

CHAPTER 26

Garwood Evercamp imagined conversation as a row boat. If everybody crowded on the same side, the boat sank.

He had sunk many a boat before developing his skills of discourse. Now, when he wanted to tip a conversation a certain way, he packed his vessel with people he knew would row in the right direction. Or he simply refused to let anyone else *into* the boat, a tactic he had perfected when negotiating contracts and settlements, a tactic he considered highly appropriate for tonight's encounter with this investigation duo. No authority behind their questions, but Garwood was eager to deflect any further probing. And he might just pull it off, if he could give this pair enough information to get Carra Lynne locked away far from here. That photo had come from a WANTED poster, he was certain of it.

He sucked on a molar. It pained him, but he couldn't keep his tongue away from it. Valerie had suggested he see a dentist. She was right, of course, but he'd told her the pain would have to get much, much worse before he'd open his mouth to a stranger. That was a woman's province.

Valerie had blushed and reached for another drink.

He would need to have the tooth looked at, but not now, not with so much at stake. The molar could wait. He probed it tenderly with his tongue as he cast a sad eye at the couple seated across from his nephew.

"I shudder at the memory of all that *blood*," he said, injecting a tremble into the very word. "I'm a tough old bird, my stomach not easily turned, but a child—" He shook his head glumly, eyes at the floor. In law school he had perfected a dozen different attitudes, all conveyed with a mere shake of his head. "If Carra Lynne stumbled into that room—"

"Was there any indication that she was in the room where her mother died?"

The woman. Garwood resisted an outright scowl at her—at this Dixie Flannigan—who had the appearance of trouble the moment he saw her flitting from one party guest to another, asking questions. Clearly, she hadn't been taught the feminine importance of keeping her lip buttoned.

"*Someone*," he said, forming the word with precise emphasis, "had been in the *storage area*. Storage comes *previous* to the bedroom, where Patricia...bless her tortured soul...died. The police and medics were called, naturally, but by that time Astin and I had rushed to my sister's aid, tramping through the blood, praying we could save her. Unfortunately, she had been dead for several hours."

"What specifically made you believe someone had been in the room before you arrived?" The Flannigan woman again.

Astin rattled his cup on its saucer. At times Garwood felt his nephew had learned too well the devices for commanding an audience.

“Carra Lynne’s lewd friend was taking men up there,” Astin said.

“Now, son, we don’t know that for a fact.” Garwood squeezed his nephew’s shoulder and rescued the antique coffee setting from the boy’s impetuous grasp.

“The carriage house was used mostly for storage,” Astin added, in a much milder tone. “My father turned one of the rooms into an office—”

“Which we later insulated,” Garwood explained. “To maintain safe wine temperatures—not having a cellar. One of the tragedies of living on the Gulf Coast is the scarcity of wine cellars. The bedroom beyond the storage area, of course, had not been used since the early nineteen eighties, when reduced finances forced James Carver to release their last maid from service—”

“And that bedroom is where you found Patricia?”

The woman’s lip had come unbuttoned again. This time, Garwood merely nodded, a succinct, factual nod. “In the *storage* area, we found fragments of a broken bottle still fragrant with wine. Patricia never drank.”

“This friend you mentioned, if she still lives in Galveston, Carra Lynne might be visiting her now.” The woman directed her comment to Astin. “If you could give me a name—”

“Sharon Young.” Garwood’s tongue retained a bitter taste after the name had passed his lips. “Miss Young was a year or two older than my niece and, I’m afraid, not the best influence. She vanished the same day Carra Lynne did.”

“She was a slut, Uncle Gar!” Astin’s impatience asserted itself again. “I know we didn’t want her lewd behavior exposed when it could still damage Carra Lynne’s reputation—”

“Son, we don’t know for a fact—”

“We found a condom! That’s proof enough.”

“Where?” the woman asked. “And when? If you’re certain it was left in the bedroom the day your mother died—”

“We found it in the *storage* area,” Garwood stated firmly. “We have no idea *when* the thing was dropped. Evidently, someone had unwrapped it in preparation for use, yet a laboratory examination found no trace of body fluids.”

“A police lab examined it?”

The woman asking, of course. The man might as well be mute.

“A private laboratory.” Projecting an avuncular solicitude in his head shake, Garwood placed both hands on his nephew’s shoulders. “I saw no need to display any dirty linen when Patricia’s death was so clearly by her own hand.”



“Clearly,” Dixie might’ve told them, was not always a useful word in suicides. And removing evidence from a crime scene suggested the lawyer didn’t take his oath to uphold the law too seriously.

Yet, had the suicide team any doubt, they would’ve ordered a psychological autopsy. Dixie made a mental note to look up the report. Suicide often destroyed entire families in a backwash of guilt and shame—certainly it might frighten a seventeen-year-old daughter into flight. But all this anguish had happened four years ago. Who, besides her family, would Carra Lynne seek out now that she’d returned to the island?

“Did your sister have a steady boyfriend?” she asked Astin.

He shrugged. Evercamp wagged his head, a gesture that loosened the jowls drooping minutely at the corners of his mouth. He didn't seem old enough to have jowls. His eyes were sharp and clear, his lank blond hair only lightly threaded with gray. Seeing this pair together, Dixie wondered how many of Astin's mannerisms were unconsciously copied from his uncle's. Both dressed meticulously, wore their hair longer on top than on the sides. Both used antiquated language.

From the shadows, Valerie said, “Carra Lynne wasn't steady about anything.”

Dixie hadn't heard their hostess enter. Now she watched the slender figure move into the light, choosing her moment as dramatically as a stage performer. The whole family might be acting out a play.

“Carra Lynne was like mercury, always on the move, solid one moment, liquid the next. She sampled boyfriends and tossed them away like empty bottles. She'd stroll into our house unannounced, and unobserved. I'd find her playing on the floor with Heidi.” Valerie set her glass on the coffee tray and gathered the cups. Her speech had lost much of its champagne slur. “Ms. Flannigan, Mr. Dann, the caterers are gone, but could I get you a bite to eat? Entice you to stay awhile longer?”

Dixie stole a glance at Parker. Their hostess was graciously tossing them out on their party-crashing ears. But Dixie hadn't nearly exhausted her list of questions.

“Actually, we do need to be going,” she said. “If I could just get a picture of what happened the day you discovered Carra Lynne was gone, steps you took to find her, what the police—”

“Useless!” Astin said.

Evercamp patted him quiet. “Carra Lynne was seventeen, technically barely a minor. The police have so many runaways on the books already, I suppose they didn't put a great deal of effort into finding her. The way it looked, her choosing that day to disappear, was that mother and daughter had argued. The only real question was whether Carra Lynne fled before or after Patricia's death.”

Valerie finished moving the empty cups to the coffee tray. She stood like a wraith, patiently waiting for them to leave.

“What was that coffee you served?” Parker asked, smiling his most contagious smile and scooping up the tray with the grace of a first class waiter. “Not Colombian, not Turkish. Something milder. Armenian?”

“Italian.” Valerie tossed a derisive glance at her husband.

“Italian, of course!” He leaned down to Valerie and whispered something Dixie didn't catch. Valerie laughed.

Balancing the tray on one hand, Parker made a sweeping gesture at a painting across the room. Together they approached the mediocre landscape, Parker talking in his seductively low salesman's patter. Dixie wondered again why there were none of Sheldon's paintings in evidence, at least in the rooms she had visited.

“When did you last see your sister that day?” she asked Astin.

“We passed in the dining room at breakfast. I suggested she come downtown to help out at the import office while I ran some errands. She never showed up. When we...found my mother...I... didn't think...that is, my sister came and went as she pleased. I was angry and called around, but I didn't really worry until the next morning, when Carra Lynne hadn't come home all night.”

“Who did you call?”

“Sharon’s parents, of course, and Curtis—”

“The piano player who was here tonight?”

“Curtis Todd is practically part of the family,” Evercamp explained. He stepped in front of the glass-front curio cabinet and extracted the monkey. Its cymbals clanged together as he moved it to the desk. “We also talked with my son. Sheldon and Carra Lynne were close. He told us about a bar on Post Office—”

“Sharon’s influence again,” Astin said.

“Do you remember the name of the bar?”

“Started with an ‘s’.” Evercamp frowned, picked up a tiny screwdriver and applied it to the monkey’s back. “Silver’s, Slines—”

“Slice’s,” Dixie provided. “You said your mother was found in an unused bedroom in the carriage house, a room that Carra Lynne’s friend Sharon—”

“Had turned into a whore house.” Astin’s fingers clenched his sister’s photograph. “That slut was mixed up in all this somehow.”

“In your sister’s disappearance? Or your mother’s suicide?” Dixie’s hunch meter suggested the prudish Astin Gray might have had a crush on Sharon Young. His intense reaction seemed akin to jealousy. Had she rejected him?

Astin threw his hands wide, as if to include any possibility. “Before meeting Sharon, Carra Lynne was a good kid. A little wild, even a terror at times, but never...promiscuous. She has a heart as big as the Gulf, brought home stray dogs, injured birds.” Astin looked at his uncle. “You remember what Sharon’s stepfather said when I asked if they’d seen their daughter since Carra vanished?”

Evercamp nodded. “‘Good riddance.’ His exact words.”

Which was more or less what the lawyer had said about Carra Lynne earlier in their conversation.

“We hired a detective,” Astin said.

Finally, they were getting to something Dixie could use. “What did he find out?”

“Detective Paddock traced the two girls to Grovemont, Georgia,” Evercamp said, removing a pair of double A batteries from the monkey’s back. “And lost them. My mother, Carra Lynne’s grandmother, lives in nearby Oakbridge. We thought perhaps the girls had run out of money and needed a place to stay. But...they...um, never arrived at my mother’s house.”

Oakbridge was Marla Gennae Thompson’s birthplace, where Carra Lynne obtained a new ID.

“Perhaps the girls spotted your detective and were scared off,” Dixie suggested. “Did you know Marla Gennae Thompson in Oakbridge? Or her grandmother, Ariana Cooper?”

“No,” Evercamp answered, though Dixie had directed her questions at Astin. “Should we?”

“Apparently, Carra Lynne adopted Gennae’s identity.” Dixie watched Astin, slumped forward, elbows on his knees, his face in shadows. “I’ll need your detective’s name.”

“Mr. Paddock ran out of leads and dropped the case.” Evercamp tossed the batteries into the trash can. “I believe he closed up shop.”

“He still might be able to help.”

“I really don’t see how. Ms. Flannigan, we’ve told you everything we know in an effort to help you find my niece. Despite Astin’s brotherly concern, I believe a few months in jail will improve her temperament. And if Carra Lynne has indeed returned to Galveston, surely you can find her without Mr. Paddock’s clumsy assistance.”

Yes, and she could find a local P.I. named Paddock without Evercamp’s help.

Evercamp replaced the monkey’s double As with a pair from a desk drawer and screwed the backing in place.

“Where will you start looking?” Astin asked. “You said she was asking about Sheldon?”

“That’s what led me here to what seems to be a dead end, unless you know where Sheldon lives.”

“My son lives like a hobo, I’m afraid.” Evercamp wagged his head solemnly. He strolled past the curio cabinet, where he deposited the monkey, and to the foyer door, which stood ajar, inviting them to leave.

Dixie heard the faint tinkle of chords from the grand piano. Knowing she had squeezed just about every drop of information from these two that she was likely to get, she rose to leave.

“It might help if we had a better photograph,” she told Astin.

He still held the mug shot as if staring at it could make his sister materialize. “I don’t... I’m sure there’s a photo—”

“Valerie!” Evercamp called. “Get Ms. Flannigan a snapshot of Carra Lynne.”

His wife turned from her tête-à-tête with Parker to stare at him for a beat before moving to the desk, where she opened a drawer.

“One thing I can’t get straight,” Dixie said. “If Carra Lynne’s friend was known to frequent the carriage house, why would Patricia choose that bedroom to end her life? Did it hold some special meaning for her?”

“Naturally, we asked ourselves that question.” Evercamp shrugged. “I dropped by that evening to have Patricia sign some papers. Astin said she’d been closed in her bedroom most of the day with a headache. When we knocked, she didn’t answer.” He frowned toward the piano, from which flowed the notes of an Irving Berlin tune. “It’s a bit late for Heidi to be practicing.”

“Gar, you know she won’t go to bed until you tuck her in.” Valerie’s smile suggested she was no longer so eager for her guests to leave, at least not Parker.

“We called out to my mother,” Astin said, “and still received no answer. Finally, I found the spare key to her room.”

“The papers were not all that important,” Evercamp added. “But we were worried. Patricia had not been in the best health, mentally or physically, and we wanted to make sure she was all right.”

“She wasn’t in her bedroom,” Astin said.

“We looked for her car. It was in the garage. We searched the house, the garden. The only place left was the carriage house.” Evercamp frowned again as Valerie approached with a photograph. “That can’t be Heidi playing. It must be Curtis.”

Dixie could not put a title with the tune, but it wasn’t at all like Heidi’s classical number earlier. She noticed Parker was studying the photograph album Valerie had left open on the desk.

“Curtis went home nearly an hour ago,” Valerie said, handing Dixie the photo.

It showed a blonde teenager sitting on a piano bench with a girl Dixie recognized as a younger Heidi. Dixie was trying to reconcile that picture with the skinhead image she had of Carra Lynne when Astin stood abruptly.

“That’s one of Carra Lynne’s pieces.” He sprinted toward the door.

At once, they all hurried after him, heels quiet on the Persian rug, then clumping like a herd of horses on the hardwood floor.

The music stopped before they reached the living room. The keyboard cover was raised and the piano bench was pushed aside, as if someone had made a hasty exit. A quick search of the house revealed an open window in the back, on the ground floor. The screen had been removed and tossed on the grass.

“It was Carra Lynne,” Astin asserted. He jumped out the window, a stand of oleander breaking his fall, and dashed to a hedgerow fence that enclosed the grounds.

Beyond the fence lay an alley, and dozens of escape routes for a slender girl who’d grown up on this island.

CHAPTER 27

How low she must have felt to rip that razor through her wrist.

Dixie back-peddled furiously, as wind caught the Frisbee, sending it high and wide in the night sky. Mud chased alongside.

Not just a brash, frustrated slash, according to the police report Evercamp had given them, but a careful, one-and-three-quarter-inch cut following the vein precisely.

Stretching, Dixie caught the fluorescent orange disk. When she came down, the fickle sand shifted beneath her feet. She fell —*whump!* On her backside.

“Uncle!” Dixie cried. “Enough! You win.”

Parker jogged close to give her a hand up.

“Would you repeat that, please? Into my tape recorder?”

“Some battles are not worth fighting.”

“Aha! All this time I thought it was a game. No wonder I never win. Here, let me help.” He brushed sand off her jeans, lingering suggestively over the ministrations to her butt. “This part needs extra attention.”

“Yeah, right, Lochinvar.” She batted his hand away, but then pulled him close, glad for his occasional silliness, as they turned to walk back to his beach house. Her own moods bent too often toward gloomy.

Driving home from the Evercamps’ party, they’d combed the entire east end for places Carra Lynne might hide out. A phone call to the Evercamps told them Astin’s search had come up equally dry. Dixie had turned on the radio to avoid talking about Patricia Gray’s suicide. She hated suicide. It was so damned selfish.

But now, as she stood beneath the stars, feeling a warm Gulf wind on her face, her arm around a man who gave her more contentment than she’d ever known, Dixie empathized with Patricia.

“Guess this case took some turns you didn’t expect,” Parker said, reading her mood.

The water lay calm tonight, inky black and polished by starlight. Dixie stooped to pick up a discarded soft drink tab that some hungry bird would undoubtedly mistake for a tasty morsel.

“I sensed that Gennae—or Carra Lynne—was running from something much darker than a felony theft charge. But from what I hadn’t a clue.”

“Now you believe she had a hand in her mother’s death?”

“Not directly.” Suicide was not nearly as easy to fake as people believed. “Think about it. How do you get a woman to hold still while you neatly slice her wrist?”

“Restraints. Astin said his sister was using the room for sex orgies. Might’ve had bondage implements around. Finagle the mother upstairs, tie her down, handcuff her, whatever.”

“There’d be bruising where she fought against her bonds.”

“Drugs, then. Slip a little something into her afternoon tea.”

“It would show up in an autopsy. The report indicated no drugs, no hesitation cuts.” Dixie shook her head. “Most of us are too squeamish to hit a vein with the first jab of a razor.” She bent the pull ring against the sharp aluminum tab that had sealed the soda can.

“Maybe she practiced. Don’t most suicides go through the motions a few times before doing the dirty deed?”

As a former prosecutor, Dixie knew that most cops treated every unexplained violent death as homicide until proven otherwise. The number determined to be self-inflicted had amazed her, so she’d spent some time researching the phenomenon. In one case that landed on her desk, a man had used the cordless mini-saw he received for Christmas to cut through the two ascending carotid arteries and jugular veins in his own throat. Hearing the *buzz* from the bedroom, his wife thought he was shaving and wondered which of their grown children had given him an electric razor.

“The absence of hesitation cuts would encourage a suicide team to be extremely thorough. And they also found no defense wounds, no scratches or bruises indicating Patricia was forced to act against her will.”

“You’re losing me. Did she or didn’t she?”

The one thing the investigation report failed to address was the possibility of emotional coercion. But what emotional leverage could a daughter inflict that would compel her mother, without hesitation, to slit her own wrists?

“No,” she decided, “Patricia Gray decided to die, and she acted on that decision with finality.” She forced the pull tab back against itself in the other direction, creasing the metal. “Not much chance of anyone rushing the woman to ER before she bled out.”

Parker didn’t respond for a moment as they watched a night bird peck along the beach. “I don’t understand suicide,” he said. “How does a person get to that point? There are always other options.”

But a person overwhelmed with life rarely saw those options. As a child, before being adopted by the Flannigans, Dixie’d listed all the methods she could think of for taking her own life. She’d studied each possibility—drowning, poison, sharp-bladed instrument—in detail, determined to find a way that would look like an accident. Stepping in front of a speeding truck had won out, and if her life hadn’t taken an upward turn when it did, some poor truck driver would still be shaking his head and groaning miserably over the kid who “just came out of nowhere.” But at least no one would’ve guessed suicide. Carla Jean, her birth mother, could’ve continued her fantasy life without guilt, searching for a prince among all the frogs she brought home.

Parker stepped behind and enveloped her, his chin on the top of her head. As they both gazed out at the shimmering, gently rocking waves, a fish broke the water with a wet *plunk*.

“Did you know that suicide kills more people than AIDS?” She asked Parker.

“*That* I can understand. Why prolong excruciating pain when death is inevitable?”

“It’s also the second leading cause of death in college students.”

“Which makes no sense at all. College is the best time of a kid’s life.”

“Not for every student. Competitive, demanding, lonely. Most cases are attributed to severe mental illness, depression or manic-depression.”

“Sickos.”

“Maybe. But during the ten years of the Vietnam War, almost twice as many American men under thirty-five died from suicide as from war injuries.”

“Statistics can prove any friggin thing the politicians want them to prove.”

Dixie shrugged, flipping the pull tab back and forth with her thumb. She’d forgotten that Parker lost a good friend in Viet Nam. “Psychiatrists now consider genetics a factor.”

“You’re saying suicide is inherited?”

“A ‘suicide’ gene. Mostly found among patients who suffer severe depression.” Dixie’s birth mother had been manic-depressive, the current label being ‘bipolar.’ A head-fall injury from a moving vehicle had put her in a nursing home, and Dixie sometimes wondered if her mother had jumped. “Shake a suicide victim’s family tree and you’ll likely find at least one other unripened apple.”

A cloud scudded over the moon, turning the Gulf blacker than Valerie’s ebony hair, with its single white streak like an errant moonbeam. Shadows painted the sand into a palette of gray tones.

“What about those stories I’ve read about suicide epidemics?” Parker said. “At public sites like the Empire State Building—”

“—the Golden Gate Bridge, the Beachy Head cliffs? Power of suggestion. Usually, they follow a highly publicized and romanticized self-inflicted death. Take a slow news day, and the media plays up the story for more than it’s worth. Suddenly people everywhere see their lives as hopeless, fly to San Francisco just to jump. All for a moment of fame.

“And always from the side facing the bay, not the ocean.”

So Parker had also read about suicide—probably in the tabloids. But he often surprised her with the encyclopedia he carried around in his head.

“Statistics are just numbers,” he said. “They never explain *why*.”

“‘Why’ is a Gordian knot that psychiatrists and psychologists constantly pick at—*ouch!*” The metal tab had snapped in two, slicing her finger.

Parker took the two pieces of metal from her, slipped them into his pocket and pressed his finger against the cut to stop the bleeding.

“‘Razors pain you,’” he quoted, kissing the top of her head. “‘Rivers are damp; acids stain you; and drugs cause cramp. Guns aren’t lawful; nooses give; gas smells awful—”

“‘You might as well live,’” Dixie finished. As a kid eyeing every Mack truck that passed, she had memorized the Dorothy Parker poem. Now she recalled another bit of verse, scribbled on the back of a Quick Stop receipt, and wondered if the desperation she’d seen in Carra Lynne’s eyes was a red flag signaling another potential suicide. *The suicide gene?*

“You’re worried about her,” Parker said, removing the pressure to examine her cut finger. The bleeding had stopped. “That’s the real reason you won’t let this case go. Ryan and that thirty-thousand reward money aren’t even in the picture anymore.”

Dixie shrugged out of his grasp. “Aren’t you at all curious? Carra Lynne’s been in town for over twenty-four hours. Plenty of opportunity to drop by the old homestead, see how her brother spiffed it up, maybe hit him up for some cash. But she hasn’t.”

“Are we sure about that?” He draped an arm over her shoulder and pointed her toward home.

“If Astin was acting tonight, he deserves an Oscar.” Dixie stepped into the faint footsteps they had made on the way out.

“Carra Lynne finds us nosing around her uncle’s new house, asking questions. She plays that taunting little piano number. Who was that meant for?”

“Her brother, maybe. Telling him she’s in town and wants to talk?” She wondered how close he siblings had been. Eight years older, Astin must have felt some responsibility when his sister vanished.

“Why not wait for Chateau Lafitte to close and catch Astin alone?”

Good point. “So it’s her uncle she came to see. Slipped inside the house, heard Uncle Gar saying she should spend a few months in jail—”

“She must know we’ll watch Chateau Lafitte. Think she’ll leave town now?”

“Or hang out with a friend until we believe she’s left town.”

“Cousin Sheldon?”

“Maybe.” The wind had picked up, roaring around their ears until they were nearly shouting to be heard. The sea had turned choppy, white caps rising high and rolling toward shore. Lightning streaked the sky.

“So tomorrow we stake out the pawn shop again?” Parker said.

There was that “we” thing that thrummed Dixie’s anxiety button. Parker could take care of himself, she’d no doubt of that when she thought about it logically. And Carra Lynne had shown no overt signs of being dangerous. But Dixie couldn’t help worrying. Not all cases were so tame, and she didn’t want him thinking that working together this weekend was a prelude to a more permanent arrangement. Yet she had to admit enjoying the chance to toss ideas around.

“Okay, Nick Charles, the way I locate a person is by discovering who they know and where they go. Somebody on this island knew Carra Lynne four years ago. Somebody here knows Sheldon.”

“Like who?”

“That’s the part we have to think about.”

Mud trotted up, sniffed their legs and ran ahead of them. Dixie snuggled closer to Parker as they walked. The hammering wind brought the cool scent of ozone into the hot August night. She wondered if Carra Lynne would sleep on the beach again tonight, and when they reached the portico, she asked Parker to unlock the Caddy’s trunk. She removed the ground cloth she’d rescued from the taxi before the tow truck showed up and tied it to a side view mirror. The thin metallic fabric whipped like a flag in the wind, but Dixie figured it would hold. She’d used a prisoner’s knot.

“What’s that for?” Parker asked.

“An offering. I’m wondering if we’ve been followed all night by a moon shadow.”

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