

## CHAPTER 36

Up close, the carriage house appeared shabby, its upkeep obviously neglected. Paint had been applied without stripping off the old scale. Some of the bricks needed new mortar.

The skinny staircase they climbed flanked the far side, away from the manor house and near the gate Dixie and Parker had entered. Had Carra Lynne climbed these stairs the day she and Sharon vanished? If so, was she bent on a sexual tryst, as Astin suggested? Or seeking her mother?

Dixie could imagine the kids playing here, chasing each other up and down the stairs. Jumping off, Superman and Wonder Woman capes tied around their necks. Astin, at fourteen, would've too big to play make-believe with his sister, especially considering his gardening responsibilities. Maybe Carra Lynne had other playmates.

"I've been trying to put together a picture of your sister's usual day," she told Astin. "What she liked to do. Who she spent time with, and where. Hobbies. Favorite hangouts."

"Before she became an impossible teenager, I might have said, 'look for Carra Lynne anywhere there's water.' Beach, harbor, bay. A human divining rod. Turn your back and she'd run to the surf. But shortly before my sister started high school, she changed."

"Changed how?" Parker asked.

"Became secretive, unmanageable. I failed to influence her at all, and Mother turned a blind eye to Carra Lynne's problems. Skipping classes, staying out all hours. Then she met Sharon Young." He bit down on the name. "And all of Carra Lynne's bad habits quadrupled."

Sharon, dead, was not going to help them find Carra Lynne, and Dixie wanted to save the "why didn't you tell us" discussion for Astin's uncle. "There had to be someone else she trusted. What about Sheldon?"

The banister joggled under Dixie's grasp.

"Sorry." He tested it lightly with his weight. "There's a service elevator at the other end, but it's not in much better condition. I've pumped all the revitalization funds into the main house."

"No problem." Despite the shaky banister, the steps seemed solid enough. Astin obviously hadn't intended to entertain visitors here.

Reaching a landing barely big enough for one person, he opened a wobbly screen door and fitted a key into a simple door lock.

"You mentioned my cousin Sheldon. Lazy, irresponsible and inconsiderate. I never understood him, but it doesn't surprise me that Carra Lynne sought him out the moment she hit town."

The door creaked when he pushed it open, and Dixie had to hold back a giggle. . Shades of haunted houses. Was Patricia's ghost lurking inside to jump out and go "boo"?

Inside, despite more than adequate air conditioning, a musty odor clung to the cool air. Two grime-coated windows allowed thin rays of sunshine to play across the floor. Dixie heard a rustle of paper as something scurried into hiding.

The room was square, with high ceilings and a very narrow hallway opposite the door. Floor-to-ceiling shelves, crowded but orderly, with various products in dusty jars and boxes, covered two walls. Metal file cabinets, a metal desk, and stacks of wooden crates surrounded the windows on the wall facing the street. The third wall, separating this room from whatever lay beyond, held wooden wine racks, empty except for fifteen or twenty bottles. The racks turned the corner into the hallway. A faded green overstuffed armchair and a humpback trunk occupied the remaining floor space, leaving scarcely enough room to walk.

Astin flipped a switch, lighting an overhead bulb.

“My grandfather replaced the antique gas fixtures with electrical, but no one ever got around to installing a proper chandelier in this room.” He brushed at a spot of dust on his white shirt. “In the hundred years our family has been in the shipping business, I don’t believe anyone ever threw away a routing form, cash receipt, or any other document. Now, of course, I’ve computerized all the records.”

A psychic Dixie knew had once told her that the aura of violent death never leaves a house, no matter how hard a person scrubbed. She’d said it wasn’t the stench of decay but the residue of emotions, of sadness, terror, fury, and pain embedding themselves in the walls and floors and cracks. Dixie hadn’t put much stock in what she said at the time, but here, in this carriage house, she could believe death had imprinted itself.

“Is that the trunk with Cara Lynne’s personal items?” Covered with fine leather, aged to a rich patina and finished with hammered brass trim, it appeared to be an heirloom.

He nodded. “Don’t expect to find much in there, though. My sister didn’t squirrel away treasures like some girls. Even as a child, when she grew bored with a toy, she threw it out. She treated clothing the same way. A few books, some sheet music and her school clothes, that’s about it.”

“You said Valerie packed the trunk?”

He sneezed. “Sorry. Dust. Valerie and Heidi. When Carra Lynne first went missing, I looked through her things for some indication of where she’d gone. Maybe you’ll have better luck.”

“An excellent Beaujolais,” Parker said, wiping his finger over a dusty wine bottle. “Has it gone off?”

“Take it with you. I’ve maintained the temperature up here, so I expect you’ll find it still quite enjoyable.”

Parker gestured toward the racks. “An odd place to build wine storage. Why not downstairs, where it’s cooler?”

“At the time, business had fallen off and we’d subleased our warehouse. The garage downstairs was our main storage, filled with merchandise and shipping supplies.” Astin skirted a crate, careful to avoid brushing it with his dark suit pants. “Uncle Gar and I took a big gamble, with no certainty that imported wines would remain popular long enough for us to make a profit. This space wasn’t being used. We bought the racks cheap, and I installed them. Temporary, we told ourselves, until we hit the big time.”

“Did you?” Dixie lifted the trunk lid. “Hit the big time?”

The dank odor that wafted out smelled like Dixie’s clothes after a romp in the Gulf.

“Business turnaround was slow,” Astin said. “We eventually reclaimed our warehouse and added a separate room for cool storage. We’ve taken most of these sample bottles down to the restaurant. It’s time I cleared them all out and shut off the air conditioning up here.”

“Guess you need a wine lover to make you an offer.” Parker smiled, his big friendly salesman smile.

While the men examined the labels and talked price, Dixie sat down in the green chair to carefully remove items from the trunk. The clothes were mostly casual, jeans, shorts, knit tops, swim suits. She lifted them out one by one, then refolded them, imagining Carra Lynne slumming around Galveston, her head full of teenage rebellion. All the jeans were ragged at the hem, where they’d dragged the ground, possibly when she went barefoot or wore flat heels. The knit tops were all black or tan, size small. An oversized white windbreaker, yellowed with use, boasted a slew of bird patches. A tattered, well-thumbed volume titled *Birds of the Texas Coast*, bore hand-printed notations of sightings. The most recent was an American Oystercatcher sighted weeks before Carra Lynne’s disappearance.

Beneath all the ordinary clothes, Dixie found a copper-colored sequined stretch top, low cut with wide straps, a shiny black silk skirt, and black sequined shoes with three-inch spike heels. A fuck-me outfit. Sharon’s influence?

A fist-sized bundle of lottery scratch-offs topped two science fiction paperback novels and an old library copy of *Mary Poppins*. Dixie tried to remember how old she’d been when the enchanting nanny captured her own imagination. Fourth grade? Fifth? She’d dreamed of owning a magical Mary Poppins umbrella that could fly her away from the men her mother brought home. Until her adoption by the Flannigans at age twelve, she’d slept many a night in her closet, under her bed, or outdoors to avoid drunken visitors with grabby hands. She wondered now what had prompted Carra Lynne, who threw away toys as soon as they bored her, to treasure a story about a nanny who could fly. What did Carra Lynne yearn to escape?

The last book in the stack must’ve dated even earlier in the girl’s childhood. Large, thick, heavy and enclosed in its own leather dust box, it was titled *Songs, Poems and Stories for All Time*. Dixie slid the book out and thumbed through. “Sing a Song of Sixpence,” “Humpty Dumpty.” Also a C.S. Lewis story and excerpts from *Walden*. The book fell open to “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.” The pages here were riddled with pinholes, as if someone had jabbed it repeatedly. Hating the story but perhaps revering the book too much to rip out the pages?

Dixie flipped to the front fly sheet and found a note in fine, careful script: *To Carra Lynne on her first birthday. We love you, darling. It was signed, Mom and Dad.*

Dixie thumbed through to the end, then returned the book to its leather cover and set it on the floor. She found only a thin sheaf of sheet music, classical pieces by Bach, Handel, Chopin and several by Irving Berlin. No diary, no address book. A pair of shoe boxes held makeup and toiletries, three blue rhinestone buttons collected on a safety pin, and two keys swinging from a green string.

The brass key looked like the one Astin had used to open the carriage house door. The other was an old-fashioned skeleton type. Dixie placed the lids on the shoe boxes and set them in the trunk, then went to the front door and tried the brass key. It worked.

“I imagine the other key fits the rear closet,” Astin said.

Dixie glanced toward the hallway cramped with wine racks. “Back there?”

He nodded and took the key from her. “My father’s effects. Carra Lynne liked to fool around with them.”

“What sort of effects?” Only the most morbid, sentimental or procrastinating soul kept a dead man’s clothing for fourteen years. Dixie itched to look in that closet, but reminded herself to be methodical. Patience Pays Dividends—a sampler her adoptive mother had embroidered hung just above her bathroom door, meant to teach good tooth-brushing and hand-washing habits.

“Dad whittled.” Astin set a bottle of wine in a box that already held several. “Parker, we can use the lift to take these down. I assume you know not to jostle the bottles any more than absolutely necessary, and to keep them out of the heat—”

“Which means going straight home,” Parker said to Dixie. “Hope that’s okay.”

“As soon as we’re through here.” His house was only minutes away. In Galveston, everything was minutes away.

As the men rummaged for more wine crates, Dixie refilled the trunk with Carra Lynne’s things, thinking how pitifully few belongings the girl had acquired in seventeen years. Grabbing the bulky athletic shoes, one in each hand, she realized the left shoe was stiffer than the right one. They were both laced up tight and tied with long loopy bows. Dixie untied the stiff one and peeled back the tongue. A slender bottle had been shoved into the shoe. Around the bottle, a rubber band secured a strip of paper.

Dixie removed the paper. The bottle was cool to her touch, clear glass, a half-inch in diameter, about three inches tall, and filled with a murky liquid. She raised it to the light. A layer of sand settled to the bottom around a trio of miniature seashells. Sea water? She unscrewed the white plastic cap. The water smelled rank, fishy.

A young child who visited the beach but lived inland might treasure such a collection, but Carra Lynne lived within biking distance from the Gulf. Why save water, sand and a few shells she could pick up anytime?

Dixie replaced the top and regarded the *Mary Poppins* book again. Magic umbrella...magic talisman? Kids collect oddities, but Carra Lynne wasn’t in the habit of collecting. A bit of her favorite beach, maybe, for good luck?

Unrolling the paper strip, Dixie saw a column of type that instantly riveted her attention.

And I run,  
flee,  
run wild,  
run free,  
heron wings  
on my feet,  
lifting me  
off the beach,  
out of reach,  
fleet  
as the wind  
in my face,  
racing,  
waves lapping

my toes—  
one-two-three-four-five—  
all there.  
Still alive.  
Count fast  
And he won't come.  
My thighs pump  
thru the mist  
like tires,  
quick & round,  
eating up the ground.  
Then I see her face  
in the clouds,  
raindrops,  
sad drops,  
from her empty eyes,  
and the wings tumble  
from my heels  
like rocks,  
sharp rocks,  
closet rocks,  
don't fall, don't fall.  
One-two-buckle-my-shoe,  
count fast and  
he won't come.  
He always comes,  
wicked tight mouth  
frowning.  
Sly.  
Stand on the rocks,  
don't fall.  
Don't cry.  
Someday I'll open  
that mouth  
With a rock.

## CHAPTER 37

Carra Lynne might have copied the poem from a book, but Dixie didn't think so. It was too much like the she'd found on the beach. Dixie released a breath that had caught in her lungs as she read the poem again. The girl had an interesting way of expressing her thoughts. *One-two-buckle my shoe.*

*She had a system,* Tom Rich had said, *involving ones, twos and nursery rhymes.*

How old was Carra Lynne when she wrote this poem? It was simple in structure, with simple words, but the meaning ran deep. A troubled girl of ten could have penned it. Or twelve. Or seventeen.

Was Carra Lynne's purpose in returning to her hometown to finally "open that mouth with a rock"? And who was the owner of that "wicked tight mouth?"

Dixie regarded Parker and Astin filling boxes with wine, paying her no mind. Carra Lynne had hidden the bottle and poem in that shoe to keep it from prying eyes. Living in a house filled with eyes—mother, father, brother, uncle, aunt, cousin—whose did she fear? All of them?

Wanting time alone with the poem to analyze the words, Dixie rewound the paper strip, stretched the rubber band—

It snapped. Flew across the room.

Dixie darted a look at Astin, but he hadn't noticed.

She shoved the bottle and paper into her jeans pocket. Then she refilled the trunk and shut the lid.

Champing inside like a racehorse at the starting gate, Dixie tried to concentrate on the remainder of the storage area, thankful that Parker was keeping Astin occupied. Those seashells must've been collected when Carra Lynne was a youngster. What meaning would they have for the teenager who dolled up in a sequined tank top?

She heard the metallic whine of an elevator as Parker and Astin took some of the wine crates downstairs, leaving her alone for the moment. Dixie wished she had an hour or two to comb this entire carriage house.

At seventeen, Carra Lynne had surely seen all these dusty cans and boxes hundreds of times. What brought her up here?

Sex, according to Astin. Yet there was nothing sexy about this place, with its funky smell and cramped quarters and lumpy green chair. But maybe that hadn't mattered as much as the seclusion it offered.

Packaged spices, teas, oils, exotic vegetables and meats crowded the shallow shelves that stretched from the floor to the twelve-foot ceiling. Under with each item, a tattered, yellowed label bore the item name, its country of origin, and an order number. Samples. Below the shelves a few boxes held quantities of the products. One box was marked ARTICHOKES, another OLIVE OIL. Long outdated, Dixie judged, from the rings on the cardboard left by rusted cans.

Farley Short had said James Carver's last shipment before he vanished included artichokes, olive oil, guava juice and smoked oysters. Surely these partially filled crates

couldn't have sat here fourteen years. Could they? No date marked on the shipment, no expiration on the imported cans. Garwood had said that he and Astin took the company in a new direction, but wouldn't they have sold all the goods James Carver ordered? Unless they simply were too absorbed in changing the company's direction.

Then again, in the wake of his father's disappearance, a teenage son would be confused, angry, fearful, certainly not thinking too clearly about a routine shipment of goods.

Dixie set her thoughts on fast-forward. When James Carver vanished, Astin and his uncle installed the wine racks. Then as soon as the wine business paid off, they reclaimed their subleased warehouse and installed wine storage there. When Patricia died and Carra Lynne vanished, this room must have looked much the same as now. Astin had stopped using it.

The storage area appeared to take up half the upper floor, which left the remaining half to encompass a bedroom and a locked closet, for which Astin still held the skeleton key Dixie had found.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, Parker and Astin returning.

Dixie skimmed through desk drawers and file cabinets, but nothing impressed her, except a variety of spiders big and small. Fly and beetle carcasses littered the floor, crunching under Dixie's boots.

The front door creaked.

Opening another drawer, Dixie found a box of utility knives, yellow handled, with snap-off blades, like the one Astin had used in the garden. These were rusted.

As soon as he entered the room, Astin sneezed and looked pointedly at his watch, which he wore as nurses often did, on the inside of his wrist. To prevent limbs and thorns from scratching it while he worked in the yard?

Parker resumed reading wine labels, but Dixie doubted he could keep Astin's attention much longer.

"You mentioned a bed," Dixie said, brushing dust off her hands.

Astin eyed the cramped hallway. "Back that way. But you won't find anything useful in there. The cleaning people—"

"May have missed something." Dixie restated her previous suggestion, "If you want to check on your staff, I promise to leave the room exactly as I find it."

He glanced again at his watch and swiped his blond hair back from where it had fallen across his forehead.

"I do need to get back, but I can spare a few more minutes, in case you have questions." Moving into the hallway, he added, "I built the wine racks to slide right across the doorway. The room wasn't used. At least, I didn't realize it was being used."

Through a skinny opening, Dixie saw a powder room. "You'll need to squeeze on past me," Astin said, "So that I can slide the door open."

Dixie eased by.

Astin rolled an empty rack outward, revealing a room beyond, much dimmer than the one they'd come from. Dixie could see a four-poster bed and a standing wardrobe.

"Where's the light switch?"

"Beside the door, on your left." Astin remained in the hallway. "I don't like going in there. Hope you don't mind."

She flipped the switch and a lamp came on beside the bed. A ruby glass shade turned the light rosy, the room decadent, and Dixie was swept by déjà vu. Her mother's bedroom had looked much like this one, all fringe and tassels and satin pillows.

"You said this was the maid's quarters?"

"Yes, until the early 1980s. My father dismissed the gardener first, then a year or two later we stopped having a live-in maid."

The furnishings, in Dixie's unqualified opinion, were half the caliber of the antique pieces she'd seen inside the restaurant. The bedspread and draperies were red velvet. She couldn't imagine a maid sleeping in this gaudy room, unless she also earned horizontal income.

"Was the room refurbished? This bedding appears...um...newer than the 1980s."

Astin frowned, puzzled. "Mother may have considered renting the room to boarders for a while. As I said, Carra Lynne and her trashy girlfriend were bringing men up here."

Would Patricia Gray have decorated the room like a cathouse for a boarder? Or for her daughter's use? Not very damn likely.

The heavy draperies would prevent light from escaping and would also dampen any sound. With the private entrance located away from the main house, someone could run a full-scale prostitution racket from this room without anyone in the manor knowing about it.

Dixie's cell phone vibrated at her waist. She glanced at the number—Ryan—and let voice mail take it.

"What made you think Sharon and your sister used this room for sex, other than the condom you found?"

Astin looked down at the keys Dixie had taken from the trunk, running the green string across his thumb.

"As you might notice," he said, "there's not quite the accumulation of dust here as in the outer room. I certainly never had time to dust. And on the occasions I worked in the storage area, I often smelled perfume."

Another stab of déjà vu—Shalimar. Dixie's birth mother had favored the heavy vanilla-based scent, and Carla Jean had a knack for attracting men like an open jelly jar attracts flies. One whiff of that perfume now could make Dixie gag.

She sniffed the stale air, smelled only the dry must, and released a rusted catch on the wardrobe. A woman's dressing gown hung inside, black lace.

Filling the narrow doorway, Astin swept the hair off his forehead again and cleared his throat.

"If you find my sister, is there any chance we could avoid turning her over to the police?"

Dixie studied his tortured features and wished she could say what he wanted to hear. That Carra Lynne was a troubled young woman was becoming more and more apparent. And Dixie wanted to help her. But sometimes help had hard edges.

**Read the next chapter.**

**Purchase the book.**