

CHAPTER 3

La Marque, Texas

Texans with a gambling addiction have only three options: dogs, horses and the lottery. Almost any convenience store sells lottery tickets. But only two race tracks exist in the greater Houston area. On a hunch, Dixie'd scouted the parking lot at the horse track without finding Thompson's Ford Escort. No big surprise. Spurred by her nephew's high expectations, she'd felt compelled to stop on her way to meet Parker, but hadn't really expected to strike it lucky.

The unwelcome surprise came at Gulf Greyhound Park. The popular dog track was located in a tiny community between Houston and the newly revitalized Galveston Island. Through a crust of road film Dixie spotted the Arkansas license number and knew she had the right car. Apparently, Gennae Thompson preferred pups to ponies.

Damn! Dixie glanced at her watch and reached for her cell phone. The local law could take over from here. If they responded promptly...*big if*...she could still make dinner on time.

But finding the car didn't guarantee the thief would still be on the premises. The expansive circular parking area, filled with locally-owned vehicles but also with plenty of out-of-state cars and RVs, provided a perfect opportunity to dump the Escort and pick up a new set of wheels. Alerting the locals prematurely would only bring her flak the next time she needed their help. With a feeling of being handcuffed by circumstances, she closed her cell phone and parked near the entrance.



Dixie walked the entire building and scanned the outdoor bleachers without seeing a woman matching Gennae's description. But now, standing in the center betting queue of the Players Lounge, yellow WANTED poster in hand, she cast a wary eye at a skinhead two lines over. A tingle between Dixie's shoulder blades suggested her hunch might yet pay off.

"Gin Sip on the nose," a woman ahead cooed loudly to the man standing beside her. "Sweetie, you said I could pick the winner in this race." Lime-green bobbles dangled from each ear; lime-green stretch pants clearly defined each ample butt cheek.

The portly man in a flowered shirt shook his head. "Gin Sip's a maiden, no stats. Everything we've won tonight you're going to lose on one stupid bet?"

"In my premonition, Gin Sip burst from the gate like a rocket, trailing a wake of fire—"

Dixie hit a quick-dial button on her cell phone. The couple's squabble and the murmur of a hundred simulcast monitors would easily cover her own conversation.

"I may've spotted that kid I'm looking for," she said, when Parker answered.

Eight freighted seconds passed before he spoke.

"Dixie, these reservations were damned hard to get."

“I know. But I really need to check this out.”

Parker's frustration sighed into her ear. Any other Friday night they'd be eating a gourmet meal from his own kitchen. Brawny, passionate, fairly useless with a hammer or wrench, he could make pots and pans dance like a scene from *Fantasia*. Yet, he'd been excited about dining out this evening at a new inn and restaurant that drew a favorable write-up in *Galveston Streets* magazine.

“All right, check it out,” he agreed finally. “Mud and I've already lost twelve games of Solitaire. Should we go for twenty?”

Dixie pictured her Mean Ugly Dog sitting at a card table with Parker. She grinned, wishing she was with them. But how long could it take to get a full-face view of that skinhead?

“Can you move the reservations up half an hour?”

“On grand opening weekend? The place is booked solid.”

“Can't hurt to ask. If they won't, then just muse over the menu with a bottle of their best wine—my treat—until I arrive. Okay?”

“I'll 'muse' for exactly fifteen minutes.”

Dixie couldn't blame him for being pissed. Living eighty miles apart limited their opportunities for spontaneous get-togethers, and every time they booked a date more than a few hours in advance, Dixie's erratic schedule crimped the plan.

But Ryan was counting on her, too.

“I'll finish up here as fast as I can,” she promised. “And Parker...thanks.”

With an indecipherable mutter, he disconnected. She considered calling back, telling him she'd leave right now. Maybe that tingle she felt was nothing more than an itch.

The skinhead wore camouflage fatigues, a silver skull earring, and work boots. Gennae's mug shot showed a square, pretty face, wide mouth, full lower lip, no jewelry, platinum waves falling to her shoulders.

Nevertheless, some oddities in the skinhead's appearance suggested female in drag. No Adam's apple, for one. Despite the August heat, an oversized jacket obscured the kid's chest. And his gait, as Dixie followed it to the betting queues, had swayed too much to be all male. On the other hand—

“Pardon me,” a sharp, nasal voice addressed her.

Dixie spun on her boot heel to find a face from her past: Assistant District Attorney Rodney Kincaid, handsome, ambitious, and slippery as wet fish.

He shoved a ten-dollar bill toward her. “I believe you dropped this.”

“Nope, not mine.” Maybe he didn't remember her. When Kincaid joined the DA's staff, several months before Dixie left it, she hadn't liked his slam-dunk attitude toward gaining convictions. She wasn't at all pleased to see him now.

“Sorry. I was sure it fell—” His eyes did the quick blink of recognition. Too quick. “I know you. You're a prosecutor—or were. Left a couple years ago. Flannigan, right?”

“Three years.” After battling Texas' revolving-door justice for a decade, she'd had enough. Sliding a glance at the skinhead, Dixie offered the obligatory handshake. “Where *are* you now, Rodney?”

“Chief in the 332nd. Recent transfer.” He tucked the bill into his jeans pocket. Nice fit. Fantastic body—for a jerk.

“Did you ever have that judge?” he asked.

Dixie shrugged it away. “Part of another life.”

As the woman at the head of the line completed her betting transaction, Dixie tuned out Kincaid and moved up a step. When he followed, she glanced pointedly at the shorter queues, then cut her gaze back to find him straining to read the WANTED poster in her hand.

“Gennae Thompson,” he read from the bold type.

Dixie folded the photograph out of sight. “A.k.a. Margie Tomlin a.k.a. Genny Tomkins.”

“Wanted in three states, including Texas?”

So the guy was a speed reader. Dixie shoved the poster deep in her pocket.

Kincaid looked around and lowered his voice. “Is she here?”

“In this crowd? Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Thirty-thousand dollars. Better than your average bail-bond contract. That’s what you’re doing these days, isn’t it? Bounty hunting?”

“Yep.” Dixie chose to ignore his snide tone.

She saw the skinhead slap a wad of bills on the counter and receive a betting slip. As he turned to leave, Dixie finally got a straight-on look at his square face—wide mouth, full lower lip, *brown* eyes. Gennae had green eyes, but colored contact lenses would handle that. A lightning-shaped tattoo marked the skinhead’s right cheek. No mention on the poster of a tattoo. It might be recent. Or fake.

Dixie sensed Kincaid’s gaze. To follow the skinhead now would certainly draw the prosecutor’s attention.

“Give us a quiniela box, one, three, and six,” the man in the flowered shirt told the betting clerk.

“No, sweetie,” his wife argued. “Gin Sip on the nose.”

“We are not betting all our winnings on your hair-brained fantasy.”

When the couple moved off, Dixie laid a ten on the counter. She wasn’t much of a gambler.

“Gin Sip,” she told the clerk. A woman’s premonition counted a lot higher in her book than eeny-meeny-miney-moe.

“To win?”

Well... “Win, place, or show,” she hedged.

“Across the board.” The clerk punched out her ticket.

For a calculating moment Dixie loitered, as if deciding where to light. Despite her often loudly voiced opinion that politics swung too many sound cases into the shitcan, her relationship with the DA and many of the staff had remained congenial. No point in slamming the door now.

“Give the folks at home my howdy.” She smiled at Kincaid, sketching a wave in passing. Tucking the betting slip into her pocket, she strolled in the same direction as the skull earring and camouflage fatigues.

Each of the Horizon Restaurant’s nine cascading tiers had a single row of tables where viewers could watch the races live or on simulcast. Cash machines and self-serve betting terminals provided added temptation. Spotting the skinhead, Dixie asked to be seated at a table one level up. Facing the young man—or woman—she could appear to watch the dogs while comparing his features with the mug photo of Gennae Thompson.

The shaved scalp accentuated the unusual shape of the kid's ears, a feature most difficult to alter. Upper shell tipped outward, lobe snug against the head. Exactly like Gennae's. With that single point of reference, Dixie assessed the eyes, nose, and mouth again: all conformed to the mug shot. The disguise worked because most people, like Kincaid, shied away from skinheads. Only a cop or a bounty hunter would peer past the camouflage and rough tattoo.

Now all Dixie needed was a worthy officer to exercise the warrant. If she handled the arrest and paperwork herself, she'd never make her dinner date with Parker. She ticked through her mental Rolodex...

With most law enforcement agencies she enjoyed professional rapport, but here in La Marque—well, some officers just didn't like bounty hunters. Finally, her gray cells chucked up the name of a local deputy sheriff she could trust to arrest the kid without causing more trauma than necessary. She also knew a clever defense lawyer who'd get probation if anyone could, perhaps partnering on the out-of-state charges.

A trumpet sounded. Handlers in royal blue shirts and black shorts brought out the dogs. The announcement board showed nine minutes until the next race. Not much time. And no guarantee that Thompson would hang around for the last four matches.

Snapping her cell phone open, Dixie eyed the ample space between tables that allowed bettors to converse discretely. She dialed the deputy sheriff's pager number. As it rang, she saw Rodney Kincaid headed her way.

Shit.

When the paging service answered, Dixie left a hasty message that she prayed would bring a patrol car before Gin Sip crossed the finish line.

"Mind if I join you?" Kincaid sat down without waiting for Dixie's answer.

Pushy. Her brain-video ran an instant replay of Kincaid's earlier ploy with the sawbuck. What the hell did he want from her?

"Rodney, when we worked together we never exchanged more than a dozen words. What's up?"

He grinned, his practiced, confident prosecutor's grin. "You left quite a reputation behind, walking out right after a string of convictions."

And one big loss that allowed a pair of murdering thieves to go free. Nobody seemed to mind as much as Dixie had. Nobody important was killed; just a crusty old lady.

"Everyone thought you had a sweet junior-partnership lined up," Rodney added. "With one of the big firms."

"What others think never concerns me much."

"But...bounty hunting?"

"It put more Benjamins in my bank account last year than you'll earn in the next five." People always understood the money chase better than loftier explanations. And better than hearing she hadn't a clue what to do with the rest of her life, that skip tracing was just a positive action in route. And Rodney Kincaid was precisely the sort of prosecutor who would see Thompson as merely another slam-dunk conviction, never caring that an ounce of human interest might turn the girl around while she was still young and impressionable. Dixie started to rise. "Rodney, it's good seeing you but I'm really not interested in raking over—"

"That vigilante thing last spring. A friend of yours was involved."

Peripherally. Dixie stared at him. “Your point?”

A waitress appeared. Dixie shook her head, noticing that Gennae Thompson was drinking draft beer. Kincaid ordered iced tea.

When the waitress moved off, he said, “Your friend and the Trial Bureau Chief were real close, I heard.”

So that was it. The jerk thought Dixie had some sort of insider knowledge. Magic dust. Gossip that might give him a keener edge in carving his way through the DA’s hierarchy. The concept of simply doing a good job would never enter his scheming mind.

Dixie glanced at Gennae. The girl sipped her beer, then rotated the glass on the table, gazing down into the liquid. Her lips moved, as if reading her fortune in the amber depths.

Banking the animosity she felt toward the lawyer, Dixie forced a friendly tone. “Rodney, maybe you never learned the difference between free speech and cheap talk. You’ll find rumors are about as easy to unspread as butter, and they’ll make that ladder you’re so eager to climb damned slippery.”

“Don’t tell me you went as far as you did in ten years without sorting the strong rungs from the weak.”

“Call me old-fashioned, but I concentrated on putting criminals behind bars. And, yes, I got convictions.” Not by pleading out every case except the sure wins, which was precisely Kincaid’s method: rush to trial if he had a confession and two eye witnesses; plea bargain all other cases.

A number rolled up on the announcement board: two minutes till race time. Dixie peered out at the parking lot beyond the track—no sign of a green-and-white—and considered a couple more cops she could phone, as soon as she shook off Kincaid.

At the table below, Thompson unfolded a magazine clipping and stared at it. She continued to rotate the beer glass, occasionally taking small sips, lips moving continuously. What was she doing? Reading? Singing? Praying for a win?

With an ear-ringing crash, a waiter dropped a tray of bottles.

Dixie started, but Gennae Thompson actively cringed, spilling her half-finished draft across the table. Snatching the news clip from the spreading liquid, she attempted to sop up the spill with a paper napkin. When the waiter came to assist, Gennae tossed down a couple of bills and moved to another table.

Anyone running from the law would be uneasy, Dixie figured. But it was hard to imagine the nervous kid below attracting customers into a computer store as fast as she peddled stolen goods out the back. Beginning to wonder if she’d made an error, Dixie looked at her watch.

The race announcer started his patter.

“...High Voltage Stepper, defending champion from the George Shaw Kennel, and Rowdy Pup, who blazed her way to an impressive six-length win over Fancy Jo in thirty-point-six seconds...”

Parker would be cursing his eighteenth Solitaire game about now.

“Here comes Sparky the bunny...and they’re off! Number one, number six...”

Kincaid turned his attention to the simulcast.

The skinhead gripped the Formica tier divider separating her level from the next level down and followed the action out on the track like a kid playing a video game.

Number four moved up from the rear, closing in on the lead.

“Gin Sip, in her maiden race...” The announcer ran his words together as number four took second. “Nose to nose and they’re IN!”

When the scoreboard announced a photo finish between Gin Sip and the favorite, the skinhead threw a crumpled betting slip on the floor and started toward the escalator. In her disappointment, Gennae Thompson completely forgot to walk like a man.

“Hang it!” Kincaid scowled at the board. “Rowdy Pup came in third.”

Which still put him in the money, Dixie figured.

She rose, waving her winning ticket. “Can you believe this? Gin Sip came through on a long shot! Rodney, order us a glass of wine. Hell, order a whole bottle.”

“You haven’t won yet,” Kincaid reminded her. A light leapt into his eyes that she hadn’t time now to decipher.

“At Gin Sip’s odds, even second place ought to pay for a bottle of Zinfandel.” Then she whispered to him. “Rotten damn time to have to pee. I have the bladder of an ant. Would you mind cashing in my ticket with yours?”

She shoved the betting slip into his hand and made haste toward the ladies’ room. Rounding the corner, out of sight, she veered to the glass-enclosed balcony and escalator in time to see her thirty-thousand-dollar felon exiting the building on the floor below.

As Dixie rushed toward the moving stairs, she heard a voice—

“Didn’t I tell you we should bet on Gin Sip?”

—and bumped into a lime-green hip that jutted across her path.

Dixie stumbled, narrowly avoiding a spill down the escalator. By the time she righted herself, Marla Gennae Thompson was halfway across the parking lot.

CHAPTER 4

“Winner, sinner, no beginner!”

Gennae bumped over a pothole, taking the surface roads fast, careering around turns, bouncing over gravel, asphalt, concrete. She’d grown up in coastal towns, learned to drive on pitted streets.

“Near but no win. *Shoulda* been my night to win. *Shoulda* bet on the right dog.”

The nearer to home, the louder the voice. She did *not* want to hear the voice. *Not*.

“Hark, hark, the dogs do bark.”

Her throat felt raspy from the constant chatter. Where was she? Couldn’t see much in the fog.

A road sign appeared, arrow pointing right: GALVESTON 13 MILES.

“Home. This little pig went.”

Couldn’t go there. *Go there, you die.*

Gennae hiccupped and glanced at the Escort’s glove box. Show no fear, shed no tear.

She whipped the steering wheel and pulled off the road, onto the shoulder, her insides shaking.

“Like a leaf on a tree,” she rasped.

Peering in the rearview mirror, she considered turning back the way she’d come. Back to 59 and straight down south to Mañanaland, no hurry, no flurry, no worry.

But through the Escort’s open window, she could smell the sea and wished she could hear it, the roar, the slap of waves on the shore, the *shhhsh* as they swept away again.

She loved the sea.

The sea was home.

She hated traffic noise.

The sea was too distant to hear. Yet.

“Three men in a tub went out sea.”

The sea was home.

“Home is where the gnome is.” Home was four years ago.

She hiccupped.

“The wolf huffed and puffed. Never go home, never go home.”

Yet, she must.

Blowing all the air from her lungs, Gennae bent forward, calming the flutters. She drew the sea-scented air deep into her chest. As the breath hissed slowly out between her teeth, she guided the Escort back onto the pavement.

“Show no fear, shed no tear.”

She aimed it toward the Galveston bridge. Toward the coast. Toward home.

“There was a crooked gnome, who had a crooked home—”

Come home, the voice whispered.

Gennae went rigid.

She glanced at the glove box as she swerved into a U-turn, away from the coast.

“Coast, home. Not to the gnome. Never go home. Never.”

Driving faster, she took a sharp left, then reversed it.

She *must* go. Home.

The Ford bottomed out in a pothole, flew through an intersection, and landed skidding on gravel. She turned again toward the coast, the rich, clean sea smell boosting her spirits, despite the flaming horror in her belly.

Come home.

Reaching across the passenger seat, she opened the glove compartment and removed a blue steel utility knife. Handy for slicing open boxes.

“Coast, host, slice of toast.”

Come home.

Gennae hiccupped, harder this time, making her chest hurt. She turned left, right, retraced her path. Her voice felt scratchy, her throat dry, as she muttered faster and faster.

“Coast, host, slice of toast.”

She envisioned the sea. Dark-wet-soothing.

Lapping the shore. Lapping the coast.

She pushed a slide button on the box knife, bringing the razor into view. In the murky light of street lamps, the razor glinted.

“There was a crooked gnome, who had a crooked home. Home on the coast, slice of toast. Slice...”

She laid the cool blade against her face.

Come...

She traced her cheekbone, her jaw, then the smooth skin of her neck—

...home.

—until she felt a tiny pulse.

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