

CHAPTER 40

Inside Chateau Lafitte, waiters bustled, filling trays with smoked salmon and boiled shrimp, bowls with salad greens and fresh fruit, platters with hot cornbread and muffins. Dixie's palate quickened at the mixture of aromas as she imposed herself between Parker and Garwood and they made their way among the tables.

"This is not a time for Astin to be ignoring his business," the lawyer told Parker.

"Looks like everything's under control," Parker said.

Dixie might as well be invisible. She had not missed Garwood's remark about her being Parker's assistant.

"Yes, well." Garwood stuffed his damp handkerchief into a jacket pocket. "I've tried to train the boy to stay on top of things. Perhaps you would—you and Ms. Flannigan, that is—would join my wife and me for lunch. The proposition I have in mind will ease this Carra Lynne situation all around."

Dixie stole a look at Parker. She had no interest in any proposition Garwood offered, but she was interested in answers. Regarding the lawyer obliquely, she thought about the "he" in Carra Lynne's poem.

"Mr. Dann's busy schedule may prevent us from staying for lunch," she said. "Perhaps we could wait with you in the bar until your table's ready." Officially, the restaurant wouldn't open for another nineteen minutes.

"Perfect." Garwood pulled a pocket watch—complete with dangling gold chain—from his pants pocket and gazed at it for a beat. "I believe we'll find Valerie there."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Dixie said, taking Garwood's arm, leaving Parker to bring up the rear. "The import company belonged to James Carver Gray. He and Patricia had *two* children. Did Patricia inherit the entire estate by marriage? Or did James Carver's will divide it among his heirs?"

Garwood's priggish lips tightened into a stiff frown. "That's an impertinent question, Ms. Flannigan."

"Impertinence is a doorway to knowledge," Parker commented, before Dixie could stick a foot in her mouth. "And to locating lost nieces."

A waiter pushed past carrying a tray of condiments, and Astin appeared abruptly in his wake. His shirt looked wilted and bore a soil smudge from his morning in the garden.

"My father willed me sole ownership of the business," he said. "Periodically, he returns to check on how I'm handling it."

Garwood gasped. His face flushed with quick anger.

"Son, I've told you not to say things like that," he snapped.

"James Carver *returns*?" Dixie asked, but Astin had already strode off across the main dining room toward the bar, his uncle hard on his heels.

Parker encircled Dixie with an arm and tugged her out of a waiter's path.

"Don't you think we should ease up on prying into their family affairs?"

“Now? Just when the soup is heating up? When relatives disagree, you can bet the juiciest secrets are about to surface.”

“If pressuring them for information would help us find Carra Lynne, I’d agree with you. But they obviously don’t know anything.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Seeing his stubborn scowl, Dixie added, “Some families can’t be drawn around you like a cozy blanket, Parker. I wouldn’t trust Garwood Evercamp closer than a porcupine. I’ll bet you a bottle of Aile d’Argent that Uncle Gar controls the Gray inheritance through your buddy Astin. Look at this place—the tessarae games, the mannequin—it’s an extension of Garwood’s study. This is his venture, only it’s Astin’s money paying for it, Astin’s butt on the line if it bombs.”

Parker remained silent as they entered the bar.

“You’ll never make a successful gumshoe,” Dixie whispered, “if you back off too quick. We came here to find out why Garwood sent a detective to search for his niece, then called him off when the trail got bloody. And why she returned home without making contact with anyone who knew her—”

“If we back off, maybe she’ll come forward.”

“She’s had plenty of opportunity, and she hasn’t spoken to any of them.”

“Are we certain she hasn’t?”

Dixie smiled. “Now you’re thinking like a snoop. Everyone could be lying.”

Parker frowned again, clearly mulling over this new perspective. They moved into the bar, where Garwood had joined his wife near another portrait of Jean LaFitte.

Today Valerie wore a silver-trimmed black suit, her silver-streaked hair pulled back in a clip and her face tense with sobriety. Judging by the Bloody Mary cradled in her hands, Dixie figured sobriety wouldn’t last too deep into the afternoon.

“There you are,” Garwood said as they approached. “Val, you remember Ms. Flannigan and Parker Dann.”

Valerie raised her glass. “We need an attractive couple to liven up this party.”

Her smile seemed genuine. Dixie smiled back. She didn’t really want a drink, but she ordered fizzy water to “make nice.” Parker would be proud of her.

“I’ve told Astin he should level that carriage house,” Garwood told them. “Stop the ugly rumors once and for all.”

“He can’t do that,” Valerie countered. “It’s not his—”

“I know, I know!” The lawyer held up a hand.

“The Historical Society—”

He cut her off again. “At the very least we could gut the interior, restore it as servant’s quarters, add some gauche memorabilia and turn the place into a museum. Charge admittance. Let the old gossips in for a peek and they’ll rewrite Patricia’s suicide as one of their romantic folk tales.” Rounding his vowels and dropping his pitch to mimic a doleful announcer, Garwood added, “Mourning the loss of her husband, Patricia Kuznicki Gray lived only to see her children grown. When she could no longer bear the loneliness—”

“*Lonely?*” Valerie scoffed. “With Curtis lapping after her like a back-alley stray after—?”

“Val!” Garwood’s complexion reddened.

He was saved further embarrassment by the bartender setting down their drinks—another Bloody Mary for Valerie, whiskey neat for her husband, San Pelligrino for Dixie

and Parker. By the time the waiter departed, Dixie had decided her next stop would be Curtis Todd's house, and Garwood had regained his composure. He instantly steered the conversation in the direction he'd been headed earlier.

"I invited Parker and Ms. Flannigan to discuss the proposition we talked about last night after they left," he told his wife. "I suppose I must agree with Astin. If Carra Lynne is indeed in town, we need to find her. She's a fragile child—"

"As loony as her old lady," Valerie said.

"Val, I wish you wouldn't utter such things. Patricia was despondent, yes. She wasn't a strong woman—"

"Is that her portrait?" Parker asked, indicating one of the pair Dixie had noticed Friday night mounted over a distinctive fireplace inlaid with shiny multicolored tiles.

"Yes." Garwood eyed the pair over his glass. "Patricia and James Carver. My sister inherited all the beauty in our family."

"And you got the balls," Valerie quipped.

This time the lawyer merely glared at her.

Dixie studied the couple in the paintings, the woman blond and strikingly attractive, the man thin and pallid. He bore a vivid resemblance to Astin. *A gentle man*, Farley Short had dubbed him, which could also mean *weak*. Astin had his mother's strong mouth and chin. Carra Lynne had her father's ears.

"Parker, whatever you thought to earn on this search for my niece, I'm willing to match," Garwood said, finally getting his proposal out on the table. "Additionally, I can give you any paperwork you'll need to claim a reward. In effect, you would double your take. All you have to do is let us be the ones to turn Carra Lynne over to the local authorities in a manner that will preserve her rights as a citizen and ensure her mental, emotional and physical safety."

What a mouthful. And what did it mean, exactly? And who did Garwood think he was fooling?

Parker nodded vaguely, allowing a space of silence. "Why did you take Hall Paddock off the case in Grovemont, when he was very close to finding Carra Lynne?"

Yes! Dixie mentally kissed him, retracting all her earlier digs.

"Well," Garwood blustered, "perhaps you two are not as smart as I surmised. I should think it obvious, another inconclusive death, my niece vanishing—"

"Do you believe Carra Lynne had a hand in Sharon's death?" Parker asked.

"What I think has no bearing. She fled a crime scene, which in itself would make the Grovemont authorities suspicious. When they discovered her mother had recently met a similar demise, Carra would be forced to endure rigorous questioning and investigation. The media would try the case, and regardless of any legal outcome, that child would never shake off the suspicion—at the very least—of complicity."

"Why are you so certain she *didn't* have a hand in Sharon's death?" Dixie injected. "The medical examiner found a recent bruise on Sharon's forehead."

"Sustained when her head hit the bed's rail," Garwood said.

"So the report indicated." Dixie had slept in an iron bedstead and knew how painful those rails could be. "But the bruise might have resulted from a blow. Stunned, Sharon would've been easy prey for someone with a knife."

Garwood scowled and sipped his whiskey. Dixie caught Parker's penetrating gaze and knew he wanted to divert the conversation into calmer waters. Valerie, however,

looked fascinated, bright eyes gleaming, chin resting on her folded hands, Bloody Mary momentarily forgotten.

“Your unfounded theorizing is precisely the sort of thing I avoided by firing Paddock,” Garwood stated pointedly.

Dixie couldn't deny that. “He said a sudden gastric disorder prevented you from making the trip to Grovemont.”

“That's true. Astin, Valerie, and I were dining with Curtis Todd and a friend of his, a potential investor, when Paddock's call came. I scheduled the earliest flight out, but had to cancel. Bad fish. A rather fortunate case of food poisoning, as it turned out. Carra Lynne had already fled, and my presence would only have complicated the police investigation.”

“Why not send Astin? He could've identified the body.” Dixie could hear the irritation in her voice but refused to temper it. “Weren't you at all concerned that Sharon's mother still believes her daughter is alive and happy?”

“What earthly good would come from shattering that belief?”

“Claire could stop waiting for her daughter to send another Christmas card.”

“A sentiment that won't help my niece.”

Parker touched Dixie's arm. “It's not easy to make important decisions under stress.”

Dixie bit down on her annoyance but made a mental note to check airline schedules. If Garwood took an earlier flight and popped in on his niece intending to muscle her back home—

Her extrapolation halted abruptly. Was she thinking Garwood killed Sharon while Carra Lynne watched? Why would he?

Parker was right; she just didn't like the man.

Sipping her water, she glanced around the room recalling the magazine clip Carra Lynne appeared to be reading at the dog track and wondering if it had been the *Galveston Streets* write-up on Chateau Lafitte. Had that article enticed Carra Lynne to come home? How did she feel about her brother's renovation of Gray Manor? “What Astin said about his father being alive—”

“James Carver Gray is dead!” Garwood's drink sloshed precariously. “A judge made that ruling seven years ago.”

“But what if he isn't?” Dixie persisted.

“My nephew is only airing the guilt he feels at taking control of his life, taking control of what is rightfully his. Without Astin's determination and drive, this—” The lawyer waved an arm to indicate the dining room ready to accommodate hungry customers. “—would not exist. Please do not undermine what he has accomplished by supporting the unfounded burden of guilt he persists in carrying.”

“Well said, counselor!” Valerie toasted him with her glass, then drank deeply as Garwood glared at her. Her eyes twinkled.

“Does Astin have any proof that his father's alive?” Parker asked. “Have they spoken?”

“Of course not!”

Valerie giggled. “Astin sees his ghost.”

Dixie wondered how she might whisk Valerie away for a private chat. Truth or gossip, the woman seemed not to mind spilling her thoughts.

“Men desert their families every day,” Dixie said. “Especially in times of extreme duress, as in the foundering of a family enterprise. If James carver returned—”

Seeing Astin approach again, looking grim, Dixie left the supposition unfinished.

“He never left,” Astin said, joining them. He was dressed for business now in a pewter gray suit, white shirt and gray-and-yellow-striped tie, looking once again as natty as a riverboat gambler and not at all the despondent youth. “I used to think it was Mother or Carra Lynne who dusted and rearranged my father’s whittling closet.”

Garwood shook his head in defeat and blotted his forehead. “At least keep your voice down, son. Don’t broadcast to the entire room.”

There was that word again: son.

“Actually, I stopped by to apologize,” Astin said to Valerie. “I won’t be able to attend Curtis’s chamber concert tonight.”

“Nonsense!” Garwood pocketed the handkerchief again. “Heidi’s practicing with Curtis right now for her big event. She’ll be crushed.”

“I know. Give her my apology. I’m examining Farley Short’s business records and inventory after we close up.”

“You’ll have to reschedule,” Garwood argued. “I intend to be there when you go through that old scoundrel’s books.”

“Uncle Gar, Farley has another buyer coming tomorrow. Unless we want to risk—”

“All right, go ahead with it.” The lawyer sighed. “But take your time, make sure those records are impeccable.”

“I’m still curious,” Dixie said, before Astin could leave again. “Why do you believe your father is alive?”

Astin slid a glance toward his uncle. “You saw my father’s trophy closet. Not a speck of dust.”

“A prank,” Garwood shoved his empty glass toward the bartender. “Anybody could pick that flimsy old lock with a paper clip.”

“Have you ever thought about hiding upstairs and watching to see who goes in there?” Dixie asked Astin.

“Of course. Many times I’ve waited in the carriage house bedroom all night, peeking through the wine racks. I’ve heard footsteps enter the storage area from the stairs, but somehow he always knows I’m there and vanishes before I get a look at him.”

“Like a ghost,” Valerie commented over the rim of her glass.

Garwood sighed again, noisily.

“But Carra Lynne saw him.” Astin’s gaze slid from Dixie to Valerie. “Remember how she could slip around quiet as a bird? She saw him several times. Said he scared her.”

Her own father? Carra Lynne’s poem came to mind again...*count fast and he won’t come. He always comes, wicked tight mouth frowning. Sly.*

“The whole island believes my mother was demented when she died,” Astin added. “They even whisper that my father left because he couldn’t face having her committed.”

“And you’re suggesting *he’s* the one who is...in need of psychological help?” Paranoid? Schizophrenic? It might explain his dumping the family burden and dropping out of sight.

Astin shrugged. “Something, or someone, terrified my mother into taking her own life and my sister into leaving town. I believe only one person could do that. And he is not dead.”

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