

CHAPTER 14

“Aunt Dix, I found a dude who knows Gennae’s neighbor.” Excitement broke Ryan’s changing voice even more than usual as he rattled off a name and phone number. “He’s not online or I’d do the interview. Save you the trouble.”

The newspaper ad tucked in her pocket, Dixie was headed for Smart Tech when Ryan’s call came. She pulled into the freshly resurfaced parking lot.

“Good job. I’ll call him.” Ignoring the designated spaces, she parked the taxi in a shady spot next to the building and lowered the windows a crack. The sun had already heated the cab’s interior enough to melt the small amount of makeup she wore. “But if Gennae kept to herself, as her coworkers implied, a neighbor might not know much.”

“He *dated* her, Aunt Dix.”

“Excellent. A neighbor who dated Gennae definitely qualifies as a hot lead. I’ll call right now.” Dixie’s Smart Tech hunch wasn’t nearly as hot. “I have a couple more ideas to follow up, then I’ll get back to you tonight.”

“Wait! Is Gennae in Galveston? Did you spot her?”

“In a way.” How much should she tell him? At ninety-two percent, Dixie’s success rate at tracing skips ran above average, but Ryan refused to believe *anyone* could escape his bounty-hunting aunt. She didn’t want to disappoint the kid, nor did she want to raise his hopes too high.

She told him about tracking Gennae to Slice’s.

“A bar? How did you know?”

“She drank a beer at the racetrack. Also, bars are the best places for striking up a conversation and scoping out an unfamiliar town.” To appease Ryan’s appetite for drama, Dixie related a few details of their bar-hopping experience. She didn’t mention the skinhead disguise. No need in spreading that gem over the Internet.

“Why’d she go to *that* bar? Is it famous?”

“Not really.” Dixie hesitated. The more he knew, the more involved he’d want to be. Once again she wondered about the risk of Ryan’s online search activity. The possibility of endangering her nephew—or Parker or any of her family—always gave her a shudder of panic. But she wouldn’t lie to him. “Gennae was asking about a friend who used to stop in there.”

“Wow! Then all you have to do is find the friend and wait until Gennae shows up. We’ve got her, Aunt Dix!”

“Not yet, kid. This friend may not be in town any longer. The people we talked to hadn’t seen him for a while.”

“What’s his name? I’ll look for him on the Internet.”

“You aren’t leaving a trail, are you Ryan?”

“I’m careful, like we talked about. What’s his name?”

“Sheldon Evercamp. Possibly from Georgia.”

“That’s where Gennae’s from. I’ll check there first. What are you gonna do now?”

Since she'd pretty much spilled the works already, Dixie told him about calling the art galleries—which would be opening in about five minutes. She also mentioned the Smart Tech store.

"With so many leads, no way she'll get away from us," Ryan said, the rap of computer keys clipping his voice. "I'm emailing my bud in Nacogdoches. His mom wants to go back to school. The reward money will help."

"Ryan, Gennae might already be gone from here."

"Wherever she is, we'll find her. We make a great team, Aunt Dix."

Team? Dixie grimaced at the word. Parker and Ryan had both proved resourceful, but as long as she worked alone, no one else got hurt. If only they weren't so damned eager. The only way she could see to unhitch herself from two self-defined helpers was to find Gennae Thompson, turn her in, and put an end to this reward business.

She dialed the number Ryan had given her for Gennae's neighbor, Daryl McCrae.

"Hello, hello, hello. This is Daryl, well not exactly. It's Daryl's mechanical stand-in. Tell me whatever you want Daryl to know and I promise he'll call you back as soon as I find him."

Dixie hung up without leaving a message, but the boisterous voice had made her smile. For the next twelve minutes, she called the list that accompanied Ryan's email and described Gennae in both her skinhead and WANTED poster personas. No luck.



Smart Tech appeared considerably larger than she expected from the description of its sister store in Tulip, Arkansas. It anchored an entire shopping-strip-to-be, all stucco and red clay roofs. The uniform architecture looked out of place on a street filled with miscellaneous fast-food stops, gas stations, drug stores, pawn shops, and laundromats. Only a few cars littered the parking area, bright yellow stripes sectioning the dark gray asphalt.

According to the ad, the electronics store would open for business the following Wednesday. Workers here now were likely loading shelves, checking alarm systems. Management might be on hand, too, handling last minute details.

Multiple swinging glass doors graced the entrance, but the automatic opening device was turned off. Dixie checked each door until she found one unlocked and muscled through. Hearing scattered sounds of activity, she followed a CUSTOMER SERVICE sign to the general offices. A young stocker took her card and directed her to HUMAN RESOURCES.

Now that she was inside, Dixie wondered if Gennae would apply at a store this big. She'd have a tougher time faking references with a human resources director than with an overworked independent employer who needed immediate help.

The woman behind the desk—mid-twenties, dressed in the style touted by pricey department stores as "corporate casual"—looked up at her. A pile of computer print-outs marked the corner of her desk. A PC monitor glowed with a work screen. Her gaze did a swift once-over of Dixie's attire—boots, jeans, camp shirt. She rose unenthusiastically and stretched out a hand.

"I'm Tracy Lowell. Did we have an appointment?"

"I saw your ad in today's newspaper—"

“And thought we were still hiring.” She smiled, revealing a mouthful of braces. “I like your initiative, but most of our positions are already filled.”

“Most, but not all?”

“We haven’t run a HELP WANTED ad in over a week.” The woman motioned Dixie to a gray tweed guest chair and waited for Dixie to sit before resuming her own seat behind the desk. She studied Dixie thoughtfully. “What sort of job did you have in mind?”

Dixie withdrew Gennae’s mug shot from her pocket. Before leaving Parker’s, she’d carefully torn off the lower portion of the yellow page, which stated the reward offer.

“Actually, I’m looking for a woman who might’ve applied for a job.” She held the photo so that Tracy could see it. “She’s wanted for fraud and theft from stores much like yours. Very personable. Presents herself well.”

Tracy shook her head. “We’ve had a few drop-ins, but—”

“Don’t let the blond hair throw you. She could be a brunette by now. Or a redhead.”

“She doesn’t look at all familiar. And we do check references.”

“She’d probably arrange to have references. Does any of your hiring take place in other stores? Out of town, out of state?”

The woman thoughtfully shook her head again, studying the photograph.

“I’d appreciate your calling me if she drops by.” Dixie scribbled her cell phone number on a business card. “The woman’s known aliases all are listed.”

“May I make a copy of that sheet?”

“Sure.” Dixie handed her the poster along with her card.

Tracy stepped into another room and Dixie heard the hum of a copier.

“Is she dangerous?” Tracy asked, returning the yellow poster.

“Not overtly. But don’t try to restrain her. And don’t let on that you recognize her. Just take any information she offers and let her go. Then call this number immediately. Will you do that?”

“Yes, certainly.” Tracy studied the photograph. “She doesn’t look like a criminal.”

“Most crooks don’t.” Surely Gennae would change her skinhead getup before applying for a job. Nevertheless... “She’s been known to wear various disguises—even dress as a boy, shaved head, tattoo, camouflage fatigues.”

Tracy frowned. “I wouldn’t let a kid who looked like that walk into my office.”

CHAPTER 15

Entering Gallery Pizzazz on Post Office Street, Dixie felt antsy, as if she'd drifted too far from the action. Earlier, sitting in the taxi outside Smart Tech, she had phoned art galleries, starting with those nearest Slice's, and bingoed on the sixth call.

But the ground cloth she'd found indicated Gennae had spent the night on West Beach—the other end of the island. Despite the fact that canvassing the entire West End made no sense, she'd scouted parking lots all along 61st Street, where her hunch meter ticked the loudest. With the August sun beaming through the taxicab's untinted windows, she'd begun to feel like a roasted chicken. Now she'd lost most of the morning and her one semi-solid lead remained Sheldon Evercamp.

Gallery Pizzazz, wedged between a dry cleaner and a sandwich shop, boasted a snazzy sign featuring a neon caricature of Leonardo DaVinci. Two paintings hung in the foyer. Beneath them, on a pedestal table, lay a guest book, a small service bell, and a crystal dish of citrus potpourri that scented the deliciously cool air. Dixie printed Parker's name and address in the book—he was the only person she knew who loved getting junk mail—and rang the bell.

Waiting, she admired an original watercolor by someone named Zamy Stuynavitz. Finally, she heard the ring of shoe heels on hardwood.

“Good morning! Welcome! What brings you to Pizzazz this fine Saturday?”

The bright male voice demanded cheer the way Chubby Checker demands the twist. Dixie curbed her wicked inclination to destroy the man's humor by saying “a thief and a fence.”

“I called about the Sheldon Evercamp pieces,” she said.

“Ohhhhh, yes.” He wore his hair buzzed on the sides, long on top, a style Dixie associated with Dilbert and wondered why anyone would want to look like a comic strip. Owlsh eyeglasses enlarged the man's pale brown eyes above a pug nose and plump lips. The combination made his face appear as if it'd been squeezed in a vice.

He introduced himself as Barry Cole, the man she'd spoken to on the phone. “I expected you earlier.”

“Something came up. You *do* have some paintings by Sheldon Evercamp?”

“We have some *very* nice Evercamps, some of his best work. Only, I'd like to give you my undivided attention and I have another guest here at the moment.”

He glanced at the doorway he'd come through, where a woman now stood. Tall, young, and as foxy as Cole was owlsh, she wore the shortest shorts and the reddest lipstick Dixie'd ever seen.

“What's happening, Bare?” The woman ran a pink tongue over her front teeth. “Is she tripping on my time?”

“Leetza, this lady's here to look at some paintings.”

“What do I have in here, Bare? Pea soup?” Leetza indicated a wide, thin portfolio she carried.

“Ms. Flannigan’s here to see something more...regional,” he said. “I’ll take her to the east parlor, and she can browse while we finish up.”

Dixie followed Barry Cole through a long showroom to another room in the back.

“These three pieces are, in my humble opinion,” he said, “the best Evercamps in town.”

“If you like weird,” Leetza countered. She stood very close behind Dixie.

Two-foot square, framed in slender wood strips, the watercolors looked at first glance like lively beach scenes. On second glance, Dixie spotted impish sharks lurking among the waves, mischievous monster crabs hiding in the swirls of sand, and bashful ghouls crouched in shadows, ready to pounce on unwary sunbathers.

“Evercamp,” Leetza said. “Isn’t he the butt rash who threw up at my—?”

“No, dear, that wasn’t Evercamp,” Cole said. “If you’ll just wait in the next—”

“I’m waiting, ain’t I?” She nudged Dixie’s upper arm with her elbow. “Artists get shut out by this gallery if they don’t produce regular sales. I’m thinking, we paint, he hypes—it’s like sleeping in twin beds, rubbing each other’s back, like.”

Ignoring her, Cole said, “Evercamp’s work is amazing, don’t you agree? The way he renders the creatures in that charming style similar to—”

“Maurice Sendak,” Dixie said. “Or Mercer Mayer.” She knew little about art, but she’d read picture books to Ryan when he was a tyke, over and over, until he could recite the words as she turned the pages.

“Exactly, children’s picture book art,” Cole said. “Yet look at the tremendous sophistication in the overall work.”

“Nice,” Dixie admitted. Despite the sinister aspect of the concealed threats, the paintings felt cheerful and fun, the creatures humorous rather than frightening. She liked Evercamp’s work.

But she wasn’t here to buy a painting.

“Evercamp,” Leetza said, digging her sharp elbow into Dixie’s arm again.

“Wasn’t he the frosted flake who drank all my wine—?”

“No, that wasn’t Evercamp,” Cole said.

“This is the sort of painting I want,” Dixie told him, wishing Leetza would either hit on the right memory or keep her trap snapped. “But not *these* canvases, precisely. I’d like to commission Evercamp to paint a West Beach scene that includes my friend’s house. Where can I get in touch with him?”

“Ohhhh, I’m afraid I can’t give out that information.”

“Here comes the full nelson,” Leetza said, nudging Dixie again. “Get ready to open your checkbook.”

Dixie experienced a sudden, irrational desire to bounce the woman into the next room and lock the door. “Barry, you’ll handle the transaction, but I want to talk personally with the artist.”

Cole nodded his narrow head solemnly. “I’m sure we can arrange a meeting. When—?”

“I’m only in town for the weekend. I’d like to get this moving today. Can you phone him now?”

“Bare! Am I invisible here? I’m standing in front of you, I’m ready! I can paint frames around this Evercamp-whomever. Show the lady my stuff.”

“Let me just look in the file,” Cole whispered, ignoring the woman again. He whirled on his toe to approach a closed door.

Dixie shrugged at Leetza, and the three of them squeezed into a closet-sized office, cluttered and smelling of cigarette smoke. Barry flipped through a card file.

“Evercamp, Ever...oh, dear. Our card has a notation that he’ll be in touch. We have no way to call him, and no address.”

“No address? Isn’t that a bit strange?” Dixie asked.

“Artists have strange tattoos on their tushes.” He did an eye-roll toward Leetza. “Listen, I’m certain we can work this out. I know several other—”

“I can do a fab canvas for you in oil,” Leetza said. “Much deeper—”

Cole snapped his fingers in Leetza’s face, shocking her silent. “—watercolorists! Who can do a spectacular job for you.”

“No one paints like Sheldon Evercamp,” Dixie said simply.

“True enough. Listen, perhaps I can call around, see if anyone has an inkling where to find him.”

“You don’t think he’s left town, do you?”

“Ohhhh, he would certainly arrange for his paintings if he planned to stay away. Don’t you think?” He frowned, muttering, “Peculiar, not to have a phone number.”

“I’ve heard he does odd jobs,” Dixie said, “to supplement earnings from his art. Did he mention where he works, or for whom?”

“A shop of some sort, I remember that. Not the usual retail, though, something shabby...hmmm...”

“A pawn shop!” Leetza shouted. “He’s the dork-face who was trying to unload a surfboard at my reception.”

“Yes, that’s it,” Cole said. “Evercamp and another young artist struck up a conversation about making ends meet in a world that plops down forty thou on a new car, but can’t part with a measly eight hundred on a masterpiece. Pawn shop—you’re right, Leetza. I’m certain that’s what he said. Imagine selling used items all day. Depressing.”

“Which pawn shop?” There had to be several on the island.

“Sorry,” Cole said. “I’m certain he never mentioned which one.” He raised his eyebrows at Leetza.

“E-Z Cash?” she suggested. “Kwik Pawn?”

Dixie jotted her cell phone number on a business card and handed it to Barry Cole. “Would you phone me the minute you learn anything?”

“The very instant! I know how it is to want something with a passion. I’ll make those calls right now and stir things up.”

“I’m the one you should lay that number on,” Leetza said.

“Sure.” Leetza was the one who’d remembered the pawn shop. Maybe she knew more. Dixie scribbled on another card. “Do you have any idea where Evercamp lives? Or paints?”

The artist shook her head, staring at the business card. “This is a post office box in Houston. You said your friend lives on West Beach.”

“He does.”

“Then give me his home address.” She dealt Dixie’s arm another sharp nudge. “I’ll drop by, make a few sketches.”

“Look, here’s the deal.” Dixie grasped the offensive elbow between thumb and forefinger, applying just enough pressure to weaken the artist’s knees. “If you help me find Evercamp, *maybe* I’ll buy a painting from both of you. Got it?”

The woman nodded, pain etched in her wide eyes.

When Dixie eased off, Barry Cole let out a whoosh of breath.

“I assure you, Ms. Flannigan, I will track down Mr. Evercamp,” he said hurriedly. “Just have a spot of patience.”

Dixie turned on her heel. “I don’t have time for patience.”

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