

Political Dirty Trick

A Crystal Moore Suspense Novel

James R. Callan



Political Dirty Trick is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, places or incidents is purely coincidental.

Political Dirty Trick
Copyright © 2018 by James R. Callan

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means, electronically, mechanically, including but not limited to photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without prior written permission from the author, except for the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cover Design: Adrijus Guscia
Formatted by Enterprise Book Services, LLC

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 13: 978-1-7321227-0-3
ISBN 10: 1-7321227-0-9
LCCN: Applied for

Political Dirty Trick

Chapter 1

Saturday, March 24

She crept into the room, a mere shadow. No sound. No trace of her presence. The small flashlight she pulled from her pocket produced only a slight glow, hardly noticeable from across the room, invisible from outside. But it revealed the major objects in the room: a desk, two chairs. And the Mondrian. She studied the painting for a moment. *Why would anyone pay big bucks for this nonsense? With a canvas, a paint pallet and a bottle of vodka, I could produce the same thing in an hour or two. Would anyone pay me three hundred thou for it? Not a chance.*

No one was in the house, yet she moved with care to lift the painting off the wall. Lighter than she expected and only about three feet square. She turned and glided out of the room. Except for the missing painting, nothing had been disturbed, not even the dust. She made her way down the short hall and into the kitchen, headed out the way she came in.

She froze.

A noise, ever so slight, came from the back door. A key slipped into a lock.

The owner, at a campaign rally, shouldn't be home for another hour. Light flooded the entry room and she heard footsteps coming toward the kitchen, toward her. The room was still dark, but her eyes had become accustomed to the low light. Her mind raced as fast as

her heartbeat. She started forward, then stopped. Back toward the study would leave her exposed in the hall.

The only other exit was a door on her left. She opened it. A pantry. She slipped in, and eased it shut just as the kitchen lit up.

The person walked as if familiar with the house, confident of the surroundings. Leather soles. Heavy. Probably a man. He hesitated. She held her breath. What if he opened this door? Her flashlight was too small for a weapon. The muscles in her body tightened like a boa constrictor.

The person moved on, headed down the hall. She waited, mentally counting off the number of seconds she had taken to reach the office. *Please let him go into the living room.*

She waited ten seconds, eased open the door. Light spilled from the study. She stepped out of the pantry, painting in hand. Before she could close the pantry door, she heard leather shoes pivot on hardwood floors. Now the steps had more purpose, as the man started back. She looked at the lights and the distance to the back door and took the only safe route: back into the pantry. She had just closed the door when the man reentered the kitchen.

The bright lights had destroyed her night vision and now she could see nothing. But she could hear. The man stopped, and began punching numbers into a telephone.

Chapter 2

“**That’s why I’m** running for governor and that’s what I’ll try to do if elected.”

A reporter for an online newspaper called out. “Mr. Drake, you said you’d *try*. Your opponent says he’ll *deliver*. That makes him more decisive, doesn’t it?”

Ron Drake, sixty-six years old with heaps of silver hair atop a trim body, smiled at the young woman. “I’d be more inclined to say it shows he doesn't have much experience with government. Whoever becomes governor has a bully pulpit, a lot of contacts, and a little sway - *if* he won by a landslide. He can suggest a direction. But if my opponent thinks he can push around 181 strong willed Texans, well...” He gave a soft laugh. “Well, he must not have lived in Texas very long.”

The woman tried again. “Your opponent—“

Ron interrupted. “Doris, I don’t want to talk about my opponent. Jim Bob is a nice guy. But I’m not going to give him any more of *my* press time. If you’ve got a question about the programs I’m proposing, let’s hear ‘em.”

A man from the *Dallas Morning News* spoke up. “Mr. Drake, why do you put education ahead of law enforcement? A number of

people think that's a big mistake. The Texas Rangers don't agree with you on that front."

"For one simple reason, Johnny. If we educate our children well enough, law enforcement will be a lot easier. If we teach our children the difference between right and wrong, give them a proper moral compass, then crime goes down, traffic accidents go down, even parking tickets go down. Law enforcement gets easier. And maybe we get back to the days of 'One Riot; one Ranger.'" He shifted his gaze to include all the reporters. "I'm totally for more law officers *now*. But the solution for the long range is education. A return to moral principles."

Crystal Moore couldn't help but grin. Ron Drake was one of her grandmother's best friends and had been for a long time. Crystal had known him all her life. Still, she marveled at the easy way he handled questions, never getting flustered, apparently never offended, and never without a sensible answer. She had heard him at three press conferences. Not once had he trashed his opponent, Jim Bob Wilson, and Wilson was an easy target to trash.

Within a few minutes, Drake ended the press conference and moved away from the podium. "Hi, Crystal. What are you doing here? Surely you've heard me talk enough over the years."

Crystal stepped forward and gave the slender, six foot politician a hug. "Nana wanted me to come and hear what you had to say to the locals. I can report back it was a fantastic speech. And your answers satisfied even the pickiest reporter."

He laughed. "They just want a sound bite. But why didn't Eula come herself?"

"She's got Melva and a couple of other friends over for Mexican Train. Had it planned before she knew you were making a campaign stop here. Wooden Nickel doesn't rate that attention very often. Why don't you come over for a bit. She made fried pies. First blackberries of the season."

“Mighty tempting. But I’m supposed to hang around here for another hour, in case someone wants a picture or something, though I can’t imagine why anyone would.”

Crystal laughed. “Because you’re the hot ticket, the next governor.”

“Candidate. Only a candidate.”

“With speeches like that, and your terrific platform, a raft of people think the governorship is in your pocket. And I agree.”

He smiled at the granddaughter of one of his best friends. “Not so fast. You know what they say: ‘It ain’t over ‘til —“

Crystal immediately started singing. “It’s a great day for shining your shoes.”

He laughed. “Sorry, Crystal. But you do *not* qualify as the ‘fat lady.’ The election is still seven months away. A lot can happen.”

“And I’m sure a lot will. But it won’t change the outcome. The election is yours. But, I’ll be glad to help you any way I can.”

“I never turn down help. You can lend a hand out here in east Texas. My campaign office seems to think only the mega-cities count.” He glanced down at Crystal’s wrist. “Is that a newfangled watch or something?”

Crystal lifted her arm up. “No. This is a fitness bracelet. Tells me how far I’ve walked each day. I’m trying for 10,000 steps a day.”

“Sounds like a lot to me. Surely you’re not trying to lose weight?” Crystal, standing five feet seven inches tall and with a nice figure, tipped the scales at one hundred eighteen pounds. Her black hair reached just below her ears.

“No, no. But since I sit at a desk hunched over a computer a lot when I’m at work, I need to get in some exercise. I’m not much on going to the gym. So I try to walk a lot. You should try it.”

He chuckled. “That’s for you young kids, I’ll —.” *The Eyes of Texas* began playing, and Drake reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He tapped the screen and the music stopped. “Hello, Nat. What’s up?”

* * *

The thief could hear the man talking on the phone.

“Mr. Drake. You haven’t moved the Mondrian have you?” A moment of silence. “Well, it’s gone.” Another pause. “I mean it’s not in the study where it usually is. I went in to put those papers you wanted on your desk. First thing I saw was a blank space on the wall where it usually hangs.”

Her heart was pounding so hard she was afraid the man could hear it. She took a deep, silent, breath. *Calm down.* Drake was still at the rally. This man would leave. She would have plenty of time to slip out before Drake returned. *Relax. It will be okay. Deep breaths.*

“Yes sir.” The man was talking again. “I’ll wait right here. How long before you get home? Fifteen minutes? Okay. I’ll help myself to a Dr Pepper and wait.”

Drake should be at his rally for another hour. It was supposed to be two hours, and those things never ended on time anyway. Fifteen minutes meant he was leaving right now.

She heard the refrigerator door open, close, and then the fizz as a soda can popped opened. *Go back into the office, she willed. I’m sure you’ll find a much more comfortable chair there.*

Instead, she heard the creaking of a chair as the man sat down beside the kitchen table.

Chapter 3

Calm down. Make a plan. You're good at that. But her heart raced in double time. If she got caught—and if she stayed here she would get caught— she'd be looking at grand theft. It wouldn't be a prank, a political dirty trick. This was an expensive painting. Of course, that's why she chose it.

She cracked the door open a quarter inch. The man sat with his back to her, relaxed, apparently not planning to move until Drake got home. She could almost sneak out without him knowing it. Except the painting would scrape on something, or the floor would squeak. Some small noise, just enough to make him turn and see her. With the Mondrian.

What if she could knock him out for a couple of minutes? She glanced around in the pantry. Even with the door open a crack, her vision wasn't good, but she could pick out bags of sugar, flour, coffee filters, canned goods, a broom. A broom! She could hit him over the head with the wooden handle. But would that knock him out? Probably only wake him up, make him mad, alert him that she had the painting. She picked up the sack of sugar. No. Too soft. She turned her attention to another shelf. She picked up a big can. It felt heavy enough. And solid.

Even as her heart raced, she moved slowly. She knew the slightest sound in the silent house would grab his attention. The door opened without a squeak. *Three steps, that's all I need.* Her soft, rubber-soled shoes did not make a sound. She raised the can. A medium tap was all she needed. Her arm started down.

At that instant, he turned his head, beginning to look around in her direction. She brought her hand down faster. His sudden movement foiled her aim and instead of hitting the back of his head, the can slammed into his right temple.

The Dr Pepper can slipped from his fingers and fell to the floor, spilling brown liquid across the clean tile. The man slumped forward, tumbled from the chair, hitting his head on the counter before landing on the floor.

The thief studied him for a few seconds. She thought about checking his pulse, but didn't want to touch him. *He's definitely out.* She stepped back into the closet. She glanced at the can as she set it back on the shelf. Stewed tomatoes. With her gloves on, there would be no fingerprints. She grabbed the Mondrian and took one last look at the man. Still out. *I didn't hit him that hard. He won't be out long and I'm sure he'll be okay.* In less than thirty seconds from the time he hit the floor, she was out the back door.

Three minutes later, the thief was in her car, slowly driving away. She smiled. She remembered the times she had sneaked up on her dad. He said she was like a shadow, passing over things without disturbing anything, not making a sound. She had been a shadow tonight. At least she was until that man came in. And then he wouldn't leave. But when he woke up, he wouldn't remember her. He didn't see her. He didn't hear her. He wouldn't have any idea why he fell over and hit his head on the counter.

Her mind wandered to her meeting with George Weeks ten days ago, the meeting that got this whole thing started.

Chapter 4

Wednesday, March 14

Ten days earlier

"**Wow. Look at** these numbers. Old Drake really started fast out of the box," she said.

"He's going to be tough. I won't say this to any of the guys at campaign headquarters, but I don't think Jim Bob has any chance of catching him."

"Come on, George. There's over seven months to go. Things are just getting started." Ginnie Leverett wore a red jumpsuit that stopped at mid thigh, and red boots. At thirty-five and divorced, the tall, slim brunette needed something new and different to be involved in. She chose the Texas governor's race. Working for Jim Bob Wilson's campaign enlivened her ho-hum life.

George Weeks shook his head. "Drake is just better. Has the experience. Has more money. People like him."

"There must be some angle we can work to get Jim Bob in as governor."

"I don't know. Short of a really good Podirt, I'm afraid Jim Bob is going to lose. By a lot."

Ginnie cocked her head, looking puzzled. "Podirt. What's that?"

"Sorry. Forgot you're new to this. It's a Political Dirty Trick. Something that drags your opponent's numbers down like they had a cement anchor attached."

She frowned. "Like what?"

"Oh, like digging up an illegitimate child, or a problem with the IRS. Or faking some award or military service."

Ginnie was shaking her head. "Is that legal?"

"Absolutely, if it's true."

She looked down and mulled this over. "Okay. I don't want to get into something that's illegal."

"You have to look at the situation from a political point of view. It's not something you'd do to an ordinary person. But when a person runs for office, they open themselves up to lots of scrutiny. Anything in their past is fair game. Doesn't make any difference how long ago or what the circumstances. I've done plenty of those in other campaigns."

Ginnie's frown showed her disapproval.

George Weeks smiled. "Nobody got hurt, except at the polls. I know I've made a difference in some elections."

"So, you make public he didn't pay his income tax and people realize he isn't the type of leader they want in the governor's office."

"Yeah. And military service is a big one. I remember one time a guy was really rising in the polls. He began to talk about his service in the Vietnam War, how horrible it was in the jungles and the brave things he did. I found out he was in the navy, but he never left San Diego. Once it went viral, he was toast."

"Why'd he do that?"

"Just dumb, when you get right down to it. He didn't need to pump up his credentials. But he got carried away. It's easy to do in a heated campaign. I think he began to believe it." He shook his head. "Stupid, though. Cost him the race."

"And you're saying we need a Podirt on Drake if Jim Bob's going to win."

"That's the idea. The problem is, Drake's a straight shooter. I don't think we could find anything like that. We have to come up with something that will sink him in the polls, but that doesn't have too much collateral damage."

"Like, if it was an illegitimate child like you mentioned. You don't want to expose them since they didn't do anything."

George's head wobbled and his mouth drew into a straight line. "Yeah. Something like that. But as they say, 'that ain't gonna happen.' I've looked already. Nothing. Drake really is one of the good guys."

"Any ideas at all?"

George looked away, but said nothing.

"What?"

"Nothing. Forget I mentioned it."

"Come on, George. What you got?"

For nearly a minute, the broad-shouldered man looked down as if he were studying his grey sport coat. Finally, he raised his head and looked at his trainee in Jim Bob's campaign office. "Drake owns a very expensive piece of art. A Mondrian. What if we could steal it?"

"Whoa. That sounds totally illegal."

George raised his eyebrows. "Think about this. Steal it and hide it in a mini-warehouse —rented under Drake's name." Now he smiled.

"So?"

"After awhile, you unlock the warehouse."

Ginnie's puzzled look remained. "And?"

"What can happen?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. How am I supposed to know?"

"Think about it. What can happen?"

She shrugged. "Somebody opens the door and finds it."

"And then what?"

"Well, they could recognize it and turn it over to the police. Or they could sell it and keep the money."

"Bingo. Suppose they turn it over to the police. When the Mondrian is stolen, Drake will get a ton of press on a major theft."

Lots of publicity. But then it turns up in his own warehouse." George's eyebrows shot up. "Oops. What was he trying to pull? The public will react badly. His numbers will sink."

Ginnie started to speak but George held up his hand and kept talking. "Or, the person who finds it, sells it. You can be sure the art police will track it down. The trail will still lead back to Drake's own warehouse, and the media will jump all over it." He spread his hands and smiled. "And here's the best scenario. Before it's found, the insurance pays Drake for his loss. Now, the doodoo *really* hits the fan. Insurance fraud. And much more. He's a loser now. Jim Bob wins."

"But Drake didn't actually do anything."

"Exactly. That's the beauty of this plan. He didn't do it. And eventually, his high-priced lawyer will make that clear, poke holes in whatever might be brought against Drake. So, in the end, Drake will get off all charges, and get his painting back. No problems. However, by then, he's lost the race. Jim Bob is the next governor."

Ginnie frowned, still trying to process this.

George looked pleased. "Don't you see. It's a perfect Podirt. No one gets hurt. But you change the direction of a political race."

"How do you get a warehouse in Drake's name?"

George laughed. "Piece of cake. Pick the right time and place and it's a five minute job."

"But you're stealing a work of art." Ginnie was still struggling with the legality of this. She didn't want to get involved in something questionable.

"Not really. You're not going to keep it, or sell it. You're putting it somewhere for safe keeping, in storage *under his name*. Drake doesn't lose a painting. Only misplaces it for a few months."

"I don't know." Ginnie shook her head and sighed. "You think that's Jim Bob's only chance?"

George nodded

Chapter 5

Saturday, March 24
Back to the Present

The sign for the Wooden Nickel Mini-Storage brought Ginnie's mind back to the present. She circled the self-storage units. *No one here. Course not. Who would be at 11:30 at night? That's why I waited to this late hour.* She continued back around and parked in front of unit number seventy-three. She had suggested this unit to George because it was not visible from the road. No one in sight. She didn't want anyone to see her doing something illegal. She'd never broken the law. George said this wasn't really a crime. Just a Podirt — a political dirty trick. Just putting *Drake's* painting in *Drake's* storage unit — for safe keeping.

She left the motor running but turned off the lights, got out and retrieved the painting. In seconds she had the lock opened and was pushing the door up. Suddenly she was seeing her own shadow in front of her. She stood very still. *Go to the next row. Go somewhere else.* Her shadow became more distinct and a car drove up and parked at the unit to her left. *Turn your damn lights off.* But she heard the door close and the lights stayed on.

“Hi, there. I thought surely I’d be the only one here this late.” The man’s voice had a friendly tone.

If she answered, would that make him think she wanted to visit? Maybe if she didn’t answer, he’d think she was unfriendly and go away.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” the man continued, and sounded closer. “My name’s John Littlefellow. Looks like we’re going to be storage neighbors.”

She turned her head and was shocked to see how near he was. “Good to meet you, John.” She turned back and struggled to push the door up, while holding the painting.

“Here, let me help. I don’t think they ever put any grease on these railings.”

“I’ve got it,” Ginnie said and gave the door another push. It opened and she started into the shed.

“You’re storing a painting in here? I hope you’re not going to leave it very long. These places are terrible for paintings. Either too hot and humid or too cold. I’ve even seen rats chew into the canvas. You can ruin a good painting in no time at all.”

Ginnie marched in away from the headlights and placed the painting against the wall, with only its back visible. *Is he ever going to leave?* She waited but couldn’t hear him move. Was it worse to stand there or turn and face him? She couldn’t decide, but it was getting awkward. She put a smile on her face, turned and walked out to face the intruder. She grabbed the door, yanked it down and snapped the lock closed.

“Don’t mean to be rude, John, but my husband didn’t want me to come this late, and he’ll be racing in if I don’t get home.”

“I understand. I won’t let Donna come down here this late at night. But I’ve seen paintings get ruined in one of these units. Or a basement. So don’t leave it here too long.” He paused a second. “Well, goodnight.” Littlefellow walked over to his unit and opened its lock

Ginnie jumped in her car, reminding herself not to throw gravel on the man. No point in doing any more to wave a red flag in front of him. Slowly she backed up, eased around his car, and gave a friendly little wave as she drove out of the lot.

Chapter 6

“Well, how’d Ronnie do tonight?” Eula Moore asked her granddaughter when Crystal walked into the kitchen.

“Very well, I’d say. He asked why you weren’t there.”

“And you told him Mexican Train came before a politician, I hope.”

“Not exactly. But you need to hear one of his speeches, Nana. I’ve heard three now, and I believe he’s going to be the next governor of Texas.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Smart as a whip, straight as an arrow, and likeable as a baby lamb. Want something to drink? Sweet tea’s made up.”

Crystal sat on a high kitchen stool. “How about a fried pie?”

“None left. Those women were like a swarm of grasshoppers, eating everything in sight. Have some tea. So, you think Ronnie’s gonna win come November?”

“No doubt about it.” Crystal put ice in a tall glass and filled it with tea.

“Course, beatin’ Jim Bob is hardly a fair fight. That man has the sense of a retarded mule. How on God’s green earth did he get nominated?”

“He was going to be the lieutenant governor on the ticket. Then, after the filing deadline, the top man, Warren Poker, got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He’s lucky he’s not in jail. But it dumped him from the ticket, and Jim Bob moved up.”

“Well, he might have worked as lieutenant gov, which is about as important as teats on a boar hog. Fills a space, but don’t work. Can’t see him being in charge of anything. How’d he get on the ticket at all?”

Crystal shrugged. “His father’s money, I guess.”

“Which old Jim Bob number one probably swindled someone out of.”

“Won the lottery is what I heard.” Crystal took a sip of the ice tea.

“And you don’t think old Jim Bob’s money can buy enough votes to beat Ronnie?”

“His daddy didn’t win *that* much money. When people hear both of them speak, the choice will be clear. The latest poll shows Ron with sixty percent, Jim Bob with twenty-three percent and seventeen percent undecided.”

“Hope you’re right. Ronnie'd make a fine governor. Texas could use a strong, honest man, or woman, running things.” Eula got up. “I’m heading to bed. See you in the morning, honey.”

* * *

The EMS and police screamed into the driveway within minutes after Ron Drake arrived home and found his friend on the floor unresponsive. It took even less time for the medics to pronounce Nathanael Owens, Ron’s property manager, dead. Before Ron could ask any questions, the EMS people had packed up and left.

A crime scene tech took fifty photographs, then dusted every surface in the kitchen and office, and around the back door. They checked all the doors and windows, trying to determine how the intruder had gained entry. Ron heard one of them grumble that a

little more dust would have helped. They asked Ron to check and make sure nothing else had been taken, or disturbed.

Even after the body was released by the Pine County justice of the peace and removed by the funeral home, Ron remained at the kitchen table, head in his hands. He answered questions from his friend, Sheriff Bill Glothe, in a monotone, often after a deep breath and without looking up. He had known Nat for ten years and considered him more of a partner than an employee.

Finally, everybody had left except Glothe. "You're sure you're gonna be all right, Ron?"

Ron's face now looked ten years older than it had at the rally earlier in the evening. "Yeah. It's so senseless. Nat was sitting in this chair. He wasn't chasing the thief. Why would he be killed?"

Glothe skipped over the question. "I hear what you're saying. 'Course we're not sure he was sittin' in the chair, although it looks that way. Once the crime scene guys finish analyzing the photos, we'll have a better idea. Don't think the autopsy will help us much. But I got to agree with you. He had a soda in his hand. Wasn't chasing anybody. And I don't think he was threatening the thief with a Dr Pepper can." The sheriff shook his head. "Makes about as much sense as diapers on a bull."

Drake eased up out of his chair. "Go on home, Bill. We can work on this tomorrow. I appreciate your staying, but I'm okay. I'm going to fall into bed, not even shower. I'll stop by your office in the morning."

Chapter 7

Sunday, March 25

The next morning, Ginnie Leverett slid into the booth opposite her best friend, George Weeks. “Glad you came.” She was grinning like a kid who found a twenty dollar bill. She checked the nearby booths, and the position of the waitresses. No one was near. Even so, she leaned close to George and whispered.

“We’ve changed the race. Jim Bob will win in a walk. The Mondrian is in a safe place until the time is right.” Her hands were in constant motion as she bounced on the booth’s faded faux leather seat.

George Weeks’s expression befitted an undertaker. “Are you not at all concerned a man is dead?”

A frown replaced Ginnie’s smile. “Dead? Who?” Her mouth gaped open and deep lines creased her forehead.

“The man in Drake’s kitchen?”

“He’s dead?”

“As a doornail.”

Her face sagged, and she stared at the table, slowly shaking her head. “I just knocked him out so I could get out of there. He came in and found the painting missing and called Drake. Said he’d wait until

Drake got home. And he sat between me and the door. What was I supposed to do? I couldn't just wait until Drake came home and found me with the Mondrian hiding in the pantry." She looked up at George. "I just tapped him on the head. I didn't kill him."

"The police think you did."

Ginnie almost screamed. "Me?"

"The thief. That whoever took the painting killed the man."

"Killed ..." She looked down at the table and slowly shook her head. "I've never even gotten a parking ticket. I never cheated in school."

A waitress approached and Ginnie order coffee. The waitress went for the coffee and Ginnie stared at George. Neither said a word. Ginnie's hands were shaking and she clasped them together, trying to stop them.

After the waitress delivered the coffee and left, Ginnie grabbed the cup in both hands and took several sips "It was an accident. An unfortunate accident. I was just going to tap him, knock him out for a few seconds." She stared down into the cup, as if trying to read something in the coffee. After a minute, she looked up. "Okay. Let's not panic. I wore gloves. There's no way they can trace this to us."

"Us? I didn't kill anybody," George said.

His determined tone jolted Ginnie, and she realized her friend sounded very distant. "We're in this together." She tried to hide the desperation surging inside her. "We talked about stealing the painting, waiting until Drake collected the insurance money, then letting it look like he had hidden it himself."

"I didn't join up for anything violent. I didn't kill anybody. There's no *us* concerning the murder."

Ginnie was taking a small sip of her coffee and almost choked. Her eyes now turned hard. "You rented the storage unit in his name. You planned this. You talked me into being a part of it. You're in as deep as I am."

Even before she finished, George was shaking his head and moving a little farther away from her. "If this all comes tumbling

down on us, I'm in trouble for falsifying the rental document. I'm in trouble for helping plan a political dirty trick." He continued shaking his head. "I've got no part in the murder. We never discussed that. The dirty trick was to steal the painting, make it look like Drake was into insurance fraud"

Ginnie looked at him with dismay, but said nothing.

The tall, heavy set man leaned his elbows on the table and lowered his voice. "I've been dabbling in politics since college. And I graduated fifteen years ago. This is not the first podirt I've been involved in. But never—*never*—did any of them involve violence, or anybody getting hurt. Physically, anyway. I'm not going down for murder."

They sat in silence for a minute, each studying the other, two friends who were no longer certain of each other. Ginnie broke the silence. "Well, it wasn't really murder. At worst, it was, ah," she thought for a few seconds. "Manslaughter. I certainly didn't intend to kill him. It's just that as I was starting to hit him on the head, he turned in my direction. So, I rushed, maybe hitting him a little harder than I intended. And because he turned, I hit him on the temple instead of the back of his head. I'm sick about it. I'm truly sorry he's dead. But it wasn't murder. It was manslaughter."

"But you did mean to hit him."

"Well, yeah."

"And you were there to commit a burglary, weren't you?"

"You know I was."

Again, George was shaking his head. "Ginnie, you don't understand. In Texas, those two acts taken together add up to a lot more than manslaughter." He put his coffee cup down and looked directly into her eyes. "That's capital. That's the needle."

Chapter 8

Crystal tapped the doorbell at Drake's country house. Eula put her finger on it and held it there for ten seconds. The seventy-seven year-old Eula was short at five feet two inches, but she was long on gumption.

"Hello, hello. Glad you stopped by." Ron Drake gave Eula a big hug and Crystal a smaller one. "Come on in. Alice has made coffee and scones." He leaned in between the two women and whispered, "She's a great housekeeper. But truthfully, I don't care for scones. She thinks they're a special treat and I don't have the heart to tell her. So, anything special comes up, I get scones. Please eat several. And take some home with you."

Eula laughed. "That's a man for you. But, just wanted to come over and see the real color of your office. Crystal said you got a call at the rally that your picture was stolen. Figured whatever was behind that picture was probably the original color."

"You come on back and take a look. Actually, I don't remember the color myself," said Ron.

"I know you'll miss the picture. But I won't miss it. Always thought it was ugly," Eula said as they walked back to Ron's office.

"Nana! That's rude. Ron's lost a valuable painting and you're –"

“It’s okay, Crystal,” said Ron. “Truth be known, it wasn’t one of my favorites either. But Ellie loved it. So I bought it, then kept it after she died. A reminder, I guess. We didn’t always agree, but we seldom disagreed.”

Crystal looked at Ron and for a moment, she thought his eyes misted over a little.

“Glad to hear that,” said Eula. “I always thought that was a flaw in your good judgment. ‘Course I’m talking about the painting. You couldn’t do better than Ellie. She was as fine as they come. But that painting; I wouldn’t give you two cow patties for it.”

Ron smiled. “Glad you don’t work for the insurance company. I think we had it covered for four hundred thousand.”

“Humph,” Eula snorted. “I guess the insurance company shares that flaw with you. Four hundred thou. You *are* talking dollars?”

“That’s about what we paid for it.” He looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds, then back at Eula. “That could have been fifteen years ago.”

“You were probably under-insured,” Crystal said. “It would probably cost you at least a million today. I read one of his brought fourteen million a few months ago.”

“Crazy fools,” muttered Eula. “Proves most people got more dollars than sense.”

“When will the insurance pay you for the loss?” Crystal asked.

“Not any time soon,” said Ron. “First, they’ll try to track it down. Somebody tries to sell it, most likely the buyer will be an undercover insurance investigator. So, they’ll see if they can catch the thief. Obviously, insurance companies don’t like to part with money.”

Eula laid a finger on her temple. “I’m thinking ‘bout putting some bowls of paint and a canvas in the cage with my pet gerbil. See what he can come up with. Probably bring in a hundred thousand.”

Ron chuckled. “Good idea, Eula.”

“Except she doesn’t have a gerbil,” Crystal said.

“So you just twiddle your thumbs until they feel like paying you?” asked Eula.

"That's pretty much how it works," answered Ron.

"Well, I'm satisfied seeing the blank space on the wall. Let's go have some scones," said Eula and she marched out the door heading toward the breakfast room.

"I thought I saw a police car leaving as we drove up," Crystal said.

"Probably heard he had scones," Eula muttered.

"Any news on the painting?" Crystal asked.

Ron stopped, and his entire body seemed to sag, like air escaping from a balloon. "I guess you haven't heard the full story. When I got home from the rally last night, Nat was lying on the floor in the kitchen, dead. The police believe Nat came in and caught whoever stole the Mondrian, and the thief killed him."

Crystal's hand flew to her face. "Oh my God."

"I'm so sorry, Ron. I know you and Nat were close. Terrible to come in and find your friend dead. And I apologize for being so" For once, Eula was at a loss for words.

Ron put his hand on Eula's shoulder. "You didn't know. Actually, it was good to be thinking about other things."

"So, the police just now left," asked Crystal.

"No. They came back this morning to check a few more things. Last night, they thought they had an idea what happened. But this morning, they're not so sure."

"What are they thinking?" asked Eula.

"Nana, Ron probably doesn't want to talk about it."

"It's okay, Crystal. I can't think about anything else. As I said, they thought Nat came in and surprised the thief and the thief hit him. But after thinking about it last night after they left, I couldn't make that work. Nat called me to tell me the Mondrian was gone. I said I'd be right there. And Nat said he'd grab a drink from the fridge and wait for me. When I found Nat, a Dr Pepper can was on the floor, open, but spilled all over the place. So, it looks like he called me, got a Dr Pepper and then got hit on the head by the thief."

"Whose prints were on the can?" asked Eula.

"Only mine and Nat's. I'd put it in the refrigerator and Nat took it out."

Eula gave a quick jerk with her head. "So old Billy Goat thinks you killed Nat."

"Well, he isn't saying that. But I'm sure someone at the police department has suggested it."

"But Nat was your friend," objected Crystal.

"Police will tell you victims are most often killed by a relative or someone they know."

Crystal nodded twice. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Have a few scones and then take a bunch with you," said Ron. "I'm going to be okay."

* * *

Ginnie sat in her red Fiesta, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel. Clearly it was an accident. No malice or forethought or whatever. Manslaughter. Maybe a year in jail. *I could do that. If I turned myself in, maybe less. And time off for good behavior.*

She'd never spent a day in jail. Not even an hour. Six months would be a long time.

George didn't think the police would call it manslaughter. He's smart, but does he really know Texas law? Maybe not. Maybe just trying to scare me. I need to check this out. But not from my computer.

She headed for the library.

Forty-five minutes later she was back in her car. The library's only computer had been available. With the help of Google, she had found the Texas statues on murder and specifically on capital murder. She had run searches from every direction she could think of. But they all came back to the same passage. The charge could be capital murder if the defendant committed a felony and in performing that felony, committed an act that was clearly dangerous to human life and this act caused the death of an individual.

Stealing, and that's the way the police would look at it - not a political prank - was a felony. Certainly stealing a painting as expensive as this one had to be a felony. Not that Ginnie knew much about paintings. But just the name, Mondrian, meant it was expensive. Could she argue hitting someone with a can of tomatoes was not dangerous? She had planned to tap him lightly, just enough to knock him out for a minute. No more.

But the man was dead.

She closed her eyes and an image of the man lying on the floor materialized in her mind. Her eyes shot open and she shook her head, trying to erase the image.

Maybe he had a heart attack. She'd have to check the news.

Her palms were sweaty and she wiped them on her pants. Capital murder. That was serious. It could mean the death penalty. Or a life sentence. That might be even worse. And the damn article said "without the possibility of parole." That could mean locked in a cell for fifty years.

She replayed last night's escapade. She had worn gloves, so her fingerprints shouldn't be on anything. She had used a bump key, so she hadn't left any marks on the lock. Not that scratches on the door or lock would give the police much help. But certainly they'd get nothing from the lock. Even her shoes were Walmart specials. Millions of them sold. No pattern on the soles. And it hadn't rained in weeks. So, the ground wasn't soft. Shouldn't be any print there.

In her mind, she retraced her steps. Through the woods, onto the grass, then the gravel drive and the cement. No place for impressions, except the woods. And why would they look there? If they did, what part of the woods would they look at? It's not like there's a path. And if they found any prints, so what? She was wearing generic shoes. One pair out of a gazillion.

Her mind went back inside the house. In the pantry, she had only touched the door knob on both sides and the can of tomatoes. But she'd had on gloves. And, she had replaced the can back on the shelf,

more or less where it had been before. So what if they found the can and decided it was the murder weapon?

Her mind recoiled at the thought. She had meant to just tap him, knock him out for two minutes. One minute. *It wasn't murder. It was an accident.*

Could a strand of her hair have caught on anything? She had worn a knit hat and tucked her hair under it. Unlikely any hair was left behind. Had she leaned against anything? Could a fiber from her jacket have caught on anything? Even if it had, would her DNA be on her jacket? Probably not. The jacket would have to be burned.

She thought about the man. She hadn't touched him. The can did. How could he have died? I didn't hit him that hard. Did I? Maybe he was sick and anything, any shock to his system, could cause him to stop breathing.

For awhile she sat in silence, thinking about the body on the floor. *I'm sorry, mister. I didn't mean to ... hurt you.*

But her mind was certain about one thing. She refused to even think about the death penalty or life in prison. It was an accident.

She started the Fiesta and moved out of the parking lot. Whatever, she didn't leave any clues. Drake didn't have any security cameras. She was in the clear. For the first time since talking with George, Ginnie allowed herself a slight smile. *I was like a ghost, a gentle breeze. I was in and out and left no trace, no hint I was ever there.*

The smile disappeared. The painting was missing and a man was dead. She had left evidence someone was there. But nothing pointed to her.

She had stopped at a signal light when a new thought slammed into her mind.

Someone saw her put the painting in the storage unit.

Chapter 9

Somewhere a horn was blaring. Then another. Ginnie blinked twice and looked in the mirror. A man in a convertible behind her was yelling at her and shaking his fist. She looked ahead, saw the light was green and accelerated through the intersection. The jerk deserved a one finger salute, but Ginnie decided she didn't want to call any more attention to herself. She pulled into Sonic and parked at one of the order stands.

“Welcome to Sonic. Can we help you?” a voice came over the speaker.

“Yes. A tall cherry limeade please.”

“That will be \$1.63. We’ll bring it right out.”

Ginnie fished in her purse for money. But her mind was on the man at the storage unit. If he knows a valuable painting was stolen last night, he’ll figure out it was me. Maybe he already knows.

A girl on roller skates brought the drink. Ginnie handed her two dollars, said to keep the change and the girl skated off. Ginnie took a long pull on the sweet and sour drink and settled back in the seat. She shook her head, trying to understand how all this had happened. It was just a political dirty trick, a podirt. If things worked out right, it would cost Drake the election—which was a good thing. And with all

his money, he'd get the charges dropped and continue on with his life. Only not as governor.

She almost choked. But now I've killed someone.

If George was right, and he usually was, the police would call it capital murder. The article on the Internet basically said the same thing. She took another sip and her eyes hardened. She gripped the cup so tightly it cracked and started to leak. She wrapped a napkin around it. *I can't get the death penalty, or life without parole for this, for an accident.*

She had been so careful during the robbery. If that man hadn't come in to Drake's right then, she would have been gone. *But he can't tell anybody who I am. The police will never connect me with the murder.*

Suddenly her eyes popped open wide.

Unless that man from the storage place goes to the police.

She tried to reconstruct the scene at the storage unit. He had seen a painting, but not *what* painting. If he had suspicions, wouldn't he have gone to the police already? Wouldn't the police have picked her up by now? How could he have known about it last night? In fact, how would he find out about it today? The *Wooden Nickel Gazette* didn't come out for four days. They'd probably run a full page story and picture on the theft and murder. Everybody would know then.

What about the *Tyler Press*? Would they carry the story? Probably tomorrow.

A thought materialized in her mind. George had known this morning. She rummaged in her purse and pulled out her cell phone.

"George, how did you find out about the ... dead man?" She almost said murder.

"I ran into this woman I know. She's a dispatcher for the sheriff. She told me. Made me promise not to tell anybody. Of course, I thought you knew."

"Well, don't tell anybody else. I won't be in today. Maybe not tomorrow. I'll see you when I see you."

Why didn't I run into, or run over, the guy at the storage unit. She took another sip of her drink. It tasted only sour now. She tried to

remember the scene last night. He had driven in and left his car lights on. She never got a chance to see what kind of a car it was. Dark. But it was nearly midnight. Anything other than white looked dark. He'd sounded friendly enough, even introduced himself.

She sat up a bit straighter. What was his name? John. She remembered saying "Good night, John." Not much help. She remembered his last name was a little strange. How strange? Foreign? No. Unusual. But nothing came to her mind.

I will think of it. And when I do, I'll tie up that loose end. I'm not going down for capital murder. Get rid of that guy and no clues lead to me.

She started the car and backed out.

Nobody's looking for me now. John Whoever doesn't know about the theft or mur - ah, dead man - yet. I need to see he doesn't find out. Before the Gazette comes out.

She clenched her teeth. Were two capital murders any worse than one?

* * *

It had taken two hours, but it finally happened. She was sitting in her living room, typing away on a piece she had promised out this week. No rush. But, crank these out when you can, don't wait for the deadline. She had stopped to review what she had written, copy for a long video meant to sell something nobody really needed or wanted.

Without warning the name appeared in her mind. John Littlefellow. That was it: Littlefellow. She set her laptop aside. A quick check in the telephone directory revealed only one Littlefellow. Donna. She smiled. He had said his wife's name was Donna. She noted the address and set out. The piece she was writing could wait. Littlefellow could not.

* * *

It was a modest house, well kept. The lawn was neatly mowed, and some flowers were planted and blooming. Someone cared. She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw no children's toys around.

How did she get into this? Fate? Bad karma? She didn't mean to kill the guy in Drake's house. But would any jury see it that way? She was about to be caught stealing a very valuable painting. They would see her as killing to avoid being caught. If they convicted her of capital murder, there could be capital punishment.

They wouldn't catch her if she could snip off one loose end.

But how could she do that? Kill him? The man in Drake's house had been a mistake. It had just happened. An accident. Now, she was considering a deliberate act. Her stomach roiled and for a minute she thought she might throw up. Could she do it—deliberately kill someone?

"Remember, Ginnie. Always do what's right." Her mother's voice came through as clear as if she were sitting in the car. "Stay away from bad things. If you do, you will be blessed and you'll live a long, happy life."

Ginnie shook her head. She didn't need to imagine her mother preaching to her today. She didn't need a guilt trip. She'd heard it all before, many times. Right now, she needed to think clearly.

At this point, it's him or me. If Littlefellow goes to the police, tells them what he saw, then he is effectively giving me a death sentence. That will be a deliberate action by him that will result in my death. Not an accident. He will have to work it out, plan his call, turn me in. I didn't plan to kill the man at Drake's house. But Littlefellow will plan to kill me.

She sat for several minutes, eyes closed, her mind flashing pictures of Littlefellow going to the police, the police arresting her, the jury convicting her. When her mind started toward the death chamber, she shut it down. Littlefellow would start things in motion ending in her death.

Her eyes opened.

This is self defense. And self defense is acceptable everywhere.

Her queasiness was fading. Now that she rationalized this was self defense, she felt better. Maybe “better” wasn’t quite the right word. Maybe justified. Either way, a life would be lost. It was hers or his. She had a right to protect herself. Even her bible reading mother would accept that. Ginnie would not put it to that test.

The door to the small house opened and Littlefellow came out, got into the car and backed out. Ginnie followed at a discreet distance. *Maybe I’ll get lucky. Maybe he’ll drive in front of a train or an eighteen wheeler.*

He drove to the local convenience store, brightly lit, and went in. Ginnie waited half a block away, lights out. After a few minutes he came out with a bag, got in his car, and drove home.

Something needed to happen before the *Gazette* came out. Even tomorrow, the Tyler paper would carry the story.

Chapter 10

"Well, how was your visit to the Piney Woods?" Brandi Brewer, Crystal's petite housemate, sat curled up on the sofa.

"Much more relaxing than here in Dallas." Crystal dropped her briefcase on the table and slumped into a pink over-stuffed chair.

"Ah, but Mark O'Malley is here, right?"

"My job is here. Mark is just my boss." Crystal tried not to sound defensive.

"Yeah, And the Milky Way is just a cloud. Can't blame you, though. That's one gorgeous hunk of man."

"My job is here," Crystal repeated. "And I like my job."

"And your boss. But, enough of your love life."

Crystal let out a loud guffaw.

Brandi ignored her. "I'd say you backed a winner this time. I mean Ron Drake, not Mark."

"I believe you're right. But how did you come to that conclusion?"

"The old-fashioned way. I listened to their speeches."

"Good for you." Crystal cocked her head to the side. "But I must say, I'm amazed."

"I'm not as smart as you, but I *am* amazing," Brandi said. "So, I decided I'd listen to them and decide which one was telling the truth and which was trying to pull the fur over my eyes."

"Wool. So, what'd you think?"

"Your friend Drake sounds like he knows what he's talking about. Made sense, even to me. And, he didn't promise me a load of stuff I know he can't deliver. Old Jim Bob, on the other hand, reminded me of the men my mama warned me about. You know, the kind who offer you candy if you'll come with them. "

Crystal laughed. "I think you've nailed both of them."

"I didn't go to college, but I'm a graduate of street U. I can spot a phony day or night. How do you know Drake?"

"He's been a good friend of Nana's forever and I've known him probably twenty years."

"Since you were ten?"

"That's about right. Just a couple of years after my parents were killed."

"You gonna work on his campaign?"

Crystal shook her head. "No. He's got a P.R. firm here in Dallas. I've just gone to several of his speeches because he's been a friend for a long time. I'd like to see him be our governor. I'd certainly help if I could be of any use, but I doubt he'll need me."

"Even as smart as you are, I don't think he's gonna need you. It would take something drastic for Jim Bob to beat him. Course, this is Texas. And there's a lot more Jim Bobs and Billy Joes than Ronalds."

Crystal kicked her shoes off. "What shall we have for dinner?"

"Pizza's on the way."

"How'd you know?"

"I'm psycho."

"Psychic."

"Whatever. But, since we've polished off the election and dinner is on the way, let's get back to your love life."

"Once again, I don't have a love life."

Now it was Brandi's turn to let out a loud guffaw. "I see you after you've been out with Mark. Boy, do you have a glow, like you've been irradiated or something. I don't know about Mark, but I know about you. No use denying it. You've got a thing for Mark."

For more than a minute, neither woman said anything. Brandi watched Crystal who just stared at the painting on the opposite wall.

She looked back at Brandi. "We get along well. We really enjoy each other's company. He's funny and thoughtful, kind and supportive."

"And sexy."

Crystal smiled. "Well, there is that. But I've been out with a lot of sexy guys. Mark is so much more. And we can talk about all sorts of things. A lot of guys can talk about football, their job, their favorite bar or beer, maybe the crazy things they did in college. Mark and I have some really interesting conversations on a wide variety of topics."

"I'll bet he's a good kisser, too."

"He is very good." Crystal held up her hand. "But, you'll have to take my word on that. I'm not letting you check it out."

"So, you've claimed him for yourself."

Crystal didn't answer, but a little smile caressed her face.

Brandi let out a whoop. "See. There it is. You're getting that glow just talking about him."

Now the smile was full blown. "He does make me feel like I'm glowing."

Chapter 11

Monday, March 26

Ginnie spent much of the day waiting a short distance from Littlefellow's house, then following him. He went to the high school, parked and went in. Ginnie waited half a block away. Fortunately, it was a cool day. Cumulus clouds kept the bright sun from raising the temperature to a normal March day in Texas.

After it was clear he was in there for the day, Ginnie drove to the Sonic and had lunch, but nothing tasted good to her. She threw away half of her fries and returned to her vigil. Several hours later, Littlefellow came out and drove home. The trip offered no chance for Ginnie to make a move.

It was just after dusk when he once again came out of his house and drove away. Ginnie almost ignored him, imagining another trip to the brightly lit convenience store. But, her time was running out. She didn't own a gun. Her options were limited. Her hands shook as she turned the key and started her car. She followed John's car, trying to ignore the churning in her stomach.

But instead of the convenience store, he pulled into the post office, parked across the lot and went in. A mud-covered extended

cab dually had pulled in cross wise, taking up most of the space close to the door.

Great. Just what I need. A witness.

But even as she spoke, a petite young woman came out of the post office, climbed up into the big truck and drove out of the parking lot.

Ginnie watched the truck turn at the next street and quickly disappear from view. She checked in all directions. No one in sight. The post office had been closed for hours. This late, no one would be working inside. Her head swiveled continuously, checking to see if any other car turned onto the street.

Littlefellow came out and started across the pavement to his car.

She started slowly, lights out. When he was in the middle of the drive, she pressed the gas pedal to the floor. The Fiesta's spunky engine took hold and the car jumped forward.

Littlefellow turned his head at the sound. He paused, peering into the dimly lit parking lot. Then his lanky body leaned forward and he started to run.

Too late.

The red Fiesta, still accelerating, hit him with its right front fender, crushing bones. Littlefellow's body flew through the air, thumping down on the unforgiving concrete some twenty feet away. The third-class mail he had been holding was still fluttering in the air as the Fiesta exited the parking lot.

Ginnie did not look back. She did not check to see if he was really dead. She did not stop down the block to see if anybody found him. She kept driving and didn't stop until she was inside her garage.

Then, she broke down. She put her head on the steering wheel and started to sob.

She had deliberately taken a life. She had killed a man simply because he had seen her put a painting in a storage unit.

She remembered a case in Florida where a man was acquitted of killing a person because he felt threatened. Ginnie had felt threatened by Littlefellow.

Not anymore.

* * *

Twenty minutes later, she sat at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee. Self defense, she told herself. Finally, the knot in her stomach began to relax and she was able to think. Her mind started to access all aspects of her situation.

Her biggest problem was the car. Soon the police would be looking for a car with a damaged front end. She could not drive around town until they pulled her over. She got up, went to her bedroom and threw a few things in a small suitcase. She wouldn't be gone long. But she couldn't have the car repaired here. Or any place close. She picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Hi, Sara. Ready for some company?" She listened for a moment. "In a few hours. I'm leaving now. I know it'll be late, but I wanted to come see you." *And I need to get away right now.*

She tossed the overnight bag in the car and drove slowly and carefully out of town.

* * *

Ginnie had crossed into Louisiana an hour ago and was nearly two hundred miles from home when she had her plan worked out. Her mind had been on the accident most of the trip, when it was not focused on the man in Drake's house. She would have the car repaired in Rayville. But trying to cover every possible loophole, she needed to disguise the source of the damage to her car.

As she pulled off the highway, she saw her opportunity. Just a few feet to the right of the exit ramp was a tree. She pulled off the road, stopped and got out. She needed to do this right. She walked over to the tree. Nothing in the way. Nothing to present a problem. She got back into the Fiesta and slowly drove into the tree, catching it squarely with her right fender. She jerked forward, her body pulling at

the seatbelt. She could hear the metal crumpling, glass breaking. But, the airbags did not deploy.

She got out and inspected the damage. The headlight, broken when she hit Littlefellow, now hung by two wires. She studied the car in the dim light provided for the intersection of the exit ramp and state road. To her, it looked perfect. She had hit the tree with the right front fender, exactly where she had hit Littlefellow. All the damage could have been caused by the tree.

She could hear the body repair shop macho guys: “Dumb woman driver hit a defenseless tree. That’ll cost her.” That caused another thought to pop into her mind. She probably didn't want to claim this on her insurance. Might be okay, but she was taking no chances. And no check or credit card. Better to pay for the repairs with cash than to have any trail.

Satisfied that evidence of the earlier collision with a man had been obliterated, she got back in the car and made her way to her friend’s house.

* * *

The next day, *The Wooden Nickel Gazette* carried two stories on the front page. One article above the fold covered an art theft and murder, the other a hit and run accident that resulted in a vehicular homicide. The lead story said the art, a \$700,000 Mondrian, was taken from the home of Ron Drake, currently the leading contender in the gubernatorial election. Dead was Nathanael Owens, a fifty-three-year-old employee of Drake. Police theorize Owens came in during the robbery and was killed by the thief.

The story continued with more information on the painting, a little history on Mondrian, and a good section on the gubernatorial race and Drake's widening lead.

The second story, near the bottom of the page, said thirty-four-year-old John Littlefellow, a social studies teacher at the Wooden Nickel High School, was the victim of a hit and run accident.

Littlefellow's body was thrown sixteen feet by the collision. The police found no skid marks.

Each story contained a critical bit of information: "At this time, the police have no suspects or leads on the crime."

Chapter 12

Monday, October 1

Six Months Later

"Thanks for coming by, Will."

"When my boss calls, I jump."

Jason Dustin, department head at the National Fine Art Insurance Company, picked up the note on his desk. "When it suits you. You're recommending paying the insurance claim on the Mondrian now. Why so soon?"

Will Timson sat down, relaxed. "Well, two reasons come to mind. First, we haven't heard a single word about the Mondrian. Not a whisper. Usually there would be rumors floating around. On a painting of this type, we should have found it months ago and be watching the trial of the thief. The claim was filed on March 27. Today is October first. That's over six months and not a peep."

"You've worked all your sources?"

"You bet. I've offered a pretty good chunk of money for a lead. Nothing."

Dustin nodded a few times. "You said first. What's second?"

Now, Timson scooted forward on his chair. His eyes sparkled and a sly grin spread across his face. "This piece was grossly

underinsured. Probably about right when he first bought it and got the policy. But, he hasn't updated the coverage in ten years. And old Piet Mondrian has really gotten pricey lately. One of Mondrian's rectangular paintings brought over four million at auction last year. Stupid people. Of course, Drake's is not one of those that's just colored rectangles."

"Your point is?"

"My point is, he's got this one insured for \$400,000.

"Again, your point is?"

Timson spread his hands. "We pay him, and the painting is ours. Ours for \$400,000. And it's worth probably twice that. We make four big ones clear, if we ever recover it." He smiled and moved to the very edge of his chair. "I say, let's pay him before we find it and have to give it back."

Dustin laid his hands on his desk and sat back in his chair. "Doesn't sound quite kosher to me."

"Perfectly legal. And the document the insured signs when we make the payment says that should it be recovered, it's ours."

"You're talking about the subrogation clause."

"Yeah. It's all there in black and white. We have specific clauses setting forth the subrogation rights of our company. And of course, it is clearly laid out in the document the insured signs when payment is made."

Jason focused on his desk but said nothing.

"We've been diligently looking for it for six months," Will continued. "We didn't just dog it. I've covered every angle I can think of. I've offered big bounties to anyone who could give me a lead. And I've got nothing. Let's just close this out. Clear the files." Again, a big grin split his face. "And if we happen to recover it, that's our good fortune."

"I don't know."

"Give it some thought. If we were dealing with a case where a New York Court would decide, then I'd have to rethink it. But in Texas, I believe the courts will say, we acted in good faith and upheld

the conditions and intent of the insurance contract. A San Antonio Court of Appeals ruled the insurer acquires its subrogation rights once it pays the loss."

"And if a different court rules against us?"

"Should it ever come to a court battle and we lose, we're not out anything. We just don't get a bonus."

Timson went on, "Looks like a win-win situation to me. Drake gets his money. If it's never found, we are out that much, but that's the insurance business. Plus we get brownie points for paying off quickly. Good for business. But, if we do later find it, we can be big winners."

"You're sure you've put in due diligence?" Dustin cocked his head slightly and gave Timson a hard, piercing look. "You're not playing games here, are you, Will?"

"Absolutely not. I have all my efforts documented. Duke Bentley's been on the case, and you know what a bulldog he is. Feel free to check with any of my sources. They'll all tell you I've never offered so much bounty." Timson was very serious now. "You know me, Jason. I like to catch the bad guys. This time, I don't think we're going to. Not any time soon, anyway. This was just not done in the usual way. No known MO. We've done all we can. We can just sit and wait, and get a bad rap for not paying off in a timely fashion. Or we can pay off now." Again, a big smile. "And hope we find it later."

Chapter 13

Saturday, October 6

“**You’re sure he’s** collected the insurance money?” Ginnie Leverett asked.

“Absolutely. On that front. But are we sure we want to continue this? I mean, it’s already caused one death.” George Weeks locked his eyes on Ginnie’s. “Is one the right number?”

Ginnie ignored his question. “Time to start phase two. It might take a week or two to hit the fan. But that will be just right. Maybe two weeks before the election, old Drake will be on his knees and fading fast.”

“I don’t know.”

“What’s not to know? You helped develop this strategy. We’ve waited six months for things to come together. I wasn’t sure the damn insurance company would come through in time. Of course, we’d still have the painting in his warehouse. But with the insurance company paying him, we’re in great shape. One thing I *am* sure of. If we don’t pull this off, Jim Bob is toast. He’ll finish third in a two man race.”

“Be careful.”

“Relax, George. Nothing ties this to us. Nothing. No links.” She got up and looked down at her friend. “Let the game begin.”

* * *

It was well past midnight. She couldn't afford a mistake this time. She had watched for an hour. No one had come near the storage units. No police had driven by. No kids looking for a place to park and make out. It was as quiet and dark as a grave. She smiled. *Drake's political grave*. She slid out of her car, decked in black from head to foot, plus black gloves. Though no one was around, she tiptoed down the drive, and around the back until she found unit number seventy-three.

She fished the key out of her pocket and unlocked the padlock. Carefully, she slipped the lock and key in her pocket. She patted her pocket, checking the key really got in there. No links. No clue she had ever been here. *Should I check to see that the painting is still there?* She stood there for nearly a minute, trying to decide. Finally, she retrieved her small penlight, pulled the door up just a foot, bent down and shined her light inside. She swept the light along the side wall. Her grin gave the answer. *There it is. Waiting like a good puppy. Time for you to move on little puppy. Find a new home.*

Political Dirty Trick

A Crystal Moore Suspense, Book # 3

Available in digital, paperback, hardback and audio editions.

On Amazon at: <https://amzn.to/2UDjXxw>

Audible at: <https://adbl.co/2RUCmW3>

Barnes & Noble at: <https://bit.ly/2m5KQOw>

