

## CHAPTER 43

“He’s eccentric,” Parker said, talking about Taz, the artist who painted the seawall mural.

Dixie had caught glimpses of it, fish and sand crabs in bright colors. “I thought that was graffiti. Taggers gone wild.”

They stood outside Curtis Todd’s house, both doors open on the Cadillac, with the air conditioner going to flush out the heat.

“Might’ve started as graffiti,” Parker admitted. “Now it’s a landmark. Guess it was easier to hire Taz than to him quit.”

“It’s gaudy.”

“It’s fun!”

They slid inside the car and Parker aimed it toward Seawall Boulevard.

“He can’t still be painting around Steward Beach,” Dixie said. “That part’s been finished a while.”

“We have to start somewhere. Why were you asking Curtis Todd about Lafitteville? Isn’t that the theme park we saw advertised?”

“It seems Sheldon’s involved.” She told him about Ryan’s ‘hot lead,’ finding the Lafitteville website with Sheldon’s name listed and Voodoo Daddy’s Swamp Hut as the meeting place.

Parker changed lanes to turn at the traffic light ahead. “As a matter of fact, I’ve seen Taz at Voodoo Daddy’s.”

“Ought to be a million tourists there today. And two eccentric painters. Should be as easy as finding mouse eggs.”



People layered the beach like a human carpet, walking, sunning, swimming. They lined up to ride the Water Coaster and stood six deep to buy food and drinks at Voodoo Daddy’s.

Seventeen feet above the sand, every available parking place along the seawall had a car wedged in. On the wide sidewalk, Dixie and Parker had to keep moving or risk being run down by skateboards and three-wheelers. The sun beat them from all directions, shining down, bouncing up from the concrete, glancing off the water. After walking four blocks from the car Dixie felt sweat sliding down her neck and sides. She envied the swimmers.

“In this crowd, we’d need a dozen clones to find Taz,” she grumbled. “What does he look like?”

“Gray hair. Dark suntan.”

“That describes at least forty percent of the people down there. The other sixty percent have breasts. Could you be more specific?”

“Skinny. Usually wears a Speedo and sandals. Didn’t notice any tattoos, birthmarks—”

“Skinny helps.” Most of the gray-hairs on the beach would tip the scale in the high numbers. “How old?”

“Sixties. Looks younger until you get close. Rides a bike sometimes.”

They stayed on the seawall, walking east until they ran out of populated beach, then retracing their steps and moving farther west, continuously scanning the crowd and asking street vendors if they’d seen Taz. Everyone seemed to know him, but no one had seen him. Sixty-seven minutes after they started Dixie was ready to cry “uncle.” Her T-shirt was soaked. Sweat trickled down her face, stinging her eyes and melting her makeup.

“This is hopeless. We need an address, a phone number. A frozen Margarita and a towel would be nice, too.”

“If the lines have thinned out at Voodoo Daddy’s, we could squeeze in. *Or,*” Parker teased, “we could call it quits for today. That Nautical has a brand new fully stocked bar. Plenty of awnings for shade. A massage setting on the quad-head shower. Huge, fluffy, thick towels. And yours truly will make you the meanest ‘Rita you ever dropped a lip over.”

“Sweet temptation, Parker. Who did you take lessons from? Satan?”

His smile broadened. “The fridge is stocked, too. Iced snow crab, romaine salad with mandarin oranges, mushroom-rice pilaf—”

“Stop!” She wasn’t ready yet to pack it in, but they did need to find some water. Heat exhaustion was no joke. “Maybe Taz has better sense than to lounge on the beach in the hundred-and-five-degree heat of a Sunday afternoon. Maybe he’s hanging out in the Post Office Street bars today, with all the other smart artists.”

Parker looked disappointed, but shrugged it off. “One way to find out.”

He took her arm and made a path through the foot traffic on the sidewalk. They’d just reached the street when Dixie felt a pat on her butt, a walk-by groping.

She whirled on the offender. “Hey!”

People looked her way. Impossible to tell by their innocent smiles which one had groped her.

Then farther ahead, walking like he was going to a fire sale, she spotted a skinny guy tanned to the shade of dark toast, wearing a Speedo and sandals. A bush of gray hair bounced around his shoulders.

“Is that Taz?” she asked Parker.

“That’s him!”

They pushed through the crowd already closing behind the artist.

“Taz, wait up!” Dixie shouted.

The man paused to glance over his shoulder and wave them on, then kept walking.

“Slow down,” she yelled.

He didn’t, but she and Parker barreled through, pissing off a lot of people as they passed. Finally, they caught up with him. Dixie rattled off their names as she scurried alongside.

“Pleased to know you,” he said without stopping. His long stride and steady pace kept Dixie hopping at double-time. “Are you plugging in?”

Plugging in? What did that mean?

“We’d like to ask you a couple questions. Can we stop and talk a minute?” she asked.

“Talk?” Like it was a foreign word.

“We’re looking for a friend of yours,” Parker said, his long legs easily keeping pace with Taz.

“Sheldon Evercamp,” Dixie added.

“Shel-my-man! What’s he up to?”

“That’s our question,” Dixie said. “When did you see him last?”

“Sheldon’s plugged in. We schemed out the Magic Kingdom on the Sand together. Mouseville comes to Lafitteville.”

To stay abreast, Dixie speeded to a slow jog and tried to make sense of what he’d said.

“You and Sheldon are involved in the proposed theme park?”

“Charlie Tunaville. Supersized pier stretching two blocks wide, a mile out over the Gulf. Big pirate ship. Monster coaster. Funnel cakes supreme.”

“Shrewd concept.” Or a pipe dream. “Where did you and Sheldon talk about this?”

“At the Hub.”

“Voodoo Daddy’s?” Parker asked.

“I bring the people. Shel gets the island’s high holies plugged in, passing around some of that green energy they been collecting.”

“Today?” Dixie pressed.

“Today, yesterday, next month. Time folds and expands.”

Their planning session must’ve convened around a tub of high octane hooch. Maybe the only way to get answers was to *plug in* to Taz’s fantasy.

“High holies?” Dixie asked, glancing at Parker. “What are they?”

“Council. Chamber. Deep pockets.” Taz’s smile showed they’d piqued his interest, finally. “What’s your concession?”

“Parisian Pies,” Parker suggested, taking Dixie’s cue. “Latest theme park confection. Better than funnel cakes or Dutch dough.”

“To do the deal, we need to talk to Shel,” Dixie added. “Where can we find him?” They passed a surf shop and Dixie realized they’d walked ten blocks already.

“How much pirate gold you bringing aboard?” Taz asked.

“Enough,” Parker told him. “But we don’t negotiate without Shel.”

“And not on the sidewalk,” Dixie added.

Taz swung a Cheshire Cat grin at Parker, then at Dixie. “You two shine pretty good.”

He kept walking.

“Shit! He’s been toying with us,” she told Parker. “Shining us on.” And drawing them farther and farther from Stewart Beach. Her groper!

“Heard you asking around,” Taz said. “Not about Lafitteville. About Taz.”

“So you let us find you.” She reached over and pinched his butt, digging her nails in.

“Ouch, lady!”

“Payback. Now slow down and talk to us.”

“Can’t walk slow. Puts ants under my skin. Why are you looking for Shel?”

“To commission a painting,” Dixie lied, knowing it was lame but unable to think of anything else. “That’s what he does, right? Paint? Seems like you two could use a fistful of green energy to fund Lafitteville.”

He peered at her suspiciously, obviously trying to decide if she was still shining.

“You think Shel’s that good?”

“I like his style,” Dixie said, packing as much earnest respect into those four words as she could manage. “The painting was supposed to be a birthday gift for my friend here, but when Shel never phoned, I had to blow the surprise.”

“You haven’t seen *my* work. My real work.”

“No,” Parker said. “And my house has more than four blank walls.”

Unwilling to play Taz’s game any longer, Dixie stepped in front of him, hands on her hips, blocking his path. He halted inches from bumping into her.

“Spill it,” she demanded. “Was Sheldon back there at Steward Beach?”

Grinning like a blue-eyed hyena, he used both hands to sweep back his shaggy hair.

“Shel made you for private cops. Said you were sniffing around his old man’s house last night.”

“We didn’t see Shel at the party.” Unless he was their mysterious virtuoso.

“Neither did anyone else,” Taz said, squeezing past her and moving on.

“We’re not cops, not even private investigators,” Dixie assured him, reluctantly keeping pace again. If Taz’s ploy was to lead them away from Stewart Beach, then Sheldon must’ve been in a situation where he couldn’t immediately leave. Would he still be there? Should they shag it back or keep trailing the cuckoo bird? “We’re actually looking for a friend of Shel’s who’s in trouble. Did he have a girl with him?”

“The little chickiepoo.”

*Damn.* Dixie wanted to choke him. “Does Chickiepoo have a name?”

“Chickiepoo’s all grown up. Still has those same sad eyes.”

He had to be talking about Carra Lynne. Didn’t he?

“Carra Lynne Gray. Do you know where she is?”

“A spoke in the wheel of Lafitteville, she is where she is. Got to have chickiepoos to energize the masses.”

Dixie studied Taz’s lined face and sea-blue eyes. He had a well-toned forty-year-old body, but the face of age. Eyes deep with intelligence, despite his ridiculous persona. He was every bit as old as Farley.

“Would I find Chickiepoo back at Voodoo Daddy’s?”

“Everybody goes to Daddy’s.”

On a hunch, Dixie asked, “When was the last time you saw James Carver Gray?”

Taz blinked at her, faltering only slightly. “The Gray man slipped into the ether.”

“When did you see him last?”

He shrugged. “Here today, gone with the tide.”

Riddles. “What the hell does that mean, Taz?”

He shrugged again, elaborately, his gaze never wavering as he strode alongside her, no longer in such a hurry.

Dixie’s pager beeped. She glanced at Parker and checked the number—Brew. With more information, she hoped, than she was getting here.

“*Where* did you see James Carver last?” Parker asked.

The artist leaned his head back and gazed upward, as if expecting to see the answer written on the cloudless sky.

“On the dock.” With another huge grin, he broke into the Otis Redding song, “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay.”

Same place Farley saw him last. “Yacht basin or commercial harbor?”

“Picky, picky. Harbor lights.”

“When?” Dixie demanded.

He tossed his head back again and closed his eyes.

“Summer solstice. June twenty-one, nineteen-eighty-six.” When he looked at her again, Taz’s cocky smile had vanished. “Give or take a few years.”

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