

CHAPTER 38

“Whatever she’s done, I’m sure we can make some sort of restitution,” Astin said. “I can’t bear to think of her sitting in jail. If *we* paid you to find Carra Lynne—”

“I’d still need to notify the local police. She’ll answer to charges in all three states, but if the theft victims are repaid, state attorneys will likely cut a deal.” Carra Lynne would have to steal a lot more than a load of computer goods to win free room and board in today’s crowded prisons. “But, Astin, police in Grovemont, Georgia are also looking for your sister in connection with a suicide.”

Astin’s features went rigid in the rosy light of the redecorated maid’s room.

“Uncle Gar said you would find out about that. It looks bad, Carra Lynne being implicated in two suicides, but my sister wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

Dixie opened a dresser drawer. Empty. A wooden hairbrush lay on the bedside table. Any hair would’ve been gathered by the forensic team. She held the brush toward the lamp to examine the intricate carving of oleander blossoms.

“Did Carra Lynne ever try to take her own life? Or talk about it?” Peeling back the red velvet bedspread she found bare box springs. No mattress. Probably saturated with too much blood for the cleaning people to salvage.

“No.” Astin looked surprised. “At least, not before she left here. I don’t know what she’s thinking now. And there’s nothing here that’s going to help you. Carra Lynne’s out *there* somewhere. Surely you could be—”

“We’re almost finished,” Dixie insisted.

Glancing toward the clink of glass as Parker loaded another crate with wine bottles, Astin remained inside the doorway.

“Hall Paddock’s notes included a list of neighbors and your sister’s teachers and friends.” A damned short list. Sheldon’s name had been there, Sharon’s, but one name Dixie expected to find hadn’t been. “Can you think of anyone she knew who wasn’t listed?”

Astin shook his head thoughtfully. “I gave it all to that investigator.”

“What about her music teacher? She must have had lessons to play as well as she did last night.”

“Curtis Todd.” Astin smiled. “Or Curtis *Toad*, as Carra Lynne called him. I can’t imagine that we didn’t mention Curtis, he’s such a part of the family. He taught my mother, taught me—though I’m afraid my lessons didn’t take too well. Carra Lynne has all the musical talent.”

“He didn’t seem old enough to have taught your mother as a child.”

“No. She studied briefly, I believe, when she was young, but started seriously taking lessons with Curtis after she married my father.”

“Can you get me Todd’s phone number and address?”

“I’m sure I have his business card downstairs. And now I really do need to get back. Have you found anything here that will help you locate my sister?”

“It’s hard to say.” Dixie drew aside the draperies and looked down. Not much traffic on this Sunday morning. Not much traffic anytime, Dixie imagined. The manor house faced the main road, but this building faced an alley.

Following Astin back into the hallway, she spied an open door at the end of the hall.

“That’s the closet you mentioned?” He still had the green string wrapped around one hand, keys dangling.

“We’ve been using the lift,” he said, “to transport the wine crates down. Other than the lift, there’s only my father’s whittled pieces, and he left us so long ago what possible help—?”

“Humor her,” Parker called. “Believe me, it’ll save time.”

“All right.” Astin motioned grudgingly for Dixie to precede him. “Before the living room was converted to office and warehouse space, this closet held linens. And clothing, I suppose. My father installed the service elevator to bring supplies up. Then he put in the window and the rocking chair. He would sit up here for hours when decisions became too burdensome.”

The space was large for a closet but extremely small for any other use. Sitting in that rocking chair, a person could look directly down the hallway to the carriage house entrance and could also look out the tall window to the garden below. A limb of a sprawling live oak tree stretched close enough to touch.

Beside the rocking chair, an open box held small pieces of exotic wood, some of it dry rotted but most in fairly good condition. A second box served as a table. A moth-eaten man’s sweater hung from a wooden peg. Scores of even shallower shelves than those up front climbed the wall to the tall ceiling. They were filled with wooden pieces no bigger than a man’s thumb. Animals, fish, birds, flowers. On the wall opposite the window was a sliding metal door Dixie assumed to be the service elevator.

Astin toed aside a few wooden pieces that lay on the floor. “After my father left, Carra Lynne liked to play with this junk.”

And kept her key on a green string. Dixie took down a golden retriever, the natural wood grain giving the dog’s coat its wave and coloring. She set it back on the shelf.

“This room looks recently cleaned. No dust.” Even the window sparkled.

When Astin didn’t respond, Dixie retrieved a tiny duck from the pieces on the floor.

The front door creaked. Interesting, how ominous it sounded even in daylight. She could imagine the ghost stories that uncoiled hinge might inspire.

“Your dad had talented hands,” she said, fitting the duck’s broken neck back in place. “I can understand wanting to keep these little guys secure. Who maintains—?”

A throat-clearing sounded down the hallway. “Too bad my brother-in-law’s talent didn’t lean more toward business.” Striding toward them, Garwood Evercamp’s squat form filled the narrow hallway. “John Carver’s incompetence and neglect practically ran the company into the ground, but he could always find time to chip away at his little pieces of wood.”

“Uncle Gar—”

“Speaking of business, Astin, you’re needed downstairs.”

Another utility knife, this one made of blued steel with a replaceable blade, sat among the wooden bric-a-brac. Dixie wondered if John Carver had used the knife for whittling.

“We were just going,” Astin told his uncle.

Garwood glared at his nephew before reversing directions to lead the way out.

As Dixie passed the bedroom, she paused to flip off the light. Her hand on the switch, she studied the bawdy frills and wondered what Carra Lynne had thought, supposing she had indeed stumbled into this room and found her mother lying among the blood-soaked bedding. *Is she still alive? Phone! I need a phone! An ambulance!*

If Carra Lynne discovered her mother dead or dying, why hadn't she called 911? Why run?

Dixie could think of only two reasons.

Fear. She was terrified, seeing all that blood, not knowing what to do. Yet, how much wherewithal did it take to reach for a phone? Or maybe she was terrified of a person. Had Carra Lynne mistaken Patricia's suicide for murder and feared the killer was still in the house? In that case, why not run straight to the cops?

Shame. This second possibility saddened Dixie, but she thought it more likely. What if Carra Lynne, at some earlier time, had found her mother with a lover, or with one of a string of lovers? Or johns? Wouldn't be the first time a widow secretly prostituted herself to earn a living. And if Carra Lynne discovered her mother's secret life, had the girl been so ashamed, so disgusted, so furious with Patricia that she perversely chose to follow a similar path? Astin had thought it was Sharon who brought men up here, but Carra Lynne was at that rebellious age of puberty. *I'll show you. I can fuck more, suck more, than you every thought about. With a whore for a mother, what else can I be?*

Again, it wouldn't be the first time.

And if Patricia endured her daughter's disgust, only to find Carra Lynne following her lead, was she then stricken with such shame and guilt that she killed herself? Even if Carra Lynne only *believed* her brutal reaction triggered Patricia's death, she might be running from her own shame and guilt.

Yet neither possibility answered the question about dust. Who was maintaining John Carver's cubby hole?



Garwood Evercamp led the procession single-file down the carriage-house stairs. At times he simply could not comprehend his nephew. In what trashcan had the boy deposited his mind when he arose this morning? No good could come from allowing these meddlers to tramp around in an old scandal. No good at all.

Garwood slid his tongue over the bad molar. Pain was his constant companion since the dratted thing flared up. To stop Valerie's nagging, he had finally called a dentist, a chamber friend, who agreed to a Monday appointment.

Extracting a bottle of aspirin from his pocket, Garwood popped three tablets into his mouth, relishing the sour taste as he chewed. Half the bottle gone, and now his ears ringing, yet the pain had not begun to subside.

The footsteps behind him halted. He turned to find the woman dialing her cell phone, and Parker Dann inquiring about Astin's prized tree, the tree with Posiedon's headstone beneath it. Shuddering at the memory of that dreadful beast, eighty pounds of teeth, muscle and mange, Garwood bit down on the sore molar. Pain soared through his skull. A disgusting seepage spread across his tongue.

Curse the girl! Drag home a vicious mongrel. The whole family breathed easier when the thing died, and bygod that was the last of Carra Lynne's strays. No earthly reason for Astin commemorating the dog in concrete. An eyesore, that headstone. At times, though, the boy could be quite obstinate.

"Astin, this is no time to be dawdling in the heat." Garwood shook his head wearily and glanced up at the clouds that had threatened rain all morning. "Go on inside. I have a proposition to put to Mr. Dann and his assistant, on the subject we discussed last night. We'll follow along right behind you."

CHAPTER 39

“Amy, what do you mean you’re on your way to drop off Ryan?” Dixie asked, returning her sister’s call. “Didn’t he tell you I’m in Galveston?”

“At Parker’s,” Amy said. “Yes, he told us.”

“Mom!” Ryan’s voice in the background sounded frantic. “I said you didn’t have to call her!”

Garwood had stopped on the pathway ahead. He stood mopping his sweaty brow with a handkerchief and glaring at her.

“Exactly what did he tell you?” Dixie asked Amy.

“Mom!”

“Ryan said you need his help and we should drive him to Parker’s house. You’ll bring him home tomorrow.”

The scheming imp. “Amy, let me talk to him.” When Ryan came on the phone, Dixie said, “What’s the deal?”

“I got a great lead! I know we can find her now.”

“What’s the deal with your lying to your mother?”

“I didn’t lie. You, me, Parker, we can surround her.”

“That’s not going to happen, Ryan.”

“Why not?”

“Does the word ‘dangerous’ mean anything to you?”

“What could be dangerous? You’re there, Parker’s there. It’s three against one— Mom!”

“Dixie, what’s going on?” It was Amy.

“I’ll explain everything when I get back to Houston. You don’t need to drive here.”

“Never mind the drive. What’s all this about danger and someone lying? Are you in trouble again?”

“No trouble. No danger.” Amy was more of a worrier than Parker. “Ryan’s just practicing being thirteen and obnoxious. Listen, I know Parker would like to invite you guys for a weekend, but tonight’s not a good time. Okay?”

Hearing his name, Parker stopped examining Astin’s hybrids and grinned at her. “Barbecue on the beach. Your whole family. Anytime next week, and we’ll discuss delivering that blue-water Nautical.”

“Dixie, are you and Parker arguing again?”

“No, Amy, everything’s fine. We’ll talk tomorrow. Let me yell at my conniving nephew.” When he came back on, Dixie said, “Okay, what’s so hot you had to lie to your parents?”

“I want to be there when you catch her,” he sulked.

“Not going to happen, Ryan. You want to tell me, or not?”

“Sheldon Evercamp’s name showed up on a website. Lafitteville. A pirate theme park in Galveston.”

Ahhhh. Dixie recalled the handbill she had seen at Kwik Kash, and the similar one she had picked up on The Strand. Perhaps Sheldon had thrown his name in the hat for artistic consultant on the project.

“Was there a physical address listed for him? Or for the theme park?”

“Not an address, but a place on Stewart Beach that sponsors the meetings. Voodoo Daddy’s Swamp Hut.”

“And the next meeting is sometime today?” Thus Ryan’s timely fib.

His stubborn streak kicked in for a few beats. “I think there’s a meeting at three o’clock.”

“You think? What did the announcement say?”

“There was a meeting last Sunday at three. So there might be one this Sunday. Today.”

“Might be. And this is the flimsy idea that goaded you to lie to your parents?”

“I didn’t lie. You and Parker can’t surround a place by yourselves. You need my help.”

Obviously, he’d never seen Voodoo Daddy’s.

“Ryan, it would take two dozen cops to surround that place. And a meeting last Sunday does not ensure another meeting today, unless the site specifically stated ‘weekly’ meetings. Did it?”

“No.”

“Monthly?”

He didn’t answer.

“Ryan, did you have any other reason to believe Sheldon or—” Uh-oh, she hadn’t spoken to Ryan since discovering Gennae was actually Carra Lynne. “—or Gennae might show up there?”

Another beat of silence. “It was a hunch.”

Oh, boy. She gave him another sixty-second lecture about honesty and about the systematic discipline of pursuing ideas rather than running hell-bent after hunches. Yeah, right, like she was a great example. She felt weary with the whole prospect of chasing the reward money. Her energy had refocused on a slip of poetry.

Before she could disconnect, Amy came back on the line.

“Someone called here for you, Dixie. A man named Kincaid, Rodney Kincaid. Do you know him? He said he used to work with you.”

“Briefly. What did he want?”

“He wanted to know how to reach you. I gave him your home phone number, since it’s listed, but he already had that.”

“Did you give him my cell phone number?”

“No. I thought if you wanted him to have it, he’d have it. Was that right?”

“Absolutely.” Not that it was any big secret. “Did he give you any sort of message?”

“Just that he wanted to talk to you and was it all right for me to give him your cell phone number.”

“Did he say he’d call you back?”

“He said he might, if he couldn’t find the number anywhere else. What should I tell him?”

“Give him the number. I’ll talk to him.” What the hell could it hurt?
And what the hell did he want?

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