

## CHAPTER 18

In the spotty shade offered by a stand of oleander shrubs, Dixie propped open the driver's side door of the taxi. She had moved it to a side street, where a wildly painted Volkswagen partially blocked it yet she could still see the door to Kwik Kash.

When sixteen minutes had passed without Ray leaving to see his "friend," her hunch solidified that Sheldon Evercamp and the Kwik Kash clerk were one and the same. Why was Sheldon being so secretive? No phone listing—okay, lots of people preferred not to be bothered with crank calls. But no way for his agent to contact him? These days everybody had a cell phone.

In the next ten minutes she checked her watch no less than ten times. She hated stakeouts. And she had not come prepared for this. To take her mind off the sweat trickling down her sides, she dialed Parker's cell phone, told him what she'd learned and what she suspected. Hearing a rush of wind and the squawk of seabirds, she pictured his dark hair blowing in the salty breeze. Fit and tanned in his white shirt and shorts, not a bead of sweat anywhere. Large Blue Blocker sunglasses. Great legs. A stir of longing rippled through her.

"Guess Evercamp must've heard someone was asking about him at Slice's last night," Parker said.

"That would account for his evasiveness."

"Think your bird will show?"

"If not here, maybe they'll meet somewhere. Once Ray a.k.a. Sheldon escapes the pawn shop, I haven't a clue where to find him again. I'll have to sit here until he leaves."

In the beat of silence that followed, Dixie knew he was seeing their weekend squandered like silver dollars in a slot machine.

"What if you're wrong and it's not him?"

"Ray said he'd be seeing Evercamp later, so either way I could score."

Silence again, then, "Are we still up for lunch?"

"Absolutely. If you don't mind eating lunch sitting in the front seat of your air-conditioned Cadillac. If I take my eyes off that pawn shop door for an instant, Ray will choose that instant to leave—the unfortunate reality of stake-out."

"Keep me posted," he said, his voice cool enough to frost her ear. "When I'm through here, I'll catch up with you."

When they disconnected, Dixie phoned Ryan. For once her nephew wasn't glued to his computer desk. She left a message that their bird still hadn't shown its feathers. Then she rummaged in the ready bag she carried everywhere, pulled out a pair of baggy shorts, a teal tank shirt, and a baseball cap. In one minute, twenty-nine seconds, hunkered in the back seat of the taxi, she shed the hot jeans and camp shirt, donned their blessedly cool replacements, and pulled her hair up under the cap. She added a pair of running shoes. From a distance, she figured "Ray" wouldn't make her in the simple disguise.

Using her unlimited long distance service to gather more background on Gennae seemed a better use of her time than merely sitting surveillance. She strolled to the corner, where she could catch the wind blowing from the Gulf, and placed a call to Tom

Rich, owner of King Smart Tech in Tulip. Unfortunately, he'd known Gennae only during the time she worked for him.

"Every Sunday morning and Wednesday night I took that girl to my church." Rich had the resounding bass drawl of a country preacher. "You can't tell me that meeting good Christian folk doesn't have a positive effect on a young woman. Have you located her?"

"Was it Thursday, following your Wednesday church visit, that you discovered the theft, Mr. Rich?"

"You could quite literally have knocked me over with a feather. I put my faith, trust, and confidence in that child, and look how she repaid me. I confess, I have never been so humiliated. Police officers swarming around the store—"

"How big a town is Tulip?"

"Sixteen thousand, four hundred, and fourteen citizens."

And a *swarm* of cops. "Did Gennae make any particular friends among your customers? Anyone she spent time with outside the store?"

"Not that I could say. She was a personable young woman. People liked her. I liked her. I entrusted my entire business to the girl."

"Yet she only worked there for, what, three months, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I know what you're thinking. I should have been more cautious. I blame myself as much as anyone. None of the references she gave in Georgia are checking out."

He was just now verifying references? For some men, a sexy body and a smooth come-on were endorsement enough.

"How do you mean they're not checking out?"

"She never worked at any of the places she said she did."

Surprise, surprise. "Did she provide a former residence address?"

"No good, either."

"What was that address?"

"I tell you, it's no good. No such street in Little Rock. She did have a proper Georgia drivers license, though, and she did live at the address she gave here in Tulip—moved in the day *after* I hired her."

"What is *that* address, Mr. Rich?"

He fumbled with papers for a moment, then he read it off, along with Gennae's social security number. Dixie jotted them down.

"Have you actually seen Gennae?" he asked.

"I may have a lead on her. Mr. Rich, what were her habits outside of work?"

Dixie wiped a trail of sweat off her neck and drank the last of her bottled water. "Did she like movies? Dancing?"

"Bingo. She played bingo at the church with me a few times."

Whoopee! Bingo would make any twenty-year-old's heart beat wildly. "Is that what prompted the notation on the poster about habitual gambling?"

"The girl would play twenty-five cards at a time. Refused to leave until every last number was called. I'd say that was a trifle more involved than the good Lord intended. And she bought lottery tickets every week, had a system—ones, twos, and nursery rhymes. I never understood it."

"Then you based your term 'addicted gambler' on these limited observations?"

Her first night in Texas, Gennae'd bet on the dogs and hustled a pool game. Still, she had

stopped betting after losing one dog race and winning a few bucks at pool.

“‘Enthusiastic’ seems a more fitting word.”

“No, I’d say it was addiction. We drove down to Kender, Louisiana, one night, a little town on the Indian reservation. There’s a casino, and Gennae gambled away her entire paycheck. Don’t know how the girl would have eaten all week if I hadn’t advanced her a few dollars. By the way, where in Texas did you say you’re calling from?”

“Southeast. About Gennae’s friends, who can I talk to who might be more her contemporary, someone she’d confide in.” Dixie blinked from the Kwik Kash entrance to the traffic polluting its way past.

“I don’t know that Gennae made such friends. She was much smarter than one might think.”

“By ‘smarter,’ you mean...?”

Rich hesitated for longer than Dixie thought necessary to answer a question he’d obviously already put some thought into.

“Gennae preferred the company of more mature individuals than herself. People who could stimulate her intellect, who could guide her spiritual growth.”

“Such as?”

He cleared his throat. “As I said, I introduced her to my friends at church. I believe the ladies were quite taken with Gennae, Babs Hanson in particular.”

*Yes, you dirty old fool, give me something.* “Perhaps if I could chat with Babs—”

“Ms. Flannigan, this whole thing has been enough of an embarrassment for me without stirring up—”

“No stirring. I promise. Just a friendly conversation. I’m not stirring you up, am I?” This was the money man. Ryan would be crushed if Rich withdrew the reward offer. She spooned a double helping of honey into her voice. “You do want Gennae brought to justice, don’t you, Mr. Rich?”

“As for justice, I’ll leave that to the Almighty. I merely want to visit with the girl about the incident.”

A thirty-thousand-dollar visit? Dixie almost hooted into the phone.

“This friend Babs—”

“I’ll have to ask her permission before giving you her number. I won’t budge on that policy, Ms. Flannigan.”

“Why don’t I call you back in five minutes?”

“Well, I suppose Babs might be at home now.”

“Thanks, Mr. Rich. By the way, which church do you attend?”

A weighted pause. “I won’t have you making problems for me at my church.”

“My goal is to clear up any problems. Isn’t that why you posted a reward for information leading to Gennae’s capture? To possibly regain some of your stolen merchandise and prevent her from stealing from another employer?”

“Of course. But the police have already covered the ground here. What I expect for my money is new information.”

*Touche.* “Mr. Rich, I saw Gennae last night. She evaded me, but—”

“You actually saw her? Where?”

“I believe she’s still in the area. I need all the information I can get to find her again.”

“Where did you see Gennae?” Rich’s voice lost its deep resonance and tightened until it was almost shrill. “I request—no, I *demand* you tell me right now what you know.”

“Right now I don’t know anything that will help you—or will gain me that reward.” If Dixie hadn’t already verified that the money was in an escrow account, she’d be suspicious of Tom Rich’s motives.

“I’ll pay you extra—”

“When I do a job, I do it thoroughly. Will you call your friend?”

“All right. I’ll phone immediately. But you must promise to get with me first before notifying the police.”

*Oh, really?* “Once I have Gennae in my sights, Mr. Rich, you’ll be the first to know.” And I’ll be parked on your doorstep with a tote bag to carry all those greenbacks.



Two customers had entered Kwik Kash while Dixie was on the phone. Neither had Gennae’s build, no matter what disguise she wore. Dixie removed her baseball cap, raked a hand through her steamy hair, and fanned herself with the cap. She scanned the immediate area for a cool spot of shade. If she stepped inside Burger Boy for a whiff of air conditioning and a cold drink, she’d lose sight of the pawn shop.

Seeing no cars queued up at the drive-thru, she crossed to the window, ordered a large iced tea and a larger iced water—which would cause yet another problem soon. She spotted a telephone stand where she could set her drinks down and take advantage of its minimal relief from the blazing sun while following up with Tom Rich. Reluctantly, he gave her the number for Babs Hanson.

Dixie doused ice water on the shop rag she’d been using as a sweat towel and applied it to the back of her neck as she dialed. The woman answered immediately, her quiet Southern voice eliciting visions of spreading oaks and long, lazy afternoons sipping mint juleps.

“Mrs. Hanson, you met Gennae Thompson when she visited the church with Tom Rich?”

“Lovely girl. Sweet, pretty. We talked about beaches. We both love the sea, which may be why we hit it off so well—that sound, you know. Like being back in the womb, I told her, where we’d all like to be at times.”

With a grateful sigh, Dixie wrote down the word “beach.” Babs already sounded more agreeable than the lecherous Tom Rich. “Did she mention any particular beaches she liked to visit?”

“Oh, I don’t think the child was a world traveler, as I am. I’m not even sure she ever mentioned where she’d learned to appreciate the sea. Did you know the beaches on Saba and St. Kitts are black? Lava sand, they call it. Strange but beautiful. Gennae was amazed.”

St. Kitts—wasn’t that in the Carribean? Babs would jump at Parker’s yacht delivery invitation like a honeybee on a blossom. “Did Gennae ever talk about places she lived before moving to Tulip? People she knew?”

“She mentioned her hometown was Oakbridge. Told me she missed her mother.”

A tinkle of ice, the slightest lady-like slurp—was Babs actually drinking a cool mint julep? Dixie salivated and sipped her weak tea.

“Did Gennae mention her mother’s name?”

“Patricia? Isn’t that what she told me? Yes, her mother’s name was Patricia. No one ever called her Trish or Patty. Gennae asked about my name, was it short for Barbara, which it isn’t, but people do expect Babs to be a diminutive.”

“Did Gennae ever talk about visiting Texas? A particular town? A beach?”

“No, I don’t believe she ever did.”

“Did she mention any place she’d lived, other than Oakbridge?”

“No, I’m certain I’d remember. The odd thing, though, Gennae didn’t have a Georgia accent, not to my ears, and I generally can tell. I know you’re a Texan. From a metropolitan area, I’d say. Or else you work in a situation that requires public speaking. You’ve done a fine job of sharpening up those long Texas vowels.”

Ten years in front of a jury might qualify. Across the street Dixie spied a bench in the shade of a sprawling live oak tree, flanked by cemetery head stones. A young couple seated on the bench were stealing licks off each others’ ice cream cones, stopping periodically to engage in soul kisses. Dixie thought of Parker and what she might be doing instead of sweating in front of a pawn shop. “If not Georgia, where would you suppose Gennae’s home state to be?”

“Oh, I’m not saying she wasn’t *born* in Georgia. Just that she certainly spent most of her childhood elsewhere. The girl isn’t much more than a child, even now. I hope she’s all right. I miss her.”

“Babs, could you make a guess, judging by your knowledge of accents, where she spent most of her childhood?” Gennae’s rap sheet had listed alleged activity in only three states.

“Why, somewhere in Texas would be my guess. Did they ever clean up the shore at Padre Island? A shame how our beaches get so filthy.”

“I’m not sure. Did Gennae ever mention Galveston beach?”

“Well, now, I don’t recall. I’ve been there, of course. Good strong seawall, soft brown sand—so much more soothing to the eye than the blinding white shores farther south.”

“You and Gennae never discussed Galveston? Things to do there? Places to go?”

“Gennae was a good listener, not much of a talker. She could sure make me laugh, though. Had a special name for everyone she met, all from nursery rhymes. Called me Tuesday’s Child.”

“You’ve been a great help, Mrs. Hanson—”

“Please, it’s Babs. I’ve never been a formal person.”

“Can you think of anything else that might help us locate Gennae?”

A few seconds passed before Babs answered. “I’ve been honest with you, Ms. Flannigan, that’s only right. But I sincerely hope I haven’t been any help at all. I have mixed feelings about all this. I don’t believe Gennae stole all that expensive equipment Tom says. What would she do with it? And if she did take a few things, then I’m certain she had a very good reason. Tom Rich will never miss those dollars. I want to know that Gennae’s all right, but I don’t want to see that girl go to jail. So if that’s what you’re planning, I hope I haven’t helped you a lick. Please pardon my candor.”

“Candor is one virtue I appreciate, Babs.” Dixie watched the young couple leave the bench, arms entwined around each others’ waists, while she decided if she had any other questions. Not at the moment. “Sounds like you’re a good friend. Thanks for talking to me.”

“In exchange, I expect you to tell Gennae that Babs believes in her, no matter what Tom Rich says.”

“I’ll do that. By the way, did Gennae have a special name for Tom Rich?”

“Why, yes, she did. She called him Georgie Porgie. But I tend to believe he’s a good man down deep.”

Georgie Porgie—didn’t he kiss the girls and make them cry?

## CHAPTER 19

“Monday’s child is fair of face, Tuesday’s child is full of grace,” Dixie muttered, recalling that she’d always hated that particular nursery rhyme. Having been born on a Tuesday, and never particularly graceful, she took the verse as a personal affront. As a child, anyway.

Now she wondered what nursery rhymes meant to Gennae Thompson that she would use them to invent pet names for people and, if Tom Rich was to be believed, to work out her gambling strategy. Of course, the whole “Tuesday’s Child” thing might’ve been a thief’s guise to win over Babs Hanson.

The sun had shifted westward, and Dixie no longer had even the spotty shade from the telephone stand. She looked back at the taxicab and the privacy afforded by the pink-flowered oleanders, which might prove useful if she was forced to pee in a Burger Boy cup in the back seat. At such times she always reconsidered wearing skirts.

A garbage truck rumbled past, throwing off stench and road gravel. Dixie glanced at her watch again. *Come on, Ray, Sheldon, whoever you are, move! Go to lunch, go home. Give me a lead.*

She crunched the remaining ice from her tea.

Babs Hanson certainly had seemed fond of Gennae. Was the friendship mutual? Or had Gennae intended to run a scam on Babs—gaining the woman’s confidence, setting her up as a mark—only to abandon the plan when Tom Rich discovered his missing inventory?

No indication in the info from Ryan’s network that Gennae had ever pulled off a job more sophisticated than the “sweetheart scam” she’d done on Rich—charm the mark, win his confidence, then liberate cash, car, or other valuables. In Rich’s case, Gennae had charmed him into hiring her without checking references, possibly had thrown in a little slap-and-tickle, then had emptied his warehouse. Simple.

But she was young, and most con artists started with the easy jobs.

Most cons also worked with partners at one time or another. Could a former partnership be Gennae’s connection to Evercamp? He might even be the scout, slated to move in early, select a mark, and set up the downstream sales.

Heat shimmers and a volley of heavier truck traffic distorted Dixie’s view of the Kwik Kash entrance. She ambled back toward the taxi.

Babs had said Gennae’s accent placed her from Texas rather than Georgia. Perhaps she and Evercamp hadn’t met in Georgia, after all, but had run across each other right here in Texas, both young, displaced Crackers. Chatted each other up, discovered mutual interests and talents. Then maybe Gennae headed to Sheldon’s old thieving grounds to work the marks he fingered but never had a chance to fleece, while Sheldon took over her equally fertile territory in Texas. Networking among crooks, an interesting theory.

But then, thieves and fences always managed to find each other.

Dixie's stomach told her lunchtime had come and gone. She spied a Jack In The Box and a Taco Bell down the road. But Burger Boy still got her vote, if Parker didn't show up soon and insist on something healthy. She dialed his cell number again. Got no answer.

Muscles growing mulish from inactivity, she rose and stretched. The cemetery occupied both sides of 61st Street, about half a block from Kwik Kash. She could walk around, mourn convincingly over the tombstones, and still watch for Sheldon/Ray to move out. Paper and pencil for rubbing over the inscriptions would provide good cover. In the taxi's trash container, she found a solicitation letter offering her yet another "low-rate" credit card. The blank side would do.

Once she left the meager oleander shade, the sun blazed the top of her baseball cap and bounced heat up from the sidewalk. Traffic churned up street dust, exhaust fumes, and a cacophony of sound, but walking eased the stiffness out of her knees. Cursing the boredom of stakeout, she dialed Daryl McRae again, Gennae's neighbor in Tulip. This time he picked up on the first ring.

"McCrae." He sounded rushed.

When Dixie introduced herself, some of the exuberant enthusiasm of his answering machine voice returned.

"Glad you phoned, Flannigan. Need to put a few things straight with you, but now's not good. Dentist appointment, ten minutes. Tooth gone bad. Never had such pain before."

"May I call later? After the dentist?" He did sound as if he was talking around a mouthful of pain.

"Sure. Meanwhile, don't put too much stock in what Tom Rich tells you. That old coot had the hots for Gennae. Pissed him royally when she wouldn't put out. Gennae and I talked about it. Sexual harassment. Low key but insidious. Could be he stole all that stuff himself. Sold it. Set her up to take the fall. Collect insurance. Only she's quick. Bright. Saw the writing, took the hint. Tom Rich is a royal donkey's ass. Don't listen to him. I'm out of here. Call back later."

The phone clicked in Dixie's ear.

Okay, Daryl, just what *do* you think of Tom Rich?

Was he reporting what he knew or what Gennae had told him? Had Gennae charmed Daryl, too? In her short stay in Tulip, Arkansas, the girl certainly made an impression on at least three residents. But where was she now? Planning her next scam right here in Galveston? Or already burning up the tarmac toward Mexico? And how much did Sheldon Evercamp actually know? Was Dixie wasting this fine summer day in a graveyard for naught?

A tilted stone bore the name "Alexandra," her own middle name, which she hadn't used since third grade. Sounded regal on a tombstone

She dialed the numbers Tom Rich had given her, heard a variety of wrong-number speeches: no one had heard of Marla Gennae Thomas or any of her aliases. Two more of Gennae's neighbors in Tulip provided no help. As Dixie started to punch in Parker's number again, her cell phone rang.

Stopping in the shade of a stone angel, she tapped the answer button. "Flannigan."

"Dixie-buddy! How's life treating you?"

She gazed down at a granite marker and the three-by-eight plot of earth that surrounded it. "Better than some, Brew. What's up?"

"Found a lady in Oakbridge you'll want to talk with."

"She knows Gennae?"

"You might say so, only she called her Marla. Ariana Cooper claims to be your bird's grandmother. Maternal side."

"You said *knew* her. No recent connections?"

"I set it up for you to get the dope first hand. Give the lady a ring." He rattled off the number along with a few more for neighbors in towns where Gennae was wanted for theft. "I'm about to catch some shut-eye, but you know where to find me later. By the way, your name's being tossed around by one of your old D.A. buddies."

"Tossed around how?"

"Questions, mostly. About some of the cases you tried, where you got certain info, who was your snitch."

"As we agreed, Brew, you're not on any snitch list of mine. The Gypsy Filchers never appear in any paperwork." The D.A.'s office maintained a list of approved sources, but Dixie had always paid the Filchers out of her own pocket. "Who's asking?"

"Name's Kincaid. Rodney Kincaid. Is he a friend?"

"Not exactly." Did that mean Kincaid's appearance at the dog track last night wasn't coincidence? "How long has he been asking around?"

Brew was silent a moment, and Dixie could hear keys clicking. "Looks fresh. Last night, this morning."

"Okay, thanks for the heads up. Now here's another name." She spelled out Sheldon Evercamp and asked him to follow up, particularly in Texas, Georgia, and Arkansas.

"Past my sack-out time, Dixie. I'll cast the net, but you'll have to wait for the catch until I go vertical again." He clicked off.

Dixie quietly cursed Kincaid, then put him out of her mind. She could deal with him when she returned to Houston on Monday.

When she dialed Ariana Cooper and got no answer, she left a carefully worded message. Instantly, the cell phone chirped in her hand.

"I'm on 61<sup>st</sup>," Parker told her. "Where are you?"

She spied his Cadillac, and all her irritation of the past hours drained out of her. She envisioned grabbing a pair of ice cream cones and entwining themselves on that cemetery bench.

"I'm practically in front of you, leaning on the imposing, angel-etched tomb of Señor Juan Menchaca. How'd you get here so fast? I called ten minutes ago and you were out of range."

"Guess I was buying lunch."

Probably not from Burger Boy. As he made a U-turn to park, Dixie ambled over to sit in the blessed air conditioning. Parker offered to leave the car running while they ate, but that would only make the heat feel worse later. Instead, she coaxed him into a shady spot beside the grave of Lucy Calloway Griffin, where they had a better view of Kwik Kash than the bench would provide. They sat on the grass and opened two crisp taco salads.

“Rosalea Rodriguez, Jose Lopez,” Parker read from nearby stones. “Plenty of Hispanic influence here.”

“And French, and Dutch.”

“Comes from being a major port. Guess you could trace a lot of these names back to South America and the Caribbean islands—Tortuga, Aruba, the British Virgins, the Dutch Antilles. A well-traveled corridor.”

Probably. Dixie wasn’t particularly interested in Galveston’s cultural deceased—and Parker’s ongoing romance with the Caribbean made the shoulder and neck tension return. As they ate, she brought him up to date.

“Tom Rich was right about none of Gennae’s references checking out,” she told him. “Nobody I phoned had ever heard of her.”

“Guess she made them up. Can’t expect good references when you leave your employer shy a few cases of merchandise.”

“A practiced con would’ve covered that detail,” Dixie argued. “Routed the calls to a friend who knew the scam. Maybe even to Sheldon Evercamp.”

“Eduardo Galvez—think he’s related to the city’s namesake?”

Dixie glanced at the elaborate tomb, built above ground and adorned with a bust of the departed. She shrugged.

“The few people who remembered Gennae at all described her as a ‘nice’ young woman, quiet, no visitors, no loud parties.”

Parker balanced his salad bowl on a knee while he opened another packet of honey mustard dressing. “Am I missing something? Aren’t all con artists likable? Even the folks they rip off turn them in reluctantly.”

“Gennae doesn’t quite fit. Something’s off—”

Dixie’s cell phone chirped again. At times she hated that sound.

“Ms. Flannigan?” The voice was elderly but clear. “You left a message inquiring about my granddaughter.”

“Mrs. Cooper?”

“You’ll have to speak up if you expect me to hear you.”

Dixie turned away from the noisy street traffic. “Could you hold a second, Mrs. Cooper?” she shouted, then said quietly to Parker, “Keep an eye out for Evercamp?” Partners did come in handy on occasion.

“Sure. What’s he look like.”

She described the pawn clerk and his boss behind the barred window. Then she remembered a customer who’d gone in about ten minutes earlier and hadn’t yet come out. “Five-eight, medium build, sandy hair, jeans and a blue T-shirt.”

“Hold on a minute. Your description of the customer is practically the same as your description of Evercamp. Anything written on those shirts to tell them apart?”

In Dixie’s mind, the two men were easily distinguished, but she couldn’t think of a single outstanding feature that would ensure Parker distinguishing one from the other.

“Maybe you should mosey across the street, scope out the goods.”

“And make sure our boy hasn’t skipped out by a back entrance?”

“That happens in the movies, Parker.”

Dixie hadn’t noticed a back door, but now that he’d put the thought in her head, she couldn’t help wondering if she’d been watching an empty nest all this time.

As Parker strolled across the street, Dixie moved away from the traffic noise, near a pair of identical granite tombstones carved with names that sounded vaguely familiar: Sarah Carver Gray and James Johnson Gray. Astin Gray's relatives?

"Thank you for returning my call, Mrs. Cooper. Like I said in my message, I'm trying to locate your granddaughter. I saw her yesterday, here in Galveston, Texas, but we...got separated. Would she have any friends here? Relatives? Would you have any idea where she might go?" Too many questions. Dixie bit her tongue, knowing she had come on too strong. But this was her first real lead, and she wanted to cover all the bases before the old woman's attention wavered.

"You say you *saw* my granddaughter yesterday?"

"Yes, ma'am—"

"Are you some kind of psychic? One of those crackpots who claim to talk to the dead?"

*Dead?*

Despite the heat radiating from the tombstones, Dixie felt a shiver. Of premonition.

"Do you know where I might find your granddaughter, Mrs. Cooper?"

"Of course I do. I'm looking at her right now."

"Marla Gennae Thompson is with you there in Oakbridge?"

"Has been ever since the accident, nineteen years ago this coming Monday. Marla and her mother sit right there on the mantel. Been housebound myself thirty-some years, can't get out to visit no grave. Had the ashes sealed in pretty porcelain jars. You saw my little granddaughter's ghost, I suppose, is that the bill of goods you're peddling?"

"No, ma'am. Did Marla have a sister?" Grasping at straws. Obviously, the girl Dixie was after had used the dead girl's name to trump up false ID for herself.

"One daughter, one grandchild. Marla's father used to drop by, pay his respects. Now he's married again. Time goes on, but the three of us are all right here, doing fine, and we don't need no soothsayer bringing us together in the afterlife."

Dixie thanked her again and powered the phone off. She scowled as she fished the yellow mug shot out of her pocket.

Obtaining false ID was easier than most people realized, especially if a child died before obtaining a social security number. With a copy of the birth certificate, all sorts of false identification could be manufactured—seeming all the more authentic because it traced back to a real birth. Only at the Oakbridge courthouse would anyone discover that Marla Gennae Thompson also had a death certificate on file.

But if the Thompson girl had been dead nineteen years, who was the young woman who'd ripped off Tom Rich?

Dixie wondered if she would pick up Gennae's trail by flying to Oakbridge, where she had filched her new alias, or to Tulip, where Gennae-whoever had ripped off Tom Rich. There had to be some clues floating around those towns. But how long would the girl hang around Galveston for Dixie to discover her real identity and return?

Across the street, Parker was exiting Kwik Kash. He jogged away from the pawn shop, jaywalked through honking traffic, and from the look on his face, Dixie knew they'd lost another bird in the wind.

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