

## CHAPTER 28

*Sunday*

The sun hadn't yet shown itself above the eastern horizon when Dixie placed her lips close to Parker's ear, his musky male scent triggering a pleasant memory of the night's sensual moments.

"Okay if I take your car?"

He was still snoozing. "Mmmmgrmbml."

"Thanks. I'll bring breakfast. Don't cook."

She'd never borrowed the Cadillac before without asking, but with the taxi's windows stuck shut, it would already be unbearable. And she was damned unwilling to give up on Carra Lynne without following a few more trails. Thinking about this as she hurriedly dressed, Dixie figured it might be time to overhaul the four vehicles she owned, taxi, Mustang, all-purpose van, and tow truck, each several years old. For now, she needed a car just long enough to call on Sharon's parents. Early, before they got off to church or a day at the beach.

She checked her email: six from Ryan, mostly wanting an update, none from Brew. In the kitchen, she left a huge note on the refrigerator: THANKS FOR THE WHEELS. AND REMEMBER, DON'T COOK.

The ground cloth she'd hung on the Cadillac's side mirror was gone. Could've blown away in the wind. Or maybe not.

Behind the wheel, she allowed questions to surface that had haunted her throughout the night. Why had Carra Lynne come home if not to see her family? Had she overheard the conversation in Evercamp's study? How far had she run this time? Out of town? Or just out of sight? And what had happened to Sharon Young, the friend who left town with Carra four years ago?

Apparently, they'd parted company after Grovemont. No indication from Tom Rich, Daryl McCrae or Babs Hanson that "Gennae" had a roommate. Sharon might know—or guess—where Carra Lynne was headed. They might've discussed states, towns...countries...places a fugitive could hide out. If Sharon had been in touch with her family, they might provide a line to grab hold of.

The sun cast a peachy glow over the East End Historical District as Dixie pulled up in front of Hall Paddock's office on 14th Street, just off Broadway. The row of buildings sat close to the street, patched sidewalk scarcely three-feet wide. This section of the island had been converted from small homes to live-in offices. Blue and beige ceramic tiles bordered the curb, someone's effort to spruce up an otherwise colorless business area. The same color scheme brightened four office fronts.

Paddock's was the second, according to the address listed. Brass nameplates over door knockers identified each business: ABC Printing, Dawson Delivery, Laurie's Dog Grooming. Paddock's nameplate had been pried off, screw holes plugged with wood putty. Above the offices, second-story windows suggested lofts.

Dixie lifted the knocker and banged it down a couple times. Inside Laurie's, a dog yipped.

She knocked again. More yipping. But no sound issued from behind Paddock's door to indicate anyone was inside. She unclipped her cell phone and punched in his number. When it rang, she heard a faint corresponding jingle upstairs. After three rings, a machine clicked in. Dixie introduced herself, said Garwood Evercamp had suggested she get in touch, and left her cell number.

A white lie. Garwood's reluctance and Dixie's curiosity had placed Paddock first on her list, and stopping here gave Sharon Young's family more time to wake up. As with Paddock, she'd decided to drop by unannounced. If she was going to piss people off before breakfast, might as well make the most of it and see their reactions face to face.

Claire Young lived in the central part of the island, homes built after World War II but before the rambling ranch style took over. Someone years ago had painted the house sunrise pink, a Galveston favorite. Storm shutters enclosed the windows. One of the front shutters had been torn off and replaced in a slightly new position, leaving a thread of green where the former paint color showed through. As she rang the bell, a murmur inside the house suggested a radio or television playing.

When a tall, rangy blonde opened the door, the heavy odor of sausage cooking wafted through. The woman looked fifty-five, but Dixie figured hard living accounted for a decade of that. She wore baggy red shorts, a tank top that sagged with her large breasts, and a dish towel slung over one shoulder. She held a greasy egg turner, probably for flipping the sausages.

"Mrs. Young? Mrs. Claire Young?"

The woman glanced behind, where a man of about forty sat in a recliner watching a TV news program. Curly salt-and-pepper hair, profile craggy and bloated.

"Not Young any more," she said, keeping her voice low. "Branson. Or Reyes, depending on who's asking."

Dixie handed her a card. "Which name do you prefer?"

The woman glanced again at the man. "Reyes."

"Actually, it's your daughter Sharon I'm looking for, Mrs. Reyes. When did you last speak with her?"

Claire's slack features quickened with interest. She read the card Dixie had handed her. Except for the obligatory phone numbers, all it said was: D.A. Dixie Flannigan. Only a handful of Dixie's closest friends and family knew that D.A. stood for Desiree Alexandra. Her birth mother was a hopeless romantic. Most people assumed erroneously that Dixie was with the DA's office, and even when they asked, she could usually hedge her answer.

Claire Reyes stepped across the threshold and closed the door partially behind her.

"Have you seen Sharon?" she whispered.

"No. I'm trying to find her friend, Carra Lynne Gray, and Sharon may be able to help me."

"Lord, I haven't seen my girl since the two of them ran off together." Her shoulders and face drooped as if the last spark of energy had drained from them. A worm of grease eased down the upheld spatula toward her fingers.

"Claire!" the man inside shouted. "What the shit're you doing out there? Burning my breakfast?"

"It's on low," she called. "Waiting for the biscuits. Nothing's going to burn."

“Have you spoken with Sharon at all since she left here?” Dixie asked.

“Oh, yeah, she called at first, regular, sort of. Every couple weeks, letting me know she was okay. Sharon’s thoughtful like that.” Claire’s face softened. “Named her after my grandmother. Sharon looked a lot like Grams, a lot like I did once, when I was young and firm. Anyway, after a while Sharon stopped calling, sudden like.”

“When was that?”

“Maybe three months after they took off. Round Christmas time. Sent me a blouse and a card.”

Her eyes dampened, and she dabbed them with the back of her wrist.

“Do you still have the card?” The postmark would be over three years old, but it was something.

“Yeah, but that detective took the envelope. Is it that lawyer who brought you into looking for them, Carra Lynne’s uncle?”

“I’m not working for Garwood Evercamp, Mrs. Reyes, but he does still have an interest in finding his niece.” Unlike Sharon, Carra Lynne hadn’t called home once after leaving the island. Not to talk to her family, anyway. Maybe friends. “Perhaps Sharon had a close friend, a boy she dated or another girl, maybe. Kids often tell a buddy more than they tell a parent. Can you think of someone the girls were close to?”

“Oh, sure, Sharon had friends, but no one she brought around here. *He* wouldn’t have it.” She rolled her eyes toward the man watching television. “Carra Lynne was the only one Sharon ever talked about.”

A buzzer sounded inside the house.

“Claire! Get in here, the oven’s going off.”

“All right, just hold your water!” Claire flicked her gaze over her shoulder, then back to Dixie.

“How about places Sharon and Carra Lynne hung out. Did she talk about where they spent time, things they did?”

“The beach, mostly. Or down around the galleries on Post Office.” The buzzer sounded again. “Wait right here, would you?”

She slipped back inside the house, easing the door shut within an inch of the jamb. Through the skinny opening, Dixie saw little more than a sliver of the flickering TV screen. She turned her attention to the yard, which was mowed and trimmed. Spanish daggers grew in a clump at one corner. Three squat palm trees edged the road. A Mitsubishi sat in the driveway, silver metallic paint oxidized to mottled gray.

Clair returned, sans spatula, and thrust a fold of bills toward Dixie.

“When you find Sharon, give her this. It’s not much, but maybe she can use it to keep herself...well, just to keep herself away from here.” She glanced back at the man in the recliner. “Sharon’s a smart girl, a little defiant, maybe, but smart. She’ll do better on her own. Tell her, take care, and—” Grabbing Dixie’s hand, she closed it around the money, a flare of hope in her previously bland face. “Tell my girl to call me sometime. I want to hear how she’s doing.”

“Mrs. Reyes, I can’t take this.”

The woman backed away and began closing the door again.

“Give it to Sharon, okay? Tell her...tell her I love her.”

The door snapped shut.

Dixie unrolled the bills, two twenties and a ten. No problem passing the money along if she got the chance, but finding Sharon Young was not her priority. What if she never found her?

Dixie wanted to shove the fifty dollars under the door, release herself from that responsibility. But the flash of hope she'd seen in the mother's face stopped her. Hope was hard to hold onto at times, and if Dixie carrying the money around for a while gave Claire some small satisfaction, what could it hurt?

Dixie couldn't help wondering if P.I. Hall Paddock had also taken money to deliver to Sharon.

## CHAPTER 29

A phone call to Paddock's number told Dixie the investigator was still not available. As she pushed Claire's fifty dollars into her pocket, her fingers touched a card already there. She pulled it out.

### FARLEY SHORT IMPORT/EXPORT

She was wearing the same jeans she'd had on Friday night, when she and Parker visited Slice's Tavern and Deli. Farley had seemed agitated that night, trying to tell her something that, in his whiskey fog, refused to take shape. "Artichokes," he'd said. "James Carver's artichokes."

Knowing now that James Carver Gray was Astin's and Carra Lynne's father, who'd vanished ten years before his wife committed suicide and his daughter pulled her own vanishing act, Dixie suddenly had an intense interest in speaking to Farley again. Why would he have been so determined to tell Dixie about James Carver unless he had seen Carra Lynne, recognized the girl despite her skinhead getup, and overheard Dixie asking about her?

Dixie slid into the driver's seat and used Parker's mobile phone to call the number on Farley's card. It rang six times.

"Yes?" His oboe voice trilled with impatience.

"Farley, this is Dixie Flannigan."

A hesitation. "Oh, yes, from the Evercamps' party."

"Could I drop by and talk with you for a few minutes?"

"That would be nice. I don't get nearly as many visitors as I'd like. But I'm all packed up to go fishing before this fine morning turns foul."

Dixie looked at the western sky, where dark clouds had gathered. "I won't take much of your time, I promise."

"Well, now, I suppose we could chat while I load the boat, if you'll meet me at the yacht basin." He gave her directions and a slip number.

According to the dash clock, Dixie'd been gone forty-seven minutes. She could count on Parker copping zees for another hour, long enough to exchange a few words with the former importer and still have time to pick up breakfast. Maybe.

Shoving the Cadillac in gear, she sped back toward Broadway then headed west. This would be a good time to have Parker along, with his intimate knowledge of the yacht basin. A rabbit's warren of streets truncated abruptly as land ended and water began. Despite Farley's directions, she dead-ended twice and had to retrace her route, but found the slip with less trouble than she expected and spied Farley loading a modest-sized fishing boat. He looked spry this morning, vital, and somewhat younger in khaki shorts and white crew-neck shirt.

A brown pelican perched on the boat's bow. Dixie had never seen one so close in. When a horn sounded sharply nearby, the bird lurched into the air, made a lazy circle, sharing the sky with a dozen gulls, then resumed its perch at the front of the boat.

Dixie called to Farley and waved.

"Ms. Flannigan, I'm very glad to see you." He paused his work long enough to shake hands. "Welcome to the Spunky Mackerel. Plenty of room to sit while I finish loading."

Waves slapped the side of the hull, making it squeak and groan.

"Thanks, but I'll just stand here on the dock."

"Coffee!" He hustled to the bow and scooped up a Thermos. "I have some Styro cups here somewhere."

"I don't want to hold you up," Dixie called. "Just a few questions." Watching the sway caused by the wake of another boat shoving off was already making her queasy.

He returned carrying a Styrofoam cup filled with steaming black coffee. It smelled delicious in the balmy morning.

"The Mackerel's not as creaky as she might sound, I promise you."

"She looks sturdy."

"Polyester!" He patted the boat's side as Dixie often patted Mud. "That's the secret. Polyester and epoxy over steel plates. Absorbs ten times the energy of fiberglass. I built this lady myself, all nineteen feet. Smack her hull with a *sledgehammer* and she would not even dent."

Dixie smiled at his enthusiasm. Quite a feat, building a boat. "She's beautiful. Farley—"

"A Swede! That's where I learned the polyester secret. Planned on sailing all the way to the end of South America one day." He gazed wistfully seaward. "But today I'm going to catch a big fish."

"Farley, the night we met at Slice's—"

"Bull reds—have you seen a bull redfish? They're biting this morning."

"No—"

"Beautiful golden bronze, deep red spot on the tail. I caught a fifty-pounder once. Hard fighters, the bull reds. You should come along, have some fun while we talk. How's your coffee?"

"Perfect." She sipped it. "I appreciate the offer, Farley. Maybe some other time. Friday night, you spoke of James Carver. I didn't know the name then, but I believe now you meant James Carver Gray, Astin's father."

Farley's smile faded. He turned away from her and lifted a small ice chest.

"You mentioned he had boxes of artichokes and smoked oysters on the dock, and you told him to move them." At least, that's what she'd pieced together from the drunken comments.

Farley positioned the ice chest in the boat. "James Carver was a good friend until the day before he vanished. I'm afraid we had a falling out."

"About the boxes?"

"More or less." He continued working with his back to her. "Difficult days. Gray Imports was foundering, my own company not doing so well, either. But wine sales kept mine afloat."

“Gray Imports didn’t deal in wine?” Garwood had mentioned insulating the storage room, but that would’ve been after Astin’s father vanished.

“James Carver?” Farley turned to face her. “Not to talk ill, but James Carver would agree if he were standing here, he never was a decisive person. Wine, as you probably know, requires special handling. Neither of us was equipped. The yuppies were driving BMWs and drinking vino by the gallon. I seized the opportunity while my friend was still making up his mind.”

“You were expecting a load of wine that day?”

“My first purchase. Lots of activity that day. Big loads coming in for big companies. One area was set aside for smaller cargos. James Carver received a special shipment, just a few boxes on a pallet, really, from a captain on one of the Mediterranean cargos. My wine was to be offloaded at that same spot.”

“And the next day he vanished?”

The brown pelican rose into the sky again, folded his wings like a sleek paper airplane, and dove beneath the water’s surface. Fishing for his breakfast, Dixie figured.

Solemnly, Farley averted his faded blue eyes and turned to hoist an Igloo collar marked LUNCH.

“My last words to my friend were hateful. Always felt badly about that. The newspapers did not report him missing for almost a week. Usually, we would bump into each other once or twice daily, but I never laid eyes on the man after we argued.”

The pelican resurfaced, but without the fish.

“Farley, do you have any idea where he went? Or why?” Six years old, Carra Lynne was at a tender age to lose a father.

“I always wondered. James Carver was a gentle soul, but stubborn, and not a very good businessman. Gray Imports had been around since the late eighteen hundreds.” Farley stood and scratched his sparse hair, surveying the remaining items to be loaded. “An only child, he was naturally expected to take over when his own father passed on—barely forty. Heart attack. Quite a burden to leave on a son who’d rather be baiting hooks.”

“Then you think he left to escape the business problems.” A gull swooped past, letting out a raucous cry. “Was the company heavily indebted?”

Farley hoisted another cooler, this one marked BAIT. The brown pelican continued diving and coming up empty, gulls squawking all around him.

“James Carver didn’t go around with his hand out, if that’s what you think. I imagine he believed he’d let his wife and children down, though, living closer to the bone every year. The Grays were once as wealthy and respected as any family in Galveston, except possibly the Moodys and the Maceos.”

“Was he a gambler?” Like father like daughter?

“Oh, no. Merely incompetent. Fortunately, the boy Astin inherited the family drive. Started helping out when he was just a lad. Later, after James Carver left, Astin and his uncle made the company profitable again.” Farley made a tsk-tsk sound with his tongue. “Made changes James Carver would only argue about.”

“Argue with who? Garwood?”

Farley nodded. “My friend did not see eye-to-eye with his brother-in-law. Gray Imports will never measure up to what it once was, mind you, too many big importers now. But Garwood and Astin built it into a respectable little enterprise again.”

The gulls had discovered Farley's bait cooler. They flew close and squawked. A yellow lab ran past Dixie, nearly butting her aside in its enthusiasm, and bounded aboard the Spunky Mackerel, his sudden weight rocking the boat.

"Whoa!" Dixie's coffee spilled over her hand.

"Oh, my." Farley fumbled in his pocket and handed her a clean cotton handkerchief. "Don't mind the pup. He's a neighbor. Vicious birds, those laughing gulls. Scare them away, boy! Good job."

The dog lumbered back for a head scratching while Dixie dried her hand.

"Why don't you come aboard, too?" Farley suggested again. "I need to strap everything down good."

He waved her on and, cautiously, she climbed aboard the boat. Her stomach lurched as the vessel swayed away from the pier. She hated relinquishing control of her surroundings, hated boats because they snatched away her foundation.

"If the Evercamps hadn't moved in to help Astin with the company, Patricia Gray might have sold it during those first difficult years." Farley smiled thinly. "And I might have been the one to buy it."

Interesting.

"Funny," he added, "how time—or fate—tips the scales first one way, then another. Gray Imports is considering buying my business now."

"I thought you'd hired a management company?"

"Their contract is up for renewal, and Garwood's taking a look."

"Garwood, not Astin?"

"Two fish in the same barrel." He shifted a rod and reel to the front of the boat and looked around as if checking what else needed buckling down before he shoved off.

"Farley, how well did you know Astin's sister?"

A brilliant smile spread across his bony face. "Oh, she was a pipper, that one, and pretty as a rosebud. She sure did enjoy the Gulf. James Carver often brought her along when we went fishing, and later, I took her out alone a few times. Wouldn't handle a rod, but would work a hard day's labor for an hour or two on the water. Each time we brought the boat in together, she would clean it. As payment, she said."

"How old was she?"

"Oh, just a mite, really. Twelve, perhaps. An inquisitive child—I would spin sea myths and Carra Lynne snapped on those stories like a hungry sea trout."

Farley's smile faded abruptly. He shook his head and buckled the last cooler to the ship's hull.

Everything was loaded. Dixie hadn't learned anything particularly useful, but she felt she might if she could just keep him talking.

"Farley," she shouted over a sudden barrage of bird shrieks, "Carra Lynne has been gone since the day her mother died. Did you hear any gossip back then, any speculation about where she went?"

He was in the cockpit now, readying the engine. "I do not repeat gossip, Ms. Flannigan."

"Even if it would help James Carver's daughter?" Help her into a jail cell, maybe, but hey, better than a longer prison term down the way.

Once again, Farley took awhile to answer. "I heard her play once, a concert at the junior high school, my own son on drums and not particularly happy about it. Carra

Lynne was a star that night, playing a duet with her teacher. Not to knock any shine off Alicia Evercamp, but her cousin was the real talent in that family. Took after her mother. Saddened me to hear she had run off with that other girl. A bucket of trouble, that one.”

Farley reached for the starter key, and Dixie knew the engine roar would put an end to their conversation.

“What sort of myths?” she asked desperately, as he turned the key. The brown pelican rose into the sky in preparation for another dive.

“She liked the Siren legends,” Farley shouted. “Stay aboard. Help me catch a big fish.”

Dixie smiled, swallowed the remainder of her coffee, and pumped his hand goodbye.

Back on firm ground, she watched him maneuver out of the slip and head for deep water. The Sirens were mermaids, weren’t they? Who beckoned sailors onto treacherous rocks?

The pelican burst from the water, victorious at last, a fish dangling over the edge of his beak. Rising, he tossed his head back and flipped the fish into the air to fall into his deserving gullet. Before he could snap his bill shut, a laughing gull swooped by and snatched the fish.

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