

## CHAPTER 41

Curtis Todd's house lay inland, a mile or so past the Evercamps'. From the curb, it reminded Dixie of a fancy cake—painted mint-icing green, boxed in square by butterscotch storm shutters and decorated with a rainbow swirl of flowers. Tall hibiscus, lemon yellow and cherry pink, skirted the siding, fringed by petunias in blueberry, raspberry and vanilla. Todd's designer might've modeled it after the witch's gingerbread house that beckoned children in *Hansel and Gretel*.

At the curb sat a Jeep Wrangler. Licorice black.

The glaring sun had just started downward in the western sky toward a bank of ugly storm clouds. The air was still, hot and humid.

Before coming here, Parker had insisted on taking home the wine he had purchased from Astin. Kwik Kash was on the way, and Dixie, hoping to catch Sheldon, convinced him to stop in. The gray-haired movie junkie emerged from behind his barred window to tell them Sheldon worked only part time. No phone number or address listed in his personnel file.

At the beach house, Dixie changed into shorts and phoned Hall Paddock's list of potential leads while Parker unloaded wine. None of Carra Lynne's acquaintances admitted seeing or hearing from her after she left town.

Dead ends.

Dixie wondered now what to expect here at this sugarplum house. Ryan's sneaky plan to put himself physically in the chase had quashed her interest in helping him collect the reward on Carra Lynne, and Parker's impatience at wasting their weekend had begun to rise like mercury in a thermometer. Three times he'd pointed out ice cream stores or juice bars and suggested stopping. Three times she'd put him off.

The notion persisted that Carra Lynne might be in danger, that the "he" in her poem might be real. Garwood? James Carver? Would finding Carra Lynne prevent another "suicide"? Dixie kept seeing that crescent-shaped bruise on Sharon Young's forehead. It might mean nothing, but the facts in the case didn't add up, and Dixie felt an urgency to complete what she'd started.

"I didn't hear you accept Evercamp's generous offer," Parker said, as he rang Curtis Todd's doorbell.

"You didn't hear me turn it down, either."

"Guess he thinks we're on the payroll, then. Are we?"

"If it will make him more cooperative, I'm happy to let him believe we are."

"Seems like a lawyer would get it in writing."

"A meticulous lawyer would. Garwood strikes me as neither meticulous nor scrupulous." She'd left a message with Brew to round up all the dope he could find on Garwood and Sheldon Evercamp, the entire Gray family, Farley Short, Curtis Todd—

The maestro answered the door and peered at them through the slatted metal storm door. Dixie could hear piano music inside. She introduced Parker and herself.

"Mr. Todd, Garwood Evercamp and Astin Gray suggested we talk with you." Not entirely untrue. "We're looking for someone you know. Could we come in for a few minutes?"

“Now? I’m instructing a student.” His voice was soft but had the rasp of a heavy smoker.

“We won’t take long. Just a few questions.”

“Who’re you looking for?”

“Carra Lynne Gray.”

He hesitated. “She left town years ago.”

“We have reason to believe she’s returned—”

“*Concentrate*, Heidi,” he called over his shoulder. “More pedal.”

“Mr. Todd, we could come back when your lesson is over,” Dixie offered.

He hesitated for another music-infused moment.

“Nah, we’ll be at this another hour. Heidi’s getting in some last-minute practice before debuting in a chamber group tonight, but she doesn’t need much from me at this point.” He held the storm door ajar so they could enter.

Inside, what would probably be a cluster of small rooms in any other house on the block had been converted to a single L-shaped space, with a trio of square pillars supporting the overhead beams. The ceiling, usually only eight feet high in homes built in this town after World War II, was vaulted to the rafters and layered with an acoustical material resembling crushed marshmallow.

The music halted as they cleared the doorway.

“Play, Heidi. Don’t divide your concentration.”

A brooding, bearded William Baldwin, Dixie had pegged him that first night, dark hair only lightly peppered with silver. But up close, seeing the lines bracketing his eyes, she added five years to his age.

As the rehearsal continued, Todd led them to a conversation grouping of four armchairs. A pair of glasses sat on a coffee table, ice diluting a golden brown liquid. Had the maestro shared tea with Heidi before her practice?

The spacious room contrasted sharply to the color-splashed exterior. Starkly simple furnishings, polished oak floors and beige walls provided an austere backdrop for black and white photographs that covered every wall and nearly every surface. Dixie scanned them as she passed. Most featured young people at pianos. Each photo bore a typed caption with the musician’s name and a date. Midway along the wall, Dixie found the one she expected, signed in a youthful scrawl: Carra Lynne Gray.

“Quite a history of students,” she commented. Then she saw a second photo of Carra Lynne, taken a year later. Then a third. She pointed to the fourth. “I understand she was quite talented.”

“One of my best. What makes you think she’s returned to the island?”

“I saw her.” More or less.

Todd nodded soberly, his expression thoughtful yet distracted. Heidi hit a sour bass note, then stumbled over the next measure.

“Please make yourselves comfortable and excuse me while I give this kid a word of encouragement. Opening night jitters.”

Dixie glanced the length of the room at the intent Heidi, dressed today in a white T-shirt and shorts and dwarfed by the piano. “Please don’t mind us. We’ll be fine here until you’re finished.”

When Todd retreated, she waved Parker over.

“Who would you say was his favorite student?” she whispered.

The longest wall contained at least a hundred photos, neatly but economically mounted in the sort of frames available three to a bundle at superstores. Dixie had now counted ten of Carra Lynne. No other child warranted more than two.

“Here’s Astin,” Parker said. The picture he indicated showed a boy of about seven frowning in concentration over the keyboard. “This must’ve been taken at Gray Manor. Isn’t that the same fireplace?”

The distinctive inlaid tile was unmistakable, the edges of James Carver’s and Patricia’s portraits visible above a baby grand, which occupied a space now filled by Chateau Lafitte’s best tables.

“That’s the same piano featured in several of Carra Lynne’s photos,” Dixie said. “Todd must’ve spent a lot of time in that house, perhaps before he had a studio. The pictures go back—wow, look at this. She can’t be more than three years old.”

The tiny girl was perched on a booster seat to reach the keyboard, her fingers stretched wide.

“I think you’ll find this interesting,” Parker stage-whispered from where he’d strolled to the adjoining wall.

The music stopped, and Dixie glanced back to see Todd bent over Heidi’s shoulder. He reached around her to play with both hands. Dixie moved to Parker’s side. The photograph he’d found was dated twenty-seven years earlier and pictured an adult woman at the baby grand in front of that same distinctive inlaid tile fireplace. The picture was signed by Patricia Gray.

“Like mother, like daughter.” Parker gestured toward a dozen other photos, all of Patricia and taken over a period of just a few years. In one shot, she wore a maternity dress and appeared to be about six months along.

“I’ve heard that serenading your unborn child can instill an early musical talent,” Dixie said. “If Carra Lynne is as gifted as people claim, maybe it worked.”

Behind them, Heidi’s rehearsal continued, with greater precision. Then footsteps approached.

Dixie moved to a shelf of photographs above a sideboard. Some of these were also of Patricia. A couple were studio portraits, the others candid shots, indoors and outdoors. One photo included the entire Gray family, Patricia, James Carver, Astin at about the age of eight, and Carra Lynne, a toddler in her father’s arms. Another showed Patricia standing between the two children, her son a gangling teenager, her daughter a thin, snaggletooth kid with cropped brown hair and round sage-green eyes. This was the only color photograph in the room. Dixie picked it up to study it closer. At such a tender age, Carra Lynne already wore that haunted expression. Maybe it was merely a physical aspect of her features, like sweet-natured girls who looked pouty or bad girls who looked chaste. Or was the kid already plagued by fears?

“That snapshot was taken right after James Carver vanished,” Curtis Todd said. “The newspapers used it in their appeal to locate him. Excuse me for being such a thoughtless host. Please sit down. Let me get you some tea. Or coffee?”

“Nothing for—”

“Anything cold!” Parker said, joining them, a magazine in hand, forefinger tucked inside to hold his place.

“Fine, then. It won’t take a minute.” Todd strode briskly through a swinging door.

“Why’d you do that?” Dixie admonished Parker. “While he’s collecting his thoughts, we lose the element of surprise.”

“Guess you’re not interested in what I found.”

“What?”

“May be nothing.”

“Parker!”

“Thought you’d want to see this write-up. Not every lawyer can get his housewarming party mentioned in *Galveston Streets*.” He opened the magazine to a two-column piece picturing Curtis Todd at the piano and the headline, *COMPOSER ANNOUNCES NEW CONCERTO*.

Dixie skimmed the article, which mentioned an earlier work that apparently had garnered national acclaim in the music world. *After more than two decades of silence, virtuoso Curtis Todd plans to debut the first movement of his new concerto at the home of...* It mentioned the Evercamps briefly and went on to say that Todd, as a young man, had toured America and Europe, playing to packed houses and garnering rave reviews.

“This is the same magazine issue that carried the opening of Chateau Lafitte,” Dixie said, glancing at the cover. A teaser line explained the coverage of local minutia: *Treasures of Galveston’s Past and Present*. Being musically challenged, Dixie hadn’t realized Todd was a minor celebrity. After his explosion of fame, the article continued, Todd dropped out of sight. Glancing around the room, Dixie wondered if his abrupt career change had anything to do with a certain young mother.

“Good catch,” she told Parker.

He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “Does it gain me a bonus?”

“Who said you were even on the payroll, rookie?”

“In lieu of pay, I’d gladly accept your undivided attention for a few hours this evening.”

Before she could comment, Todd reappeared with a pitcher and three tall ice-filled glasses on a tray.

“I suppose I still don’t understand what brings you here,” he said, setting the tray on the sideboard. “Surely Carra Lynne’s brother would be the first person to hear from her.”

Not if she expected the Galveston police might be watching his digs.

“Carra Lynne might be in some trouble,” Dixie said vaguely. “Have you heard from her at all since she left here?”

“No. What sort of trouble? If she needs help...money, whatever...what can I do?”

Eager, wasn’t he? Pouring the tea, his hands wobbled a bit.

“For now, we need information. Astin told us you were a good friend of the family. We hoped you could tell us what you know about Carra Lynne’s habits before she left town. Places she might go, other people she knew.”

Todd wiped a hand over his lean face. His fingers appeared impossibly long and thin.

“Here, please sit down.” He gestured toward the armchairs. When they’d both selected one, he took a third for himself.

The seating seemed lower than normal, possibly to accommodate his students’ shorter stature. Sitting at the edge of his chair, knees jutting upward, glass balanced

between both hands, Todd somewhat resembled a grasshopper or, considering Carra Lynne's nickname for him—Curtis Toad—a slender, somber frog.

He reached toward his breast pocket but checked the gesture abruptly. Recently stopped smoking?

"I can't say that I knew the kids Carra Lynne hung around with in those months before she left," he said. "They weren't of her tenor, I can assure you. She seemed determined to act out her wild side, which kids do, of course. A full year before she left she'd stopped practicing, would probably have stopped taking lessons if Patricia hadn't insisted she continue."

He wiped a hand over his eyes again, as if to clear his vision. "How else can I help you?"

Recalling Valerie's catty remark, Dixie decided to jar some meatier discussion from him.

"I understand you spent a great deal of time at Gray Manor, not only as a music instructor, but as a friend. As a *very good* friend of Patricia's after her husband disappeared." Dixie paused to let that register. "Why do you think Patricia killed herself?"

He rose from his seat, pain showing clearly in the sudden twist of his mouth.

"God, I've asked myself that question so many times. *Concentrate, Heidi!* Andante, *then* adagio." He glanced at a phone on a nearby table. "You have to understand, I loved that family. Never had one of my own. Never took the time, I suppose. All I ever wanted, from the day I started my own first music lesson, was to play and compose and teach. Marriage and children never seemed...important. But Patricia wanted all that. Why throw it away?"

He was rambling, which could mean she'd get lots of information, not all of it helpful. Specific questions might elicit more specific answers.

"When did you meet Patricia?"

"When I played at their wedding. I knew J.C.—James Carver—in school. He met Patricia on a business trip to Atlanta, married a year later, and brought her here." Todd looked at his watch, then at the phone again. "I discovered she'd always wanted to play, and volunteered to teach her. J.C. encouraged it. Patricia was a good student. Not a great talent, but passionate, dedicated to her practice."

He cocked his head, listening to Heidi's softer notes—*pianissimo*, was that the term? Dixie recognized the piece now as something by Bach.

"I can see by your photo collection that you taught the entire family. Carra Lynne started when she was quite young."

"The earlier the better, in my book. Astin never hit the age of enthusiasm. He couldn't care less about music. But Carra Lynne responded instantly, and she had the talent Patricia craved. When J.C.'s business hit hard times, I continued the lessons without charge—she was that good. And I knew Patricia needed to see Carra Lynne excel. She had surrendered all her own musical interest to her daughter."

"What do you mean by surrendered?"

Todd glanced at the phone, did the face-wiping thing again. "As soon as Carra Lynne showed both talent and enthusiasm, Patricia stopped playing. She loved Astin, of course, but she doted on her daughter, until...well, until Carra Lynne pushed her away. She pushed everyone away. Everyone who cared about her."

“You?”

“Me, her fellow students, her mother.”

“How, exactly?”

“She seemed bent on punishing Patricia, staying out all hours, drinking, choosing friends who could only bring her trouble. Like Sharon, the one she ran away with.”

“Do you have any idea what caused the rift?”

He stood and paced. “Do teenagers need a reason to resent authority? In Carra Lynne’s case, she only had one parent left, only her mother to blame for any imagined offense.”

“Like James Carver abandoning the family?”

“I wondered about that.” He sat down, glanced at Heidi and lowered his voice.

“Garwood and Val moved in for a few weeks and stayed nearly a year. J.C. asked Garwood to move out. You’d have to know J.C. to realize how hard that was for him to do. His business wasn’t in the best shape, not profitable enough to support two families, even with Garwood providing free legal services as partial compensation.”

“How did Patricia react to his throwing her brother out on his ear?”

“Harshly put, but yes, she was upset. Patricia was never adept at handling disharmony. Maybe they had words. I don’t know. Anyway, a few weeks later, J.C. pulled his disappearing act, and Garwood moved his family back to Gray Manor. *Fiero, Heidi!*” Todd stared at the phone. “But that was all years ago, long before Carra Lynne’s resentment surfaced.”

He drained his tea glass and glanced at theirs, obviously ready to hurry them along. But Dixie wasn’t ready to let him off the hook. Curtis Todd knew this family perhaps better than any outsider should.

“Carra Lynne’s resentment, did that start around the same time you and Patricia became lovers?”

Parker’s chin dropped almost as far as Todd’s.

## CHAPTER 42

Another flash of pain worked over Todd's face. Dixie almost regretted having caused it. He'd likely throw them out, now. No big gamble, since he hadn't yet said anything that would lead Dixie to Carra Lynne.

Surprisingly, he seemed eager to keep talking.

"God, I begged Patricia, when it all started, to be open and honest with her family. I suppose you talked with Val. She's the only one who ever encouraged us—"

"How did she encourage you?" Parker asked.

"Oh, she'd arrange to pick Carra Lynne up to baby-sit Heidi. Or she'd take them both shopping. But Garwood, Astin—I never felt totally comfortable when we were in a room together. And Carra Lynne—I guess she formed a schoolgirl crush."

"On you?" Dixie could tell he'd been handsome in his youth, but he was a lot of years past young. "How old was she?"

"Twelve or thirteen, I suppose. It was harmless, but you know how frail these young egos can be. And Patricia blamed herself for everything, from J.C.'s leaving to Astin's resentment and Carra Lynne's acting out. I tried to tell her, people do things, crazy unexplained things, we all do and they're wrong, and yet they happen, and no one should take responsibility for another person's actions. But Patricia wore guilt like a diva—"

"Did James Carver find out about your affair?"

"There was no affair to find out about. J.C. was gone five years before she would, before we..." He sighed softly, then a forced calmness steadied his voice. "How long is a woman supposed to mourn? I had loved Patricia since that first night, at their wedding reception. Silently. Never a word, never a touch that might be construed as more than friendship."

"Let me see if I have the chronology right," Dixie said. "You're still a young man when James Carver brings his bride home. You fall in love with Patricia—and you never marry?"

He stared down into his tea glass. "Rehearsed the wedding march a few times in my head. A few relationships came close, but no. Marriage wasn't important to me. Like I said—"

"You had your music. Parker showed me the recent splash you made in Galveston Streets. '*Youngest composer of the decade.*' Then you vanished from the music world. What happened? Why give all that up?"

He took a while answering, his gaze straying once toward the phone. "I like teaching. What more can I tell you?"

"Unrequited love, unfulfilled talent, truncated career." Dixie stared at him. "All for a woman you could never have?"

"You don't understand. It was enough to be near Patricia, teaching her, instructing Carra Lynne." He stood. "*Fiero, Heidi! Fiero!*"

"Yet, you and Patricia did eventually become lovers," Dixie coaxed.

He reached for his cigarette pocket again and sat down.

“After J.C. was gone six months, I revealed how I’d always felt. I shouldn’t have. It became hell for both of us. Three more years passed, passion so thick when we were in a room together that I’m surprised people didn’t gossip more than they did. Finally, after one of Carra Lynne’s lessons, I stayed for dinner. Astin went out that evening and Carra Lynne had a sleepover with a friend. Patricia and I went upstairs to her bedroom and began a clandestine liaison that lasted until...until she died.”

“Her husband was gone five and a half years—”

“About that.”

“—before you consummated the relationship? And it’s been four years since Patricia killed herself.”

His impossibly long fingers swept his face again. The ice had melted in his glass, and he sipped the tea-tinted water.

Dixie completed the math in her head. “So you and Patricia were lovers for—”

“Four years, seven months, twenty-one days.” Todd’s tobacco-scarred voice sounded gruffer than ever.

Heidi’s playing had quieted again. Dixie leaned close to murmur her next question. “And you never asked Patricia to marry you?”

“Hell, yes, I asked her! I hated the secrecy. The day Garwood finally convinced her to legally pronounce J.C. dead, I asked her. That’s when I realized there was someone else.”

“Another lover?” Parker sounded as miserable as Todd must’ve felt.

A morose nod.

“How did you know?” Parker asked.

“She told me.”

“Did she say who the other man was?” Recalling that sexy carriage house bedroom, Dixie doubted Patricia was completely truthful.

Todd shrugged and shook his head. “I would’ve wondered about Garwood, living right there in the house for months and months, always at Patricia about business decisions and disposition of property, if he hadn’t been her brother. I even wondered if J.C. had secretly returned.”

The phone rang, and Todd glanced at his watch.

“You thought Patricia’s husband became her secret lover?” Dixie found that intriguing. Astin and Carra Lynne weren’t the only ones who suspected James Carver of lurking.

“I only know there was *someone*. Now, I really need to take this call.” He answered it and asked the caller to hold.

Parker rose first, carrying his and Dixie’s glass to the tray on the sideboard. Todd moved toward the door.

“We seem to have strayed from the subject of Carra Lynne’s whereabouts,” he said. “I hope something I told you will help. If you find her, will you ask her to call me?”

Dixie nodded vaguely, though she hadn’t really noodled it all out yet. “Can you think of any place Carra Lynne might be staying? Was there anyone she would trust to keep quiet about her return to the island?”

Todd shook his head impatiently.

“What about Sheldon, Garwood’s son? Do you know where he lives?”

Todd opened the door. “Last I heard, he crashed wherever he could find a bed. Hangs out in the art strip on Post Office.”

Not lately, according to April and the gallery owner. “Can you recall a name? Maybe another artist?” A long shot, but Dixie needed to take something away from here she could use.

Todd shook his head again. “Whoever Sheldon’s staying with, you can bet it’s someone Gar wouldn’t approve of.” He started to close the door.

“Wait,” Dixie said. “Could Sheldon be involved with a project called ‘Lafitteville’? Do you know anything about that?”

He rubbed his chin through the beard. “I’ve seen the fliers around, and that weirdo who painted the seawall handing them out.”

“Weirdo. Do you have a name?”

“No. Carra Lynne knew him, though.”

“Taz,” Parker said. When Dixie looked at him, he added, “Part of the local color.”

“Yeah, that’s him,” Todd agreed.

Before he could push them out the door, Dixie thought of one more question. “After four years of hiding, Carra Lynne suddenly returns home. Do you have any idea why?”

Todd looked at her as if she’d finally said something that tweaked his interest. “Well...tomorrow’s her birthday.”

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