

CHAPTER 44

“Let him go,” Dixie told Parker. “If Voodoo Daddy’s is the hub Taz claims, someone there is bound to know Sheldon.” She felt as her hair had melted in the sun and was running in greasy rivers down her neck.

Taz sketched a wave and struck out walking again, not the slightest bit winded. Or melted.

“It’s a long stroll back to Stewart Beach,” Parker said. “Your nose is already pink. Before we go anywhere, let’s get some water. And buy you a hat.”

Dixie had to agree on the water. “I have a hat in the car.”

“Good place for it.”

This part of the beach offered nothing but sand, surf, rocks, and more people, but Parker spotted a convenience store across Seawall Boulevard. Dixie waited until they’d maneuvered the six lanes and entered the air conditioned building to return Brew’s call. While Parker explored the aisles, she positioned herself in a quiet corner and dialed the number Brew had left, adding an extension code that let him know who was calling.

“Your boy Sheldon doesn’t show up on any databases,” Brew said. “We did find a birth certificate in Oakbridge. His father, on the other hand, has a corner of the Oakbridge records division dedicated to his name.”

“Divorce cases?” Quick to file and often quick to clear, divorce suits could stack up fast.

“Divorce, paternity, personal injury. Also, quite a few lawsuits filed *against* him.”

“Unhappy clients?”

“Not my area of expertise, Dixie. I scanned back issues of the Georgia Bar Journal, the section that lists which lawyers are getting their hands slapped by disciplinary action. Seems Garwood Evercamp made a habit of collecting personal injury money that stuck to his pockets.”

“He didn’t pass the money on to his clients?” She looked for Parker, saw him fingering a toy boat. No one could piddle around a store with more ease or find an interest in more unlikely items—beef jerky, mood rings.

“Not as much bread as the client expected. Sued for six hundred thou, collected half, the client received a check for forty thousand dollars. Does that seem right to you?”

Depended on the circumstances. “Discovery and deposition costs can eat up a lot of bucks. Still, that sounds excessive. What about the other cases?”

“More of the same. Awarded four hundred sixty-five K, the client got one-fifty. Sounds like a cool racket. Think I should study law?”

“A crowded profession, but you could do worse. And you’re smart enough to make money without resorting to sleazy rip-offs. You said there were several of these cases?”

Parker turned from the cash register carrying a paper sack.

“I counted ten separate entries over several years,” Brew said. “Including at least one contempt-of-court charge.”

Was it possible Carra Lynne had stumbled on one of her uncle's unhappy clients and come back here to warn him? After all this time, the cases would've collected lots of dust, but an angry client might've spent the years oiling a legal gun. Or a real one. Even a thief might be protective of family.

Or was Carra Lynne planning to put the screws to her uncle over some juicy tidbit? Garwood hadn't changed his name, so he wasn't hiding from the Georgia courts, but she might have uncovered a piece of information he'd pay to get his hands on. Dixie couldn't imagine what that might be.

"The lawyer also has a dicey credit history," Brew continued. "Repossessions, slow pay. Apparently, his first wife had money, which he went through like prunes through a goose after she landed in a nut house—"

A psych hospital?"

"According to the shrinks, she was bonkers, along with a history of drug and alcohol problems."

"When was this?"

"Ancient. Over fifteen years ago. Wasn't sure you'd even want it."

Dixie didn't see how it could bear on Carra Lynne's present whereabouts. Interesting, though, the number of people Garwood came in contact with who developed drinking, mental, or emotional problems."

Parker uncapped a bottle of cold water and handed it to her. Dixie took a quick sip. "Anything on Astin Gray?"

"Not much. The stuff you mentioned showed up, of course—father declared dead by a court about seven years ago, mother's death certificate three years later. Incorporation filed for Chateau Lafitte. Found some write-ups in the local paper—family heirlooms donated to a museum, wonder boy makes good, that sort of thing. Recent mortgage to finance the new restaurant."

Dixie chugged a good portion of the water. "Which bank?"

Brew named the financial institution where Garwood Evercamp served as a board member.

"No police record, not even traffic tickets. And now, my good friend, I need to get back to other business."

"You didn't find *anything* on Sheldon Evercamp, the lawyer's son?"

"Birth certificate. That's it. No drivers license."

"Social security number?"

"Can't get into the S.S. records, and he hasn't written the number on any application where I can capture it."

"Brew, I need you to look up one more name—"

"Can't! Really, Dix, we have a big haul—"

"Don't tell me. Put Pearly White and Smokin on this one."

He chuckled. "Our octogenarian hackers are second-honeymooning in the Caribbean. Took one of those new cruises that sail from Galveston. Said they needed to put some sweet togetherness back in their marriage."

Dixie watched Parker unwrap a Nutty Buddy ice cream cone.

"This is the same bickering couple who divided their apartment down the middle with a line of black electrical tape?"

"Wish I could offer more help, Dixie. I have other work—"

“The name is Curtis Todd. A composer. You know I wouldn’t ask unless—”

“Okay, okay. Sleep is just a distant memory, anyway. I’ll knock this out quick and get back to you.”

He clicked off.

“Did you buy two of those?” Dixie asked, ogling Parker’s ice cream.

“Thought we’d share.” He offered the untouched side.

Dixie bit through the thin chocolate peanut crust to creamy vanilla ice cream, knowing it would make her thirsty again.

“We’re cooled off now. Let’s walk,” she suggested.

“Can’t take ice cream outside. It’ll melt before we go ten steps. Not much chance of Sheldon still hanging around Voodoo Daddy’s now, anyway.”

He was right. Nearly forty minutes had passed since they first spotted Taz. The wacky distraction gambit, patting her bottom to get attention then leading them away from Sheldon, had worked like voodoo magic.

Customers came and went as she and Parker stood inside the convenience store, taking turns eating the ice cream. Between hurried bites, she related everything Brew had told her.

“Let’s go.” She wiped her fingers on the napkin Parker handed her. “Maybe we’ll run into someone on the beach who knows Sheldon or saw where he went.”

They left the store, crossed Seawall Boulevard again, and walked to the Swamp Hut. It was crowded. They asked around the bar, but with no luck.

Then a man eating a hamburger said, “Sidewalk artist? He’s over by the Water Coaster. We wanted him to paint us.” Reaching across the table, he took the hand of a woman eating a salad.

The woman nodded and clasped his hand, smiling. “A portrait for our anniversary. But the line was too long.”

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