

## CHAPTER 45

The crowd around the Water Coaster included a gaggle of laughing, squealing, darting children. Screams of glee raced toward Dixie and Parker as a small boy shot past, followed by a determined girl in close pursuit. Dripping wet, they tumbled to the sand, giggling and shrieking.

Older kids slouched in pairs and groups.

“Big time waste,” Parker grouched. “Sheldon’s had plenty of time to make himself scarce. Why would he send Taz to draw us away and then wait for us to catch up again?”

“I got the feeling Taz enjoyed leading us on that wild walk-a-thon. A day like this, maybe Sheldon attracted enough art lovers to make some bucks. Then he spots us, and he’s faced with either talking to us this time or splitting again and losing out on next week’s lunch money. Good buddy Taz says, ‘Go ahead, paint. I’ll have some fun.’”

“Even so. Sheldon couldn’t expect him to keep us occupied for long. He’s gone, I tell you.”

“Maybe.”

“Dixie, the weekend is practically gone, too. If we plan to salvage any—uh-oh.” He took her elbow and nodded toward two women, each carrying a small painting.

“Looks like you win.”

Wearing swim suit tops and cutoff jeans, and scarcely old enough to be called women, they hurried toward the stairs leading up the seawall to the sidewalk. Dixie jogged after them.

“Did you just get those painted? May I see?”

The girl wearing a bright pink top responded by holding up her artwork. “Awesome, isn’t it? Fifty-five bucks, and we stood in line forever, but worth every nickel.”

Behind the pretty face deftly rendered in watercolor lurked a leering starfish. Sheldon’s work, no doubt about it.

Dixie shaded her eyes with one hand and searched the direction the women had come from.

“Where is he?” Parker asked, ambling up beside Dixie.

“Gone,” the girl said.

“Lucky us.” The second girl, wearing a fully loaded yellow suit top above her hip-huggers shyly held her own portrait for Parker to see. “A lot of people were ticked off after standing in line for so long.”

“Nice job,” he said. “Almost as attractive as the original.”

She blushed to a pink that nearly matched her friend’s suit.

“Did the artist say where he was headed next?” Parker asked.

She shook her head. “He worked fast, took our money, and packed up in a hurry. Had a lot of stuff to load, though. You might still catch him, ‘round the other side of the coaster.”

“Thanks.” Dixie sprinted away, scanning the crowd but also the sidewalk and parked cars above eye level.

She spotted him.

A bicycle, saddle pack loaded with art supplies, stood angled between two cars. Sheldon was unlocking the security chain.

As she and Parker raced for the stairs, Sheldon mounted the bike.

“Get the car,” Dixie said. “I’ll follow on foot, keep him in sight until you pick me up.”

When she reached the sidewalk, Sheldon was walking his bike across Seawall Boulevard at the stoplight. Dixie had to wait for the next green or risk becoming road kill. But he had to move slow, too, in the traffic. By the time she made it across the street, he was mounted, riding a block ahead, and he didn’t appear to have spotted her. Dixie paced him, keeping her head down as if merely out for a jog. Never mind that no one in her right mind would jog in this heat.

When Parker pulled the Cadillac alongside Dixie, Sheldon had reached the Broadway-Seawall intersection. She rounded the car and hopped in, already breathing hard in the sweltering humidity.

“He might turn at the signal,” she panted. “Don’t get too close. We’ll spook him, and that bike can squeeze into skinnier places than we can go.”

Sheldon continued on Seawall to Ferry Road before turning. Modest homes and apartment complexes populated this area. When he whipped into a driveway beside a small house sorely in need of a fix-up, Parker drove on past. A few yards ahead, Dixie jumped from the car and doubled back. She watched Sheldon carry the bike up three steps to a shallow porch, paint peeling, potted plants tucked into every cranny. Balancing the bike, he wedged the screen door open while he unlocked the main door. Dixie waited until he began pushing the bike through before dashing up the steps behind him.

“Hey, Ray! My buddy from Kwik Kash. Fancy meeting you way over here.”

Startled, he darted a look at her. His face froze in recognition. Wrangling the bike, he tried to yank it quickly inside the house.

“Or is it Sheldon Evercamp?” Dixie said, shoving in behind him.

“What do you want?”

“You don’t sound glad to see me, Sheldon.”

“You can’t just barge into my house.” Hands busy with handlebars and seat, he couldn’t do much to stop her. Then he must’ve seen Parker coming up the walk, six-two, grim-faced, and all muscle. “Jesus Christ! What do you want?”

“Friendly conversation,” Dixie said.

“We’ve been admiring your art,” Parker said. “You come highly recommended by two satisfied customers we met at Voodoo Daddy’s.”

“And by your friend Taz,” Dixie added. She was already inside the house and Parker stood on the threshold, dwarfing Sheldon, who still had his hands full of bicycle.

He looked around futilely, then pushed the bike on in. “Okay, come on in. But don’t bother laying that commission crap on me this time.”

“Actually, it wasn’t *all* crap,” Dixie admitted. “I do think you have an interesting style.”

As in Curtis Todd’s house, walls had been knocked out to make one big open living area, but the work here was crude. A counter separated the kitchen. New planks

had been added to complete the hardwood floor beneath the removed walls, and the patch job stood out like a white hair on a brown mole. Furnished with a jumble of flea market finds, interspersed with unfinished canvases on easels, on tables, and stacked against walls, the house looked artistically cluttered and smelled of paint.

Sheldon leaned the bike in a corner, then reluctantly closed the door after Parker had entered.

“Okay, talk.” Sheldon raked a hand through his spiky sun-streaked hair. His skin had reddened, making his blue eyes look even bluer, flatter, colder than they’d appeared yesterday.

He didn’t ask them to sit.

“Taz told us your cousin Carra Lynne paid a visit,” Dixie said. Not precisely true, but close enough. “Bummed a sleep-over, did she?”

“She’s gone.”

“Looks like she left a few things.” Dixie scooped up a CD player from a box stacked on a wicker chair against the front wall. Heaped around the chair were several TVs, DVD units, a trombone, and other miscellanea. In addition to the CD player, the box held small electronic accessories.

“That stuff’s mine.” He slouched into the adjoining kitchen and snatched a Miller Lite from an old round-cornered refrigerator transformed by paint into a Sheldon original mural, complete with lurking gnomes. “I pick up stuff at garage sales and close-outs. Resell it.”

He popped the tab and swallowed a long gulp of the cold beer.

“Interesting that you just happen to have a storage carton bearing a Tulip, Arkansas, shipping label.” When Sheldon shrugged, Dixie set the CD player on top of the other equipment. “Receiving stolen merchandise can land you in as much trouble as your cousin’s in. Are you such close kin that you’d go to jail for her?”

“She told me it came from a store going out of business. How could I know she stole it?”

“Ignorance won’t cut much ice with a judge.”

“You’re not cops, so why do you care, anyway? April said you’re lawyers.” He gave the word the same disgusted inflection April had.

“You don’t like lawyers?”

“Licensed to steal. I can do the same thing without a diploma.” He slugged back another shot of the beer, leaned his elbows on the kitchen counter, and stared at her.

“Your father’s a lawyer,” Parker said. “Guess that flavors your opinion some.”

He had gravitated to a wide canvas stapled to the longest wall. The painting depicted Galveston Island modified by a few additions along Stewart Beach. A wide pier stretched out far into the Gulf, with rides and vendor booths sketched in. The Jolly Roger’s skull and crossbones waved above a Spanish galleon anchored at the end of the pier. A banner read, LAFITTEVILLE.

Taz’s pipe dream.

Sheldon scowled, his gaze sliding to Parker, then back to Dixie.

“What the Christ do you want from me? Take the stuff. Send it back to the store Carra Lynne allegedly stole it from. Then get out and leave me alone.”

“Taz explained your project,” Parker said. “Seemed excited about your getting city funding for it.”

“Taz talks too much.”

“Your record’s clean, Sheldon. I checked.” Dixie wandered toward the back door. “An arrest for aiding and abetting would queer any deal with city council.” Even pipe dreams could land on a town meeting agenda.

“My cousin came into town. I gave her a few bucks and a bed for the night. What’s the big deal? My father would have that case thrown out in two seconds.”

“Is Astin involved in this project?” Parker asked. “Chatear Lafitte, Lafitteville?”

“No!”

Sheldon’s inflection left no doubt that Astin’s interest wouldn’t be welcome, even if he dumped a galleon full of doubloons at their feet.

Parker moved on to study an unfinished canvass propped on an easel. Dixie skimmed a curtain aside on the back door window so she could see out.

“When did Carra Lynne leave?” she asked.

“Before I went to the beach. A few hours ago, give or take.”

“Headed where?” No garage in the back yard. No white Escort parked on the sun-scorched grass.

“How would I know where she went? She needed some bucks, I loaned her some. That’s it. That’s all I know.”

Every dollar in his pocket probably wouldn’t have taken the girl far. But that might explain why Sheldon needed the money he earned today at Voodoo Daddy’s.

“Where is she staying tonight?”

“I don’t know that, either. I told her to get lost.”

“After four years, you two must’ve done some catching up,” Dixie persisted.

“What did you talk about?”

“You don’t mind if I use your bathroom, do you?” Parker asked. “Where is it? Back here?” He indicated a hallway and started in that direction without waiting for an answer.

“Be my guest,” Sheldon said sourly. “You won’t find Carra Lynne back there.”

“What did you talk about?” Dixie repeated.

“Nothing.” When Dixie stared at him he added, “She told me about living on the run. Said it was a real colorful trip. Asked me to come along.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Why should I?”

Dixie shrugged. His answers had the ring of truth. After two days of looking for Sheldon, he’d turned out to be a dead end. Frustration pawed at her. It *couldn’t* end here.

But hadn’t they figured from the beginning that Carra Lynne stopped in Galveston to fence the stolen goods fast, pick up traveling money, and move on? Why should it turn out any different?

“If she wanted you to go along, she must’ve mentioned a direction. A town? State?”

“Nope. Just said she planned to see how many miles of highway she could put behind her before dark.”

“What was she driving?”

“Didn’t notice.”

Unwilling to leave without a single thread to follow, Dixie tried the hook Brew had tossed her earlier.

“Sheldon, you’re a long way from Grovemont, Georgia. Do you ever visit your mother? Your birth mother?”

His features went slack. “What do you know about that?”

“I know she had a drug abuse problem. I know your father divorced her after committing her to a long-term psych facility.” Surmising part of that, but what the hell. “Is that the conflict between you and your father?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“No. But I have a mother in a long-term care facility. I know how it’d feel to be too far away to visit. And believe it or not, I’d really like to help Carra Lynne stop running, straighten out her life while she’s still young enough to enjoy it. You seem to be the only family member she saw while she was here. Does she also have reason to hate—or fear—your father?”

“How the Christ would I know?”

“I think you know a lot more than you’re saying. And if you gave your cousin all your money, I think you care about her more than you let on.” When he looked away, Dixie added, “I don’t believe Carra Lynne’s done anything *yet* that can’t be legally settled without her doing significant jail time. But she has to stop now, before she racks up any more criminal charges. If you really want to help her, tell me where she’s gone.”

Parker came back into the room.

Sheldon glared at him, then looked squarely at Dixie.

“Fuck off. And get the fuck out of my house.”

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