

CHAPTER 16

Gennae plucked a miniature microphone off the pawn shop's cluttered shelf. Twelve dollars and seventy-five cents. The orange sticker, smudged where someone hadn't waited for the ink to dry, stated its price in square numerals.

Twelve-seven-five, I caught a fish alive—the words formed silently on her lips. Four years since she'd seen Sheldon. Could she trust him? Trust, like dust, could blow away in the wind.

Dust covered the items at the back of the shelf, back where a hasty hand wouldn't reach. Eat my dust...eat a crust...may I please have another crust of bread, sir?

Gennae had barely enough bread to last until lunchtime, thanks to her “just this once” stop at the dog track. “Turn that fifty into five hundred.” Shoulda bet on Gin Sip, the underdog, never statted, running up hard, taking everybody by surprise, taking second place.

Second was okay in dog races.

Gennae felt the box knife bump against her leg. No room for second place in my race. Like Gin Sip, though, she was an unknown element. Quick. Sly. Slicing through bullshit all the way to the line. Show no fear. Shed no tear. Fear is a four-letter word.

She cut her eyes toward the counter. Her cousin hadn't changed much. Still chunky, bland, and too juvenile for his twenty-four years. Not at all like the brilliant pictures he painted. Most artists, when compared to their work, proved a disappointment. But Sheldon was the single person in the world she could trust to be predictable—and the person who knew more about her than anyone. Anyone alive.

One-two-three-four-five, I caught a fish alive.

She'd been waiting for the pawn shop to clear out, to catch Sheldon alone. Alone, except for the owner shut behind a barred window, guarding the big cash. TV sounds drifted through the barrier.

Gennae carried the microphone to the cash register.

“How much?” she asked Sheldon.

He turned the mike over and pointed to the orange sticker. “Twelve seventy-five.”

“What'd you pay for it? Two bucks?”

“Doesn't matter what we paid, the price is twelve seventy-five. Take it or leave it.”

“I've got a whole box full better than this one.”

He was looking at her differently now, a spark of recognition gleaming in his robin's egg eyes. The best-looking thing about Sheldon had always been his blue eyes. Look at you with those jeepers-creepers peepers you'd believe anything. Poker player's eyes.

“If you have a box full, what do you want with this one?”

“Thought we could make a deal.”

He glanced toward the barred window at the side of the store. “We don't buy stolen merchandise.”

“Did I say stolen? Why would you think they were stolen? My father’s store shut down. Too much overhead. Packed up, sold out. Still have a few tasty items to unload. Like these mikes.”

As she spoke, Sheldon’s gaze grew more and more hooded, studying her. She had changed in four years. Some of it natural, growing older, wiser. Other changes had resulted from scissors and razor, a smudge of makeup, the ink from a ballpoint pen.

“Christ!” he whispered suddenly. “It’s you, isn’t it?”

Gennae nodded vaguely.

“Colorful disguise. I thought about you, Monday being—”

“My birthday. You didn’t think I’d forget my own birthday?”

“Not this one. What were you doing slinking around over there? I almost called the law, you in that jacket. August, a hundred degrees out there, walk in wearing a jacket, are you nuts? All those pockets. I swear, I nearly called the law.”

“You want to search my pockets?”

He slid his gaze toward the window again, gave a vague head shake, and picked up the microphone.

“Let’s move over to the display. Pretend I’m showing you a better model.”

“Pretend, pretend. That’s a good game, Shel,” she said as he rounded the counter. “Let’s pretend it’s four years ago.”

“You’re schizo coming home, you know. Is that what happened back then, you finally cracked like your—?”

Gennae grabbed a handful of Sheldon’s shirt collar and twisted it tight, shoving him against a counter.

“Like who?” Her fingers itched toward the box knife.

“You *are* nuts! You want him to call the law?” He jerked his head toward the manager’s haven. “Let go!”

“He can’t see us from there. I could slit your throat, be gone in three seconds. He wouldn’t see a thing.”

“He sees everything.” Sheldon shifted his gaze toward a camera near the ceiling.

“Then he’s already seen enough to call the cops. Why shouldn’t I go ahead and cut your thick neck?”

“I’m not your enemy.”

Reluctantly, Gennae let him go. “Just watch your mouth.”

“Why? Because I finally said to your face what everyone said behind your back? What she finally proved slitting her wrists like that?”

“Suicide, the newspapers reported. Is that what your dad thinks, cousin?”

Sheldon set the microphone on a shelf, picked up a pricier model, and gave a nasty chuckle. “Sure took the wind out of old Windbag Evercamp, his own sister doing herself in. Niece vanishing with her tramp girlfriend. Headline: ‘Bigshot lawyer discovers closet full of colorful skeletons.’”

Gennae listened carefully. At least one thing hadn’t changed; Sheldon still hated his father. She could use that. “Is that all they found?”

His eyes went hooded again. “What else *should* they have found?”

Leon Stovall’s body, for one. Gennae had followed the story in the news: Only one body was found—her mother’s.

Turning to the microphones and tape recorders displayed on the shelf, she said again, "Her death was written off as suicide?"

"It *was* suicide. Is that why you stayed away all this time? Thought they'd blame you?"

Gennae shrugged. She slipped her right hand into her pocket and grasped the comfort of the razor. One flick of her thumb and its shining sharp blade could slice away all her problems. Like mother, like daughter.

"I need to see your father, Shel. Alone. Where would I find him these days? His address isn't listed." She flicked the blade out, then back in.

"His office—"

"Why would I go to his office? Never bothered him to walk into our house unannounced anytime he pleased. He's my uncle. Where's his goddamn house?"

"Jeez, you're touchy." Sheldon smirked. "Just like your mother."

"Where's his house, Shel?"

"If you go see him looking like that, like some right-wing militia freak, you won't get past the houseman—"

"My pretentious uncle has a houseman? Isn't that cozy?"

A buzzer sounded as a customer entered the pawn shop.

"Houseman, bodyguard." Sheldon's gaze followed the customer to a rack of musical instruments. "Dad got some threats after one of his cases went south."

"Still, he must be doing all right these days with his slimy law practice. I read that he's on the ballot for town council. Maybe my mother's death bought him some public sympathy."

"Not until he hired a spin doctor. Listen, I can't stand here yukking it up over old times."

"Where's his house?"

"Call his office. Tell him to meet you."

"If I'm crazy, Shel, aren't you just a little bit afraid I'll follow you home tonight, surprise you in the dark, and slice the answer out of you?" One-two-buckle-my-shoe. Show no fear.

"Jeez, you're still doing that muttering thing."

"Where's his house?"

"I don't know. Okay? Dad and I haven't spoken in months. He doesn't approve of my lifestyle. He moved a couple weeks ago. What do I care where?"

Gennae studied him, wondering whether to believe him. Could she believe anyone? There was a crooked man... who lied a crooked mile...

"Don't call your father, Sheldon. Don't call anyone. You never saw me."

"Christ. What are you planning?"

On the shelf, behind the microphones, something skittered in the dust. A beetle? Covered white with dust and moving.

A spider?

...He hid a crawly spider behind a crooked smile...

She was six. Rushing home from her first day of first grade. Sheldon and his parents had come to visit for a while. Finding her mother in the kitchen, stirring butter and sugar in a big brown crockery bowl, she perched on a bar stool to watch. The kitchen was fragrant with vanilla and warm with heat from the oven.

“Hickory, dickory, dock. You’re early, Mouse!’ Mama held out the wooden spoon for her to lick. “I was making lemon squares to surprise you.”

“Mouse likes lemon squares.” She scooped a finger through the spoonful of batter.

Her mother looked all rosy and beautiful, afternoon sunlight flooding through a window over the sink and falling on her shining blond hair. Touching her own hair, as pale as her mother’s, she wondered if she would ever be beautiful.

“I must’ve read the clock wrong. How was your day, Mouse?”

“Good.” It *had* been good. No naps. “How was your day?”

“Better, now that you’re home. Milk or Coke? Whatever you want, pour me a glass, too.”

She ran to the fridge as her mother reached for the flour.

The canister was open a crack, which seemed wrong. Mama was always particular about closing things—doors, drawers. Canisters.

When she lifted the top off, a spider as big as her hand skittered out. Coated white with flour, it sped up her arm toward her face. Her mother screamed, swatted at it, knocking the canister over, flour flying.

“Mama?!” The Coke bottle crashed to the floor, spilled, and spread across the tile.

The spider crawled into her mother’s hair.

She clawed at her head, screaming, spinning around the kitchen, stepped in the spilled Coke and skidded, arms flailing. The spider crawled down her face.

Mouth clamped tight, she shrieked and slapped, swiping the spider to the floor, where it fled across the room, into a crack.

Mama shuddered, moaning, and slumped across the counter, clutching her chest.

“Mouse, I...I...don’t feel right, Mouse...need a...need a...doctor...I...”

“Mama?” She ran to the phone just as Sheldon’s father came in. Her uncle grabbed the phone away and dialed.

Her mother survived the heart attack. But after that, when she opened doors and drawers and canisters her face wore a terrible fear. She lost weight, cried a lot. People began to say she was strange. Sheldon and his parents decided to stay on for a few weeks...

...and we all lived together in a crooked little house.

“Would you stop that muttering? That’s creepy, you know that? No wonder everybody says you turned as crackpot as your old lady—”

The box knife was out of her pocket, razor ready, and shoved toward Sheldon’s crotch before Gennae realized she’d willed it.

Shed no tear. Show no fear.

“Jesus Christ!” His gaze darted toward the camera, then toward the customer, and back to the barred window.

Gennae knew her hand was hidden from anyone’s line of sight.

“Watch your language, Sheldon. In fact, when anyone, *anyone*, mentions my mother, you’ll tell them *she* wasn’t the crazy one in our family. You got that?”

“Nobody talks about it anymore. Nobody cares—”

“You got it?”

“Yeah, okay. Now get out of here.”

She slipped the knife into her pocket. “Where can I find you later? To do a little business?”

He went to the counter, took one of the pawn shop’s business cards from a plastic holder, and scribbled a phone number on the back of it.

CHAPTER 17

Dixie yanked her hand back from the taxi's blistering door handle. The late morning sun had climbed high during her brief chat with Barry Cole in Gallery Pizzazz, and the meager patch of shade where she'd left the taxicab had vanished. No wind whispered along the awning-shaded sidewalks of Post Office Street, and the lightning-laced clouds she'd noticed last night had long vanished. Heat radiated from every surface. The air smelled of sun-softened asphalt.

Gingerly, she opened the trunk and found some shop rags to grasp the door handle. Inside the cab, she wrapped two rags around the steering wheel, using a third to turn the ignition switch. Even after the car was in motion, the air inside felt hot enough to steam clams. Thinking of Parker breezing around the bay in a catamaran, his Cadillac sitting unused, she cursed her shortsightedness in not trading cars. Must've tucked her brain in her back pocket this morning.

Pawn shops. Information listed four, one on 61st Street, just four blocks from the new Smart Tech. Ignoring her hunch that she should start there, Dixie methodically chose the nearest E-Z Pawn on Broadway and plodded west.

A clerk there admitted hearing Evercamp's name tossed around but believed he was a freelance pawnbroker, making deals wherever they fell. The manager might know more but was out. Dixie took his number to call later.

When she returned to the taxi, the window motors on both front doors refused to work. Out of habit, she always locked the car when she got out, leaving the windows lowered a crack for ventilation. Now, only that finger-sized crack, and the back windows, which were designed to go down only half way, allowed air to circulate. Poking along at the thirty-five-mile speed limit didn't pull enough breeze through to keep the car from turning into a sauna. Visions of the cool, dark confines of a movie theater taunted her.

At the next pawn shop, no one knew Evercamp, nor had anyone matching Gennae's description stopped in to ask about him. Dixie left a card and requested the manager to call if he had a sudden flash of insight.

Passing a security mirror, she caught a glimpse of her face—flaming pink—not sunburned but flushed from the intense heat. She bought a bottle of cold water from a vending machine, swallowed part of it, then soaked another shop rag to blot her face. Heat stroke she could do without.

The third stop was a repeat of the others. That left only the Kwik Kash on 61st. "It's always the last place you try," Parker commiserated, when Dixie called his cell phone to find out if he was headed home yet. He wasn't. She could hear seagulls squawking behind him.

"It's the last place you try because you stop looking. You find it, you don't look anywhere else."

“Dixie, you need another car.” He gave her the name of a mechanic who would fix the window motors and flush out the radiator. “Pick up a rental. You’d look good in a sporty red Mazda convertible.”

“Oh, yeah, *that’s* inconspicuous.” He hadn’t lived in Galveston long enough to realize it could take a full day—or more—to obtain a rental car, but Dixie had experienced the problem in other small towns. “The only good thing about the taxi is no one notices it, even on an island where real cabs are as rare as clam’s teeth.”

“Exciting weekend we’re spending together. I’m having all the fun—Astin’s pretty sold on this thirty-footer, by the way, smooth ride but just unpredictable enough to be exciting—and you’re browsing pawn shops.”

“What sounds like heaven right now would be you, me and Mud in Margaritaville.” She bit down on the harsh fact that she’d rather be browsing the cemetery across the street in hundred-and-ten degree heat than riding on that boat. Eyeing the Burger Boy, she added, “When you’re finished, I’ll treat for lunch, then maybe we could drop off the taxi to be repaired and ride together the rest of the day.”

“Yes, ma’am, a deal. You’ll see how handy a sexy assistant gumshoe can be.”

Kwik Kash shared a parking lot with a real estate agency, a coin merchant, and the Burger Boy. The building faced south and sported a wide awning. Dixie parked out of direct line of sight from the pawn shop, and entered through a glass door reinforced with iron bars. The interior was dim. The chilly air instantly broke her arms out in goose bumps. Ignoring a faint mustiness, Dixie inhaled deeply, deciding she could gladly idle here awhile.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust to the lighting. She saw a young man behind a counter fitting rings into a fake-velvet display tray. An older man, with long gray hair and pale acne-scarred skin, sat on the far side of a service window watching an old Bogart movie. The window was closed, and like all the glass in the store, reinforced with iron bars.

Dixie approached the younger man. Five-foot-eight, stocky, with a spiky thatch of sun-streaked blond hair, he had arranged the rings in rows of color—amethyst, sapphire, ruby.

“Mr. Evercamp?”

He glanced up from the jewelry counter. His eyes were the sweet shade of blue that made young women swoon. The rest of his face was flat, wide, and forgettable. A sly wariness narrowed his eyelids as he studied her.

“Sheldon’s not here.” He stooped to trade the ring tray with another from a shelf in the glass display counter.

“When do you expect him?”

“Couldn’t say. Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, that is, if we’re talking about the same Evercamp. Sheldon, the watercolorist?” Dixie’s gaze took in the shelves and racks around the store stocked with the usual pawn shop merchandise—TVs, DVDs, musical instruments, small kitchen appliances, computer peripherals. Dust motes danced in the sun rays that beamed through barred windows. Four glass display cases formed a central enclosure where the clerk stood, cameras, guns, and jewelry locked safely away from pilfering fingers. A stack of multicolored fliers on the counter advertised a proposed theme park called “Lafitteville.”

The clerk placed the second tray of rings on the glass surface. “Sheldon shows at a gallery on Post Office—”

“I stopped there first. The thing is, I’m in town only a couple days, and the gallery owner didn’t have a working number for Mr. Evercamp. Said I might find him here.”

“I’ll be seeing Sheldon later. I can tell him to phone you.” He selected an intricate gold band fitted with a large citrine. With a jeweler’s cloth that smelled of oranges, he polished the filigree setting. Green paint discolored his square fingernails at the cuticle.

Yahtzee! “Then I’d have to wait around for him to call. If you can you tell me where to find—”

The clerk shook his head. “Don’t have an address.”

“Where did you plan to meet? Maybe I could—”

“No special place. We find each other.”

He repositioned the citrine in the tray and plucked up an emerald-cut diamond set into a masculine band that Dixie instantly pictured on Parker’s finger. He sometimes wore a class ring, his hands always clean and well manicured—not like this pawn shop clerk’s, with their paint-stained nail beds.

“You’d think an artist with any ambition wouldn’t be so elusive,” Dixie said. “How do I commission a painting when I can’t even talk to the guy?”

His hooded eyes widened just enough to show she’d piqued his interest. “What sort of painting were you thinking of?”

“Why? Do you paint, too?”

“Sheldon’s been teaching me.” He grinned, and Dixie realized he was even younger than she’d first thought. *Early* twenties, max. Same age as his “buddy” Sheldon.

She smiled. “I’m interested in a piece by Sheldon Evercamp—the master, not the student. Something large, possibly a beach scene featuring my friend’s house, but with Galveston Mardi Gras in the background. Floats, costumes.” Parker already had two Mardi Gras paintings.

“Sounds colorful.”

“My friend appreciates color. But I need to know soon if Evercamp can do this. Can you get a message to him right away?”

The clerk nodded vaguely. “He’ll be curious—did you just stumble into...what was the name of that gallery?”

“Pizzazz. I called around after my friend raved about this guy’s work.”

“Sheldon will be glad to hear that.”

“Sooner than tonight, if possible. This is a gift. If I need to come up with another idea—”

“I’ll tell him to call. Where are you staying?”

Dixie picked two Kwik Kash business cards from a plastic holder on the counter, slid one into her pocket, and jotted her cell number on the other.

“When do you think he might be in touch?”

The clerk shrugged. “Later today sometime.”

She debated whether to show the photograph of Gennae, as she had at the other pawn shops, and ask if the girl’d been in. Even with the description and reward offer removed, the photo still looked like a mug shot. WANTED posters usually spelled cops, and she didn’t want to spook this guy with her hunch meter clanging like crazy. She’d bet

her next big check that she was *looking* at Sheldon Evercamp. If so, he was acting damned evasive, and if not, she intended to follow him to his friend Sheldon.

She offered a hand. "Thanks. By the way, I'm Dixie."

"Ray," he said, shaking her hand.

Ray, my ass.

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