

CHAPTER 33

“There’s notes in that file that could incriminate me as an accessory,” Paddock objected. He stood with his hand on the office doorknob, waiting for Dixie and Parker to leave.

“Accessory to what? You said the Grovemont cops wrote off the case as a suicide.” Dixie moved the brass starfish anchoring the file and flipped open the cover.

“I could be charged for withholding evidence.”

“What evidence? Did you see anyone enter the girls’ motel room?”

“No.” He looked at the clock.

“Did you see anyone leave the girls’ room?”

“I deserted a crime scene without notifying the cops.”

Dixie turned to Parker, using him, hoping he’d pick up her cue. “Past noon, maid might’ve come in minutes after Hall left. He knew the maid would find her.” Using Paddock’s first name. “Did it really matter who notified the cops?”

Frowning, as if weighing the possibilities, Parker shook his head. “Not to Sharon Young, maybe. But Carra Lynne—”

“Did you see Carra Lynne leave?” Dixie asked Paddock.

“No. I told you—”

“So Hall’s clear,” she told Parker. “He didn’t see anything.”

“Could’ve told the local cops what he knew,” Parker argued.

“Tell them what?” She turned back to Paddock. “Did you have any idea where Carra Lynne was headed?”

“Yeah, the grandmother lived in—”

Dixie held up a hand to stop him, then asked Parker, “Did Carra Lynne ever show at her grandmother’s house in Oakbridge?”

Still frowning, Parker shook his head again.

“Did you think Carra Lynne killed Sharon Young?” Dixie asked Paddock.

He shrugged, and removed his hand from the doorknob. “I don’t know. Coupla weird chicks.”

“Self-inflicted death, according to the autopsy.” Dixie pointed at a newspaper clipping in Paddock’s file. She asked Parker, “That’s what counts, right? The autopsy finding?”

Parker nodded, right on cue.

Dixie nodded, too, then turned her most empathetic face toward Paddock. “Hall, did you see *anything* in that room to make you believe the death wasn’t self-inflicted?”

He sighed, his gaze shifting to the ticking clock, then shook his head.

“Sounds like Hall’s clear on that score,” Dixie told Parker. “The real crime is that no one identified Sharon Young’s body.”

“That’s what I mean about telling the cops what he knew,” Parker said, not missing a beat. Dixie could’ve kissed him. “Paddock knew the dead girl was Sharon Young.”

“No getting around that one,” Dixie agreed, tactfully keeping the anger out of her voice. “Sharon’s mother hasn’t heard from her daughter in nearly four years.”

“Be mad as hell if she finds out Paddock knew all along,” Parker said.

“Carra Lynne being in town,” Dixie said, “might open it all up again.”

Paddock stared at the open file. “I saw Mrs. Reyes one day at the supermarket. She spotted me, too, and waved. I pretended not to see. Couldn’t bring myself to talk to her. Got out of there fast as I could.”

“Someone needs to tie up that loose end,” Dixie told him. “Mother clinging to the belief that her daughter’s out in the big world somewhere having a good life.”

Paddock looked pale. The clock ticked its drum beat as Dixie sat silent for a moment.

Finally, she told Parker, “Our job is finding Carra Lynne. There could be a notation in Hall’s file that meant nothing at the time but would help us now that she’s back in Galveston. Should we offer a trade?”

Parker hesitated, glaring at Paddock, and finally nodded.

The PI took a step backwards. “I don’t see—”

“Here’s how it works,” Dixie said. “We’ll handle Sharon’s identification—keeping your name out of it, if we can—in exchange for these notes.” Unblinking, she latched on to Paddock’s cowardly gaze.

She loathed the thought of looking into Claire’s eyes and telling her the worst news a mother could ever hear. She’d gladly pass that task on to the Galveston P.D., if she hadn’t personally witnessed the spark of hope in the woman’s haggard face. Damn that fifty bucks.

CHAPTER 34

In the end, convincing Paddock hadn't been easy, but it hadn't been all that tough, either. He wanted shed of the guilt, and Dixie offered easy absolution.

From the P.I.'s office, Parker drove straight to the Evercamps' house, Dixie skimming Paddock's notes. She intended to press the lawyer for any other important information he'd kept secret. No one was home. Probably glad-handing his way around a Sunday congregation, she figured. Next they stopped at Chateau Lafitte, hoping to catch Astin. He didn't answer their knock.

The Strand, just a few blocks away, was pretty much closed, too, but Dixie was eager to read Paddock's file.

"We could take a ride over to the yacht basin. Read his notes on the deck of that Nautical Bluewater. Sip Mimosas and fool around a little."

"That's at the other end of the island. I want to give Astin a few minutes to wake up and catch him before the brunch crowd arrived." Spying a brick courtyard about halfway between the Railroad Museum on 25th Street and an antique store on 20th, where the historic shopping strip officially ended, she suggested they enjoy the fresh air. They found a bench with a wide view of the Strand and a glimpse of the wharf two blocks away.

Someone had wedged a fistful of green handbills between the slats in the back of the bench. Maybe they planned to return and were using the handbills to claim this seat, but Dixie didn't see anyone who looked likely. She sat down, spreading the file on her lap.

"You were good back there," she said. "Picked up my cues like a pro."

"Move over, Nick Charles."

Fists thrust deep into the pockets of his white deck pants, he paced restlessly behind the bench. Two evenings of sleuthing. Was he already bored? This certainly wasn't the weekend he'd bargained for when he invited her to spend some time at his beach house, just the two of them, languishing on his sunny balcony, splashing through the surf, snuggling between his cool sheets. Seeing the rigid line of his jaw, she knew he was more than a little frustrated. He had been plenty patient, all things considered. Maybe she should toss Paddock's file into the nearest trash can. Had she and Parker barely struggled through one rough patch just for her to drag them into another? He could take his pick of any yummy, bikini-clad woman on the beach. What the hell was wrong with her that she'd risk shoving him in that direction? He just might sail away on that yacht with a more willing partner.

But as he stood with his back to her and his arms crossed, staring toward fishermen's wharf, Dixie scanned the contents list in Paddock's file. She and Parker could plan a lifetime of weekends to spend languishing in his beach house. Carra Lynne was headed for trouble right now. Dixie felt it as surely as she felt the Galveston sun already warming up for a scorcher.

Maybe if she brought Parker more fully into her reasoning, he'd regain his earlier interest. She scooped around on the bench to face him.

"Evercamp knew Sharon was dead. He must've known we'd hear it from Paddock. So, why didn't he tell us last night?"

"Guess he didn't want to incriminate his niece."

"What incrimination? Did he believe Carra Lynne murdered Sharon?"

"How do we know she didn't?"

"Like I said, suicide's not that easy to fake."

"But not impossible."

"No. Paddock's file includes follow-up newspaper reports. Maybe they'll tell us something." A brisk wind threatened to rip pages out of the neatly arranged folder. Dixie slapped a hand over them.

Parker paced again, scowling at the pavement. "Big coincidence, don't you think? Mother cuts her wrists, best friend cuts her throat."

"Huge coincidence. Like Evercamp's sudden gastric disorder."

"Guess you think he faked it, then hopped the next plane for Grovemont. But why would he kill Carra Lynne's friend?"

"Maybe if we took a few minutes to read Paddock's notes—"

"I think you should dump that whole file on the cops and let them handle it."

"After telling Hall Paddock we wouldn't do that?" She wished Parker would stand still so she could stop swiveling her neck, watching him.

"Forget about Paddock. Forget Evercamp and Astin and Carra Lynne. Forget all of them. Murder is—"

"Hold on. We don't know that anybody was murdered."

"Okay. If we stick with your 'suicide is contagious' theory, then Carra Lynne must be the carrier. Any way you look at it, she's dangerous, Dixie."

"Maybe. Or maybe she escaped being the next victim."

Parker stopped pacing and finally looked at her. "You're not going to give this to the cops, are you?"

"I may have to, but not until I read Paddock's file."

He hesitated, then shrugged and leaned against the back of the bench. "Okay, Nora, my love, what's my part in this caper?"

A strong aroma of fresh coffee wafted from a shop on the corner.

"How about getting us a double mocha while I scan these notes?"

"Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am. But I believe Nick and Nora would be sipping martinis about now."

"Nick and Nora would be ten-stepping octogenarians by now, slurping mashed carrots through straws."

He dropped a kiss into her hair and briefly squeezed her shoulder. As he strode away, Dixie leafed through the folder of neatly penned—and explicit—memos. At eight-twelve p.m., Sharon and Carra Lynne checked into a cheap motel. Forty-three minutes later, Paddock photographed them, with a telephoto lens, leaving for what appeared to be a night on the town. Dressed in skirts that scarcely hid the tops of their pantyhose and tanks that showed nipple even from a distance, they exited the motel room and drove away in a late-model Chevy sedan.

Paddock's color surveillance photos were excellent. The girls looked remarkably alike, both sporting short black hair, yards of eyelashes, and reddish black lipstick. Except for the distinctive shape of her ears, Dixie might've needed a magnifying glass to tell which was Carra Lynne. Sharon was also an inch or so taller and fuller in the breasts and hips.

In downtown Grovemont, Paddock had followed the Chevy to a bar—Bridge's Sports Tavern—and photographed the girls going in. After a few minutes, Paddock entered, sat alone, ordered a drink, and watched Carra Lynne play a video game while Sharon flirted with a man at the counter. Carra was an animated player, he noted, cheering when she made a hit, smacking her fist on the table when she missed. Men gathered round, watching, egging her on, making side bets.

Parker reappeared with two tall paper mugs.

"Iced mocha," he announced. "Double espresso, double chocolate, and enough sugar to sweeten our dispositions."

"I'm not in a bad mood." She tugged him down beside her on the bench and exchanged a quick kiss for the drink.

"You will be," he said, easing one of the handbills from between the bench slats, "if you keep banging against brick walls. I can think of a much better use of a fine Sunday—"

"Not too fine. See those clouds?"

"Passing through." He used the handbill to swipe away a spill down the side of his coffee cup and nodded toward the open folder. "Find anything that might speed up this case and salvage a piece of our weekend?"

"Found something interesting." She showed him the photo of Sharon and Carra Lynne. "They looked alike, dressed alike. More than just makeup and hair dye. Posture. Facial expressions. I think Carra Lynne copied her friend's mannerisms."

"Or vice versa."

"Mmmm, maybe." But that didn't feel right.

"Big-sister hero worship?"

"Or a chameleon searching for identity. Look how straight and tall she stands. Exactly like Sharon. When I saw Carra Lynne at the dog track in her skinhead garb, she scuffed along, slump-shouldered, head down. People who knew her in Tulip described a girl-next-door innocence that I didn't see there, nor do I see it in this photograph."

Parker studied the photo. "Four years of running would sure wear a person down."

"What if Carra came home to die like her friend? And like her mother? Possibly even choosing the same bed her mother died in?"

He frowned for a long, gear-grinding moment. "You lost me around that bend."

"Maybe Carra Lynne is surrendering to what she feels is inevitable. It would explain why she hasn't talked with her brother or her uncle. She wouldn't want to clue them in on what she's planning."

"Your suicide gene theory." When she started to object, Parker held up his hand. "Fine, let's run with it. Let's say Carra Lynne's bad luck is seeing two people she cares about off themselves with a razor. Nearly four years later, she surrenders to the same irresistible urge. Why now? Why here? Why not in another seedy motel room?"

"Ritual. She came home to complete the circle of death."

Parker mugged a face. “Seems like you’re making a big leap in logic.”

“Maybe.” But Dixie liked her scenario better than dubbing Carra Lynne a teenage murderer.

A woman on a three-wheeler peddled past, following the trolley tracks along The Strand. In the basket behind her seat rode a rust-colored Spitz dog, his black tongue lolling as he happily panted. As she wheeled past, the Atrium Boutique came alive, interior lights blinking on, a hand appearing in the window to flip the CLOSED sign to OPEN.

Dixie handed Parker the pages she’d finished reading and flipped to another photograph. A shocker. Hall Paddock, apparently, had managed to snap his shutter release before Sharon’s death scene sent his stomach into launch mode. The girl had indeed slumped sideways from a seated position on the bedside. A crescent-shaped bruise marred her skin where she’d landed with her forehead against the bed’s iron foot rail, torso twisted to the right, legs and hips straight, heels on the floor. The utility knife lay in her right hand, fingers still curled loosely around it. Blood had pooled and clotted the bedcovers.

Dixie saw the edge of a small suitcase on the floor behind the bed, overflowing with clothing. Nothing else. Except—

“Look at these pillows,” she told Parker. “Do you see anything?”

“Not much blood on them, if that’s what you mean.”

“The blood obviously spurted the other direction, but what else?”

He took his time. “Both pillows are bunched up, like somebody slept the way I do.”

“*Both* pillows.”

“Which means they went to bed together before Sharon—”

“—decided, for some bizarre reason, to sit up and cut her throat.”

“Sharon and Carra Lynne were arguing at the bar,” Dixie explained as Parker thumbed through Paddock’s notes. “Drinking, quarreling. The man Sharon flirted with left the bar alone, seventeen minutes before the girls. Carra Lynne seemed to be having better luck, winning a few bucks from her new friends.”

“Right here Paddock writes, ‘C.L. picked up her handbag to leave with a man. Late twenties, five-eleven, one-sixty, short brown hair, gray pants, blue shirt. Sharon pulled her aside, appearing angry.’” Parker looked up. “Sounds like Sharon was jealous.”

“As in jealous lover?” He’d struck a note Dixie’d been ignoring.

“A frustrated lesbian relationship could explain Sharon’s suicide.”

Dixie liked it. She gave Parker the folder, stood, and paced, recalling what she’d already read. “Paddock followed them to their room, watched them go in. Twenty minutes—twenty—?”

“Twenty-six minutes.”

“Twenty-six minutes later the lights go out.”

“They’re tucked in,” Parker said, “but still mad.”

“Anger being the flip side of passion.”

“Sharon makes an overture—”

“First time she’s got up the nerve, maybe, or they’ve fooled around but Carra Lynne isn’t as serious about it as Sharon is. She rejects the pass.”

“Had her libido all set for that young hunk back at the bar.”

“Sharon, crushed and miserable, retaliates by killing herself. Choosing the method she knows will hurt Carra Lynne most.”

Parker picked up Paddock’s photo of the crime scene. “Must be a book floating around, *Ninety-Nine Uses for a Utility Knife*. How’d she know where to cut? I can’t shave without a mirror, yet she hits the vein first time. What’re you looking at?”

Dixie peered over Parker’s shoulder. “You’re right. No hesitation cuts.”

“Meaning she didn’t change her mind?”

“Brave girl. Determined and focused.”

“Anger can focus energy real damned quick.”

“Yeah, but there’s another inconsistency.” She pointed to the crescent-shaped bruise on Sharon’s forehead.

“Happened when she hit the bed, didn’t it?”

“Probably. But the round foot rail is too large a curve to make this mark. A flat protruding bolt or knob might be shaped right, but I don’t see anything like that.” She fanned the newspaper articles in the folder. “Paddock kept tabs on the local press coverage, even after he was off Evercamp’s payroll. No mention of a bruise.”

“You’re losing me again.”

“It could’ve been made by a knock-out blow, a ring, maybe, a large ring.” Flat, round and about an inch wide. “Paddock waited another hour, making sure the girls were in for the night before checking into his own room. He would’ve noticed if a man followed them from the bar.”

“Are we back to goddamn murder again?” Parker crushed his cup and lobbed it at a trash can. Hard. Hit the rim and missed.

Watching him stamp over to scoop it up, Dixie wished she could put this case on hold, salvage what remained of their weekend and pick it up again tomorrow. Parker usually spent weekdays at his sales office, even though it wasn’t required, his commissions rarely coming from walk-ins. But Dixie had a date at the Harris County Courthouse tomorrow. And she had a strong feeling that Carra Lynne coming home just in time for her twenty-first birthday was not a coincidence. Her birthday was today.

Deciding to ignore Parker’s irritability, she coaxed, “Stay with me, Nick. We’re just matching all the possibilities to all the facts. The first news clip says the police questioned the bartender and a couple of the regular patrons, but never located the guy Carra Lynne—or rather Franny, according to the bartender—was chummy with.” The girls had registered under the names Frances and Priscilla Gates, sisters.

“Wouldn’t the Grovemont cops have access to missing person’s reports?”

“Sharon was old enough to be on her own, and I didn’t get a sense that Claire had filed a report. Grovemont PD had the crime scene photos of Sharon, but no photograph of her ‘sister’ to match against missing persons, which they *would’ve* had if Paddock had done his civic duty. The descriptions given by people who saw them at the motel and bar were vague. Dark hair, medium build. The false names led nowhere.”

“So they wrote it off as suicide and closed the case.”

“The *Grovemont Gazette* quotes a coroner saying the direction of the cut indicated Sharon had probably been holding the knife that killed her. The only loose end was the disappearance of the ‘sister,’ who was wanted for questioning.”

“Can’t fault the cops,” Parker said. “Two hooker-types drive into town. One offs herself, the other freaks out and splits. Call it as you see it.”

“Why waste taxpayer’s money?” Dixie agreed.

“And Evercamp drops the search for his niece—”

“Like it’s a cherry bomb about to explode in his face.”

A new frown tugged at Parker’s mustache. “In Evercamp’s shoes, guess I might’ve backed off, too.”

“She was seventeen. She’s his niece. If Ryan, a few years from now, fell in with a rough crowd and ran away, how long do you think I’d stick to his trail?”

Parker hooked an arm around her neck. “Till you dropped dead from exhaustion.”

“If he needed help, I’d help him. If he needed a good butt-kicking, I’d help him out there, too. I wouldn’t write him off. Ever.”

“But Evercamp had a nephew here at home who needed help. Astin has fielded one tragedy after another. Father deserts, leaving the family in ruin. So, with his uncle’s help, Astin turns that around. Then his mother kills herself. His sister vanishes.”

Dixie had been thinking about that, too, and praying that Carra Lynne hadn’t come home to deal her brother a new round of misery. “The problems started around the time Garwood and Valerie moved back to Galveston. Came to visit, stayed a lifetime. Even lived at Gray Manor for a few years.”

“Evercamp said they moved in to help his sister manage her finances after James Carver left. Looks to me like he did a damn good job.”

“Did he?”

“You just don’t like him.”

“Already stipulated, your honor.”

The wind knocked over Dixie’s empty container. Parker picked it up and lobbed it at the trash can. Slam dunk.

Dixie grabbed the green handbills before the wind could whip them all away. The flier was similar to the one she’d seen on the counter at Kwik Kash. This one announced the “Lafitteville project” as an agenda item on an upcoming town meeting and featured the island’s favorite pirate standing beside a treasure chest, a curious crab peeking over the mound of gold doubloons. Wondering if Sheldon had done the artwork, Dixie shoved one of the ads into the folder with Paddock’s notes before wedging the others more tightly between the bench slats.

“Murder or suicide,” Parker commented as they walked to the car, “the stuff in that file is nearly four years old. How can it help us find Cara Lynne now?”

“Habits. Who they know, where they go, especially where Cara went from habit. There’s a list here of classmates, teachers, friends—”

“Paddock would’ve questioned those people.”

“His notes are here, but memories can cough up interesting details in four years.”

He looked dejectedly at the clouds gathering in the summer sky like a wad of dirty bandages. “What now, Nora, my love?”

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