

## CHAPTER 9

“Cough it up,” Dixie demanded as Parker drove back to Chateau Lafitte to pick up her car. “What juicy tidbit did April share after you sweet-talked that lovesick smile out of her?”

“Lovesick? Really?”

“Practically panting.”

“Nice to know I can still turn a girl’s head.”

Dixie poked a finger in his ribs. “That ‘girl’ is a woman. What did she say?”

“April knew Sheldon Evercamp better than she wanted to let on. Said he works festivals with his watercolors. Quick portraits on The Strand—ten minutes, ten bucks, or whatever the going rate is these days.” He tuned the radio to easy rock. “April saw him at the spring festival.”

“Four months ago?”

“April got vague when I asked if she’d seen him more recently. But she’s definitely noticed his work around since then, at a gallery right there on Post Office Street.”

“On commission, probably. Which gallery?”

“She got vague again.”

“We passed eight or ten on the way to Slice’s. Easy to check out. The gallery owner should have an address for Evercamp. What else?”

“April likes my eyes.”

“For starters. Did she invite you to see her etchings?”

“Oil paintings of shrimp boats. Guess she was getting around to it when you parked your gorgeous rump next to me.”

Dixie spotted a motel that looked just seedy enough to overlook a patron’s dubious appearance.

“Turn here and circle the parking lot.”

He turned, circled. No Ford Escort, white or otherwise. A block farther, she pointed to another VACANCY sign. Parker cocked an eyebrow at the dash clock as he turned into the lot.

“What’s to say your skinhead didn’t produce a wig and a dress from her luggage? Ten minutes in a convenience store bathroom and she could book a room at the San Luis or the Tremont.”

Good point. If she had money to burn. “You didn’t see this disguise. It was great. Anybody would take her for a guy—”

“April made her as female.”

“Did she? Or did she pick that up from our description?”

“Then how did Ryan’s friend’s mother spot her?”

“She spotted the car and license plate. I agree, Gennae might do a quick-change, but a woman doesn’t shave her head without some long hard thought. Even if she dumps the fatigues, I think she’ll keep the boy look. She pulls it off pretty well.”

“Didn’t fool your eagle eyes.”

“No, but I saw the WANTED poster, spotted the Escort in the parking lot, and *expected* she might be disguised.”

“She should work on disguising the car.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t ditched it, or at least swiped a Texas plate. Ryan had two license numbers for her, so I’m thinking she lifted a set before leaving Arkansas and doesn’t realize the number was reported stolen. Look! Another motel.”

“Dixie, it’s after two o’clock.”

“Last one, I promise.”

He obliged, but her run of good luck must’ve ended. They passed a couple more VACANCY signs, and she craned to see the parking areas without asking him to turn in.

“Hope you’re coming to my place for a...nightcap,” Parker murmured, pulling alongside Dixie’s taxicab.

They’d only recently resumed the sexual part of their relationship, after a breakup followed by a long platonic spell.

“I seem to recall an earlier offer that sounded more exciting. What do I get with my nightcap?”

“A friendly tongue bath, for sure.”

“You mean Mud still remembers me?”

“Speaks of you constantly.” He caught the finger lazily ambling its way up his inner thigh and tugged Dixie close enough to kiss. “Guess I could root around, find a pillow, a sheet, a spot for you to bed down for the night. Can’t have you falling asleep on that long drive home.”

“You have a guest room.”

“Full of moving boxes.”

“The couch, then.”

“Sectional. Your feet would hang off.”

“That leaves only your bed.”

“Hope you brought enough clothes for the weekend.”

She brought their paired hands to her mouth and licked the tender spot between his knuckles. “A good bounty hunter’s always prepared.”



Following Parker’s Cadillac down Seawall Boulevard, Dixie darted into a couple more parking lots. As she passed the Holiday Inn she thought about Parker’s comment. Different clothing, a wig, and a hundred bucks or so would gain Gennae entry to ritzier digs than the motels Dixie’d been searching, and the bigger hotel parking lots would provide better cover for the car. Gennae had to sleep somewhere. Dixie couldn’t believe she came all the way to Galveston to hook up with Sheldon Evercamp only to leave without finding him.

If she’d found him, perhaps her old friend put her up for the night. Based on Rocko’s description of “junk” dealer, Sheldon might be just the guy to buy a few choice electronics items, no questions asked. *Negotiate the deal...steal a set of Texas license plates...get some shut-eye, and shove off tomorrow morning.* Even if Gennae discovered Sheldon had left town, surely she’d get a night’s sleep before hitting the highway again.

Either way, time was ticking by. If this were any town other than Parker's, Dixie'd swallow a few No Doze and spend the entire night scouting out that Ford Escort.

## CHAPTER 10

The moment she hit the beach her hiccups had vanished. Gennae ooched her bare feet into the wet sand as she walked along the edge of the surf. No fear here.

A wave washed over her ankles and broke into a rush of foam. She filled her senses with the fishy smell, the sticky, salty air, the water's constant underlying hum, and imagined herself a great blue heron, as free as the sea.

As a child, she'd listened hard to the friendly murmurs beneath the clamoring waves. *Listen deep, she'd told herself, and you'll hear a secret message.*

She'd outgrown such nonsense.

But now, out of habit, she stilled her thoughts and listened deep, trying to decipher the ocean's soothing message and let the merciful water sounds blot out the hated voice.

This was her sanctuary, miles of beach and open air, where no enemy had ever sought her out. Despite the nearness of the gnome, she felt protected here. Anonymous. For the moment, at least, her brain had ceased its anxious yammering.

Earlier, before looking for Sheldon, she'd stopped at the 53rd Street rock groin, just to feel the waves swoosh around her toes. A shaved-ice vendor, who rented the towels, chairs, and green-striped umbrellas dotting the beach, was already folding up his truck. He paid her no mind as she sprinted to the end of the groin that jutted into the Gulf. Surrounded almost entirely by water, she drew the cleansing sea air deep into her lungs, feeling the first measure of peace since deciding to return to the island.

As a kid, 53rd Street had been as far as her bike would take her. She'd spent hundreds of hours sitting on the groin or kicking along the sand at the base of the seventeen-foot concrete wall that prevented storm surges from engulfing the island, watching willets and sanderlings pecking for clams. She knew the artist, Taz, who'd painted brightly colored sea creatures on the concrete seawall. *One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.* But she couldn't sleep there tonight, not with beach patrol sweeping past every few hours, spotlights probing the shadows.

So she'd retraced her steps, clothes damp from waves splashing off the rocks, but nerves steady. The voice silenced. She'd left the friendly Taz-painted sea creatures, and after coming up dry in her search for Sheldon, had driven to the end of West Beach.

No seawall here, no street lights, just miles of sparsely built, summer-house developments. And very few people. Ripping a FOR SALE off a vacant house, she'd claimed it for the night, tucking her Escort into the portico. Tomorrow morning she'd use the house to shower and clean up, but tonight she refused to be enclosed. Tonight, the long, open beach belonged to her—and to the great horned owl working the seaweed dunes for mice.

Spreading a ground cloth on the sand, Gennae scanned the nearest windows. All dark. She tossed down her jacket for a makeshift pillow. After the long day, she was tired enough to sleep anywhere, but the sand beckoned like a feather mattress.

She lay on the ground cloth, pulled it around her cocoon-like, and slid a hand down her leg to feel for the box knife in her cargo pocket. Comforting, that knife. It could slice away all her demons.

Do or die. You or I?

Tomorrow she'd find Sheldon, learn what she needed to know. By Monday morning, one way or another—

—*she'd be dead*—

—No! She'd be okay.

Praying the voice would not invade her twilight thoughts tonight, Gennae closed her eyes...One, two, buckle my shoe. Three, four...

She was three. Or four. Standing in a dark closet, toes tight against a chalk line.

Don't move, don't move.

One tiny smudge of the chalk and her toes would get the ruler. *Whack, whack.*

Or the ice tub.

*"You want to sit down? Sit in the ice."*

She shivered. He always knew. One little toe, he always knew. Don't move, don't move. Don't want the ruler. Don't want the ice.

"Mary had a little lamb. Fleas were white as snow." The words falling softly from her lips made no sound—

*"Not a sound or you'll get the ice."*

—but she could hear the words in her head, feel them on her tongue. Sometimes she could taste them.

When her three-year-old's eyes felt heavy, she snapped them open wide, like the kids' eyes in Mama's big picture book...sitting on Mama's lap...reading the verses. Before nap time.

"Everywhere that Mary went...that Mary..."

She couldn't remember what came next.

"Mary, kite contrary, how does your garden grow?"

Saying the words made her feel safe, like being on Mama's lap, and not fall asleep, not move.

*"Cockleshells and bells...and...bells...cockleshells and bells..."*

Stay on the line. Don't move, don't move.

Brushing sand from her face, Gennae hiccupped softly. She tugged the ground cloth tighter.

## CHAPTER 11

Dixie settled against Parker's broad chest, spooning, listening to his quiet breath in her hair, inhaling the pleasantly musky scent of his bed. She felt exquisitely contented. If every aspect of their relationship were as satisfying as the sex, they could be a poster couple for *Happy Days in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

She slowed her breathing to match his and stilled the quickening of her muscles. But her brain refused to shut down. It buzzed with words and images that flickered like a movie reel: A pair of haunted green eyes—Gennae Thompson's eyes—filled with that desperate fear that made Dixie wonder what sort of life had pressed the girl into crime.

Not that every criminal scrambled from an unfortunate childhood. Dixie had met mischievous fools with no greater ambition than to rip through life having fun at the expense of others. She'd also met pure evil. Soul-less monsters. No amount of analysis could rationalize their existence, but they did exist.

Into which category did Gennae Thompson fall? Neither, unless Dixie's judgment was way off the mark. Gennae had jumped into a life of crime out of some sense of preservation. Or was pushed.

Maybe a teenaged lover had charmed the girl away from her parents. Teenage runaways discovered pretty damn fast that life on the road was not one glorious song but a medley of blues rifts—*no money, honey. No bed, no food, no future*. Then comes the finger-pointing, the arguments, and before long one lover or the other bolts. Was Gennae the bolter or the lover left behind? *Broke, bummed out, too embarrassed to go home...*

A girl with Gennae's looks could always trade on the commodity that lay between her legs and between her lips. Oakbridge, Gennae's hometown, sat scarcely fifty miles from Atlanta. Plenty of opportunity in the big bad city to sell sex. Had the kid turned to theft to avoid the greater shame?

Or was Dixie romanticizing? Maybe those haunted eyes were lying. Maybe Gennae Thompson was rotten to the core.

Giving up on sleep, Dixie rose from Parker's bed, nearly tripping over Mud, dozing alongside. Mud gave her a measuring glance then dropped his wide muzzle back onto his paws. Dixie tiptoed across the bedroom, closed herself into the guest room that doubled as an office, and sat down at Parker's computer.

Somewhere in Houston, in some abandoned building, an unlikely gang of young street people would be busily at work. About eighty percent of the Gypsy Filchers' endeavors was totally legal and directed toward making life easier for society's unfortunates. The other twenty percent Dixie ignored, figuring a few hijacked groceries that ended up in hungry bellies could be written off as anonymous contributions. And the Gypsy Filchers possessed collective talents that frequently proved useful to Dixie.

Signing onto her email service, she saw that Brew, the administrative side of the Filchers' three-person management team, was also on-line. No surprise. The youths

typically conducted their shady enterprise between the hours of midnight and dawn. With the first ray of sunlight, they dispersed like fog under a windy bridge.

Dixie clicked on the instant message icon and typed: “Hey, guy, can we talk?”

“Absoluto. Gimme a minute,” came the reply.

Waiting, she wondered if the Filchers had video-conferencing. Silly question. All their equipment was state of the art—essential to their clandestine existence.

But even without the benefit of video, she pictured Brew at his keyboard in a crowded warehouse, phone at one ear, managing multiple tasks with his multiple talents. Confined to a wheelchair after a schoolyard accident, then promptly abandoned by drug-addicted parents, Brew had learned more in self-schooling than most students managed in four years of college.

“Dixie-buddy, what’s the good word?” popped into the instant message window on Parker’s monitor.

“Search and discover. Can you handle it?”

“For you? Anytime. Who’s the unlucky lad?”

“A lady, Marla Gennae Thompson, twenty. One arrest in Georgia for shoplifting. Charges dropped.”

“How much and when?”

“Everything you can find by morning. She’s on the fly.”

“By morning might be tough. We have a bead on a Wal-Mart delivery—”

“Don’t tell me things I don’t want to know,” Dixie typed hurriedly. “Just get this info back to me ASAP. Okay?”

“Gotcha covered.”

They signed off. Brew had told her repeatedly that email was safer than a phone line, but Dixie couldn’t bring herself to believe it. She’d seen first hand the information hackers could glean from supposedly hack-proof networks. If this were any time but the weekend—a weekend she’d dedicated to leisurely pursuits with Parker—she’d have her own methods for checking out Gennae’s background. Unfortunately, the few business offices that operated on Saturday moved as fast as cold molasses. And she never minded throwing a few bucks into the Filchers’ coffers.

Scrolling through her email messages, Dixie acknowledged what her sleeplessness had been telling her: one way or another, she intended to locate Gennae Thompson and find out what had driven her to grand theft. *What goes around, comes around.* The Flannigans had rescued Dixie from a miserable existence at a younger age than Gennae. If Dixie could pass along that good fortune to another lost girl, she’d put a soft new shine on her adoptive parents’ haloes.

She clicked on an email from Ryan.

“Aunt Dix, here’s the Jobs-On-Line list for Galveston County. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Dixie hit the PRINT button.

Mission accomplished, she considered going back to bed.

Her mind still buzzed. She poured a cup of milk, added a squirt of honey, a drop of vanilla, and warmed it in the microwave. Maybe the calcium would soothe her busy brain waves. Then she strolled onto the porch that wrapped Parker’s house, choosing the side facing the Gulf. The ever-present wind plastered a strand of hair across her mouth. Swiping it away, she sat down on a deck chair.

Sheet lightning brightened the southern sky, but the air didn't smell of rain. Houston, and its neighbors toward the Gulf, typically drew more than three times as much lightning as any other part of the state, second only to Tampa Bay, Florida, Dixie had once read. Something about lying in the subtropical zone, with a combination of concrete, air pollution, oil refineries.

As she sipped her milk, enjoying the light show and the sea sounds that played gently against her ears, she closed her eyes, willing her mind to relax. Instantly, she was on the beach, toes in the wet sand, waves lapping warmly around her ankles. Tension drained from her neck and shoulders. The cup grew heavy in her hand, and she set it on the deck. Drifting in the eventide of sleep, she wondered where Gennae was sleeping tonight.

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