

CHAPTER 12

Saturday

A wet, rubbery blob bumped against Dixie's mouth. She opened her eyes to the damp exhalation of dog breath and a furry muzzle filled with grinders that, with one good crunch, could bite off a hand.

"Mud, it's too early." She'd come back to bed stiff and sluggish from the night air only a couple hours ago.

A tongue slobbered her face.

"Go back to sleep."

Mean Ugly Dog—half Doberman, the other half larger, taller, heftier than any Doberman ever—had fallen under Parker's spell as quickly as her family had. Now, when a job took Dixie out of town, she brought the dog to Galveston rather than leave him at a kennel. She'd been gone a week this time, and last night didn't count as a Mud-approved welcome. She'd scarcely greeted the mongrel before Parker urged her into the bedroom.

Not that it'd taken much urging.

A cold nose nudged her chin.

"Mud, you are dead meat."

He gave her nose another wet lick before settling on the floor.

Too late. She was awake now. Muscles achy. Bladder insistent. Teeth as furry as Mud's ears.

She eased reluctantly out of Parker's arms and admired his handsome, sleeping face for a moment, enjoying the intimacy of waking in his bed. Then she pressed her lips softly to the smooth skin above his stubble and wriggled free. Parker relished his extra winks. No need to wake him.

As she rose from the bed, a blue ball, damp with Mud's saliva, tumbled out of the covers. He snapped up the airborne toy and looked at her expectantly.

"Five minutes," she muttered, padding first to the bathroom, then directly to the guest-room computer.

No email from Brew. That bothered her. The Gypsy Filcher usually could be counted on to deliver with better efficiency.

Barefoot, in shorts and tank top, she followed Mud's fuzzy butt down the stairs flanking the west side of Parker's new home. A romp in the surf might get her blood moving again. Parker would ride off soon on a boat with Astin, and she needed to decide what to do about that. He wanted her to go along, that part was clear. And to be fair, she *should* go. After all, he'd sleazed around Galveston's underbelly with her last night, chasing a phantom. She owed him, even so far as pretending to enjoy a lurch around the bay on a fiberglass suicide toy. Anyway, the galleries, where she might get a lead on Sheldon Evercamp, wouldn't open for several hours.

Meanwhile, she needed to jolt the sleep off her brain cells.

The sky had barely lightened, the sun a sliver of pale orange on the horizon. Parker's house, finished in natural pine and commanding a corner lot in a small West

Beach development, rose ten feet off the ground on treated wood pilings. At this end of the island, no seawall protected the houses; only their height kept them from being washed away by a storm. Parker's architect had added various-sized cubes to a basic A-frame, creating a design with intriguing nooks and crannies and a spectacular view of the Gulf. But nothing beat the real thing.

Today the beach lay clean and inviting. Gulls squawked overhead. Willets ran along the sand, foraging for breakfast. Dixie'd seen pictures of the southern Pacific and Atlantic Oceans; the Texas Gulf could never quite measure up to their blue spectacle. Some days it appeared as green as jade, other days, stormy gray. But Galveston had a sultry, seductive charm. Easy to understand why Parker loved living here. Too bad her own beloved patch of earth lay eighty miles northwest.

She threw Mud's ball into a breaking wave. He chased it, missed, whirled cheerfully in the roiling surf until he spied the blue ball rushing ashore on a froth of whitecap, and dashed after it. For this game, he didn't really need her. Not like Frisbee. As he chased in and out of the waves, Dixie walked the stiffness out of her legs, allowing the warm surf to wash over her feet.

If she could count on Parker sleeping another hour, she and Mud could drive around to motels on this end of the island searching for Gennae's Escort. But Dixie didn't hold out much hope of spotting it again. Lady Luck was thumbing her nose.

Watching Mud play with a sand crab farther along the beach, Dixie considered Parker's suggestion that they deliver a yacht to his client in St. Thomas. He knew she'd rather pass kidney stones than venture into serious water. Was this his gentle way of telling her he was ready to move on?

Halted by a pulse of panic that stole her breath, she knelt to the damp sand and absently scraped granules off a sand dollar. Parker had seemed so settled these past months. Bought a house. Hired a decorator. Even commissioned a painting.

Mud dashed fearlessly at a huge incoming wave. When it carried him ashore, he shook off the water and turned, planting his feet to bark at the waves. Watching him, Dixie shook off the anxiety. She could not change Parker's rembling nature anymore than she could change Mud's canine devotion. But accepting that Parker might vanish from her life didn't seem possible, either. She was suspended like sand in the crevices of the rock groins, waiting for the next tide.

Mud pranced nervously at the water's edge, a high whine on his breath as he stared at something on the water. When he whined again, Dixie squinted in the direction he was staring.

A laughing gull flapped and struggled frantically in the surf. Dixie Jogged to Mud's side.

"Hey, buddy, what did you find?"

He sniffed and nudged at her hand.

"Okay, we'll see what we can do. Good dog."

When she waded in, Mud dashed ahead and caught the bird in his jaws. He turned to look at her and a wave lifted him toward shore. The bird dropped from his mouth to flap on the water again. When Dixie reached it, she was waist deep.

The gull, exhausted from struggling, appeared to be caught on something in the water. Mud barked, and the bird flapped so furiously, splashing and squawking, that

Dixie hesitated to get close. After a moment she caught it behind its wings. A hook was lodged behind the gull's beak.

"Damnation!" Dixie scanned the horizon for fishing boats. How long had the bird been caught like this?

She could see the barbed point poking out between the fine feathers on its jaw. No way she could pull the hook out without tearing skin and tissue. The other end of the fishing line was caught beneath the water. Dixie tugged on it—*if she could break it loose and take the bird ashore—*

But the line wouldn't give. It might be fifty feet long, wrapped around seaweed or debirs. Nothing in her pockets to cut it.

"Okay, boy. I have to get some tools." She let the gull go, and instantly it began flapping, but seemed pitifully weak. "Mud, you stay here and watch the bird."

Mud *woofed*. When she turned to go, he started to take the bird in his mouth again.

"No. Leave it alone. Just stay." She hoped he wouldn't grab it after she left, but it would be easier to spot Mud out in the water than a dying bird.

Sprinting to the house, she returned with wire cutters and pliers from the trunk of the taxi. She snipped the fishing line.

"Okay, boy, let's go." She carried the bird ashore, but wasn't at all sure she could hold the gull still while extracting the fish hook.

Securing the gull under one arm, she grasped the hook with the needle-nose pliers. The bird tried to flap, but Dixie managed to grab hold of the hook's barbed end with the wire cutters and snip it off. Then she backed the hook out.

"Got it!"

When she set the bird on the sand, it struggled weakly, its breast heaving with exhaustion. It toddled away from them. Mud followed, sniffing the bird's feathers, until it lifted off and flew a short distance. Mud started to chase it.

"Come on, boy. Let it go."

He ran to her side. She ruffled his neck fur, watching the bird a few yards away.

"Good boy, Mud." Spying his blue ball, she scooped it up and threw it well away from the gull. Mud chased the sphere, caught it, and dashed fearlessly at an incoming wave. When it carried him ashore, he tossed his head, lobbing the ball. Then, instead of running after it, he loped around and nudged her.

"Okay! I suppose it's my turn." Wading into the surf, she scooped up the ball and they played until she was soaked and winded.

Finally, she palmed the toy and walked toward dry ground. Mud wasn't ready to quit. He tugged on her shorts, she tugged back, until they both fell laughing onto the sand.

Brushing herself off, Dixie spied a camp blanket left behind by someone who'd slept on the beach. Eventually, the wind and tide would've carried it away, but for now the thin silver Mylar revealed a perfect outline of a slender body in the classic fetal position.

A ripple of disquiet ran through her as she touched the indentation. Someone had recently abandoned this spot. Frightened away? Mud could strike terror in the hearts of big, strong men. The person who'd lain here was thin, lightweight.

Peering down the beach in both directions, and back toward the road, Dixie saw no one. She scooped up the cloth. A scrap of paper escaped its folds and fluttered against the beach grass. Dixie grabbed the paper before the wind could carry it away. It was a sales receipt, for a soda and sandwich, from a Stop 'n' Go in Nacogdoches, Texas.

Dixie read the receipt again. No mistake—*Nacogdoches*. Where the mail carrier had spotted Gennae.

Coincidence. Had to be.

Gennae Thompson had *not* spent the night right here on the beach, scarcely fifty yards from Parker's house. Coincidence always made Dixie's jaws clench. It could never be trusted.

She saw footprints leading into the high grass that bordered the nearby highway.

Was it possible Gennae had spotted Dixie tailing her and decided to become the stalker instead of the stalked?

Mud sniffed curiously at the ground cloth.

"Okay, let's see where this leads." Together, they followed the footprints into the grass, back out again and up to the pavement. No tire tracks—not that she'd recognize a Ford Escort's tracks from any other. She stood for a moment, listening, trying to recall if she'd heard a car engine start up while she and Mud were playing. *Nope*. She looked down the deserted highway, then at the nearby houses. Adrenalin finally pushing the cobwebs from her brain, she jogged back to Parker's beach house.

"Stay," she told Mud, and crept up the stairs to grab her car keys. She and Mud drove around the housing development, spying no one afoot. Fresh tire tracks led into the empty portico of a model home that Dixie remembered being for sale the last she was here, but the house looked otherwise undisturbed. No Escort in sight.

She broadened her search to the quick marts on the main road and the Waffle House on 61st Street. Cheap eats, but no sign of the Escort, or of anyone who might be Gennae.

Lady Luck wasn't just thumbing her nose, she was giving her the finger.

By the time they climbed Parker's stairs again, Dixie's clothes and hair were dried stiff. She felt energized by the morning workout and by the close brush with—what? Fate? She believed in fate about as much as she did in coincidence. Wherever Gennae had spent the night, she might soon be calling on her friend Sheldon.

Dixie removed the wadded sales receipt from her pocket. She could ask Brew to follow up with the store clerk. When Gennae bought the soda and sandwich, had she already transformed from attractive blonde female to skinhead male? The amazing makeover must have taken place in the hours just after Gennae's employer in Tulip exposed the theft and before her arrival at Gulf Greyhound Park. Dixie had to admit that the concept intrigued her. As she'd maintained last night to Parker, a woman could affect a number of alternate personas without shaving her head. The disguise bore the meticulous detail of careful planning, and she'd affected the male mannerisms like a professional impersonator. What was she up to?

Come on, Brew, what's taking you so long?

Neatly folding the sales slip, Dixie noticed faint writing on the reverse side. Tiny, pencil script traveled down the length of the paper.

The bottle cracks.

Muddy glass,

rotting cork,
oozing shit
in the clean sand.
A jagged
cutting edge
speaks truth
in dark corners.
Blood bursts
through the hole in
my glass
throat.

CHAPTER 13

Parker tossed his copy of the *Galveston County Daily News* onto the kitchen counter. He'd practically shoved it under Dixie's nose during breakfast, hoping she'd notice his letter to the editor. Beach replenishment. Not thriller material, but friggin important on his end of the island. She hadn't noticed his byline in *Galveston Streets*, either. Her head was totally into the skinhead search.

"Ready to admit we were a damn good snoop team last night?" he called to her as he scraped the dishes. He could hear her scrambling into fresh clothes.

"Good, yes. *Damn* good? No." She entered the kitchen zipping her jeans. "You niggled more information from April than I might've, but we are *not* Remington Steele and Laura Holt."

"Actually, I was thinking more of Nick and Nora Charles." He slammed the knives and forks into the dishwasher, rattling them harder than he intended. "Your list of possible locations for Evercamp would be half as long if we hadn't teamed up."

"Okay, Nick Charles, tell me the most important thing we learned."

"Your bird's definitely on the island. Until Slice's, you were guessing."

"She was here last night, yes, but where she is now we haven't a clue."

He stacked the dishes in the sink to rinse them. "Drive four hundred miles to see a friend, then leave without finding him? That makes no sense."

"We don't know that she didn't find him—only that they didn't hook up at Slice's. Galveston might be just a rest stop on her way to Mexico." She popped a piece of leftover biscuit in her mouth. A spot of blackberry jam landed on her chin. "She could be planning to catch that cruise ship tomorrow."

He considered dabbing the jam off her chin, but he liked the childish enhancement to her determined mouth and studious expression.

He forced a smile. "It's a beautiful day for sailing."

"So, you'll be showing Astin Gray that boat today?"

"Smooth ride, quiet engine. I've already told Astin you might be coming along." Introduce her to the fun of boating in small doses and she'd be excited about that Caribbean trip when he mentioned it again. Fun—that's what they needed more of. Dixie took life too serious.

She fingered the scrap of paper she'd showed him with the odd notation scribbled on the back. That bit of free verse gave him the willies.

"Parker, how would I explain to Ryan that his email bird-watch paid off, but then I took time out for a frolic around the bay and let the bird fly again?"

No good answer for that one. Dixie always put family first, and she was still trying to make up with Ryan after landing on his shit list. Parker frowned, sensing another promising weekend shot to hell, he and Dixie going separate directions.

"Guess you'll be visiting art galleries," he grumbled.

"After my fingers do some walking. We could meet later for lunch."

He slammed the dishwasher shut—again, harder than he intended—and Dixie startled.

“Sorry. Yeah, sure. Lunch sounds good.”

She nodded. “April did say galleries? Not flea markets and art fairs?”

“She said ‘gallery,’ singular.”

“And you didn’t think to ask *which* gallery, Mr. Charles?”

“Like I said, she got vague.” He tossed a piece of leftover bacon to Mud. “Guess she was jealous. Didn’t want me buying an Evercamp when I could have an original April Daze.”

“You’re joking. Nobody’s named April Daze.”

“Makes you wonder.” He picked up the newspaper to throw it in the garbage, his perfect day along with it.

“Wait! Hold that up.” When he did, she snatched it and opened it to a half-page ad. “A Smart Tech electronics store opens here next week.”

“That’s a hint? You want a new PC for your birthday?”

“Smart Tech is the same small chain Gennae worked for in Tulip, Arkansas. Independently owned. She might’ve heard about this new store opening, remembered her old friend Sheldon. Figures she’ll get a job, pilfer a few pricy items each week. Sheldon-the-junk-dealer fences them.”

“Would they hire a skinhead?”

“Like you said, Gennae probably has a make-over in the trunk of her Escort, along with stolen goods from her previous employment. Which would explain not ditching the car.”

“Also explains her stopping to track down a fence instead of burning up the highway to Margaritaville.” Parker wished now that he’d told Astin to find another broker.

Dixie picked up her keys. “I’ve been thinking about that. Gennae may not realize there’s a price on her head. Ryan heard about the reward offer from an email friend who lives there in Tulip.”

She leaned toward him for a quick kiss.

“Wait.” Parker tore off a paper towel. Delicately, he steadied her chin and wiped away the blackberry jam. “Gennae must know the cops are after her.”

“If you’re a crook, the cops are always one step behind.”

The telephone rang. Parker looked at her well-shaped, very determined mouth and lightly pressed his lips to hers.

“Guess there’s no chance I can talk you into going along with me this morning.”

She hesitated, her wide brown eyes turning soft for a moment. “You won’t miss me. And I can use the time to locate Sheldon Evercamp.”

The phone rang again.

Parker scooped it up, hoping it was Astin Gray, canceling their appointment. The weather channel had warned of a thunderstorm in the Gulf. Or maybe Astin had found a better deal. Thirty-foot catamarans were plentiful at the price this buyer was asking. A clean boat for its age, a real honey of a ride. But without Dixie along, sailing was just another day on the job.

And if he couldn’t convince her to spend a couple hours on a calm bay, what were the chances she’d sail with him to St. Thomas?

The call was Astin, eagerly confirming their scheduled sail. As he rattled on, Parker strolled out to the balcony and watched Dixie drive away in the yellow taxicab. Beyond the road, beyond the beach, the Gulf of Mexico stretched to a hazy horizon.

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