

A Ton of Gold

A Crystal Moore Suspense, Book 1

A Contemporary Suspense

By

James R. Callan



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ISBN: 978-0-692-54370-2



Prologue

The Year: 1834

RIP Johnson wrapped his large hands around the metal cup, capturing some of the heat from the steaming coffee. The first slender fingers of sunlight were beginning to poke through the tall pines, turning dust particles into floating bits of silver. A wispy fog drifted up from the small lake. Rip had just started toward the cliff for a better view of the lake below, when the sound of hoof beats stopped him. They were coming fast. Probably Billy hurrying back for some hot coffee. Rip had sent him out at first light to check the trail behind them.

Billy Watkins raced his horse into the clearing, reining in his mount a short distance from Rip. The youngster slid off the sorrel gelding and ran the few feet to stand in front of his boss.

“Injuns.” He paused to catch his breath. “Couple of miles back. Coming this way. Looking for us.”

“How many?”

“More ‘n forty.” Another deep breath. “In war paint.”

“Armed?”

“I seen lots of rifles. They was definitely following our tracks. They’re coming after us.” Worry covered the rider’s face as thickly as the dust did.

For a few seconds, Rip stared down at the grass, just beginning to emerge from its winter slumber. Forty well-armed Indians were more than a match for his eight men. He looked to his left and his gaze fell on his son, pulling on his small boots.

A Ton of Gold

“You’re sure of the number?”

“Yes sir. Counted thirty-eight. And there was more. But I decided to get the hell out of there ‘fore they saw me.”

Better to ride, and fight another day. Rip shifted his focus to the wagon. Too heavily loaded to move fast. He looked past it only a second and made his decision. He wouldn’t leave it for the Indians. Half turning, he located his foreman.

“Hank, lots of injuns coming. Get your men and push that wagon off the cliff, into the lake. Then mount up.”

Hank cocked his head to one side, a frown on his face. “In the lake?”

“Fast as you can. Then brush out the tracks. And I want us moving out in three minutes.” He pivoted in the other direction. “Cookie, put out that fire and load your stuff. Move it.”

By now, his son was standing beside him. “What’s happening, Pa?”

Rip laid his hand on the eight-year-old’s shoulder. “Injuns headed this way. I’ll saddle Blaze for you. Then I want you to ride north as fast as you can. Don’t wait for me; I’ll catch up with you.”

“I’m hungry, Pa.”

“Grab some jerky from Cookie. Get your slicker. Leave everything else.” Confusion creased the young boy’s face. “Move it, James Joseph.”

In less than a minute, Rip had the small sorrel mare saddled. He picked up his son and put him astride the horse. “Don’t stop, unless you hear gun shots close. If you do, get off Blaze and find a hiding place for yourself. And don’t come out until I call you.”

“But, Pa, how will you find me?”

“I will.” Rip slapped the mare on its hindquarters and it galloped out of the clearing.

The men were struggling with the wagon, its large wheels barely moving. “Come on, Cookie. Let’s give ‘em a hand.” The cook, well over two hundred fifty pounds, and Rip added their muscle to the task. Now, with all eight men straining, the wagon wheels turned a bit faster. It reached the point where the ground began to slope toward the cliff and the wagon began to move on its own, slowly picking up speed. The men gave a last push, then straightened up to watch the

A Ton of Gold

wagon tumble off the cliff. It splashed into the water, sending a ripple all the way across the narrow lake. In only seconds, the wagon and its heavy cargo sank out of sight.

“Hank, brush out those tracks. Cookie, kick some dirt over those coals. Let’s saddle up and get out of here. The injuns can’t be far away.”

It took only a minute for the men to gather bedding and saddle horses.

“Keep a sharp eye. We’re outnumbered. We’ll come back later for the wagon. Let’s move.”

With that, Rip spurred his horse and headed north, seven men close behind. They had not covered half a mile when Cookie caught the first bullet. His weight shifted left and his horse cut to the right, sending Cookie tumbling to the ground.

Rip turned in time to see the cook hit the ground, blood spurting from a hole in his chest. Rip knew nothing could be done for the jovial man who sang while he cooked.

Sounds of rifle shots overpowered the pounding of hooves. Each man bent forward, chin almost touching the horse’s mane, trying to provide the smallest target possible. Periodically, one would turn halfway and fire a pistol shot in the direction of the Indians, not with any hope of hitting one, but perhaps causing them to slow down a bit, lose a little ground.

A bullet shattered the left knee of Hank’s buckskin mare. The horse went down and Hank flew over its head, landing hard on the ground, breaking his shoulder, leaving him an easy target.

Within five minutes, only Rip and Billy were left. When no lead whizzed by for several minutes, Rip allowed himself to believe they had outrun the Indians. Even as the thought rested in his brain, a rifle slug tore through his heart. Rip was dead before he hit the ground.

Billy panicked. He turned in the saddle, firing wildly at the pursuing Indians. Within a quarter mile, the eighteen year old son of a preacher lay dead on the dusty, east Texas trail.

The Indians rounded up the white-man’s horses. As they started to leave, their leader noticed one of the horses was a small, sorrel mare. He slid off his mount and began to walk around the area. He stopped beside a low growing cedar bush and pulled back some

A Ton of Gold

branches.

James Joseph crouched there, a hunting knife in his hand. In a single quick motion, the Indian snatched the knife away with one hand, and grabbed James Joseph with the other. The small boy struggled, but it was wasted effort. The Indian placed James Joseph on the horse, took the reins, and jumped onto his own mount. He set off to the south, pulling the small sorrel mare and its young rider behind him.

Chapter 1

The Year: 2012

CRYSTAL Moore stood in her stocking feet, glaring at the row of shoes in her closet. Her raven hair, flipped up just below her ear lobes, looked like it had received three strokes with a brush. Dark circles under her eyes belied eight hours sleep.

“Terrific, I’m late and can’t find a single shoe to wear,” she grumbled.

“One won’t do any good. Need a pair.” Brandi Brewer, a mug of hot chocolate in her hand, lounged against the door to Crystal’s bedroom. “What kind you looking for?”

Hands on hips, Crystal surveyed the jumble of shoes. “Something that’ll match my outfit.”

Brandi appraised her housemate’s attire and shrugged. “Which part?”

Crystal’s frown only deepened.

“How ‘bout those by the foot of the bed.” Brandi pointed the mug at a pair of charcoal slings.

Crystal turned her head and focused on the shoes. “They’ll do.” She padded over and stepped into the Guccis.

“Coffee?”

“Don’t have time. Didn’t sleep well last night, and can’t seem to get going.” She rummaged in her purse, found a tube of lipstick and bent down to look in the mirror over the dressing table.

“Guess not. I got up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. No news flash there. When I passed your door, you were really thrashing around. Thought you had a man under the covers.”

A Ton of Gold

Brandi giggled. “Who’s Dr. Coup?”

Crystal’s hand jerked, sending a slash of bright coral from lip to nose. Slowly, her shoulders sagged, like a balloon losing some of its air. Her eyes glazed over and she stood motionless, barely breathing.

Dr. Krupe. The brilliant Dr. Krupe. Why couldn’t she purge his memory from her brain?

She forced her mind back to the present, straightened her back, focused her eyes. “I don’t know any Dr. Coup.”

“Well, he was on your mind last night. Heard it going and coming back.”

“I don’t know anybody by that name.” She snatched a pale pink tissue from a box on the dresser and tried to repair the damage. “And why were you eavesdropping?”

“Eavesdropping? You were talking in your sleep, for God’s sake. And I have to pass by your door to get to the bathroom.” The short, auburn-haired woman turned and sauntered into the living room.

Crystal examined the image in the mirror. Her upper lip retained an orange glow on the right side. She glanced at the clock, shook her head and tossed the tissue at the wastebasket. She dropped the lipstick in her purse and hurried into the living room.

Brandi sat on the couch, feet curled under her, thumbing through a magazine.

“Sorry I snapped at you,” Crystal said as she stopped to gather papers off the coffee table. “I had a lousy night and so far this morning, things aren’t improving. But that’s no excuse to lash out at you. Sorry.”

“Forgotten.”

“See you tonight. I promise to be in a better mood.” Crystal dashed out of the apartment.

* * *

Crystal pulled open the heavy glass door to the offices of Intelligent Retrieval Systems. Pam Ragley, the receptionist, looked up. “Hi, Crystal. Dr. O’Malley wants to see you the minute you get in.”

Crystal arched her eyebrows. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know. But all hell’s broken loose. All I can tell you

is, he's on the warpath.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

Crystal paused at the open door and tapped lightly. “You wanted to see me?”

Dr. Mark O'Malley, the thirty-five-year-old president and principal owner of IRS, Inc., motioned her in with his left hand while he continued to write on a pale green pad of paper. She settled down in one of the dark blue leather chairs opposite his desk and waited.

Crystal didn't mind waiting. It gave her time to study Mark. She knew he was her boss and she shouldn't mix business and pleasure, but just watching him caused a little flutter in her stomach.

He dropped the pencil and glanced at the small, digital clock on the corner of his desk.

“Sorry I'm late,” Crystal said.

“Hasn't been a good morning. Give me an update on your project. Where does it stand?”

Crystal felt a slight blush rise up her cheeks. “It's still behind schedule, but I think we're catching up. We should be ready to load data in a week. Ten days at the outside.”

Mark's sapphire eyes bored into hers but he said nothing. She looked away, repositioned herself in the chair and slipped her fingers under her thighs. The silence seemed to stretch on forever. “We might be able to load data this week, maybe Friday, if all goes well,” she said, although her voice lacked any conviction.

A jumble of thoughts milled around in her head. *This is not at all like Mark.*

He let out a long sigh. “It seems like everything is falling behind.” He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Rooney's unhappy.” Rooney Associates provided the venture capital that was helping Intelligent Retrieval Systems grow. “They've got a new consultant. He went over our last report, and apparently, he didn't like it. So, he's stirring them up. They're coming to look over our shoulders and see what we're doing and why we're not doing it faster.”

Now, Crystal's face mirrored the concern of her boss. She knew Sally's project had bogged down recently. Phil's group had just started a new project and would have nothing to show. And her project wasn't ready to show investors.

A Ton of Gold

“At any rate,” Mark continued, his voice losing some of the sharpness, “we need to put on a good dog-and-pony show when this guy gets here. The next round of funding is due in a couple of months. Not a good time to make them unhappy. Or cause them to have second thoughts.”

“They can’t—”

“Oh yes they can. The bulk of that inch-thick agreement insures they can do almost anything. And while I *think* Rooney is fair, I *know* he’s hard-nosed. He’ll do what he thinks is best for Rooney. See if you can push—”

Pam's voice came over the intercom. “Sorry to break in, Dr. O’Malley, but Crystal’s grandmother is on line one and sounds like she really needs to talk to Crystal—right now. What should I tell her?”

Mark frowned at the intercom, then at Crystal. “Transfer it to Crystal’s office. At least one of us should be working.”

Crystal felt like she had been reprimanded. She left without a word and trudged the fifty feet to her office. She collapsed in her chair and reached for the phone. *Probably nothing more than Nana finding some new guy she wants to match me up with.*

She forced a smile on her face and tried to sound as bright as possible. “Hi, Nana. What's up?”

“Somebody tried to kill me.”

Chapter 2

CRYSTAL Moore's eyes shot wide open and she sat bolt upright. Disconnected pictures, all bleak, flashed in Crystal's mind, as a chill descended over her. "Tried to kill you!" Her voice almost failed her. Her chest felt like something was crushing it. She could feel her blood pulsing in her veins. "Are you Okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Where are you?"

"Home. Where else would I be?"

In the hospital. "What happened?"

"Some fool tried to run me off the road."

Crystal's back relaxed slightly. "Nana, I don't think he was trying to kill you."

"Were you here?"

Crystal reminded herself that this was her grandmother, her only living relative. "Okay. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I was going to town. And some redneck tried to run me off the road. Clear as could be. Meant to kill me!"

Crystal rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. She worried about her grandmother driving, or living alone, for that matter. At seventy-six, reactions slowed. Maybe her grandmother shouldn't be driving at all.

"Every week somebody tries to run me off the road while I'm driving to work. He just wasn't paying attention, that's all."

"That dog won't hunt. *I* was paying attention. I saw him. He looked right at me, then pulled over in my lane. I could see it in his eyes. He intended to run me right off the road—or hit me head-on. He cotton-pickin' meant to kill me."

"Did you call the police?"

A Ton of Gold

"What for? They'd give me the same routine you are."

Crystal took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "What do you want me to do, Nana?"

"Nothing. Nothing you can do."

Crystal struggled to keep her voice as neutral as possible. She dearly loved her grandmother but Nana could be difficult sometimes. She saw the world very clearly, with seldom a doubt on how to interpret it. "Then why did you call me? Just to worry me?"

"No." Crystal detected a trace of hurt feelings in her grandmother's voice. "Because I wanted you to know somebody's trying to kill me. And if I die under questionable circumstances, I want you to tell the police it was *murder*. And make sure they *do* something. You know how old Billy Goat is. If you don't stick his nose in it, he can't find—"

"Nana!" Crystal cut her off. "Bill Glothe's been the sheriff for ten years—and your friend a lot longer than that."

"Ugly truck. One of those, ah, what-cha-ma-callits. Ah, four-by-fours. Big as a dump truck. Puce."

"Puce? They don't make puce-colored cars."

"Well, maybe he painted it, I don't know. Looked puce to me."

"Are you Okay? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes and no. I'm fine and there's nothing you can do. Just remember what I told you. Anything happens, get Billy Goat on it."

"I will," Crystal promised. "I love you, Nana."

Crystal swiveled her chair around and gazed out the window. Already, the sun was baking the shops and restaurants in the trendy West End Historic District. An area of old warehouses, next to the schoolbook depository of Lee Harvey Oswald fame, had been transformed into a modern, attractive area popular with tourists and locals alike.

Her thoughts gravitated back to her grandmother. *Maybe I ought to go get her and bring her to live in Dallas.* The corners of Crystal's mouth curled up slightly. *That'll be the day.*

Eula Moore was a maverick. A five feet two inch, gray-haired dynamo, she lived in the middle of three hundred twenty acres in East Texas. Her nearest neighbor's house stood nearly a mile away as the crow flies and two miles by the pot-holed road. A trip to the store

in the closest town covered twenty-four miles roundtrip.

When Crystal's granddad died five years ago, she felt certain her grandmother would sell the place and move into town. But Eula steadfastly refused even to consider such a thing. She loved "The Park," as she and her husband had named it fifty years before. Why would she want to move?

Crystal understood. After her parents died in an auto accident when she had just turned seven, her grandparents took her to raise. At first, she was so angry at the world she hated everything. But month-by-month, the pain eased and The Park helped in the healing process. The beauty made it difficult to stay bitter, and the tranquility slowly dried her tears. She pictured one of her favorite spots, a hill that fell off sharply to the water, across the lake from the house. Her seven-year-old eyes had seen it as a sheer cliff overlooking the ocean, promising adventure.

"Pam said your grandmother sounded a little distraught. Is there a problem?" Mark stood in the doorway.

Crystal swung her chair around. "I don't think so."

Mark cocked his head to one side and scrutinized her. "Did you do something to your mouth? The right side looks discolored, or something."

Crystal touched her face where the lipstick had smeared. "Oh, no. No. I was, ah, just rubbing it and it got red, I guess." By now, her cheeks had a pink glow.

Mark nodded a couple of times. "Remember, you promised to take me to see your grandmother's place. And try the fishing."

"Next time I go, I'll invite you."

"Don't forget." Mark started to leave, then turned back. "Oh, I'll be out of the office tomorrow. Hot prospect down in Waco. But I'll be back Wednesday for our lunch meeting. Looking forward to your presentation." He paused a moment, as if checking a mental to-do list. "We'll put together such a great demonstration the venture capitalists will throw money at us." He winked, gave her an encouraging smile and left.

Crystal leaned back in her chair, relief spreading from head to toe. That was more like the Mark she knew.

She recalled the first time she met Mark. And the events leading up to it. She had been writing her dissertation in information

A Ton of Gold

retrieval at Stanford University, but a misunderstanding with her advisor had effectively killed that. Crystal had felt discouraged and worthless. After a week of sitting in her room crying, she left school and returned to Texas.

Sally Pampson appeared in the doorway. “There’s to be no smiling here today. Rooney’s coming.” She plodded over and slid into a chair. “What’s caused such a contented look on such a hectic day?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about my first interview with Mark.”

“Wasn’t much to mine. Whatever he said, I just repeated my mantra, ‘I can do that.’ Finally, he asked me what I *couldn’t* do. I looked him square in the eye and said, ‘Work for a low salary.’” Sally leaned her head back and roared. “He hired me. Can you believe that?”

“Well, my interview certainly didn’t go that way. I was really down at the time, wasn’t sure I could do anything. When he said he needed a project leader, I wanted to run out of the room, but was too scared to get up and leave. I remember thinking, ‘This will be over soon; it’s almost lunchtime.’ Would you believe he ordered in sandwiches and we kept going? I’m not sure I answered any of his questions. I was so nervous, I went to the restroom four times.”

“You could have just kept going out the front door.”

“Didn’t have the nerve. Then about 4:00, he offered me the job. I was terrified. I couldn’t believe he really wanted me. What if I couldn’t do it? What if I didn’t have the brains for this work?”

Crystal’s smile faded as she remembered her apprehension. What if she were humiliated again? She might never regain any confidence, any self-respect.

“Well, Mark made a good decision. And so did you,” Sally declared.

“He wasn’t too happy with me this morning.”

“He’s not happy about anything today. Mark is completely confident about his abilities and IRS, but he’s not so confident about the good judgment of the venture capitalists. And he doesn’t know who they’ve hired as a consultant.” Sally pushed herself up out of the chair. “I guess that’s my cue to get back to work.”

For a minute, Crystal sat there thinking about her first weeks at IRS and how Mark had helped her regain some self-confidence.

A Ton of Gold

Mentally, she shook herself. *Now, he needs me to produce.* If they were to load data this week, she and her group would have to really push. She picked up the phone and punched a button. “Hi. Get the team together in the conference room in, ah, ten minutes. Thanks.”

Chapter 3

BRANDI Brewer finished washing the last of the dinner dishes, dried her hands with a bright, floral dishtowel and turned to face her housemate. “All right. What’s going on?”

Crystal put away a skillet, keeping her back to Brandi. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, something’s going on with you right now and you’re clamming up. You couldn’t get it together this morning. You wore mismatched clothes. And no earrings. Not like you at all. And to top it off, I fix my specialty for dinner and you can’t string five words together.”

“Lemon chicken is the *only* thing you fix that doesn’t come out of a box.” Crystal gave a half-hearted laugh, but her eyes remained cloudy.

“That’s what makes it my specialty. Now, what happened at work today?”

“Nothing much.”

“You know I don’t give up. Might as well tell me now and save us both a lot of energy.”

Crystal shrugged, walked into the living room and slumped into an overstuffed chair. “Mark was on a tear today, that’s all.”

“That gorgeous hunk? Hard to imagine those deep blue eyes angry.”

“The venture capitalists are unhappy. They’re going to send in somebody to pick at our work.”

“Big deal.”

“It’s never good to have the ‘bean counters’ checking on research. They’re too shortsighted. Only concerned with what you’ve done for them this week. Never look at the long range good you might be accomplishing.”

A Ton of Gold

Brandi settled back on the couch and put her feet on the coffee table. “Okay. I’ll buy that. What about Dr. Coup?”

Crystal glanced up for an instant, then refocused on the marble top of the table. She didn’t want to think about Dr. Krupe, much less talk about him.

In a singsong voice, Brandi asked, “What’s the scoop on Dr. Coup?”

“Krupe,” Crystal said without looking up. “Has an ‘R’ in it.”

“Okay, Krupe. Was this an affair gone bad?”

“We had a misunderstanding. It was a long time ago. Not important now.”

Brandi snorted. “Not important? You were sure worked up about it in the middle of the night. Not the first time, either. And did you look at yourself this morning? It’s a little early for Halloween. He dumped you, right?”

“No. He did not dump me.”

“I’ve been the dumper and the dumpee. When I did the dumping, I forgot it. When the guy walked, it bothered me. Maybe a lot. Maybe a long time.”

“It wasn’t an affair. He was my dissertation advisor at Stanford.”

“Well, I’m not very smart, but I’ve been to street U., and I can tell you this from experience. If you don’t deal with it, talk about it, scream and holler, you’re going to keep having nightmares and bad mornings. Been there, done that. Let’s get rid of that devil.”

Crystal squirmed in her chair. She studied the picture of a Spanish mission on the opposite wall as her eyes became moist.

Brandi’s voice softened. “Come on. Tell Mother Brewer what happened.”

Crystal didn’t want to talk about it. But Brandi was right about one thing: the nightmares weren’t going away. They were getting worse. Right now, she struggled to hold back tears. Why did he still have the power to destroy her self-confidence, her self-esteem? To make her uncertain of everything she did?

Contrary to her intentions, words began to tumble out of her mouth. “He asked me to come by his house to talk about my research. He’d never done that before, and it was a nasty night, but of course I went. He was the Great Dr. Krupe, the high priest of

A Ton of Gold

information retrieval. You couldn't say no.

"We discussed a few points, he made a couple of suggestions and in ten minutes, the meeting was over. I got up to leave. It was . . ." Her voice began to falter and it was several moments before she could continue. "The rain was really coming down. He offered to help me with my jacket, so I handed it to him and turned around."

Her throat began to close, as if to prevent more words from coming out. She shut her eyes. She didn't want to continue, but the words had been bottled up for a long time and now they escaped. "I felt his breath on my neck first, and he was saying it was too nasty to go home right now. I should stay until the rain stopped." A slight tremor rippled through her body. "And then his hands were up under my sweater and he was groping my breasts, pulling me back against him and kissing my neck." She ducked her head down, blinking her eyes, trying not to cry.

After a minute, Brandi leaned forward and whispered, "What happened?"

"I managed to push his hands away and turn around. He was looking at me like I was a . . . a ripe peach. I felt . . ." She shuddered. "I picked my jacket up off the floor and said I wasn't about to go to bed with him." Crystal looked at the ceiling, then back at the Spanish Mission, all the while blinking rapidly.

"And?"

"As I put on my jacket, he puffed up and said I had misinterpreted. He was just helping me with my coat and suggesting I might want to wait until the rain eased up a bit. If I had misread it, that was my lack of experience."

Crystal swallowed and there was a catch in her voice as she continued. "He said I often had trouble interpreting things correctly. And perhaps we'd better talk about my paper in his office the next afternoon."

She was quiet for a while, her eyes closed, her head bowed. Finally, Brandi said, "Well, that's not so bad. Let me count the times. There was Fast Freddie. And Sleazy Sam. And Fat Tony, and—"

Crystal's voice rose an octave and the despair came from down deep. "He was my *advisor*."

"Fat Tony was my boss."

"Did he fire you?"

A Ton of Gold

“I quit. How come it’s never anybody I like? Oh, well. What did old Poop do?”

Now, the tears refused to be held back. Crystal’s body shook and she hid her face in her hands. Brandi went over, sat on the edge of the chair and wrapped her arms around Crystal.

After several minutes, Crystal went on without raising her head. “The next day, I arrived at his office, expecting him to apologize for his behavior the night before. Without so much as a hello, he started in on my dissertation. He told me it was worthless. There was no originality, no merit to it. I should trash it. I could start over, if I wished. But I would have to come up with another proposal and try to get it approved by my committee.” She swallowed. “And get another advisor, which he thought might prove to be difficult.”

A low moan escaped from Crystal. “He said, to be perfectly frank, he didn’t think I had the ability to make it. I should consider whether I was wasting my time in school. I certainly was wasting his time.” Her body shook with silent sobs for a minute before she could finish. “So I quit. Left. Gave up my Ph.D. I was so close.” Her voice became a whisper. “So close.”

“That bastard.” Brandi had her arms around Crystal, and fire in her eyes. “Dr. Creep didn’t get your body, so he raped your mind.”

For a long time, neither woman spoke, muffled sobs the only sound. The tears finally subsided and Crystal got up and trudged into the bathroom to wash her face. When she returned she apologized for her loss of control.

“Don’t apologize. Get mad. And if you get the chance, get even.” Brandi jumped to her feet and looked down at her housemate. “And don’t call it a misunderstanding. When Dr. Creep couldn’t entice you into bed, he drummed you out of school. That’s not a misunderstanding, that’s an assault.” For a moment, fire blazed in Brandi’s eyes. Then, a grin crossed her face. “I was wrong when I called him Dr. Creep. He’s Dr. Crap.”

The tiniest hint of a smile made its way onto Crystal’s face. “I like it. Dr. Crap. Dr. Lester Crap.”

“Lester? Lester the lecher.”

Crystal actually laughed. “Dr. Lecher Crap. Describes him perfectly.”

“Dr. Crap don’t know jack.”

A Ton of Gold

“Dr. Crap is a big fat sap.”

“And you don’t give a damn what he thinks.”

“And I don’t give . . . a . . .” Crystal’s voice trailed off as the smile evaporated from her face.

Chapter 4

CRYSTAL drew diagrams on the white board while Phil Wilson and Sally Pampson, the other two project leaders at Intelligent Retrieval Systems, loaded their plates with food. Mark was already at the table, a sandwich, chips and several strawberries adorning his plate.

The lunch was not a social event. They all knew that in their profession, you either kept up with new research, or quickly fell behind. So, each Wednesday, one person reviewed a current technical paper. The responsibility rotated through the group.

This week, the task fell to Crystal. She finished the diagrams, turned around and began her talk. A navy and white, knee-length linen dress emphasized her model-thin figure. Her hair, black and shiny as obsidian, provided the perfect frame for a heart-shaped face. Her almond eyes reminded one of aged bronze. A tanned and flawless complexion made most makeup unnecessary. Today, a dainty, silver hummingbird hung from each ear.

Twenty-five minutes later, she finished describing the material in the paper and began her conclusions.

"What they found is that there is no statistical difference in these three methods." Sally raised a forefinger as if to object, so Crystal quickly added, "*When* applied to the specific problem of transcripts of spoken language."

"Okay. If you limit it to people talking, I won't object," Sally said.

The telephone rang, but nobody paid any attention.

"Maybe you should still object," said Phil.

The phone rang again. Mark frowned at the offending piece of plastic. Pam knew they did not like to be interrupted during these sessions. "Why do you say that, Phil?"

A Ton of Gold

On the third irritating ring, Mark grabbed the phone, listened, then pointed the receiver toward Crystal.

With the discussion suspended, Sally and Phil replenished their plates. Talk shifted to food and the weather, no one wishing to continue analyzing the research without Crystal's input.

Crystal listened intently while twisting the phone cord around her hand. She replaced the phone in its cradle. "Mark." Her voice quavered. "I've got to go. That was the sheriff from Wooden Nickel. Nana's been in a car accident."

"Is she hurt?"

"The sheriff doesn't think so, but she refuses to go to the hospital. So he really doesn't know. I've got to go."

"Can you call her?"

"He said she wasn't answering the phone, the door, or questions."

Chapter 5

NORMALLY, Crystal enjoyed the drive into East Texas. Today, her mind grappled with the little information she had. Nana had been in an accident; Bill Glothe didn't think she was hurt; he didn't know. And Bill was right. She wasn't answering the phone.

Nana's stubborn streak stretched from the crown of her head to the ball of her foot. She might be seriously injured and refuse to see a doctor. Nana's call about someone trying to run her off the road replayed itself in Crystal's mind, and as much as she tried to lock out the thought, she couldn't forget her parent's death. An auto accident ended their lives. Unshed tears clouded her vision. *Please, dear God, not Nana, too.*

An hour later, she turned off the county road into The Park and almost instantly felt the transformation begin. She had been gripping the steering wheel so tightly her back and shoulders ached. Now, her muscles began to relax and her breathing slowed to fit the more relaxed pace of life in the country. For the first time since Glothe's phone call, she allowed herself to take a more optimistic view.

The trees thinned slightly and the drive leveled off. The lake shimmered off to the right. Up ahead, the house rested under a canopy of tall pines. From this angle, it appeared rather unassuming. Cedar shakes, weathered to the same color as the trunks of the trees, covered the exterior. One could drive almost up to the house without being aware of it.

A car Crystal did not recognize was parked under the shed. It jolted her back to the reality that this was not a pleasure trip. Worry quickly replaced Crystal's momentary feeling of tranquility. She slammed her mind shut to the image trying to resurface: her parents' auto crash.

She parked and rushed in the back door. "Nana," she called.

A Ton of Gold

"On the veranda."

Crystal hurried through the bright living room with its high ceiling and glass wall overlooking the lake. As she stepped out onto the huge covered porch, her eyes immediately focused on the bandage. Trying not to let her voice show the level of her concern, she asked, "Nana, what happened to your head?"

"Where're your manners, girl? You remember Melva, don't you?"

Crystal looked chagrined. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Larson. How are you? I haven't seen you...in a year, I guess."

"I'm doing just fine, Crystal, and no need to apologize. You're concerned about your grandmother, as you should be. So am I. She thinks she's made of rock. Mostly her head, I reckon. She'd rather see her casket coming than admit she was hurt or sick." Melva, at seventy-four two years younger than Eula, eased herself up out of the high-backed rocker. "I've heard all about the accident. Didn't find it all that interesting the first time, so I think I'll mosey on before you get the details."

"If you stay, maybe I won't have to tell her about it." Eula sounded like a kid who had just broken a window at school.

"Not a chance, Nana."

Eula turned her head and spoke to Melva, who was already entering the house. "We're still set for the weekend?"

"I'm not the one with a banged-up noggin. Let's see how you feel in a day or two."

"I'm fine. Get packed."

"Already am. Good to see you again, Crystal. See if you can get ol' rock head to rest a bit." The last was spoken over her shoulder as Melva plodded through the living room and left.

"Okay, Nana. What happened?"

"Nothing much."

"I didn't drive all the way from Dallas for 'nothing much.' Let's have the details."

"Well, like I told you, somebody's trying to kill me. I got in my car to go down to Nickel this morning. You know how the county road has that steep hill running straight down to the highway, and the lake on the other side? Well, I guess the Good Lord was keeping an eye on me. Just as I started down the hill, a squirrel ran across the

A Ton of Gold

road. He started, then stopped, then went back. You know how squirrels are. Anyways, I hit the brakes. Well, my foot went right down to the floor. No brakes at all. I pumped 'em a few times. Nothing.”

Eula shifted in the chair, getting into her story. "Now, you know I've always thought those people in movies were pretty dumb. When that happens to them, no matter how steep or curvy the road or what might be ahead, they always try to steer down the road.

“Well, I said to myself, I don't want to plow out onto that highway—or into the lake, and I'm only going faster all the time. So, I hit the emergency brake and steered off the road for the softest spot I could find. Ran into a cedar tree.”

Crystal grimaced. "And your head?"

"Well, I hit the tree a little too hard and banged my head on the steering wheel." Her look turned more defiant than defensive. "No, I didn't have my seat belt on.”

"I wasn't going to ask.”

"Yeah.”

"No. I knew you didn't. Nana, you really should set a better example for me.”

"If I race back and forth to Dallas, I'll be sure to wear one. They irritate my bosoms.”

"That's just an excuse. What did the doctor say about your head?"

"Doctor?" She jerked her hand in disgust. "I bumped my head; I didn't break a leg. If I went to the doctor for every bump and scrape, I wouldn't have a place to live. Doctor'd own it. And would've retired long ago. Probably on my Park.”

Eula was too young to have been a pioneer, but Crystal knew her grandmother was clearly from independent, pioneer stock. "What did the sheriff say?"

"Why, he pitched a fit. Threatened to give me a ticket. I said no ol' Billy Goat's gonna give me a ticket 'less I hit *somebody*. Did the cedar tree file a complaint?"

Crystal shook her head. "It's a wonder he didn't take you to jail. What else did he say?"

"That I didn't have any brake fluid and that's why my brakes didn't work. Shows what he knows.”

A Ton of Gold

Sometimes Nana seems to be going through her teenage years again, Crystal thought. But she said, "Did he check the brake fluid?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"There wasn't any. And that's my point. There should 'a been. You know I check those things all the time. It was full last time I checked. And I don't have a leak. I never have to add fluid."

"But there wasn't any fluid in it today?"

"No. But don't you see? Remember what I told you a couple of days ago. Someone's trying to kill me. Someone tampered with 'em. Leaked it all out. Didn't work when they tried to run me off the road, so they tried messing with my brakes. That didn't work either."

Crystal sighed. Her grandmother truly believed someone was trying to kill her. Was this a sign or symptom of a serious problem? *But usually, Nana's mind seems so clear.*

For a long time they rocked quietly, enjoying the day. The sun slid behind a stand of tall pines until the entire porch rested in shade. A light breeze drifted up through the trees from the lake, carrying a slight hint of honeysuckle. Crystal knew it would be blistering hot in Dallas. But here, with the water and the trees it was just pleasantly warm.

Her mind flooded with happy memories of summers long past—sitting in the porch swing, listening to the woodpeckers, or watching the big, arrogant crows prancing around like they owned the place.

Today, half a dozen squirrels were playing tag at the edge of the grass. Brilliant cardinals shared a feeding platform with a goldfinch. A brown-headed nuthatch was sampling sunflower seeds at another feeder. And darting here and there, hovering and squeaking, were the hummingbirds. They flitted about too fast for Crystal to count.

Nana was right. Why would she want to leave The Park?

* * *

Over dinner, Crystal asked, "Why do you think someone is trying to kill you? Has anyone made any threats or said anything about killing you?"

"No. Person'd be a fool to come right out and say it."

"Has anyone *hinted* at it? Or acted hostile toward you? Do

A Ton of Gold

you have someone in mind?"

"No. Who'd want to kill an old lady like me?"

"Then, why do you keep saying someone is?"

"Cause they are." She looked at her granddaughter and shook her head. "Seems pretty obvious to me. First, a bum tries to run me off the road. Now, some skunk messes with my brakes. What would you call it?"

"A reckless driver and a leak in the brake fluid line. Where's your car now?"

"Billy Goat had it towed to the Possum Stop in Nickel. You can run me down to get it in the morning."

"Could we get it now? I hadn't planned to spend the night." Crystal saw the disappointment in her grandmother's eyes and quickly added, "Unless you were really hurt."

"Can't. Possum closed at six. Tubs'll open it up at seven in the morning."

Crystal's mind pictured the mechanic, slender as asparagus. "Nana, why do they call him Tubs? I've never seen an extra ounce on that man."

Eula giggled. "Ain't that the truth? Hardly casts a shadow. But when he was in grade school, he was a real porker. Everybody started calling him Tubby, then Tubs. Time he got out of high school, he'd grown a foot taller and just stretched the same pounds a lot farther. But everybody'd called him Tubs for so long, it just stuck." She paused to drink some tea. "We can go early in the morning. You're just going to have to spend the night with your grandmother. What's happening with you and Dud?"

"Doug."

"Doug, Dud. What's happening?"

Crystal got up and began stacking dishes. She did not want to talk about her "boyfriends", as Eula liked to call them. "Oh, we go out occasionally. Nothing too serious."

"Wasting your time there. Not going anywhere. Got anybody else on the string?"

Crystal resisted the impulse to agree, deciding it best not to answer at all.

"Thought not. I'm thinking maybe 'cause you lost your father when you was just seven, then your grandfather checks out, you

A Ton of Gold

might just think the men in your life will disappear on you.”

Crystal continued clearing the table and said nothing.

“Course, I also think something happened at Stanford. Don’t know what. And you sure ain’t telling.” Eula gathered up the glasses. “But something did. I could tell soon as you got back. You were different. Not as sure of yourself.”

Crystal almost dropped the stack of dishes she was loading into the dishwasher. She had never mentioned the problem at Stanford to Nana. Never hinted at it. In fact, she’d never talked about it with anybody before Brandi pried it out of her the other night. Was she sorry she’d talked about it with Brandi?

Chapter 6

THE next morning, Crystal and her grandmother pulled into the Possum Stop at 7:20.

"Couldn't find no problem with the brakes, 'cept they was dry. No leaks, no holes, no loose fittings. Just no fluid. I filled 'er up and it's ready to go."

Tubs had worked on Eula's cars for years and Crystal had always felt he did a competent job.

"What would cause that?" Crystal asked.

"Well," Tubs scratched his ear. "A real slow leak that I mightn't find, that could take a long time to run low." He sucked on his teeth. "That's about it."

"Or somebody lettin' it out." Eula said it half under her breath, but the tone was clear.

Tubs looked sheepishly at Eula. "Yes ma'am. That'd do it."

"Did you see any evidence of tampering with the system?" Crystal asked.

"No, ma'am. But that might be purty hard. Eula run over a lot of brush and stuff. So if'n somebody messed with it, not likely I'd know. 'Course, I wasn't lookin' for that. And now, well, there'd be *my* workin' on it."

Crystal decided to be direct. "Let's assume for a minute that someone did tamper with the brakes. Can you think of anyone who would want to cause Nana to have an accident?"

Tubs studied his grease-covered boots for several seconds. When he looked up, he said, "Well, Eula does talk purty blunt to folks sometimes. But I can't rightly say I know anybody what don't like her."

* * *

A Ton of Gold

Crystal followed her grandmother back to The Park, gave her a long hug good-bye, and started the drive to Dallas. Her thoughts turned to the events of the last three days. Perhaps the first incident could be dismissed. A lot of drivers had their minds on other things, and it took only a moment of lost concentration to wander across the center stripe. Maybe the guy was dialing his cell phone. Or texting.

But this brake business bothered her. *Nana really is good about taking care of her car. Always has been. Of course, brake failures can come on without warning. But then, Tubs didn't find any evidence of a sudden failure. Or anybody tampering with it.*

Crystal became aware that she was grinding her teeth. She took several deep breaths and rolled her shoulders to ease the tension. *Nana lives in the middle of her Park, she told herself. She doesn't see that many people often enough to make an enemy. Had to be a leak.*

Chapter 7

AT Intelligent Retrieval Systems, Mark replaced the phone in its cradle and looked up to see Crystal standing in the doorway. "You look a little more relaxed today," he said, motioning her in. "Everything Okay?"

Crystal filled him in on the accident, Eula's reaction to it, the sheriff's opinion, and Tubs' comments.

"So, what do you think?" he asked when she finished.

"Spoiled food, not poison."

Mark raised his eyebrows. "Spoiled food?"

"What I mean is, the incidents were carelessness, not an overt act to kill Nana. Why would anyone want to kill my grandmother?"

"I can't imagine. But she doesn't sound like the paranoid type to me." Mark shifted in his chair, indicating a change of subjects. "You'll be glad to know your new RAID system came in yesterday. In fact, I think Bobby Don already has it on your LAN."

Crystal had been anxiously awaiting the RAID, or Redundant Array of Inexpensive Disks, for several weeks. This particular RAID could store twenty trillion characters of data, roughly the equivalent of more than twenty million novels.

"Terrific. I think we'll be ready to load and test the full Department of Public Safety database starting Monday." She looked a little sheepish and her enthusiasm turned to embarrassment. "We're not going to make this week."

Sally Pampson stuck her head in the doorway. "Hi. You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah, come on in." Mark turned back to Crystal. "Glad your grandmother wasn't hurt. Better stay in touch, though. See how her paranoia goes. Let me know how the new RAID works. And when the data is loaded."

A Ton of Gold

* * *

Mark got up and closed the door after Crystal left, then turned to Sally. "Just wanted to know how JT was working out." JT Gonzales had come to work for IRS only five months ago. Sally had supervised her the entire time. "You're still behind your projection for the history/folklore project. Is that you, JT, or someone else on your team? Or some mix of those?"

Sally, thirty-seven and slightly overweight, relaxed in one of the easy chairs in the conference area of Mark's office. Her brown hair was short and permed so that she could, as she put it, just run her fingers through it in the morning and it was combed. "Actually, maybe a mix of JT and the project. Everything was sailing along until we got into the testing phase. Then she slowed to a crawl. I don't know whether it was because our methods were new to her or what. She was really zipping along before. But a couple of weeks ago, POW. Like she hit a brick wall. Progress just stopped.

"Good news is, she's moving again. Maybe something was going on in her personal life. I don't know. She doesn't talk much—like I do. But for a week, she snailed along at about quarter speed."

"How's the testing going now?"

"Great. With Rod's handy-dandy book reader, we've scanned in over eighty-thousand pages and we've spot-checked a good bit of that already. 'Course, there've been a few glitches we've had to iron out. We're getting there. In fact, we're ready to scan in the rest of the material."

Mark nodded a few times. "And Rod's machine has helped?"

"Oh, yeah."

Rod Tucker was Mark's best friend and a top-notch mechanical engineer. A product of Texas A & M, Rod could convert almost any idea into hardware. While he didn't work for IRS, Rod believed helping a friend was the most important thing a person could do. In this case, he had made a device that automated the scanning of books into a computer. Load twenty to thirty books into the machine and it would process them with no further human intervention.

That was only part of the solution. Intelligent Retrieval Systems' software did the hard part - making all that information

A Ton of Gold

easily and quickly accessible. Sally's project would allow people to research Texas history and folklore thousands of times faster than they could without this new program.

"So, the project's back up to speed, if running a bit behind." Mark made it a statement, but Sally recognized it for the question it was.

"Yeah." Her hazel eyes twinkled. "Speedy Gonzales and Pampson on the move. We'll be ready for the big hoedown. I've got some examples I think will wow them."

"Great. The deep pockets will appreciate that. So will I."

"Guess I'd better get hopping before anything else slows us down."

Chapter 8

OVER dinner with Brandi, Crystal had recounted her visit with Eula. Now they relaxed in the living room. “The thing is, Nana has always kept her cars in good shape. As far back as I can remember, she would check everything: oil, radiator, transmission fluid, and . . .” She paused and raised a finger. “Brake fluid. It’s Nana, not some service station man, who tells me I need to replace a fan belt or something.” She shook her head. “It’s hard to imagine her car slowly losing its brake fluid and her not noticing it.”

“How easily can you imagine someone trying to kill your grandmother?”

Crystal tilted her head to one side. “I can’t. That’s what makes this so puzzling.”

“Is there a third choice?”

“Third choice?” Crystal frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’ve said either it was a total accident, or someone is trying to kill her. Any other choices?”

The frown persisted. “I certainly can’t think of any. Can you?”

“No. But then, I’m not too smart. I thought—”

The phone interrupted Brandi, and she answered it. After a moment she said, “Oh, hi, Doug. How’s it going?”

Immediately, Crystal began waving her hands in front of her roommate’s face. When Brandi looked up, Crystal was shaking her head and mouthing “no”.

“Ah, she’s not here right now, Doug.” She listened for a few seconds. “No. I have no idea where she went, or when she’ll be back. But I’ll tell her you called.”

She hung up the phone. “What was that all about?”

“I can’t deal with Doug right now.”

A Ton of Gold

“Just tell him what’s going on. He’s a nice guy, and he really likes you.”

“He’ll want to know all the details, and then he’ll tell me they were just accidents and I’m being silly to worry.”

“Which is sort of what you’re saying.”

Crystal took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yeah. And I’d like to have someone reinforce my feelings in that direction.”

“But not Doug?”

Crystal shrugged.

“Want me to ask Tom?” Brandi was dating Tom Hawkins, a detective in the Dallas Police Department. “Or ask him yourself. You know how easy he is to talk to.”

“I don’t know.”

“How about Mark? You think he’s pretty levelheaded. Discuss it with him. After work. When he can concentrate on you. I mean, your problem.” Brandi raised her eyebrows and wiggled her head.

Even Crystal had to smile at Brandi’s suggestive look.

Chapter 9

"PUT in a landing and a ninety-degree turn in the stairs," Mark said.

"It just isn't necessary. A flight of stairs is not dangerous, except perhaps to the elderly. And it *is* my house, after all."

Rod Tucker was standing in the den of Mark O'Malley's sprawling ranch house. Located about thirty minutes south of his downtown Dallas office, the house seemed an extension of Mark himself: the unlikely combination of Texas country and high tech. It sat in the middle of twenty acres, had a pickup parked prominently on the circle drive, and had four Merced-based computers that controlled just about everything.

"You're wrong. Stairs *are* dangerous," Mark said. "Why are the English so stubborn?"

Rod lived about three miles away. Last week, he had finished a deck outside his study and now was planning some stairs down to the back yard, about eight feet below. Mark was concerned that Rod's young son might fall down the stairs.

"We're not stubborn, just firm in our beliefs," Rod said. "But, I'm an experimentalist. Let's just test this theory."

Without another word, he walked over to a door and opened it. On the other side, stairs led down to the garage under the den. He turned and looked at Mark as if to say, "I have to prove everything to you." Pivoting back, he let his knees buckle and tumbled down the stairs.

Mark ran to the door, afraid of what he might see. Rod lay in a crumpled heap at the foot of the stairs. The back of his head was on the concrete floor and his right arm was folded under his back. His legs sprawled at strange angles, and he was not moving.

Mark took the steps two at a time, fearful of what might have

happened to his friend. As Mark descended the stairs, Rod's left hand began to move. It came up and adjusted his glasses, still hooked behind his ears, if somewhat askew. Then, with the suddenness of a five-year-old, he bounced up and faced a slightly pale Mark. "See, they aren't dangerous. You can fall down a flight of stairs without sustaining injury."

Mark was too stunned to say anything.

He knew Rod was tough as rawhide and strong as a new well rope. And he realized Rod believed most things wouldn't hurt him. Apparently, he applied this to his son as well. Mark just shook his head and followed his friend up the stairs.

"I don't expect Ethan to fall on the stairs," Rod said. "But if he does take a tumble, he'll simply roll down—and the grass will be softer than your garage floor."

"Ethan doesn't have as hard a head as you do. And he may not understand the dangers any more than his father does." Mark went to the small refrigerator in the den and took out a Dr Pepper. "You're out of your mind. I will talk to Joan this week. Your wife has always had more common sense than you."

"But, I just showed—"

"I'm not discussing this topic with you anymore. I'll talk with Joan and she'll straighten you out."

Rod gave his small laugh. "Please remember, it *is* my house."

"And Joan's. And Ethan is my Godson."

Just then, a rather feminine voice said, "Mark?"

"Yes?"

"You have a visitor coming. Crystal Moore."

A grin spread across Rod's face. "I see you've added some improvements since we hooked up Shannon's camera."

Only a month ago, Rod had helped Mark install a digital camera and sensors near the gate on his drive. Rod had concealed the camera in a fake log that could elude close scrutiny. The area around the gate was bathed in a soft light, unnoticed by visitors, but sufficient for the camera to record all arrivals. Information from the camera was relayed to one of the computers in the house. Mark had given that particular computer the name "Shannon." After analyzing the data, Shannon's synthesized voice passed the message to Mark.

"I liked knowing someone was arriving," Mark said. "But I

decided knowing *who*, would be even better. So, I have the computer scan the license plate and check the results against a list of likely visitors. If Shannon finds a match, it tells me who it is. Otherwise, it simply says I have a visitor and displays a picture on the monitor.”

“What does it do about me?” Rod rarely drove a car, unless he was going somewhere with Joan and Ethan.

“It knows that you are about the only person who would ride a bicycle to my house. So, it expects it to be you. But, if the rider didn't have some of your characteristics, it would not identify the visitor as you.”

Rod gave his self-conscious laugh. “What kind of characteristics?”

“It tries to decide if the rider is the kind of person who would deliberately throw himself down a flight of stairs,” Mark deadpanned.

“So, Crystal's coming over on a Friday night.” Rod went on the offensive. “What happened to Gloria?”

“Nothing's happened to Gloria. In fact, we're going out tomorrow night.” Mark felt a bit defensive. “Crystal's coming to talk about her grandmother.”

“Her *grandmother*? Does Crystal often come over at night to talk about her grandmother?” Bits and pieces of a snicker escaped Rod's tightly closed lips.

“She's never been here before. But several things have happened—”

Just then, the doorbell rang. Mark threw up his hands, abandoning his defense, and went to answer the door.

When he and Crystal returned, Rod was gathering a few items into a backpack.

“Hi, Rod,” Crystal greeted him brightly. “Your book-reading machine is working as smooth as custard.”

“Thank you. Mark said it seemed to be holding together.”

“There's an understatement. Without it, we wouldn't be making nearly as much progress. I think you should charge IRS a royalty, or maybe a reading fee.”

“I might just do that.” Rod picked up his backpack. “Up for a few sets tomorrow?” he asked Mark.

“Sounds good. Eight-thirty?”

A Ton of Gold

“See you there. Don’t let him work you too hard, Crystal,” Rod said as he left the room.

* * *

“Before we start on why I called and wanted to come over to talk to you, I've got a question.” Crystal was standing by the fireplace. She had on well-fitted jeans and a crisp cotton shirt with an intricate design embroidered on the front. She wore just a touch of blush to complement her coral lipstick, applied more skillfully than it had been Monday morning.

“Fire away. Would you like something to drink?”

She cocked her head to one side as if debating with herself.

“How about a Coors?”

“You’ve got it.”

“May I look around in here?”

“Sure.”

When Mark returned, Crystal was checking out the CD rack. “Looks like a pretty eclectic collection.”

“I enjoy all music——well, almost all. I love the Meyerson,” he said, naming the famous Dallas symphony hall. “At the same time, I also enjoy going to Jimmy Joe’s New Honky-Tonk. I know. Weird. That’s what my mother says.” He handed her the beer, with a napkin wrapped around the bottom half of the bottle.

“Is this your father?” Crystal pointed to a picture of Mark, clad in dusty jeans and denim jacket, with his arm around an older man. Mark nodded. “And this is your sister?” Crystal indicated a picture of a beautiful blonde woman.

“No. Just a friend.” His face suddenly felt warm.

Crystal studied the picture of the woman a minute longer, a slight frown on her face.

This close to Crystal, Mark was aware, not of perfume, but a fresh, outdoor scent. “So, what was your question?”

“What is this plaque? The one with the bull on it.”

Mark looked at the plaque, then took a drink before answering. “That’s a story from another life.”

“Come on, Mark. You said you'd answer.”

“Actually, I said 'Fire away'. I did not say I would answer.” He walked over and settled onto the couch.

“Okay. Technically, you didn't say you would answer. But

A Ton of Gold

you know how curious I am. Why not just tell me?"

Mark contemplated his Dr Pepper for a moment. "On one condition: it's between you and me. It does not go to the office."

"Deal."

Mark hesitated, deciding just how much he wanted to divulge. "I grew up in Mesquite. When college time came, there wasn't enough money. So I rode in rodeos to help pay for college. I'd ridden all my life and thought I was pretty good. I found there was more money to be made riding bulls, so that's what I did. I paid for most of my college as a bull rider."

Crystal threw her head back and laughed. "That's terrific. I'll bet you were the only member of MIT's graduate school that rode bulls."

"I rode bulls to pay my way through Texas. When I went to MIT, I had a fellowship. No more being thrown in the dirt—or up in the air. No more hoping the bull didn't step on you. Some of those bulls weigh a ton or more, and their hooves can be sharp. They can do a lot of damage if they step on you."

"Did you ever get gored?" A mischievous smile crept across her face. "I know that's a little, um, gory, but did you?"

"No. No goring, no broken bones."

"Did you get that scar riding bulls?"

Mark fingered the scar that traced his left cheekbone. "Yeah. A big red bull up in Elk City rubbed me the wrong way and when I went off I hit the fence."

Crystal grimaced. "Sounds terrible."

"Actually, I did my eight and won some money to boot. That took some of the pain out of it."

"Did your eight?"

"You're supposed to stay on the bull for eight seconds. Only use one hand. Have some sort of style. And hope for a bull that makes you look good."

"Is that all? Just eight seconds?"

"Believe me, it seems a lot longer."

"And just how does the bull make you look good?"

Mark grinned. He hadn't thought about bull riding in a long time. "You need a bull that looks like the meanest critter in the world, that is very active in the ring, a bull the judges can't believe

A Ton of Gold

anybody could stay on for the full eight, but in fact isn't that tough to ride."

"Did you get those very often?"

"No. Maybe one a year, if I was lucky."

Crystal pointed to the plaque. "And this was for . . .?"

"That was for being too dumb to know when to quit."

Crystal stared at Mark, and the corners of her mouth turned down. She shook her head no.

"Actually, it was for rookie of the year. Best newcomer to the circuit—in bull riding. Of course, it was the last plaque I ever got. But I paid for college and that's what counted."

"Why didn't you get a scholarship to Texas?"

She asked the question with such innocence that Mark ignored its impropriety and simply answered it. "My grades in high school weren't good enough."

Crystal raised an eyebrow, but said nothing to the surprising statement.

"I was smart enough. My SAT's were high. But I hadn't been concerned about grades. You know the bit: it's not the grades, but what you learn, that counts. I learned a lot, more than most kids in my classes. I just wasn't worried about grades. Result: no scholarship." He paused for a moment to take a drink. "So I rode bulls. *And*, I got more concerned with grades."

"Did you enjoy it? Bull riding, I mean."

"Yeah. Mostly, I enjoyed the people, the other riders and ropers. Quite a bunch. Straightforward. Friendly. Say what's on their minds. And they *do* like to have fun."

Mark looked out the window, a faraway smile on his face. He had forgotten what good times those were. He remembered the smell of rodeos, the hot animals, his own sweat, the leather. He could almost feel the rope, tight around his right hand, and two thousand pounds of raw power restless under him, waiting to explode. The surge of adrenaline when the gate opened. The thrill of a successful ride.

Saturday had been ample compensation for a sore Sunday.

The clock on the bookshelf chimed and jolted Mark back to the present. "But, that's not why you wanted to come over. What's on your mind?"

A Ton of Gold

She took a drink of her beer before answering. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday afternoon. About Nana not sounding like the paranoid type. You're right. She isn't. I can't remember her ever sounding paranoid. Generally, she's the reverse. If people around her are worried about something, she just dismisses it."

"That could be the theory of opposites working."

Crystal looked puzzled. "Theory of opposites?"

"Goes something like this: if two people are facing a problem, the angrier one gets, the more subdued the other becomes. Person A gets a little madder; person B gets a little more subdued. They may even change sides. If person B begins to get mad about it, then person A will become calmer. In the past, when others worried, your grandmother was calm. Now, nobody is concerned about these incidents, so she is."

Crystal studied Mark for a minute. "Did you just switch sides? Or is that the theory of opposites working in our discussion?"

"Could be. But I prefer to think of it as considering all sides. Maybe she's making more of it than it deserves. Then again, maybe someone is out to injure her."

Mark saw worry and tension work their way down Crystal's face. Her eyes, normally so shiny and alive, now looked dull and brooding. No doubt she had considered the possibility that someone wanted to injure her grandmother, but this was probably the first time an outsider had said it. Mark knew that one asked for an independent opinion, hoping it would reinforce what she wanted to hear, not what she feared.

Crystal frowned at the bottle in her hand and abruptly set it on the mantle, as if it had suddenly become colder. She stared at the floor and wrapped her arms around herself.

"Crystal, I'm not saying there's someone out there. I'm saying you have to consider it." For a moment, Mark just watched her. Her expression didn't change. "What do I tell you to do when you start a new project at IRS?"

Crystal looked up and gave a half laugh. "Finish it on schedule."

Mark chuckled. "True. And my other generic instruction?"

She thought for a minute. "Consider at least three different

A Ton of Gold

ways to approach the problem. Don't just grab the first thing that comes to mind and run with it. Even if it turns out to be the way you eventually solve the problem, you'll have more insight from having considered alternatives."

"Consider alternatives." His eyes turned toward the large window opposite the fireplace. Outside lights accented a bright-pink Mimosa tree. *Why would someone want to injure an old lady?* "Has anyone tried to buy your grandmother's land?"

"No. Nana would never sell her Park."

"That's my point. She wouldn't sell. If someone wanted it badly enough, they might try to scare her off."

"She won't scare. But I see what you mean. She hasn't mentioned anything like that."

"Would she?"

"What? Tell me if someone offered to buy it? I don't know. I mean, she would if it came up. But she might just dismiss it, not think to say anything about it."

"You might ask her, casually. It's worth checking. Has she had any boundary disputes? Does anyone share mineral rights on the land?"

Crystal shrugged. "I don't know. I never heard any discussion about that sort of thing. She and my granddad bought the land over fifty years ago. I can't imagine any boundary dispute coming up now."

"Understand, I'm not suggesting there is one. I'm just saying you have to consider all possibilities. You think of your grandmother as a sweet old lady whom no one would ever try to hurt. If she's right, then there *is* someone who would do her harm. You've said she's strong willed. Strong-willed people can rub others the wrong way. Someone may see her as unreasonable, arbitrary."

For a minute, neither said anything. Mark broke the silence. "At IRS, when a project comes along, there are two possibilities for you. It might go to someone else, in which case, you're mildly interested in it. The second possibility is it becomes your project. Then you must look at it from all angles, consider all facets."

Crystal nodded several times. "Okay. This project is clearly mine. I'll consider all possibilities. It's too late to call Nana tonight. I will tomorrow."

A Ton of Gold

* * *

Mark watched Crystal drive off. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly ten, but he knew Josh Kinsolving would be up, if he was home.

On the fifth ring, Josh answered.

"Hey, how are things going?"

"Terrific, Mark. What's on your mind?"

Josh was never one to waste much time. A long time employee of Schlumberger Wire Line, he understood efficiency. Josh managed one of the oil well service company's offices in East Texas.

"I'm not looking for any proprietary information. But is there new interest in the Wooden Nickel area?"

"You mean any drilling? Not that I know of."

"I really had in mind land acquisition, or leasing of mineral rights."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. Mark wondered if Josh was considering the ethical aspects of answering or just trying to remember anything. Finally, he said, "I'm not aware of any activity in that area. What's your interest?"

Mark chuckled lightly. "It may be nothing at all. But one of my employees has a grandmother who lives alone out there. Has half a section. A couple of things have happened in the last week, and she, the grandmother, thinks somebody is trying to kill her. I doubt there's anything to it. The police don't think so. Anyway, I'm just looking for anything that might be a motive."

"Sorry. Don't know a thing. You think somebody really is trying to kill her?"

"Probably not. On the other hand, she doesn't sound like the kind easily spooked. If you hear anything . . ."

"I'll call you. And, Mark." Josh paused just a second. "Don't dismiss it too quickly. Wouldn't be the first time someone got killed over an oil lease. Or timber."

Chapter 10

MONDAY afternoon, Mark called a meeting with his project leaders. Crystal was the last to arrive in the conference room. “Sorry,” she said as she slipped into a seat, a half-finished donut in one hand.

“We only beat you by thirty seconds,” Mark said. “Okay, guys, we’ve got the date for the Rooney visit. They’ll be here two weeks from today. It’s not clear yet what happens on that Monday. But Tuesday, they’re expecting demonstrations and status reports.” He hesitated a beat. “We need to shine. They’re putting a good bit of money into IRS and it’s up to us to convince them it was, and still is, a wise thing to do.” Mark looked at each of his three leaders. “I know you don’t like to think of outsiders controlling things, but let’s face reality. We’re almost there. Almost. But right now, we need them. At least for another year.”

Crystal, Phil and Sally all nodded agreement.

“How come they’re bringing a consultant?” asked Sally.

“Actually, on a first deal like this was for me, it’s pro-forma to have a consultant. The unusual thing is that they didn’t do it at the beginning. That’s why I was surprised. And why I’m a little concerned. Not over them hiring one, but the timing. Right before the second round of funding is due.”

“What about trade secrets?” Phil asked.

“Oh, I’m certain Rooney has had him—”; Mark looked at Crystal and Sally. “—or her, sign a non-disclosure agreement. But I’ll confirm that with Rooney.”

After a few more questions, Mark turned to the main business of the meeting. “Okay. Let’s start with you, Crystal. Where is the IPPI project and what will we be able to do—with certainty of success—in two weeks?”

“We hope to start loading data tomorrow. If all goes well, we should finish that phase by Wednesday. We’ll test for the next week, then take two days to develop a ‘show and tell.’ I think we can give an impressive demonstration,” she concluded.

Mark nodded. “Are you cutting it a little close? You’ve only allowed two days to develop and perfect the demo. That leaves little room for error. See if you can tighten things a bit and allow a little leeway on the demo. You don’t want it to crash.” He turned to Sally. “How about you?”

Sally was leaning back in her chair. Crystal thought for an instant Sally might have been asleep. She leaned forward, suddenly animated. “We’re really rolling now. Barring any unforeseen problems, we’ll give y’all a demo next week. We won’t be completely finished for a while, but I think we can knock their socks off with what we have. We’re going to impress even you, Mark.”

“I’m not the important one to impress. But that’s a good place to start. When should I schedule your demo?”

“How about next Wednesday?”

“Good. We’ll all be there.” Mark glanced at Phil, then looked at the other two. “You all

know Phil's group has just started on their help-desk project. So, they're not going to have much to show. Mostly, it will be the plans and projections, and possibly a toy system to give them a feel for it. I believe that will be sufficient. They understand our timetable. They won't expect a completed system.

"But, Phil has come up with an idea that I will present to the VC guys to show that we're looking ahead, even as we are handling today's projects."

Crystal pushed the last of the donut into her mouth and glanced at Phil, who averted his eyes immediately. She guessed Phil's age at about fifty-five. He was tall, with gray eyes and mostly gray hair, which constantly looked like he had just emerged from the barbershop. Phil regularly wore a coat and tie, the only person in the office who did. He always exuded confidence and spoke with authority.

"Do you want to explain it, Phil?" Mark asked.

Without looking up, Phil said, "Ah, why don't, ah, maybe it ought to wait until after Rooney's visit."

"I think it's a terrific idea and we certainly want to put it before Rooney." Mark looked at Crystal and Sally. "Phil has suggested that we could apply some of the new IR techniques to monitor medical costs." For several minutes, Mark explained what might be done and how that could be commercially successful.

Crystal's mouth dropped open and she turned toward Phil with wide eyes. She had described exactly such a project to Phil only a few weeks ago. They had talked about it over lunch one day. He had been enthusiastic about its possibilities.

But, it had been *her* idea. Not Phil's.

She didn't understand what was going on. She stole another glance at Phil, who was looking at his hands, folded in his lap, and squirming slightly in his seat. Was he waiting for Mark to credit her?

Mark finished. "Any questions?"

No one spoke. Crystal started to, but didn't. *Am I being petty? No. That's my idea.* Still, she hated to make a big scene in front of everybody.

"Okay. Let's get after it. Make your people understand the importance of the next two weeks. Remind them that Rooney Associates is paying their salaries. And if I can help speed things along, don't walk, *run* to my office and ask."

He looked at each of his leaders, and gave a thumbs-up. Sally got up and left immediately, but Phil didn't move.

Maybe he's going to tell Mark it was my idea, Crystal thought. *If I sit here, it will be more difficult for him.* She got up and left without saying a word. But her mind was racing, bouncing between confusion, disbelief, and anger.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Crystal burst into Mark's office, her face ashen. Her eyes looked as if they were holding back tears. Her steps were uncertain.

"Mark. The sheriff just called. Nana's house is on fire. Her car" Her voice faltered. "Her car's there, but ... they can't find" Her lower lip began to tremble, and she put her hand up to cover it. Her other hand grabbed the back of the chair to steady herself.