

CHAPTER 30

In Parker's book, mornings ought to begin at noon. He reached across the bed for Dixie.

Gone.

He felt the old familiar agony, the one he awoke with every morning after their separation.

The sweet scent of her clung to his bed sheets.

Drawing her pillow to his chest, he buried his face in it. Anxiety lessened. No sounds of movement in the house. He was alone. Took Mud out for a run, Parker figured.

His head felt thick. His mouth tasted foul and dry. Bubbly wine always gave him a hangover. A cool shower and a hot breakfast would put him in shape quick enough. He wished every ache was as easy to fade.

Soaping his hairy chest, he thought about their evening at the Evercamps' and the night before at Slice's. It'd been fun poking around, sleuthing. At last he'd felt a small part of Dixie's life. He could see why she got all caught up in helping people. Like Astin's sister, father taking a hike, then the mother offing herself—not quiet like, with pills, but in full tragedy. No wonder the kid freaked out and ran.

Hell, Parker'd been running for twenty years, with nothing like that in his past. Life on the ranch'd been fine. Just too friggin routine. Seven days a week, same drill. Up at four, feed the animals, then breakfast, and out to the fields. One patch or another always needed turning, sowing, harvesting. One animal or another needed attention. His mom and dad had never been outside Montana, except to attend his college graduation ceremony. Fly out, fly back. Ranching was hard work seven days a week, landscape changing only with the seasons.

From the day in grade school when he opened his geography book and saw all those cities and states and countries, Parker'd knew he had to get out. Staying on the ranch meant giving up the rest of the world. Lucky for him his sister's husband was eager for ranch life. Probably take over once Dad retired. Or passed on.

Could've done without all that talk of death last night. But it'd sure put Dixie in a loving mood. Parker never considered himself an expert with women, but he'd swear Dixie threw all the energy and salt and obsession she usually reserved for pursuing bad guys into their lovemaking. There in his oversized bed, the Lorenz mural behind them, saucy and suggestive, starlight streaming through the wide patio doors, Dixie's fierce passion had driven them both. Time after time finding each other in the dark, amazed that each coupling only got better.

And now, morning.

Beyond the bathroom door, which he'd left open, he heard the heavy tread of Mud's paws.

"Hustle your bones," Dixie called. "We have eggs, bacon, hash browns, seven-grain pancakes. Let's eat while it's hot."

Maybe it was her voice, or maybe it was the warm soapy water, but suddenly he had a very stiff problem to attend before he could get his clothes on. Sex was so damned

addictive. Finished soaping, he turned the water on cold and let it needle away any overt thoughts of coaxing Dixie back into bed for a tumble. She'd never buy it.

Only recently had they begun sleeping together again. Never two nights in a row, until this weekend. He'd wanted to take it slow. Real slow. Breaking up once had hurt like hell. No way was he eager to go through that again. He kept the tender part of his feelings tucked away, while testing the water with Dixie one toe at a time. Gussed she was doing the same. Treating this whole relationship like a newborn foal, fragile. Being especially thoughtful with each other, for the most part. He suspected that's why she'd wanted his help this weekend.

Toweled off, he pulled on shorts and a t-shirt and found breakfast laid out at the small kitchen table, coffee steaming.

And Dixie on the phone again.

"Carra Lynne's grandmother in Oakbridge," she told him, dropping the receiver into its cradle. "Said she got the call from Garwood that Carra Lynne might be headed there, but she never showed up."

"Evercamp told us that last night."

"Never hurts to verify."

As they ate, she seemed too restless to sit, pacing to look out at the beach, returning to grab another bite. She related her early morning visits with Sharon Young's mother and Farley Short.

"You were at the yacht basin?" He couldn't seem to get her near the place.

Standing, she spread a pancake with raspberry jam and rolled it up to eat as she paced. "Farley said Carra Lynne loved the Gulf, yet she seems to have spent four years inland."

"I love the mountains, but I haven't been close enough to climb one in a while."

"Right. But if you had a chance to visit Montana, where would you stay?"

"On the ranch. Stop off with the folks awhile. Drop in on my sisters and brother, the ones who didn't move on like I did."

"Yet Carra Lynne was in town more than twenty-four hours without seeing her family." She picked up the snapshot of Cara Lynne and Heidi that Valerie had given them last night. "Either she came for some other reason—"

"Or we scared her off?" Hadn't they tread this ground already?

"She *is* running from the law."

"You said she might not have ripped off that store in Tulip."

"I said Tom Rich might've reported more merchandise missing than was actually stolen. She's still a thief, Parker. I'm betting that coming back here is a sign Carra Lynne wants to straighten out her life."

"And Ryan's thirty-thousand?"

Dixie smiled wickedly. "Oh, I wouldn't dream of letting Tom Rich keep that reward money he's offered. It's safe in escrow, and Carra Lynne will have to go through the system, own up to whatever she's done." She stared sadly at the photograph. "But now I can't help wondering what made her run in the first place."

CHAPTER 31

Cadillac Jane and Cadillac Joe...

The man and woman Carra Lynne had been following parked the Cadillac in front of a short strip of offices.

Why are you snooping? What do you know?

How had they known she'd come to Galveston?

How had they tracked her to Uncle Gar's house?

Sheldon the snitch?

Dead in a ditch, if she learned he'd ratted her out.

A two-wheel dolly stacked with boxes stood near a van parked at Dawson Delivery. Carra Lynne watched the driver enter Laurie's Dog Grooming shop. Through the window, she saw him flapping his jaw with a woman trimming a Scottie's toenails, looking in no hurry to leave.

Carra wanted an up-close on this pair Tom Rich had sicced on her. She grabbed the two-wheeler and pushed it past them. In the khaki shorts, green pullover, and ball cap she wore today, anyone would take her for Dawson Delivery, as long as she acted the part. Push, push. A wheel squeaked.

The man opened the car door for the woman.

Slowing the two-wheeler, Carra Lynne checked them out...*Cadillac Joe, Cadillac Jane...* and realized the woman was much smaller than her voice. From upstairs, listening through the air vent, she'd sounded powerful, interrupting Uncle Gar's tedious monologues.

Uncle Gar telling this couple about a detective following her and Sharon. Talking and talking about the detective, but not about...

Grovemont.

Carra Lynne winced and pushed faster, the squeaky wheel like glass shards shredding her thoughts.

Now the woman stood beside the open car door. The man brushed a hand over her dark hair.

Wrong!

Carra Lynne's mother had blonde hair, but she was small like this woman, not much older, and Cara had seen the gnome brush her hair back with that same intimacy.

Wrong!

Her mother had climbed the stairs to the carriage house.

The gnome following.

Wrong, wrong, wrong!

All the nap-time disciplines, all the closet horrors, Carra Lynne had swallowed those back, never breathing a word, keeping her mother ignorant and safe.

Had her mother known all along?

The gnome with her own mother—how much wronger could the world be?

Carra Lynne, fifteen and boys sniffing around, but she'd shrugged them off, uninterested.

But why be right?

Why be right at all?

Bring on the boys, short, fat, tall, skinny.

Carra Lynne flirting, rubbing, teasing, then turning the horny boys away. Never going *all* the way.

Then she met Sharon the Wild. Sharon the Temptress. Sharon the Princess Prick Tease of the South.

Together they took on older men. "Get 'em drunk, grab their wallets, and toss the perverts back on the street," Sharon instructed.

Like the Sirens enchanting sailors to smash their ships on rocks.

Her mother hadn't read that story from the big fairy tale book. But Carra Lynne was a fast learner, seeing her mother walk up those stairs...

Walk up those stairs...

Up those stairs.

Punishing her.

But then came Leon the Unlucky, stumbling into her mother's blood bath...

Blood everywhere.

...and the corpse...and Sharon yelling "run!"

Running, running, endless running.

Grovesmont, Georgia.

A cozy bathroom, makeup spread all around the tiny sink, Madonna belting out "Borderline" on the CD player as they colored each other's eyelids.

Sisters. Carra Lynne had always wanted a big sister. Sharon saying, "I saw some boys doing it in a movie. We cut our thumbs, press them together, and our bloods mingle—"

"Where?"

Sharon scrunched her pretty face. "Where, what?"

"Where does our blood mingle?"

"Yours mixes with mine, mine mixes with yours."

"On our thumbs, right? It mixes on our thumbs and we wash it off. It doesn't change anything. To really mix our bloods, become blood sisters, we'd need a transfusion."

"God, you're weird! If you don't want to do it—"

"I do!" She hugged Sharon, feeling contrite, wanting to be blood sisters, even if it was a silly kids' game. Even if it was only symbolic.

"Then go out rolling with Band-Aids on our thumbs?" Sharon hugged Carra, rubbing her back. Her voice softened. "Naw, we'll do it later, just before we go to sleep."

Later, at the tavern, Carra Lynne excited, having fun, meeting a cute hunk who seemed nice. She hadn't realized Sharon was striking out with her mark. Back in the motel room, Sharon loud and accusing, dark crescents of anger below her eyes.

"Pushing your tits in that dork's face. Thought any minute you'd hump right there in the bar."

"That was the idea. Get 'em hot, get 'em horny."

“Liking it wasn’t part of the idea.” Bitching at her even as they stripped off their slut suits, loud, shouting it to the thin walls.

“He was fun, okay?”

“Fun? He was *fun*?”

“Can’t see why they all have to be old and ugly.”

Arguing as their heads hit the pillows, Sharon still pissed.

“Get smart, kid. Men get their fun in two ways. Punching you or poking you.”

“Okay! Got it, *sis*!” Carra Lynne swinging off the bed. “I’m going to take a shower. See if you can be asleep when I get back!” Stomping away to the bathroom, furious. Turning on the shower, waiting for the water to warm up, then slinking back to apologize, wanting to be blood sisters, and—

Blood.

Gobbets of blood. The box knife slicing Sharon’s throat. So fast. How did it happen so fast?

Carra Lynne running barefoot through the bathroom steam, climbing out the tiny vent window, running, running...

Squeak. The two-wheeler bounced over a curb. Wincing at the sound, Carra Lynne pushed faster.

Now here were these two snoops—

Cadillac Joe, Cadillac Jane, stay out of my way.

Am I insane?

Was she? Sometimes Carra Lynne wondered.

She abandoned the two-wheeler around the corner and watched the pretty couple enter an office.

No need to follow any longer. She knew where they lived.

CHAPTER 32

Dixie waited until Parker slowed the Cadillac beside the blue and beige curb tiles before dialing Hall Paddock's number. Activity had picked up in the tiny business complex, especially for a Sunday. A Dawson Delivery truck stood ready to be loaded with packages. ABC Printing was closed. A woman in the window of Laurie's Dog Grooming was clipping a black Scottie.

Paddock's office looked as stark as ever, but he answered the phone and said he'd be right down.

"Good thing you called," he said, swinging the door open. "I never come downstairs unless I know who's here. Too many creep salesmen."

Younger than Dixie had expected, perhaps thirty-five, Paddock wore his sun-bleached hair swept to the side of his angular features. His blue Dockers and white short-sleeve shirt held crisp laundry creases, and he smelled as if he'd just slapped on some Mennen. His left arm ended at the elbow.

Dixie introduced herself and Parker, then followed the detective to an office off the entry.

The old cliché about detectives kicking dirty socks under the desk and drinking from week-old coffee cups didn't apply to Hall Paddock. Every surface gleamed as if the scrub and polish cloths had barely been tucked away. The blue short-nap carpet stood pert and springy. The room smelled of lemon oil.

"I don't do private investigation work any longer," Paddock said, motioning them to a pair of blue chairs. He took the beige one behind the desk for himself. "Hired on for an insurance company, personal injury surveillance. I'm due to relieve my partner in eighteen minutes, so I can spare about ten."

In Houston it'd take eight minutes just to get to the first traffic jam.

"Thanks, Mr. Paddock. As I said earlier, Garwood—"

"You don't work for Evercamp. I checked. But he gave me the okay to talk to you about the case I handled for him a few years back." Paddock tapped a pale green legal-size folder, about an inch thick and neatly squared with the left corner of his desk.

Dixie hadn't noticed it before because the stump of his left arm hung there, and she wanted to avoid staring. Now her gaze went instantly from the folder to the stump.

He didn't miss the glance.

"Caught it in an extrusion mold, a machine that sucks hot melted polystyrene in one end and shoots plastic bottles out the other. New model, supposed to be safe. First job out of college, suddenly I'm minus an arm. Collected enough insurance to buy this block of offices."

The speech sounded as if he'd given it a few times.

"Sorry if I —"

“Forget it. People are curious.” He swung a grim smile from Dixie to Parker. “Sometimes I think I should tack the explanation at the end of my name. ‘Hello, I’m Hall Paddock, the guy who’s forearm got molded into a Clorox bottle.’”

“Used to feel that way about my limp,” Parker said. “Caught the leg under a tractor. Now few people even notice. I’m surprised your insurance didn’t pay for a prosthesis.”

Paddock looked down at the roll of flesh that dangled just below his sleeve. “It did. I keep the damn thing upstairs in a drawer. Wear it when I’m going formal.”

The smile broadened to a grin, but the humor didn’t reach his eyes. “Let’s talk about Thelma and Louise. Two young women on a crime-and-crash mission, Sharon Young, Carra Lynne Gray. What’s your interest after all this time?” Using the stump, he angled a two-inch oval desk clock around so he could see it. The clock gave a *tick* as each second passed, much too loud for its size. Everyone Dixie’d met this morning had been rushed.

“A woman I traced from Arkansas,” she said, “going by the name of Marla Gennae Thompson turned out to be Carra Lynne. Last night we discovered her real name and learned that you were hired four years ago to find her. What happened with that?”

Paddock flipped the file folder open, then shut it again and absently stacked a starfish paperweight on top. Shifting his chair sideways, he stared out the window a moment.

“Started off simple enough. The pair stole a car belonging to Justin Reyes, Clair Young’s latest live-in. The girls abandoned the car in Dallas and took up running a badger game.”

Dixie knew the scam but recounted it for Parker’s benefit. “Attract a drunk in a bar, steer him into an alley, leave him minus a wallet and nursing a set of bruised testicles.”

Paddock nodded absently. “Sharon and Carra Lynne ran the game on lesbians, too.”

“Enterprising,” Parker said. “Guess a woman would be easier for two girls to take down.”

“Oh, you could say they were enterprising, all right. Raked in enough to live large for a while, the Sheraton, the Hilton, until their routine drew heat from the Dallas police. Only one woman and two men eventually filed police reports.”

Dixie nodded. Most victims were too embarrassed. “You talked to the victims?”

“Not much help. After Dallas, the girls hit smaller towns, heisting a car in one, dropping it in another. I’m always one step behind, until Grovemont, Georgia. Ninety thousand population. Must’ve decided it was big enough to get lost in. My job was just to locate Carra Lynne, then call Evercamp, which I did. Watched the girls check into a motel off the highway.”

Dixie hadn’t realized the lawyer had come so close to finding his niece. “How’d you lose them again?”

“When I called Evercamp, he was eating dinner with a client. Said he’d come in the next morning, considering the scarcity of flights from Galveston to Grovemont. Said to make sure the girls didn’t leave.”

“Did you have back-up?” One pair of eyes on twenty-four-hour surveillance was pretty much impossible.

Paddock shook his head and glanced at the clock.

Tick. Tick.

“No budget for it. I followed them to a bar downtown, then back to the motel, and watched for another hour. Made sure they were tucked in tight, rented a room close enough to see their car in the parking lot, caught a few hours sack time. Waited for my client to show.”

“But when the two of you knocked on the door, they were already gone.” Dixie knew the feeling.

“Carra Lynne was gone. You mean her uncle didn’t tell you this part?”

Dixie glanced at Parker for confirmation and shook her head.

Paddock swung his chair back toward the desk and stared at the phone. The stump of his arm twitched, as if to reach for the receiver. Paddock didn’t seem to notice. He looked at the clock...*tick, tick*...and heaved a long, disgruntled sigh, his eyes focusing on Dixie as if gauging how much to trust her. “Part of my deal with Evercamp was that neither of us would talk about this. Ever.”

He swung his penetrating gaze to Parker. “On surveillance, you need relief watch, right? Like my partner now, waiting for me to spell him. If Evercamp had paid enough to engage relief back then, a partner might’ve seen something useful while I was cooped. Could’ve stopped what happened later. Maybe. Or at least kept a bead on Carra Lynne.”

“What did happen?” The damn clock suddenly sounded as loud as a drum beat.

Paddock clamped his bottom lip between his teeth, as if uncertain whether to spill the secret he’d obviously kept for four years.

Finally, he sighed again. “I was never comfortable keeping my mouth zipped all this time. Withholding evidence. Could’ve burned me good if anybody found out. But zipping it turned out to be easy, because nobody asked. Nobody but Evercamp knew I was there.”

Tick, tick. Dixie was ready to yank the clock off the desk and pitch it through a window.

“Be my word against his if the cops come into this now. I have a copy of his letter that arrived with my goodbye check, telling me to leave all the “disclosure” details to him, absolving me of all responsibility. Don’t know how legal that is, but I never turned in a written report. Every note is still in that file.” He nodded to the folder.

Shit. Was he ever going to come to the point?

“You said Evercamp didn’t fly to Grovemont,” Dixie prompted.

“Came down with a sudden gastric disorder, something he ate. Told me to hang close, keep him posted. I watched the girls’ door till past noon the next day. No one came out or went in. Finally, I began to wonder if I’d been made, if they’d skipped out while I was sleeping. Car still in the parking lot—thought sure they were in for the night—and I’d only slept about four hours. I knock on the door, get no answer. I’m not much good with lock picks, but I have this thing like a gun—”

“Lockaid Tool.” Dixie wasn’t much good with picks, either.

“Yeah. Anyway, the door locks were key-operated, not the electronic cards used at bigger hotels. Thought I’d check around, see if they’d left anything inside. Felt like a real dweeb losing them after taking two months to pick up their trail.”

He stepped over to a water cooler. “Would you like a drink? My throat gets dry.”

Dixie and Parker both said no thanks, and Paddock dribbled himself a cupful, one-handed. He drained it, then did the lip-clamp thing again, scowling.

“You understand, this part goes no further than my office. I don’t even like thinking about it.” His weak smile was almost a grimace. “Bet you can tell.”

Dixie nodded, apprehension suddenly churning in her gut. “When you opened the door, Carra Lynne was gone. What about Sharon?”

“Sharon wasn’t going anywhere.” He drew another ounce or so of water. “Sort of half on, half off the bed. Looked like she’d been sitting there on the edge when she cut her throat.”

“Cut her own throat?” A shudder rose through Dixie’s spine. “Are you sure?”

“Looked like suicide to me, and the autopsy verified later. One of those utility knives with a razor that slides in and out. Never witnessed a death scene like that. You read about it, blood all over the bed, the walls, think you can handle it. I couldn’t. Went back to my room and threw up.”

“What about Carra Lynne? Did you check the bathroom? The closet?”

Paddock nodded. “Her suitcase was there, a few clothes inside.”

“Didn’t the cops look for her?” Parker asked.

Paddock absently repositioned the clock with his stump. “Should’ve called them myself, but all I could think of was getting out of there. Phoned Evercamp, told him I was off the case. He offered me a bonus to just get on a plane and fly back here. I took it.”

“So Grovemont PD never discovered the girls’ names? Never made the connection with missing persons?”

“Sharon Young was nineteen, so no milk-carton photo. And Carra Lynne’s description fit thousands of teenage runaways.”

Dixie thought of Sharon’s mother, waiting four years to hear from a daughter who was already dead. She wanted to take Claire’s fifty dollars and stuff it down Paddock’s throat.

“I kept my notes and the letter from Evercamp in case—well, just in case he ever reneged. Call me a coward, but that job was my last. Maybe it’s time for the file to go in the shredder.”

Nope. Dixie intended to walk out with that case file, even if she had to open up a whole can of Krav Maga whipass.

Tick, tick.

“Four-year-old case.” She shrugged. “Not much interest to you now that you’re in corporate work.”

Paddock nodded emphatically. “Give me simple routine surveillance, a stack of CDs, and a jog along the beach every night so I don’t get hemorrhoids from sitting too much.” He grinned and stood, as if to usher them to the door. “A one-armed man has enough problems without hemorrhoids.”

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