

## CHAPTER 22

“Uh-oh.” Dixie tapped Parker's shoulder as they approached the address Brew had given her for Garwood Evercamp. “Looks like the lawyer's having a party.”

The handsome two-story Victorian structure sat near enough to Galveston's Silk Stocking District to be considered prime property. A string of garden lights edged the walkway, and cars lined the narrow street for a block in both directions.

Parker slowed the Cadillac to a crawl. “Could be a house warming. Too bad we don't have a gift.”

“For people we don't know?”

“What better way to disarm your host?”

Above the wide staircase, common to Galveston homes built before 1940, an ornate door opened to admit a lean, handsomely bearded man in black tie.

“Never mind,” Dixie said. “I'll stop by tomorrow and catch Evercamp alone.”

“Tomorrow you'll have only one ear to bend. Tonight, captive in that house, are dozens of merry-makers who might know the vanishing watercolorist.”

True, but she hated big parties. And she preferred to know at least one person in any gathering she attended. He maneuvered the Cadillac close to a parked car and turned the lights off without killing the engine.

“Parker, if Garwood Evercamp is related, he might know Sheldon's whereabouts, but random party guests—”

“Are more likely to inadvertently spill juicy tidbits.”

He had her there. Casually inquiring about the artist would draw less suspicion than confronting Evercamp head on with a barrage of questions. Most lawyers, as she could vouch from personal experience, were distrustful by nature.

“You're suggesting we crash a formal affair. I'm wearing jeans, in case you hadn't noticed.” After losing Sheldon at the Kwik Kash, she had given in to Parker's suggestion that they call a tow truck to pick up the taxicab and “regroup” in his double-headed shower. So at least she smelled presentable.

“Look through the windows,” he said. “Not everyone is dressed to the nines.” Even in the feeble ambient light spilling from the Garwood residence Dixie could see his wicked grin as he gave her a shameless once over. “Besides, even in jeans and that saucy red shirt you outclass most women in their silk and diamonds.”

“Coming from a totally biased source.” Dixie sighed. She'd done this before, of course. It could work. “Just drop in and mingle, as if we belong.”

“Who could turn away a pair of charming gift-bearing neighbors?”

“Maybe Sheldon will show up.”

“Might even bring Gennae as his date.”

“We should be so lucky. Now where can we find an appropriate gift at eight-thirty on Saturday night?”

“Liquor store. Wine is always appropriate.” He accelerated and, at the next corner, turned toward the Seawall.

“I remember when a jug of Gallo Hearty Burgundy was a ticket to any bash.”

“Guess I should amend that. Good wine is always appropriate.”

“Hearty Burgundy was good.”

“Passable table wine. In the eighties, when we were young and broke.”

“Parker, I wouldn't have guessed you were ever broke.”

“From a ranch family? Eight kids, to spread the work around? We had a richly rewarding life, but not in terms of pocket money.”

Dixie knew he came from a Montana ranch, which seemed warm and rock-solid compared to his numerous temporary abodes that started in college and continued until he settled in Galveston. Now, in his early forties, Parker seemed to have a knack for attracting money, and it was hard to picture him as a kid wearing knee-sprung jeans and scuffed cowboy boots. She'd never seen a photograph of his family and wondered if she'd ever meet them.

A liquor store on Broadway carried exactly what they needed, including a tall decorative bag to wrap the bottle. Back in Evercamp's neighborhood, with the Cadillac snuggled against a curb three blocks from the party, Dixie spied a familiar figure ahead of them. She nudged Parker and quickened her stride to catch up.

“Farley Short! You're looking well this evening.” He did look better than he had the previous night at Slice's—sparse gray hair neatly combed, well-cut blue suit crisply pressed. Besides being curious about his presence here, Dixie intended to delay him long enough that they could all mount the wide staircase together and enter the house chatting like old friends. “You do remember us, I hope.”

Farley's gentle, faded blue eyes scrutinized her face, then Parker's. “I'm afraid you have the advantage.”

Taking the elderly man's arm, Dixie continued up the stairs.

“Parker, you remember Farley. We met at Slice's. Import-export, forty-six years.” She reached around the man's bony shoulders to lift the doorknocker.

Farley smiled, but his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “I must have tipped a few to bore you with old times. I sold out, turned my business over to a management team before the cruise lines started coming in. Too old for that hullabaloo.”

As he spoke, a woman carrying a champagne glass opened the door. She swayed, sending a ribbon of liquid over the glass rim. A white streak highlighted the side of her ebony chin-length hair, a diamond pendant hovered above a mere hint of cleavage in her long black dress, and her bright smile looked permanently molded in place. It failed to offset the melancholy in her glassy gray eyes.

“Farley, darling, come in! We're just gathering to hear Heidi play.” She laid her cheek alongside the old man's, and her lips made a smooching sound. Then, with only a blink of puzzlement, she offered the same cheek to Dixie. “Don't you look smashing! And a gift! You really shouldn't have, but thank you.”

“A woefully conventional gift for an extraordinary hostess,” Parker murmured.

“My, aren't you a breath of fresh blarney?” Genuine humor twinkled in her gray eyes as she accepted the wine and gave Parker the air kiss in return. “A welcome breath, even if you did bring your own lovely escort.”

The woman winked at Dixie. Then, as slender and supple as a flower stem, she led the way through a wide foyer to a room filled with guests. Dixie felt Parker's broad hand wrap around hers. They made a path through the crowd gathered around a baby grand piano. Dixie liked music, but she loathed the tipsy exuberance of sing-alongs.

A book of sheet music was propped open above the keyboard. A shallow vase of white spider chrysanthemums graced the candelabra position. And on the bench, a girl of about twelve sat round-shouldered, wearing a gauzy yellow dress and a sour expression. Dixie could imagine the petulant voice behind her wide forehead. Really, Mother, why do I have to perform like a trained monkey for your dumb friends?

The instant Heidi began to play, her shoulders squared up a bit. The piece was familiar, classical, and just difficult enough, Dixie calculated, to impress the music aficionados without much risk of embarrassment. When everyone applauded, a gamin smile brightened Heidi's plain face. She stood tall, gave a demur nod, and parted the crowd on her way out—probably to email all her friends that she was the hit of her parents' boring party.

A waiter passed, handing around glasses of champagne. Dixie preferred wine or beer, but no one asked.

"Farley," Dixie whispered. "I've never actually met Mrs. Evercamp before. I'm assuming she's the lady who greeted us."

"Valerie, yes. A lovely woman. I must admit I have only met her a few times myself."

"Didn't you tell me the Evercamps were fairly new to Galveston?" Come-latelies, he'd said.

"I may have mentioned that, yes. They moved here perhaps ten or twelve years ago."

A guest bumped against him and whispered a quick apology, which Farley brushed away with a smile. While his attention was averted, Dixie caught Parker's eye and, with a tilt of her head, motioned him toward Valerie. Go do your stuff.

He got the message and took off.

"Garwood's law practice must be flourishing," Dixie told Farley.

He followed her gaze to the exquisite millwork, period wallpaper, and inlaid wood flooring. "It does appear so. Are you a client?"

"Not quite." Dixie liked to stick as close to the truth as possible. "But I'm hoping he'll have some information for me tonight. I'm surprised not to see Sheldon here."

Farley raised his wispy gray eyebrows. "The son. I rather expect he will be along. Young people tend to keep their own hours."

Snagging a waiter, Farley traded his empty champagne glass for a full one. Dixie looked around for a potted plant where she might dump hers—but then she'd just have to take another glass to be polite.

"Farley, last night—"

"I'm so sorry. I wish I could recall meeting you. You seem to be a very nice woman."

She smiled. "But not a very memorable one, apparently. Doesn't matter. I just wanted to—"

"That tavern you spoke of, I live quite near there, so I do occasionally drop by." He scowled at the champagne left in his glass. "Drop by all of them from time to time. Retirement is a lonely business. Not at all the pleasure I expected."

"Are you a close friend of the Evercamps?"

“Not quite.” He smiled devilishly, and Dixie knew he’d caught her earlier evasion. Farley Short might tip a few, but there was no moss growing on his little gray cells.

“How well do you know his son?”

“Not at all, really. I’ve seen his work—”

A loud clap interrupted him.

“Attention, everyone!” A stubby man with lank gray-blond hair, porcine features, and a robust, rolling voice slapped his hands together again. “For our next performance, the maestro himself...Curtis Todd!”

The lean, bearded man in black tie—who’d turned out to be the only man besides the waiters wearing a tuxedo—gave a terse bow.

“To celebrate Val and Gar’s new home, I shall debut my piano concerto in C major.” He spoke softly in a metered tone and seemed almost as self-conscious as Heidi. “The first movement.” He sat down at the keyboard.

In profile, he looked like a bearded William Baldwin, Dixie decided, but twenty years older. Broodingly serious. Bruised shadows beneath his eyes. A mane of black hair that probably always needed cutting. His original composition sounded, to Dixie’s untrained ears, remarkably like all the eighteenth century concertos she’d ever heard. It tolled on for twenty-three minutes. No way to resume conversation without being rude.

Instead, she used the time to take in her surroundings and observe the other guests. Recognizing a woman and two men from photographs she’d seen in the Galveston County Daily News, she wondered if Evercamp had invited the entire chamber of commerce. In Dixie’s experience, business socials had the same stiff rapport she felt here.

Except for the baby grand, which showed a rich patina of age, the Evercamps’ home was furnished sparsely and not particularly well. The entire room might have been ordered off the showroom of a mediocre furniture store. Kathleen Flannigan, Dixie’s adoptive mother, would’ve described the Evercamps as “house poor,” having spent a wad on a home they couldn’t comfortably afford to decorate.

Dixie’s farmhouse, filled with embroidered epigrams, Barney’s hand-turned tables, and the familiar odor of lemon oil wood polish, remained as Kathleen Flannigan had left it three years earlier when she died of cancer. The house would likely never see a refurbishing. It suited Dixie. Perhaps achieving a satisfying decor took a few decades of living.

She wondered how much of this fussy Victorian setting could be attributed to Valerie Evercamp’s taste. The woman looked uneasy in her surroundings—crossing her arms, stroking her slender biceps, glancing around for a fresh glass of champagne. Capturing one from a hovering waiter, she sipped, then touched her lips with a knuckle as if to blot away a drop of moisture.

Throwing such a shindig as this would make anyone nervous, Dixie figured. She preferred parties of two, crowds of four, maybe five if she counted Ryan—who’d likely left a dozen messages by now.

As the opus ended with a rousing finale, Dixie noticed that Farley Short had drifted away. A clutch of bona fide guests advanced on the composer, but Dixie sighted in on the dwarfish man who’d introduced him: Garwood Evercamp, if she guessed right. She eeled her way in his direction. At five-four, she stood eye-to-eye with her host.

“Your Mr. Todd plays beautifully,” she gushed. “You must be exceptional friends for him to honor your new home with such a performance.”

He snapped his fingers for a waiter. Dixie loathed people who did that.

“Curtis has taught several members of our family,” he said. “His serious students, quality students I might add, play in symphonies all over the world.” He peered at Dixie quizzically, as if clicking through a mental photo file to match a name to her face.

Before he could ask who she was, she commented, “Valerie looks fabulous tonight, as always.”

He glanced at Valerie, chatting with Parker, and smiled, crinkling the abundance of skin around his small blue—the same blue as Sheldon’s.

“Now that you mention it,” he said, “I can’t recall when Val has looked happier or more beautiful.”

Beautiful, yes, but Dixie hadn’t thought her hostess looked particularly happy. Then again, who was she to argue?

“And this house!” she added, filling time while she considered how to broach the subject that actually interested her. “What a grand old place.”

“Thank you. A money pit, of course. These old dames will drain your pocketbook if you let them, but she’s worth every penny.”

Certain now that she was talking to Garwood Evercamp, Dixie commented casually, “I haven’t seen Sheldon yet tonight.”

He squinted at her. “How do you know my son?”

“Can’t say I know him all that well, but I’m an admirer of his talent.” She realized suddenly that she hadn’t seen a single Sheldon Evercamp watercolor here. What did that mean? Disapproval? Distaste? Were the son’s early efforts tucked away in an attic? “Sheldon and I have a mutual friend. I was hoping to ask if he’d seen her around.”

Evercamp studied her another beat. “Sheldon rarely makes an appearance. He’s at that wayward age.”

Well, shit. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Who is the friend you’re seeking?”

Dixie had Gennae’s photograph in her pocket, but hesitated to pull it out. To a lawyer, it would look exactly like what it was, a mug shot from a WANTED poster. And how could she explain not knowing her “friend’s” real name? What name would Sheldon know her by?

Finally, Dixie blurted it. “Marla Gennae Thompson. Sometimes goes by Jenny.”

The lawyer shook his head, squinted eyes accentuating his piggish nose. “I’ve never heard him speak of her, but then, as I said, Sheldon keeps his own counsel.”

The doorknocker sounded, and her host excused himself to answer it. Dixie cursed silently and wondered who else might know the watercolorist. She traded introductions with a guest, discovered he served with Garwood on the board of a local bank, and that he hadn’t seen Sheldon recently. She spoke to several more people with no better results and finally wandered over to where Parker was still chatting with Valerie.

“...a shame to live on an island and not have a boat,” she was saying, “but Gar stays so busy I don’t know when we’d find time to enjoy it.”

“I’ll bet you’re going to enjoy this fabulous new house,” Dixie injected, before turning to Parker. “Did you ask her about Sheldon?”

“He’s not expected tonight,” Parker said.

“I’m so sorry you missed him.” Valerie’s face had relaxed its earlier rigidity, and her speech had begun to slur around the edges. “Sheldon and Gar are having one of those father-son periods of not getting along. It’ll pass, in another twenty or thirty years.”

“They don’t have a current address for Sheldon,” Parker said. “Seems he likes to stay mobile.”

“Never mind. We’ll catch up with him if he’s still in town.” Dixie looked at Valerie again. “He is still in town, isn’t he?”

She laughed, a sharp angry little cackle. “Oh, yes. Sheldon wouldn’t dream of taking his spite too far away.” She drained her champagne glass.

“It’s really a friend of Sheldon’s we need to talk to. Perhaps you know her.” Dixie decided to risk showing Valerie the photo from the WANTED poster. Maybe they had seen Gennae with Sheldon and would at least have a name.

Valerie stared at the yellow sheet, drained her champagne glass and looked at the photo again, her mouth working into an odd smile. Dixie sensed someone stepping up behind them. A stubby hand reached out and snatched the poster.

“What sort of sick joke are you playing?” Evercamp demanded.

Dixie looked at him. “Do you know this girl?”

“Know her?” A strand of his lank hair parted over one ear and hung loose beside his plump cheek. He glared at a younger man standing on the other side of him.

Astin Gray.

Dixie hadn’t seen the restaurant owner earlier. Must be the new arrival. Another Chamber of Commerce member dropping by after Chateau Lafitte closed?

“Of course, we know her,” Evercamp said. “Where is she?”

“How do you know her?” Dixie persisted.

But it was Astin Gray who answered, his gaze fixed on the mug shot. “That’s Carra Lynne,” he murmured. “My sister.”

## CHAPTER 23

In the shadows outside her uncle's new home...the house that Gar built...Gennae watched Sheldon creep up to the back door.

And here's the lying cousin who lived in the house that Gar built.

"Hey, Shel!" Her harsh whisper startled him. "Weren't you invited?"

"Jesus! What're you doing back there?"

"Admiring my uncle's fancy new digs. Which you claimed not to have an address for."

"I called his office."

"How inventive. And dutiful son, you came to warn him."

"Why would I tell the bastard anything? I came to look for some paint supplies I left in my old room."

That could be true. "And you just happen to know where to find them in this new place? Where you say you've never been before? Shel, you need to practice lying. You're getting rusty."

"Believe what you want." He moved away from her toward the back entrance.

Gennae followed. Needling Sheldon reminded her of old times, growing up together, both hating his father. But times had changed. Sheldon had changed. Change is in the eye of the beholder. Behold this fine new house.

Oleander shrubs, with their yellow and pink blossoms and pungent odor, enclosed the southeast corner of the yard. Red canna lilies hugged a leaning palm tree. The garden reminded Gennae of her own home deep in the historical section. She hadn't been back there yet. At the thought of it, fear gnawed away inside her.

But the gnome is not there.

The gnome is here.

She'd seen him, all dressed up and important.

Sheldon halted abruptly. "Where do you think you're going?"

"With you."

"Not inside. I can't have you clunking around, making noise."

"I'm a cat. Sleek, long-tailed, silent. You won't know I'm behind you. Purrrrr."

"You're nuts."

"I'm not the one sneaking into my own father's house."

"What do you expect to find in there?"

"Hiding places. Places where things hide."

"Crap. I ought to bust in right now and tell him you're here."

"But you won't." She held the box knife up to the moonlight, razor-sharp and gleaming. "Did anyone check the slash marks on my mother's wrists? Couldn't they have been made by someone faking her suicide?"

Sheldon flinched. "You?"

“I saw a fine piano through your father’s window. Little sister’s been taking lessons.”

“Heidi’s not my sister.”

“Half-sister, fruit of your father’s seed. Like you’re the fruit of your father’s greed. Seen your mother lately, Shel? Is she still rocking away by that window, mind as empty as a gourd, while your father spends her money on his new family?”

Fury sparked in Sheldon’s eyes. His fist balled, he took a step toward her.

Gennae closed the knife with a click. “I didn’t turn your mother into a drug addict. I didn’t put her in that home.”

“Should never’ve told you that.”

“Yes, you should. Can’t keep a thing like that shut away inside. Festering. I told you things. But not everything. Some things I never told anyone. Now I’m one big rotting pus bag, ripe to burst. Why is my mother’s piano inside your father’s new house?”

“Astin gave it to him and bought a smaller one for the restaurant.”

“And now little Heidi practices her scales.” In Gennae’s mind, a clear plastic cleaning bag shut off her breath. Hit the notes, hit the notes. She blinked it away and filled her lungs. “So you haven’t completely severed all contact. What else did Uncle wheedle from my brother?”

“Some bedroom pieces.” He shrugged. “Things Astin didn’t have room for, like the piano. Said it was too big.”

“At Uncle’s suggestion, I’m sure.” She looped an arm around Sheldon’s arm and leaned her head against his shoulder. “Are we going in, cousin?”

He shrugged away from her. “Yeah, okay. Jesus, just don’t make any noise.”

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