

## CHAPTER 24

Astin Gray still looked shaky, although the color had returned to his face. He sat across from Dixie and Parker in an office off the Evercamps' foyer. Garwood Evercamp stood behind his nephew, hands clasping the top of the high-back chair.

Unlike the nondescript party room, this space reflected personality. An ornate desk dominated one end; love seats and wingback chairs clustered around a coffee table at the other. Mounted to the longest wall, a deep shadow box held three marionettes — pull the strings, they move, dance, come alive. Dixie recognized Howdie Doodie from the 1950's TV show for kids. The other two puppets looked familiar, but she couldn't put a name to them.

A glass-front cabinet held more collectibles—early model remote control race cars, an exquisitely painted wooden Parcheesi game, a large monkey bank, the kind that claps when you drop a coin in its mouth.

Between the wingback chairs a chess table sported oversized ebony and pewter pieces fashioned after King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. Astin sat there, looking down at the yellow poster scrap clutched in his trembling hand.

After he'd identified the mug shot as Carra Lynne Gray, Dixie had explained her interest. She held nothing back—suspicion of theft, counterfeit ID, Tom Rich's reward offer. To get information, she knew she'd have to share. But his sister's criminal charges seemed of little interest to the young restaurant owner. The fact that she was alive, well, and in Galveston was all that mattered, he said. The other stuff could be handled.

"Carra Lynne is my only immediate family. I was afraid I'd never see her again." A short strand of sandy blonde hair fell across his forehead. When he swiped it back, annoyance twitched at his lips.

He seemed even younger now than at Chateau Lafitte. And more naive. His likeness to Gennae—or rather, Carra Lynne—was so obvious now. Dixie wondered why she hadn't seen it.

"How long has she been gone?" Parker asked. He sat beside Dixie on a loveseat.

"Four years."

"My niece vanished the same day her mother died," Evercamp said. "Patricia, her mother, was my older sister and, quite frankly, the reason Val and I came to make our home in Galveston." He patted Astin's shoulder, then paced to the doorway, as if to see which of his party guests was leaving.

Valerie had sent a waiter with coffee but otherwise excused herself to attend her visitors.

"Four years, and you haven't seen or heard from your niece in all that time?" Dixie asked.

"Not a word. It does not surprise me that she's wanted by the authorities." Garwood opened the glass cabinet and gently brushed lint off Howdy Doodie's shoulder. "Carra Lynne was well on her way to causing trouble before she left town."

"What sort of trouble?" Police records would list known associates, people Carra might connect with now that she'd returned.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle.” The lawyer waved the question aside. Light through the cabinet glass silhouetted his pug nose and pudgy cheeks. “But now *this*. A felony charge—and she brings it right back home to drop at her brother’s doorstep. I say it’s high time we let the girl stew in her own juices. Six months in jail might educate her to the less desirable aspects of the path she’s chosen.”

“Carra Lynne may have witnessed our mother’s suicide,” Astin said quietly.

“We don’t know that for certain—”

“But if so, Uncle Gar, that could account for any... irresponsibility. Carra Lynne is sensitive, high-strung—just a child.”

“The *woman* in that photograph,” Dixie said pointedly, “faked at least one identity and is wanted for grand theft. That exceeds irresponsibility.”

Evercamp lifted the female puppet out of the case. Blond pigtailed brushed the sleeves of a plaid jumper and white blouse, Peter Pan collar edged in tatted lace. Lace-edged socks peeked from the tops of shiny black shoes. If he flipped her over, Dixie expected white panties would be garnished with the same lace. The doll looked impish in its master’s grasp, and Dixie wondered if the lawyer had ever practiced puppetry on a professional scale.

Their host’s gaze shifted to Parker, who was examining the chess set.

“Do you play?” he asked.

“Not well,” Parker admitted.

“Protect the royal family—that is the objective of every chess game. The queen is the strength, but when the king falls, the game is lost.” He opened a shallow drawer in the table and removed a velvet cloth. “That same dynamic holds true in households. The king is the hub. Patricia Kuznicki Evercamp and James Carver Gray were the royal couple in our family, and we failed miserably in our duty to protect—”

“James Carver Gray, that’s Gennae’s—or rather—Carra Lynne’s father?” Dixie asked.

Evercamp’s sharp glance suggested he didn’t appreciate the interruption.

“*Was* her father,” he corrected. “James Carver married my sister, Patricia, and brought her here to the island. They had two children, Astin and Carra Lynne. A good family, a family to make any man proud.”

He nodded at Astin, then used the cloth to wipe the marionette’s face. “Yet, fourteen years ago James Carver vanished, and the family began to fly apart.”

“Vanished? How?”

“Just walked away,” Astin said, his mouth a tight slash in his pallid face. “And never came back.”

“I and my wife—and Astin, of course,” Evercamp nodded at his nephew again, “though Astin’s youth necessitated a lesser role in those days—rallied round Patricia. My sister had no head for running the family business—”

“What *is* the family business?” Dixie injected.

“Imported food products,” Astin told her. “For restaurants and specialty stores.”

“Carra Lynne would’ve been, what? Six years old?”

Evercamp remounted the puppet in its niche, shiny black shoes *thumping* the wooden cabinet and effectively drawing attention back to himself.

“Six, and already a packet of trouble. Astin, you need to stay clear of your sister’s predicament. She’s an adult now, fully capable of knowing right from wrong, owning up to her offenses. You have a new business to run.”

Dixie exchanged a glance with Parker. *Packet of trouble? Owning up to her misdeeds?* Was Garwood Evercamp for real, or was he putting on a show? At least now she understood where Astin had picked up his stuffy speech mannerisms.

“The import business must be going gangbusters,” Parker said affably, lifting the pewter queen from her place on the chessboard, “to support an offshoot enterprise as ambitious as Chateau Lafitte.”

Good point. Carra Lynne might be in town to cash in on her family’s affluence. But Dixie wished Parker could curb his inclination to divert an argument. Get a heated squabble going and family secrets spit out like popcorn.

“The import company was established by Astin’s great-great-grandfather in the early nineteenth hundreds, when Galveston was still the largest port on the Gulf Coast,” Evercamp said. “It prospered through three generations, surviving changes that crippled other business on the island. Then under James Carver’s hand—”

“It wasn’t Father’s fault,” Astin protested. “The Reagan economy killed a *lot* of companies.”

“And others thrived. James Carver Gray had no business running the family enterprise. Had no head for it. I said it then and, rest his witless soul, I’ll say it now. James was—”

“He’s not dead.” Astin swept aside the unruly strand of hair that persisted in falling every time he glanced down at his sister’s photograph.

The lawyer glared from Parker to Dixie. “Fourteen years, and this boy still holds out hope. So did his mother. James Carver’s ghost gripped this family in a stranglehold. Patricia couldn’t make decisions. Astin was too young to do so. At least death, unlike desertion, is final. As horrible as Patricia’s demise was, I thank God she released this family to continue—”

“How *did* your sister die?” Dixie’s question provoked Evercamp’s barbed stare. Piss on him. As a prosecutor, she knew how to break a defense lawyer’s ponderous rhythm.

“Her wrists,” Astin said quietly, his eyes red and wounded.

“My sister was never a strong woman.” Evercamp pursed his lips and slowly shut the cabinet door. “After Carra Lynne’s birth, Patricia’s health rapidly declined. Then her husband’s disappearance affected her mental stability.”

Two people vanishing in the same family? The daughter following the father’s example, maybe? Probably not, but Dixie’s curiosity roused at the coincidence.

“Declaring James Carver dead,” Evercamp continued, “was quite probably the decision that pushed Patricia over the edge. It was I who insisted. The law requires seven years, and seven years of waiting was enough! It had to be done. I simplified the process as much as possible, but it was as if my sister were asked to strike the killing blow and just couldn’t bring herself to do it. I convinced her that the company was at risk, her children’s future was at risk, and finally she signed the papers. After leaving my office, she took immediately to her bed.”

“She just didn’t go out much,” Astin corrected.

The lawyer stood behind his nephew again and placed both hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Fortunately, Astin inherited his great-great-grandfather's business sense, and together we salvaged a rapidly crumbling family enterprise."

Astin's mouth twitched, not quite a grimace, but the beginnings of one. "We salvaged Gray Imports, true enough."

The young man seemed riveted by Parker's hands loosely holding the pewter queen.

## CHAPTER 25

Carra Lynne sat in a darkened room beside a return air vent directly above her uncle's office.

*Show no fear. Shed no tear...*

Voices carried from downstairs strong and distinct. Her brother's words summoned the vision that haunted her sleep. It had not happened four years ago.

*...three four, shut the door...*

Yet it was yesterday. It would always be yesterday.

Behind the wine rack in the storage room.

*Blood.* More blood than she'd ever imagined.

Her mother lay among red, saturated sheets, skin as pale and stark as ivory rose petals. A box knife razor had sliced her delicate vein, opened it neatly along its exposed length, nearly two inches of gaping flesh. Her mother's eyes pleaded...

"Run!" Sharon demanded.

...frail fingers grasping at Carra's hand, lips moving in one last murmured message...

"Come on, run!"

...then the pain-racked features slackened with death.

And the other corpse —had Carra Lynne only imagined it?

She slipped her fingers tightly now around the box knife in her cargo pocket. *Shed no tear.* She had studied her own slender wrist so many times, plotting the razor's track along the bulge that lay like a blue worm beneath her skin.

*Shed no tear.* She felt the dampness of shame on her cheeks as the soft shuffle of Sheldon's running shoes announced his approach. He carried an armload of canvases and painting supplies.

Carra Lynne turned away from him, wiped her face on the shoulder of her jacket. *One, two, buckle my shoe.*

"What're you...eavesdropping?" he whispered.

"Who are those people down there?"

"It's a party," he said. "*Lots* of people come to parties. You want to be more specific?"

"They're asking questions about me. And you're the only one who knew I was in town."

He stepped closer to the air vent and cocked an ear. The woman was talking, questioning.

The painting supplies in Sheldon's arms sagged.

"She sounds like someone who came into Kwik Kash today, said she wanted to commission a painting."

"What's that got to do with me?"

“Shit if I know. But I got a feeling my commission is about as real as your head goblins.”

“I grieve for you, Sheldon.” She couldn’t help needling him, even though she knew painting had been his life’s dream since he was a kindergartener with crayons and newsprint.

“What kind of trouble are you in this time?”

Nothing she couldn’t get out of. “Where would your father keep valuable papers and...and stuff?”

“Downstairs, I guess. In his desk. What’re you looking for?”

She shook her head. She felt incredibly calm talking about desks and papers. She’d seen the gnome, seen him *here, tonight*.

And she was still alive.

She felt bold. Invincible. *Show no fear*.

“Does he have a safe?”

“I told you, I’ve never been here before. Now let’s go.”

“*Does he have a safe?*”

“Shhhhhh!” Sheldon sighed and gathered his supplies tighter in preparation for leaving. “He didn’t have one in the old house.”

“But now the knave of hearts, who pinched the tarts, has this fine *new* house, the house that Gar bought —with *my father’s* money.”

“Jesus Christ! You and your rhymes. Are you coming?”

“No.”

“Suit yourself.” He repositioned his grasp on the art supplies. “When he catches you, forget you ever saw me.”

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