

CHAPTER 20

Devious. Parker adjusted the music, a steel band version of “Fly Me to the Moon,” so that it wouldn’t interfere with Dixie’s telephone conversation. *Was that the word, devious?*

No *other* word for what he was doing. He chuckled quietly as he selected a fruit knife, sliced a mango and arranged it over romaine leaves on three chilled salad plates. With a flourish, he swirled a ribbon of lime dressing over the fruit. Sprinkled fresh coconut on top. Listening briefly, estimating that Dixie wouldn’t be ready to eat for at least ten minutes, he set the plates on a pan of ice.

“When in doubt, make bread,” his mother had taught him.

On a ranch, nobody got out of working for long. Nursing a bum leg after a tractor accident, he could barely hobble around on crutches. Yet, his mother had put him to chopping vegetables at the kitchen table. A wide surface of two-inch-thick planks, worn smooth and golden from years of use, that table had been the heart of their home. He could see that table like yesterday. Later, she’d taught him to stir gravy in an iron skillet, working out all the lumps, and finally, to make bread.

Now he did his best thinking in the kitchen. He seemed to find words here, words that escaped him everywhere else. Like envy. He envied Dixie’s persistence, the way she took hold of an obligation and didn’t let go. But that same persistence toward obligations shut them out of doing things *he* wanted to do.

“Evercamp,” Dixie drawled into the receiver, using her Georgia-peach routine. “Garwood Evercamp, a lawyer. I have his office number, but the home number listed in the directory simply doesn’t work. He must’ve moved, and I need the new home number.”

She grimaced, rolling her brown eyes at Parker, as if to say “Sorry...can you believe this is taking so long?”

He liked listening to her work. Her voice, always throaty and calm even when she was ticked off, never failed to stir his lustier male urges. The instant he’d met her, he thought, *this woman’s spicy and crusty on the surface, but inside she’s vanilla custard.* Took about ten seconds to nix that notion. Dixie could be tough through and through when she needed to be.

“If the number was listed once, why wouldn’t it be listed now?” She drew a smiley face on a notepad. “I know Garwood would want his family to have the new phone number, and I drove all the way from Oakbridge, Georgia, to see him. You’re telling me to just turn around and drive back?”

Parker brushed a trio of salmon steaks with dill butter and watched Dixie draw a cluster of arrows aimed at the smiley face.

“I did leave a message at the office,” she said calmly, “but today is Saturday. No one will pick up those messages until Monday. Honey, I need to see him tonight.”

He tied a bundle of asparagus with twine. Stood it upright in a dish. A dash of salt, a few minutes in the microwave. Cooking was simple. Too bad relationships weren’t.

Maybe “devious” was too harsh a word. Crafty?

For the first time in his forty-two years, he'd found a woman worth holding on to. He hadn't a clear idea how to do that, but during those long months hobbling around his mother's kitchen he'd realized that cooking gave back all the effort he put into it. Now he intended to put his best effort into this relationship, even if it meant corralling Dixie—eight days on the open sea, no jobs to interfere—until the two of them muddled through their differences.

She wasn't a woman you could win over with glitz and glamour, though he'd tried a touch of that with the dinner at Chateau Lafitte. Give her a sentimental card and she'd go all mushy. Give her an emerald ring and those soft brown eyes would turn hard as bullets, her skeptical mind wondering what you're up to.

Muttering a curse, she punched the power button on the cordless and slammed it into the cradle.

"If this were a weekday, I could bamboozle the address out of a billing clerk at the power company." She snatched the phone back up and dialed another number.

"You really think this lawyer's related to our pawn shop clerk?"

"Has to be. The lawyer's the only Evercamp listed. Not a common name, so what're the odds?" She dropped her gaze to the notepad again. "Hello, there—"

Parker carried the mango salads to the table. She'd pushed aside her place mat to accommodate notepad and pen. He filled their wine glasses, then moved the third plate to the floor.

Mud sniffed, gave Parker a quizzical look, and stared at the grill.

"Patience," Parker told him.

The dog eyed him another few seconds before delicately licking the lime dressing off the salad. Apparently satisfied it would do until real food came, he scarfed up the mango.

Fiddling with their evening meal for the past hour while Dixie made phone calls, Parker'd realized how easy she was to be with when he didn't try to take her away from work. Play didn't come natural to her. He didn't understand that, nor why she seemed to thrive on danger. Maybe he just needed to accept these facts.

But damn it to hell, *he* needed fun, adventure, a gamble now and then. New horizons, new friends. How long had it been since he'd tramped through the Rockies? Boated the Everglades? Walked the streets of Manhattan? If he and Dixie couldn't discover a gratifying middle ground, what sort of future could he expect? Imprisoned within driving distance of home—could he live with that?

She tilted her head and a fall of short dark hair caressed her cheek—an unconscious mannerism that softened her. For that split second she seemed entirely vulnerable, and enticingly female.

A tightness spread across Parker's chest. Life would be easier if he didn't love this woman so goddamn much.

Should he feel guilty about the plan he'd cooked up? He wanted her full attention tonight when he presented his case for sailing to St. Thomas. Thus, the exotic meal, the new CD of romantic island music. Who could resist that drumbeat? And he'd rented a video for later, *6 Days, 7 Nights*—adventure with plenty of island atmosphere. If he couldn't win Dixie over with reason, he'd romance her into taking that boat trip.

He watched her sip the wine, a crisp chardonnay, while she finished her conversation. Abruptly, she clicked off. She whisked the phone and notepad to a side table.

“Fancy salad,” she remarked, tasting it. “What’s the occasion?”

Parker shrugged. “Hot weather suggested something cool and tropical.”

“It’s good.” She nibbled a coconut flake. “While you were at the grocery, I spoke to the other two employers Gennae ripped off, one in East Texas, one in Georgia. At both places she stole a few hundred dollars worth of goods. Nothing like the amount she took from Tom Rich.”

“Working up to the big time?”

“Could be. Or Rich may’ve padded the list he sent to his insurance company. What’s that music? I feel like we should be doing the limbo.”

“You don’t like it?”

“Reminds me of the sixties. Carla Jean used to love all those sentimental calypso songs, ‘Lemon Tree,’ ‘Yellow Bird,’ ‘Jamaica Farewell.’”

Parker listened up. Dixie rarely talked about her birth mother or the days before she was adopted. And he’d learned not to ask.

“She gave me a pair of old wooden serving spoons to make drum sticks,” Dixie said. “I ran around the park beating out rhythm on trees, benches, signs, anything that didn’t move. Big steel trash barrels. Your music sounds like those barrels.”

“Steel drums. That’s what they’re playing.”

The phone rang. She grimaced apologetically and scooped it up. “Flannigan.” Scribbled an address. “You did that fast, Brew. Thanks.”

As she clicked off, she grinned at Parker, her brown eyes filled with an enthusiasm that forecast trouble. “Okay, Nick Charles. Think we should drop in on Garwood Evercamp tonight?”

Parker looked at the VCR, already cued up into the living room. Couch and ottoman positioned for snuggling. Jar of chocolate-covered macadamia nuts to go with their popcorn.

Devious? Maybe the word he needed was “unlucky.”

CHAPTER 21

Gennae stood in the shadows watching the house.

The house that Jack built.

Watching the party.

Finding her uncle's house had been easy. Wait at his office. Observe. Follow.

Watch for the gnome.

She lowered the binoculars she'd picked up at Kwik Kash—under Sheldon's eagle eye, just picked them right up—and shoved her other hand deep into her pocket. Her fingers encased the blue steel. Flicked the blade out. Flicked it back. Panic subsided. But could she really use the knife when it mattered?

“There was a crooked gnome in a crooked little home.”

She raised the binoculars. No problem seeing in the dark. The house was lit up like a party boat. Her uncle liked parties. People coming and going. He liked people—who had something he wanted.

The knave of hearts, he stole some tarts.

Shaded fairy lights rimmed the wide stairs and encircled the veranda. Beyond the lighted windows people mingled. Talked. Laughed.

Up the stairs and into the light. Down the stairs and into the night.

People wandered out to the porch, sat in the swing—

Gennae had sat in a porch swing. Long ago, w With Daddy.

As a kid, she had been fascinated with his hands, slender hands, like hers.

Musician's hands. He didn't use those long fingers to play music, never had an interest, he'd told her, but he liked listening. Instead, he used his thin fingers to “play the knife.”

Chuckle. Daddy always laughed when he said it. “Play the knife.” *Chuckle.* She watched the knife skitter over a block of wood, chipping out bits.

“Listen to this little problem,” Daddy said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a finished piece of wood, all the extra bits chipped away.

He set the piece on her leg. A tiny duck.

As the swing glided back and forth, she kept the duck carefully balanced, but her gaze flew back to her father's hand, not to the knife, but to the cast on his left hand.

She'd written her name on the cast in big scrawly letters. Her thoughts flew to her brother running screaming into the living room. *Daddy's hurt!* Running with Mama to the carriage house. A heavy crate, its sharp metal rim gleaming with blood. Later, a white bandage, thick and bulky. And now the cast.

The tips of Daddy's stiff fingers clumsily guided the block of wood while the long, nimble fingers of his right hand guided a blue steel box knife.

“A thinking problem,” Daddy said, setting another tiny wood carving on her leg. “If you had a duck in front of two ducks, a duck between two ducks, and a duck behind two ducks, how many ducks would you have?”

Ducks in a row.

Daddy in the swing. Being funny.

Three ducks.

Gennae stiffened and focused the binoculars. There was Uncle Garwood.

Who pinched the tarts.

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