linked to my gypsy heritage; the pilot's medal may have been a dig at Liam's stint as an Afghanistan pilot; and David's armband tied him to his Jewish history. I could be wrong, but I'm not convinced any of the artifacts triggered the recipients to commit murder. Anger, frustration, and anxiety, yes, but not to the point of killing."

"Whomever deposited the relics knew something about the history of people who live in Gaia. But was that person trying to instigate violence? And does that person live in Gaia?" I rubbed my eyes with my palms. "There are a couple of things I haven't told you. The FBI now suspects Ted died from an overdose of epinephrine. While both of our auto-injectors were in stock Wednesday, they were gone when Nika and I checked on Thursday after the electrical storm."

Luna remained silent, waiting for me to continue, so I did. "During your psychic reading sessions the first night of June Fest, right after Larry stormed out of the patio, one of the Bulwark Boys immediately followed him. Then George did the same. And it seems the guy who followed Larry was on a bus tour at the winery Wednesday. Tiffany told me he left a foreign coin on the counter as part of his pay for the wine tasting tour. She threw it in the tip jar."

"You don't have a tip jar," Luna said.

"That's a story for another day."

"What else haven't you told me?"

I looked away from Luna. "Wednesday night someone tripped the light circuit at the winery. Later, during the storm, I thought I saw a truck by the warehouse during a flash of lightning. It looked like the one that had run me off the road." After taking a deep breath, I turned toward Luna. "And I keep thinking that Zach has epinephrine at his disposal, and I wonder if that's the skeleton in his closet."

"What does your beekeeper's instinct tell you?"

"It's conflicted. I feel closer to Zach than anyone I've met since Matt died, but we've been trying for over a month to go on a date that keeps getting postponed. Maybe we haven't yet had a date for a reason."

"Maybe. Or perhaps it's just the normal ebb and flow of life. Don't let Larry's comments take on more significance than they should. What else is bothering you?"

"I'm concerned about Franco. He doesn't have a solid alibi for Sunday when Ted died; he gave Mia a Valknut medallion; the restaurant might have epinephrine auto-injectors; and he had a visible argument with Ted on Friday. Do you think there is a connection between Franco's road rage incident and Ted's death? Maybe we're looking at this all wrong. We don't know who scattered the Nazi relics around Gaia, but we *do* know George gave the Mother's Cross to Ted. We had thought there was a connection between the artifacts and Ted's death, but I'm no longer convinced that's the case now. Something is not adding up."

Luna raised her arms into goal-post position, and then slowly lowered her palms toward the ground. "Slow down. You're getting carried away. We might want to continue this conversation at a more private location." She nodded toward Franco's nurse, heading in our direction.

He motioned for us to enter Mia's room. A surgeon followed him and said, "Mrs. Espinoza, the surgery went well. Your husband is in stable condition, but we still have him sedated. He's young and strong and we expect a full recovery. Right now, both of you need some rest and you can see each other in the morning."

Mia crossed herself in what I assumed was a prayer of gratitude. Her smile stretched across her entire face. "Thank you." When the medics left, Luna, Mia, her mother, and I hugged each other. Both Mia and her mother shed tears of joy.

Fatigue set in as the stress of waiting lifted. Luna, looking as tired as I felt, invited me to stay at her house rather than drive out to Bliss Creek.

"Sounds like a plan," I said. "I think I could sleep standing on my head in a closet. I better text Tiffany and Josh with an update and let Sasha know I'll be coming in late again in the morning."

"I have to do the same for the Sunflower."

"But I still want to leave a note on my car," I reminded her.

We retraced our steps to the elevator, down to the lobby, and along the corridor to the emergency room. It was almost empty, eerily different from what we had witnessed hours earlier. I reminded myself this lower level of activity was the norm for a small community like Gaia. We exited the building into the night, security lights bathing the few cars in the lot. As we approached my car, I noticed a piece of paper stuck under the windshield.

"Dang it, it looks like I'm too late to avoid a ticket." But I was wrong.

There was a note flapping under the wiper blade. It said, "*can't fix stupid.*"

Luna and I froze. We scanned the parking lot before dashing toward the relative safety of the hospital. Once inside, I sat on a bench, waiting for the fight-or-flight response to subside.

My hand was still shaking when I clutched my phone. "Who should I call? Nika's probably just getting to sleep. I don't want to call Agent Thielker either, since the content of the scribbled message is not public knowledge. He'd know Nika divulged more than she should have if I say anything about this."

Luna remained standing, her gaze circling the parking lot. "I don't believe anyone is out there now. I think the note was a blatant attempt to scare you."

"Well, it worked." I joined her at the window. "So now what?"

"Let's think about this. George is in custody, so he couldn't have put it there."

I rubbed my eyes with the palms of my hands. "George wouldn't have done—" Then I understood the significance of what she said. "You're right. Someone else is responsible." I felt a tired smile crawl up my face.

"That doesn't prove his innocence. It's simply a fact in his favor that someone else seems to know about the note near Ted's body. And given that Frano arrived here by ambulance, we know he's in the clear as well. Why don't we go home and sleep on it? Our thinking will be clearer in the morning."

We trudged back to the main parking lot and climbed into Luna's car. "What do you think was the road rage that caused Franco's accident?" I asked as I fastened my seat belt.

"Another good question. Given the police presence and security at the hospital, it must have been more than someone driving too slowly."

"You're thinking it was pre-planned road rage?"

"It's a good possibility." Luna drove from the hospital to her apartment over the Sunflower Café.

The cloudless night with a full moon was incredibly calm compared to the previous night's tempest. But a storm was still brewing, and it had nothing to do with the weather.