

## CHAPTER 35

By night, Chateau Lafitte had sparkled with inviting elegance. By morning, the estate appeared imposing and the house, despite its charming Victorian color scheme and gingerbread curlicues, forbidding. Dixie knew there must be activity inside, preparations for the brunch crowd later, but no life showed outside the gates.

She had not phoned ahead, as Parker suggested, so Astin wasn't expecting them. Dixie liked the idea of catching the young restaurateur without his uncle hovering. And she was certain that, forewarned, Astin would've called him. Somehow she needed to also get Parker out of the way. If she had to bear down on Astin with her questions, Parker might unintentionally jump to his client's aid.

As he maneuvered into a parking space outside the elaborate wrought iron gates blocking the entrance and exit of Chateau Lafitte's brick semi-circular driveway, Dixie noticed the mailbox. Molded from iron to match the gates, it was embellished with flowers along the top and elves hiding behind mushrooms on each side. Dixie suddenly saw the house through younger eyes. As a child, living with her unwed birth mother, Dixie had been shuffled from one low-rent housing unit to another. Carla Jean's habit was to move every few months. One summer she'd worked at the historic Hotel Galvez, certain of meeting her prince among the establishment's celebrated clientele. Almost daily she and Dixie drove past the best homes on the island, Carla Jean pointing them out, saying, "Someday, you and me, Desiree, we're going to live in a fine house exactly like this one."

During these fairy-tale excursions, they'd often stopped to gaze in envy at Gray Manor. Patricia Gray would've been a young bride then, Astin and Carra not even born. Looking up at the stone wall and the sparkling chrome-tipped finials on the iron gates, ten-year-old Dixie had thought it a fortress, keeping the respectable people safe and the likes of her and her mother locked out. She wondered now how Carra Lynne had felt growing up here. Had she and Astin played hide-and-seek in the towering thick shrubbery? Or did they grasp every opportunity to escape these historical premises to a youthful world outside? Were the grounds often filled with laughter, as children chalked hopscotch squares on the brick walks and built forts under the wide stairs? Or were school friends invited in only for fancy birthday parties? Did the siblings feel sequestered and pampered? Or imprisoned?

"We're too early," she told Parker. "I thought Astin said he opened for Sunday brunch."

"At a civilized hour. It's only ten-thirty."

"Where are the staff? Doesn't it take hours to prepare for a crowd?"

"Guess not."

"Yes, it does. There must be a rear entrance." On Friday night, when she had joined him hurriedly for dinner, she entered through a smaller pair of gates for walk-in traffic. Today, these, too, were shut. She walked toward the corner of the stone wall. "Did Astin ever talk about his family during your sailing trips?"

“Yesterday was our only time out. Talked about boats, slip fees, motor versus sail.”

“Never mentioned his cousin Shedon going along?”

“Nope.”

“They’re near the same age. Lived in the same house for a few of their formative years. Sheldon’s a talented young man and, with Carra Lynne gone, Astin’s closest relative.”

“Sorry. If I’d known his sister was your skinhead, I might’ve asked better questions.”

Before Dixie opened her door and stepped out, Parker had already exited the Cadillac and circled it. He stood beside her as she tossed Paddock’s file on the passenger seat. She leaned against the car and slipped her arms around Parker’s neck.

“That’s okay, Nick Charles. You’re doing fine. We just need to sharpen your undeveloped curiosity gene.” She coaxed his lips down toward hers, the lazy part of her wanting to go back to the beach house—and Parker’s sexy bedroom—for a few hours. “Like the way Garwood dotes on Astin yet estranges his own son—doesn’t that make your little gray cells hop around like Mexican jumping beans?”

“Not since you pointed out those stacks of money on Astin’s shoulders.”

Parker’s lips remained enticingly out of reach.

“I found an envelope in Paddock’s file,” Dixie told him. “From a Christmas card Sharon sent her mother.”

“Postmarked Grovemont?”

She nodded, her hair brushing Parker’s chin. “Yet Carra Lynne never called, never even sent a postcard. Or did she?”

“You’re thinking Astin heard from her but neglected to tell his uncle.”

“See? That curiosity gene is sharpening up already.” She eased up on her toes and consummated the kiss.

Parker drew her tighter, making it last, and when she started to pull away, made it last even longer.

“Speaking of curiosity,” he said gruffly, coming up for air, “rather than inspire raised eyebrows from Astin’s neighbors, we could take a break and—”

“And miss catching your catamaran client before lunch?”

“If Astin knew where to look for his sister, he’d have told us last night.”

“He’s had time now to think about it. Siblings usually know each other’s secrets. With a little coaxing, he might recall some of his sister’s habits that never made it into Paddock’s notes. The mind retains everything, but not always on a conscious level.”

“Sounds like we don’t get to take that break.”

“Now you’re starting to think like gumshoe.” She gave him a final peck on the lips. “We shall strike while the subject is preoccupied with setting up for business, maybe a little edgy about being distracted. When the conscious mind is busily engaged, the subconscious can be wonderfully helpful.”

“Devious,” Parker said, smiling.

She straightened her clothes. “Why the big grin?”

He shut the car door before answering. “Just filing away that distraction idea for future use.”



On a brick column to the left of the wrought iron gate, a brass plate read: GRAY MANOR, 1870. Above the stone wall that enclosed the manor, Dixie could see the upper windows of the restaurant. No activity there. Strolling alongside the wall, she saw no opportunity for entrance.

“Do you have Astin’s phone number handy?” She preferred surprising him, but she also wanted to talk before the restaurant was actually open for business.

While Parker read the number from Astin’s business card, Dixie dialed. A computerized message told her the restaurant would open at eleven-thirty and did not take reservations for brunch. They passed another locked gate and turned down an alleyway, still skirting the stone wall surrounding the grounds. Parker touched Dixie’s arm and nodded toward a separate structure from the main house that looked like a garage apartment. It stretched behind and to the right of the main building.

“Guess that’s the carriage house.”

“Must be.” Dixie surveyed the Victorian architecture, crafted to match the main building and painted in two shades of moss green with rose trim. The upper floor sat above three garage doors accessible outside the wall. Four second-story windows reflected the morning sunlight. “Wonder why she did it there. Why not in her own bedroom?”

“Or a bathtub. Hell of a lot easier to clean up the blood.”

Dixie regarded the stately main house and pictured Patricia’s body lying in a bloody heap in one of the manor’s many rooms. “Patricia lived alone with her kids. Garwood and his family had a home of their own by then. Maybe she hoped the kids wouldn’t discover her body, that police would be called when she was reported missing.”

She tugged up hard on a garage door handle. No give.

“Were you going to just break in?” Parker asked.

“If I wanted to break in, I’d use a crowbar. Are there any trucks behind the house, unloading groceries or whatever?” Even standing on her toes, Dixie couldn’t see over the stone wall, but Parker had a ten-inch advantage.

“Don’t see any.”

They continued around the carriage house to a skinny walkway blocked by a single gate—which appeared unlocked. Dixie spied a gap between the stone and the wrought iron. She pushed. The gate opened easily on well-oiled hinges.

“Hello!” she called, entering the expansive grounds. Then, quietly to Parker, “James Carver Gray chose to walk away from all this, leaving his family to struggle with the upkeep of his heritage. Quite a burden for a nonworking mother and two youngsters.”

“I’d like to borrow Astin’s gardener,” Parker said. “To spruce up my yard.”

“Take about a hundred years of sprucing to look like this. The family might’ve cut back on live-in maid service, but this garden hasn’t gone without attention.”

“Where are you going?” Parker asked when she continued walking.

“The gate was open. I’m just enjoying the view.”

He grimaced. “Hello! Anybody home?”

This time they got an answer. “Around here.”

A gust of wind scattered leaves along the pathway as it curved among sprawling oaks and towering palm trees, which Dixie realized were probably as old as the house. At a corner of the garden ablaze with color they found Astin. A gardening apron covered his suit pants and white shirt. He squatted beside a bush bearing deep red blossoms as big as salad plates.

“Nice hibiscus,” Parker said.

Oh. Hibiscus. A hibiscus bush grew beside Dixie’s front porch, but not like this one. She’d never seen blossoms so huge.

“Sounds like Parker Dann,” Astin said, without looking up. “Give me a minute. If my knife slips, I’ll have to start over.”

A branch had been lopped off and he was cutting a notch in the top of the stalk. He worked a utility blade slowly downward at an angle.

“We were hoping you could spare a few minutes before the lunch customers demand all your attention,” Dixie said.

“Sure. This won’t take long.”

“What is that, a graft?” Parker asked.

“Yes. Most of the hybrids you see here were created from cross-pollinating or grafting.”

“Looks tedious,” Dixie said.

The razor had split away the bark about half an inch. Astin picked up a sprig from the ground and peeled off a thin sliver of bark, then positioned the sprig in the cut on the stalk.

Adept, precise, engrossed. The worried young man in Garwood Evercamp’s game room, who couldn’t seem to keep his blond hair from falling in his face, had vanished. This man looked incredibly competent but still incredibly young.

How had he managed all the usual demands of high school while saddled with the responsibility of caring for a younger sister, an emotionally frail mother, and keeping his father’s failing business afloat? Even with Garwood and Valerie moving in to help, it couldn’t have been an easy life.

“We were admiring your grounds,” Parker told him. “Think you gardener could spare the time for a side job landscaping my beach house?”

Astin held the graft in place and wrapped it with tape.

“Actually, I do most of the yard work,” he said softly. “Except for the mowing, which I detest. I hope you won’t spread that about. It would seem as if the business can’t adequately support a groundskeeper.”

“Running the import business, and now the restaurant,” Dixie said, “how do you find time for gardening?”

He snipped the tape off and smoothed the end in place.

“I make time. It’s the part I really enjoy. And while a new coat of paint enhances a building, well-tended grounds give it substance and grace. I like to think so, anyway. I’ve taken care of this yard since I was nine.”

“All of it?” Parker looked incredulous. The space was easily half an acre. “A nine-year-old?”

“When the economy fell, my father let the gardener go and showed me how to work the lawnmower.”

Dixie looked at the ivy that spread between flower beds and walkways. "I don't see much grass here."

Astin's smile turned sheepish. Suddenly Dixie pictured him a skinny, sun-blond nine-year-old, reaching for a lawnmower handle as high as his head.

"I didn't like mowing back then any more than I do now. I noticed that other houses had this ground cover instead." He placed a clear plastic bag loosely over the new graft. "So I dug flower beds and, ah, at night I'd go around taking cuttings from neighboring yards and planting them in my own."

Dixie grinned. Kathleen had told her once that the heartiest flowers were clipped from a friend's yard and planted under a new moon.

Astin secured the plastic bag with a string. "Dad went white with embarrassment when he caught me, but those missing bits didn't damage the neighbors' yards. And I watered the cuttings faithfully until they covered the more and more ground. Over the years, they've spread nicely."

"Guess you 'branched' out and pirated bushes next," Parker said, obviously amused. He waved an arm to include the array of lush growth in every direction.

"The trees and hedges and many of the shrubs were already here. In late spring, though, I'd find a neighbor's bulb bed that needed dividing and help myself to a few offshoots."

Among the gorgeous hibiscus plants grew an odd tree, its branches bent and pruned to sharp angles, leaves manicured into flat-bottomed clumps. Beneath it, Dixie spied a concrete headstone, carved with one lopsided word: POSEIDON.

"What part did you like best?" she asked, tempering her words with a smile. "Stealing or planting?"

Astin narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you suggesting theft runs in our family?"

"Can't help wondering if Carra Lynne knew about your late-night scavenges."

"I suppose she might have." He rose from his crouch. "I really need to be going inside. The kitchen staff will be setting up now. What—?"

"We were hoping to get a tour. I'd especially like to see your sister's room."

Dixie moved aside a branch of pale green blossoms with lavender centers to get a better look at the oddly shaped tree. "That gravestone makes interesting garden art. A pet?"

For a moment he regarded the stone silently.

"One of the strays Carra Lynne found on the beach," he said. "Old and sick, which was probably why the owners dumped it. Dad wanted to put it down. No money for a vet. Before he could make up his mind, Poseidon just wasted away. Carra Lynne insisted on a proper burial, so I poured the concrete and showed her how to carve the name before it set up. Now the grave is part of the history of Gray Manor."

Fifty years from now his grandchildren would tell ghost stories about it. Dixie had buried a few pets in her time, with wooden markers, long since rotted away. "About that tour...?"

"All the bedrooms have been converted to dining areas," Astin said. "Except my personal quarters."

*Well, nuts.* "Then maybe we could take a look inside the carriage house?"

He blanched. "Since my mother's death, I only use it to store wine."

"That's perfect. I'm sure the police did a thorough job, but they weren't looking for clues to your sister's disappearance. Unless I misunderstood last night."

He shook his head. “We didn’t tell the police right away. I mean, we thought Carra Lynne had stayed overnight at a friend’s house. By the time we realized she wasn’t here, anywhere on the island, the cleaners had stripped the bedroom, scoured the...blood...off everything, and put it all back.”

“Even so, if Carra Lynne ventured upstairs during those hours before you and your uncle arrived, we might find a lead.” Slim chance, but Dixie was determined to see inside that carriage house.

Astin wiped the blade on his apron and closed the knife.

“There is the storage trunk,” he said. “Last year, when we started the renovation, Valerie packed up all of Carra’s things. But couldn’t we do this later?”

“If she leaves Galveston again, we won’t have an inkling where to start looking. Our best bet is finding Carra Lynne while she’s still in town.”

“If she hasn’t already bolted,” Parker said.

Dixie wanted to kick him. “Maybe she left a diary, a journal, an address book...?”

Still, Astin hesitated. Dixie couldn’t blame him for not wanting to revisit the scene of his mother’s suicide.

“If you need to take care of the restaurant, we can find our own way upstairs,” she offered.

A car horn honked. Following Astin’s quick glance, Dixie noticed that the garage had doors on this side also, which opened to a concrete loading pad.

Hurriedly, then, he nodded. “I’ll let the wait staff in and get the key.”

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