

Some Readers' Comments on *A Silver Medallion*, Book #2 in the Crystal Moore Suspense Series

A Silver Medallion is a gripping, action-packed adventure from talented author James Callan. Crystal Moore is a tough and savvy heroine who knows no fear.

New York Times Bestselling Author Bobbi Smith

James R. Callan is a master of understanding human conflict and the raw emotions that everyone faces ...”

Caleb Pirtle, III, Editorial Director, Venture Galleries

James Callan's *A Silver Medallion* is a fine blend of colorful characters, action, suspense, and serious. Crystal Moore and her grandmother, Eula, are a great team as they take on modern-day slavery and academic fraud in this nonstop novel. Check it out!

Bill Crider, Bestselling author of the Sheriff Dan Rhodes series

I bought *A Silver Medallion* at a book signing and, once started reading, couldn't put it down. ... This is a great read.

Amazon Review - G. Nuchols

This book by Mr. Callan kept me hooked from the very beginning. Drawing a plot that seemed to leap from the headlines, he writes with a page turning intensity that will leave the reader satisfied. Crystal Moore is a heroine you can fall in love with.

Amazon Review - Abookanight

A Silver Medallion

A Crystal Moore Suspense

By James R. Callan



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This is a work of fiction. All characters, places, and events are the work of the author's imagination, with the exception of the Puerto Vallarta, San Sebastian, Plaza Mar and several restaurants. Jim Demetro is in fact the artist who sculpted the Vallarta Dancers and Andale Bernardo, the Burro sculpture mentioned in the first Plaza Mar scene. Other than those, any resemblance to real persons, places, or events is coincidental.

A Silver Medallion

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While I spend a lot of time in Mexico, I am not an expert in Spanish. My thanks to Carlos Garduño for checking my use of Spanish in this book, and keeping it appropriate for the person using it at the time.

Last, but far from least, a very special thanks to Earlene for proof reading the manuscript, not once, but multiple times. If you find this book relatively error-free, the credit goes to Earlene. Those errors still in it are most likely something I changed after she had made it error-free. I will try to pay her back with coconut shrimp and hot fudge sundays.

Author's Notes

By and large, my depiction of Puerto Vallarta is correct. However, I have taken a few liberties - I guess we call those literary license.

Most of the restaurants called by name exist and are, in fact, frequented by the author. However, The Sundowner is fictitious, and so directions from it to Plaza Mar, including the small, dark, narrow street, are also made up.

The terrible road to San Sebastian still exists, but has indeed been improved, somewhat, perhaps using Crystal's twenty pesos. However, there is now a much better road from Puerto Vallarta which passes very near to San Sebastian. The road described in this book was at least as bad as I described it not that many years ago.

Lastly, Puerto Vallarta and the people of Mexico are more beautiful that I can describe. If given the chance, visit. You won't run

into José Rodríguez de Allende, but you will find many friendly and gracious people, more than willing to help you.

A Silver Medallion

Chapter 1

CRYSTAL Moore drove slowly along the sandy road that curved through the property she had roamed as a child. Her grandparents had christened it “The Park” when they purchased it over fifty years ago. To Crystal, they could have named it Serenity. The tall, stately Southern pines, the oak and hickory trees, the mirror-still lake, the peaceful quiet, all worked to cast a spell of tranquility over her.

Crystal's maroon LeSabre crested the hill. Two hundred feet ahead, her grandmother stood under a maple tree, its autumn foliage creating a golden halo above her grey hair. Eula Moore was staring at the small storage shed about twenty feet behind her cedar-shake house. She aimed a double-barreled shotgun at the door of the building.

Fifty feet from Eula, Crystal switched off the ignition, eased out of the car, and moved forward, careful not to crack a twig or crunch a dried leaf. Now she saw her grandmother's right index finger curled around the trigger. Whatever was going on, she did not want to distract her Nana.

Eula Moore pointed the shotgun at the shed, her wrinkled hands as steady as those of an eye surgeon. “Don't make no sudden moves. I got a nervous trigger finger. I might just blow your head off.”

Nothing moved.

“Now, very slowly, come on out in the open, and keep them hands over your head where I can see ‘em.”

Experience told Crystal her grandmother had heard the car, but Eula’s attention never left the shed. The elderly woman stooped down, gaze still fixed on the building, picked up a rock with her left hand and made a sweeping, underhanded throw. As the chunk of limestone arched skyward, Eula pulled the ancient shotgun up and once more trained it on the shed.

The rock struck the tin roof with a satisfying bang. No animal came bolting out the door. The noise echoed and died away. The birds stopped their chirping. All was quiet.

Crystal crept up beside her grandmother. “What’s in there, Nana?” she whispered.

“Animal. Person. Beats me. But I didn’t git to seventy-five being careless.”

Eula Moore, five feet two inches tall, ninety-five pounds with short-cropped grey hair, held a strategic position. No one could leave the shed without coming into her gun’s sight. And no one could see her without first revealing himself. Eula looked frail, but her voice was strong, her will stronger. “Better come out ‘fore I start shootin’.”

A slight breeze wiggled the leaves on a towering oak tree shading the area. A squirrel sat motionless. The scene was as peaceful as a painting of a country lane. Except for the shotgun.

A few moments passed. Then a single finger came into view. Gradually, it turned into a whole hand, waving in a small arc. “*Por favor, no dispare.*” The tiny brown hand fluttered again. The voice quavered slightly. “Please. No shoot. No shoot.”

Eula didn’t lower the gun or take her gaze off the shed. “*Por favor?* Spanish?” Eula said to Crystal. Then to the tiny hand, “*Manos arriba.*”

Now, two hands waved. But no body appeared.

“You need to work on your Spanish, Nana. He may not

know what you're saying."

Eula snorted. "*Pardon* me. I didn't go to S.M.U. Or Stanford. Maybe you can do better."

Crystal turned toward the shed. "*Salga con las manos arriba*. Come out with your hands up."

A foot materialized in the opening. "Hands up." Then a body began to emerge. "Hands up."

Was it a child? Little more than five feet tall and slender as broomcorn, she could have been a girl of fourteen. Her uncombed hair, nearly reaching her waist, appeared as black and shiny as obsidian. Pink and blue embroidery decorated the rough-woven, white dress hanging from her shoulders and stopping just short of her scratched knees. Well-worn leather sandals revealed feet accustomed to no shoes at all.

The small hands trembled slightly as the young Mexican edged forward, but she held her head high and her back ramrod straight.

Eula wagged the barrel of the shotgun at the girl. "Far enough. Hold it right there. *Alto*." Eula focused on the girl, but spoke to Crystal. "Okay. So I don't remember my Spanish good enough to find out what I got here. See what you can do. But don't get in my line of fire."

A cloud drifted away, allowing the sun to play fully on the girl's face. This was *not* a child. Those large eyes could not develop such sadness, such pain, in such a short life.

"¿*Como se llama?*" Crystal asked.

The thin young woman maintained her focus on the gun. "Rosa. Rosa Bonita Lopez."

"¿*Habla Ingles?*"

"*Un poco*."

"*Hablo Español un poco. Vamos probando con Ingles*. Let's try English," said Crystal. The young woman's expression

did not change, nor did her attention waiver from the shotgun. "Okay. Your name is Rosa Bonita."

"Si. Yes."

"And what were you doing in the shed?"

The Mexican woman's forehead wrinkled and she tilted her head slightly to one side. *Is she puzzled by the English or by what kind of an answer to give?* Crystal tried Spanish again. "¿Que hacias en el cobertizo?"

After several seconds, Rosa looked at Crystal. "Food."

"You were looking for food?"

"Si."

"Are you hungry?"

Eula made a small grunt. "Dumb question."

"Si. Yes."

"When did you eat last? ¿Cuándo comiste por última vez?"

"Ayer en la mañana."

"Yesterday morning!" Crystal turned to her grandmother. "She's probably starving. Let's take her in and give her something to eat. Then we can find out why she's here."

Eula didn't move or lower the shotgun but Crystal walked over, smiling, took the young woman's hand and led her into the house.

#

Inside Eula's large country kitchen, Crystal gave Rosa a tall glass of orange juice while Eula put the finishing touches on a chicken and rice meal she'd been preparing for her granddaughter's arrival. Rosa drank the juice without stopping and her dark, wary eyes remained focused on the chicken as Eula moved it from pan to serving dish.

"Why haven't you eaten?" Crystal asked.

“*No dinero.*”

“Where do you live?”

“*No casa. No casa.*”

“No home?” Crystal glanced at Eula, then back at the Mexican girl. “¿*Por qué?*”

“I run away.”

“From your husband? ¿*Esposo?*”

“No.” Her sad eyes closed for a moment, then softly, “No.”

“Parents? ¿*Padres?*”

“No. From *hombre malo.*”

“¿*Quien?* Who is the bad man?”

“*Señor Blackwood.*” Rosa scrunched her mouth and eyes as if she had bitten into a piece of spoiled fruit.

“Who is he? What is your relationship to him? A relative? ¿*Un familiar?*”

The Mexican woman shook her head violently from side to side. “No. *No familiar.* I am ... his ...” She furrowed her brows and cocked her head to one side. “How to say *esclava?*”

Crystal looked down for a moment as she searched her limited Spanish vocabulary for a translation. Finally, she looked up at Rosa. “The only English word I can think of for *esclava* is ... slave.”

Rosa’s head bobbed up and down. “*Si. Si.* Slave. I am his slave.”

Chapter 2

AFTER dinner, the three women sat on Eula's veranda overlooking the long, narrow lake three hundred feet down a gentle slope. Crystal and Rosa rocked slowly in the porch swing. Crystal's hair, as black as Rosa's, curled in toward the neck just short of her shoulders, while Rosa's stopped just short of her waist. Both women were slender, but Crystal stood six inches taller. While the young Mexican had jet black eyes, Crystal's might be called antique bronze. But nothing in Crystal could match the sadness and pain evident in Rosa's eyes.

Getting answers from Rosa during the meal had been impossible. She had devoured more food than Eula and Crystal together, barely allowing herself time to breathe. Grandmother and granddaughter merely looked at each other, shook their heads, and smiled.

Now, Crystal resumed the painstaking task of discovering what had brought this beautiful young Mexican woman to Eula's home.

"Rosa, why do you say you were a slave?"

"I forced to work for *Señor* Blackwood. No can leave."

"What'd you do for him?" Eula asked.

"I do all things. I cook. I clean house. I wash clothes. *Plancha.*"

"Iron," Crystal translated for Eula.

"I fix yard, grass. I wash car." She paused for a moment,

eyes wide. "I do all things."

"How much did Mr. Blackwood pay you?"

"He say he pay me minimal wage."

"I'd bet on that," muttered Eula.

"Was it *minimum* wage?" Crystal asked.

"Si. Minimum wage. But when I asked him for my money, he say he take money for food I eat, room I sleep in."

Crystal and Eula exchanged looks, but said nothing.

"I tell him I eat less. Other time, he say he take money for clothes." Her shoulders, her mouth, her very spirit, sagged. "Sometime I get five dollars. One time I get ten dollars."

Crystal frowned. "Five dollars? For a whole day's work?"

Rosa shook her head. "No day. *Un mes.*"

Shock wiped out the frown. "Are you telling me you never got more than ten dollars for a month's work?"

"Si. Sometime I get nothing. Most time, I get five dollars."

Crystal looked at Eula and shook her head in disbelief. "How long, *quanto tiempo*, did you work for Mr. Blackwood?" Crystal asked.

"Eleven months," Rosa said.

Crystal's mouth stayed open as she stared at the young Mexican woman.

"Why'd you stay so long?" Eula asked. "I'd of said, 'So long Blackheart. I'm out'a here.'"

Rosa furrowed her brows but said nothing.

"Were you free to leave?" asked Crystal.

Still Rosa said nothing.

Crystal tried again. "Would Mr. Blackwood allow you to leave?"

Rosa shook her head. “No. He say, I leave, or talk to people, Miguel have accident.”

“Miguel?”

“Miguel *mi esposo* in Mexico.”

A few seconds passed before the full meaning penetrated Crystal’s understanding. Rosa could not leave without putting her husband in serious danger. Crystal clamped her mouth shut lest her anger erupt in a scream.

Eula swore under her breath. “Damn crook. Ought to be hung up by his—“

“Nana.”

“She won’t know what I’m saying. And anyways, he ought to be.” Eula softened her tone and leaned toward her guest. “Why’d you leave yesterday?”

Rosa turned away and this time, tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her cheeks. The Mexican’s consuming anguish enveloped Crystal and her eyes misted over even though she didn’t know the cause. She wanted to take the young woman in her arms and rock her. Instead, she looked toward the tranquil lake, hoping it might uncoil her stomach, shield her from the anguish filling the veranda like a dense fog.

Darkness had descended, and to the east, a thin cloud sliced across the slender crescent moon . A dagger aimed at Rosa.

“Three days back, Lucita come work at house. She come from Mexico. We talk. She hear of Miguel, *mi esposo*. She tell me . . .” Her voice broke and moments passed before she could continue. “. . . he is dead.” Once more tears ran down her cheeks.

“Dead?” Crystal felt like someone had hit her in the chest. “What happened?”

Rosa wiped her eyes and opened her mouth, but the crush of emotion prevented words from forming. A minute

passed and then another before she could answer. “Lucita tell me he get hurt working at *hacienda*. José no let him go to doctor. Two weeks, he die. She tell me they bury him . . . *el mes pasado*.”

“Last month.” It exploded almost as a scream. Crystal could feel the vein in her neck throbbing.

She slid over and wrapped her arms around Rosa. The young woman, ramrod straight and somewhat reserved until now, melted against Crystal as sobs shook her small body.

Crystal rocked the swing slowly, gently patting Rosa. The woman’s tears gradually subsided, but an occasional low moan confirmed her grieving continued.

Crystal held Rosa tightly, both to give the young Mexican woman comfort and to ward off a sudden chill she felt. Crystal was not married yet. But she had lost both parents when she was seven and her pain had seemed hopeless for such a long time. No one could comfort her. No one could comfort Rosa.

Softly, Crystal asked, “Did *Señor* Blackwood know Jose?”

Rosa nodded. “*Señor* José get me to Texas. Miguel must work for him until I send money to pay for my trip.”

Bile rose into Crystal’s throat. José and Blackwood did business together. Blackwood undoubtedly knew of Miguel’s death long before Rosa found out. But of course he didn’t tell her. That would break the lock on her chains. His slave might escape.

Suddenly, the chill was gone, replaced by rising heat. It enveloped Crystal’s stomach first. It spread to her head. Her face felt feverish. She brushed a hand across her brow, expecting to find beads of sweat. Her breathing accelerated, now rapid and shallow, and her jaw twitched as she clenched her teeth. This Blackwood person had kept Rosa a prisoner, chained by threats and fear of what would happen to her husband if she left. And when Miguel died, this . . . monster . . . didn’t even tell Rosa.

Crystal's nails dug into the palm of her hand.
Somehow, Blackwood must be stopped.

Chapter 3

AT some level of consciousness, Crystal knew it was a dream but she couldn't seem to step out of it. Naked and locked inside a giant oven, she called for help. The men watching just laughed.

In frustration, she jerked around and the covers came off. The cool morning air shocked her warm body. Her eyes popped open and she focused on the cedar squirrel her granddad had carved for her when she turned eight. She was at The Park. She could hear voices. To whom would Nana be talking at this hour of the morning?

The events of last night surged to the front of her mind, like a camera zooming in for a close-up. Rosa.

Crystal hopped up, dressed, and splashed water on her face. She detoured through the kitchen to get coffee. With steaming mug in hand, she joined her grandmother and Rosa on the dappled veranda. The early sun peeked through the trees, casting wavering shadows across the expanse of redwood planking. But Rosa's story from last night obliterated the joy of morning in The Park.

“Good morning, sleepy-head,” Eula greeted her.

Crystal settled into a high-backed rocker. “What’s happening?”

“Oh, Rosa and I were just visiting. I was asking her where she lived before coming to Texas.”

“Miguel and I live in Santiago. With my parents.”

“Does José live there?” asked Crystal.

Rosa frowned and jerked her head from side to side. “No. He have big hacienda no far from San Sebastian. It no far from Santiago.”

“And Lucita?” asked Eula. “Was she from Santiago, or San Sebastian?”

“No. Lucita go to San Sebastian before she come to Texas. Other man tell her Miguel dead. Man say if she see me, tell me.”

Crystal sipped her coffee and tried to get her mind around the circumstances Rosa was describing. “Why didn’t Lucita escape with you ... leave Blackwood’s when you did? Why didn’t she come with you?” Crystal asked.

“She afraid.”

“Does she have a husband in Mexico? Is he working for Jose?” Crystal worried Lucita’s husband might be trapped like Rosa’s.

“No.”

“This is like pulling teeth,” Eula muttered.

“Nana, you’re not in a foreign country and just learned your husband is dead. Have a little patience.”

Eula gave Crystal a salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Crystal turned back to Rosa. “Why is Lucita afraid?”

“Her *niñas*.”

“Her children? Where are her children?”

“Mexico.”

“She left her children in Mexico?” Crystal asked. “With the father?”

“No. He is dead,” Rosa said.

Crystal’s hand began to tremble, and she put the mug

down on the small table beside the rocker. Her shoulders sagged as she tried to imagine the desperation that would cause a mother to leave her children behind and go to uncertainty in a foreign country.

A dark foreboding saturated her spirit as various images paraded unbidden across Crystal's mind. In a low and hesitant voice, she asked, "Who is keeping the children for Lucita?" Unconsciously, she held her breath, afraid she knew the answer.

Crystal heard a sharp intake of breath. Eula also anticipated the answer.

"They are at house of *Señor* Jose. They stay until Lucita make money to bring them to United States."

"Hell's bells," Nana said, looking at Crystal. "We're letting the fox baby-sit the new chicks." She turned to Rosa. "Boys, girls?"

"Two girls."

"My God," whispered Eula. "How old?"

"One has five years. One has three years."

Crystal tried to speak, but nothing came out of her mouth. Lucita would never raise the money to bring the girls to Texas. If Rosa had been trapped with a husband in Mexico working for Jose, Lucita was shackled much more securely.

She swallowed and hoped her voice would not convey her fear to Rosa. "She has to work to pay for her trip, and then work to pay for bringing the children to Texas?"

Rosa nodded.

"And like you, she can't leave to take another job?"

"No."

"Did you tell her she might make only five or ten dollars a month? That she would never pay off the debt?"

"I tell her."

“But she wouldn’t leave with you?”

“No. She say, *Señor* Blackwood tell her if she leave, or talk to anyone, children have accident or disappear.”

Crystal's thoughts raced. How could a person do this to another human being? How could he force a mother to give up her children? To threaten her by holding her children hostage? And never plan to return them to their mother?

From what Rosa had told them, Crystal could imagine the children being slaves their entire lives. Even if Lucita saved every cent she was paid, she would never have enough to rescue her children. If she did manage to pay her debt, there was no guarantee, perhaps no hope, the children would ever be returned to her.

Crystal could hear her heart pounding, could feel the vice tightening on her stomach, could taste the anger taking control of her body. She jumped up and stormed off the veranda.

She stomped down to the dock. Quiet time, just floating in the boat or paddling around near the banks always eased her mind, diminished problems, relaxed tensions. She loosened the mooring, stepped into the boat, and used a paddle to push off. Maybe the lake could work its magic once more.

The narrow lake stretched nearly a half-mile long, yet never got within a thousand feet of The Park’s boundaries. No passing cars or booming stereos disturbed the peace. Only the chirping of birds, or the splash of a big catfish, interrupted the silence.

The sun peeked through the tallest pines—an orange disk on a bright blue background. Scattered, puffy white clouds drifted lazily across the sky.

The deep, cobalt blue water enhanced the green of the trees. Some sumacs along the creek that fed the lake had already begun sporting their flashy, autumn colors. High in the pine trees on the east side of the lake, purple clumps of ripe Muscadine grapes promised a juicy treat.

Most problems just couldn't stand up to the beauty and serenity of floating around Nana's lake.

But Crystal's mind was trapped by the plight of the young mother. Twice, Crystal looked around, thinking she heard children crying. Or was it their mother? What an incredible decision to make, to leave her children behind. She could not have known what kind of man José was. He must have played the part of a savior, paying her way to a place where she could make enough money to take good care of her children. He would look after her girls until she got on her feet and could send for them. Crystal's whole body shook with revulsion. Even a rattlesnake warned you. José could not, must not, get away with this.

This man would *not* do to Lucita what he had done to Rosa. The evil could not be allowed to continue.

And yet, another part of her mind protested. *Don't get involved. Stay away from Blackwood. The man is evil. Stay away. This is not your problem. Besides, there is nothing you can do. Lucita will not leave Blackwood as long as her children are held hostage. Stay away. Put it out of your mind. Forget about it.*

But the problem had taken up residence in Crystal's brain.

She had beached the boat when a commotion caught her attention. A smallmouth bass, probably chasing a minnow, had run aground. Now, it flopped around in a frantic attempt to find enough water to swim. Crystal bent over to pick it up and was rewarded with a slap of lake water in her face as the fish flipped its tail.

"Hey, guy, I'm trying to help." She eased one hand under the white belly and her other hand over its silver body, making a cage to keep it from jumping out. Then, stepping one foot out into the water, she slipped the frightened fish back into the lake.

Rosa was out of her element, too. Crystal could help her.

But Lucita was caught in a net.

Chapter 4

CRYSTAL climbed the grassy hill toward the house. On the veranda, Eula rocked slowly, cradling a tall glass of iced tea, a smile playing at the corners of her wide mouth. Rosa sat, twisting a piece of her dress around a finger.

Crystal reached the bottom step before she could hear what Eula was saying.

“No, I don’t know what will happen to you, anymore ‘n I know which way a fish’ll turn. But you can bet your drawers I won’t turn you over to immigration.”

Rosa wrinkled her forehead and stared at Eula.

Crystal stepped up on the porch. “I don’t think ‘drawers’ fits into Spanish the same way it does in your version of English, Nana.” She dropped down into one of the rocking chairs.

“Well, pardon me. I didn’t get a graduate degree from Stanford. We were doing okay without your help, thank you.”

Rosa looked from Eula to Crystal, deep lines creasing her forehead. “You no call immigration?”

“No,” said Crystal. “We won’t call immigration.”

Rosa grabbed Crystal’s hand and held it tightly.

Eula arched her eyebrows. “Well. You got it all figured out? You usually work things out on the lake.”

“I did get a few ideas, Nana.” Crystal turned to Rosa. “I want to go see Mr. Blackwood. Will you take me there?”

The relieved look that had covered Rosa’s face vanished

in an instant, replaced by a wrinkled forehead, squinting eyes and a gaping mouth. She dropped Crystal's hand as if it were a hot branding iron. The short, quick jerks of her head from side to side made her answer clear.

"Rosa, I would be going with you. I wouldn't let anything happen to you. Mr. Blackwood has no hold on you now. It will be all right."

"Bum idea," said Eula.

Crystal ignored her grandmother. "I want to talk to Lucita, Rosa. I want to see if there is something, anything, we can do to help her. Maybe we can get her out of there."

No tears seeped from the jet-black eyes, but a slight tremor ran down Rosa's arms to her tightly clenched hands. "I want help Lucita. But I no go to house of *Señor* Blackwood."

"He can't do anything to you. I'll be with you."

"Bum idea, if I ever heard one," Eula repeated.

"*Señor* Blackwood maybe do nothing, but *Señor* Argos do bad things."

Both Crystal's and Eula's eyes opened wide. "Who is Argos?" asked Crystal.

"He work for *Señor* Blackwood. Is bad man."

"How is he bad?"

"He hurt people. He hit people, knock them down. Kick them. Broke Pilar's hand. I afraid of him. I no go to *Señor* Blackwood." She continued shaking her head from side to side. "No go."

"You're shelling empty hulls there," Eula said.

Crystal nodded. "Okay. What is Lucita's family name?"

"Morales," Rosa said.

"Morales," Crystal repeated. "And can you tell me Mr. Blackwood's address? Where does he live?"

Rosa shrugged. "I know is in Dallas."

"Do you know his first name?"

"First name is Hunter. He is called Hunter Blackwood."

#

After lunch, Crystal powered up her laptop computer and minutes later had the information she needed. She located Eula and Rosa in the utility room moving clothes from the washer to the dryer.

"I found him. Only one Hunter Blackwood in the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Address is 1 Hunter Circle. Does that tell you something?"

"It tells you to tread carefully," said Eula. "Reckon he's got powerful friends."

"If he's doing what I believe he's doing, I'll stomp, not tread. Tomorrow, when I go back to Dallas, I'm going to pay Hunter Blackwood a visit."

"And say what? 'Are you a slave trader?'" Eula turned the dryer on and headed for the veranda with Rosa trailing behind her.

"I hadn't thought of that, but it sounds good to me," said Crystal, following them. "No. I'm just going to ask to speak to Lucita and then ask her if she is being held against her will."

Eula eyebrows arched up. "And then what?"

"Then I can tell Tom I know firsthand a young woman is being held against her will."

Eula plopped down in a rocker and motioned Rosa to take one. "Now, I'm not one to give advice."

Crystal rolled her eyes.

"But, you might want to rethink - or think, I'm not sure you've thought about it yet - such a foolish idea. This man sounds dangerous. I'd hate to have to come rescue you."

“What’s he going to do? Pull me in the door and lock me up?”

“It happens.”

Crystal had no comeback. People were kidnapped. People did disappear. But...what? It didn’t happen in Dallas? It only happened to *other* people?

The three rocked in silence, absorbing the warm, fall sun. After awhile, Eula said to Crystal, “You could take Bull with you. Ask him to ride shotgun.”

Dr. Mark O’Malley was the founder and principal owner of Intelligent Retrieval Systems, or IRS, the company where Crystal worked. He had been a professional bull rider when he was younger. Eula was the only person Crystal had ever heard call Mark by his nickname from the rodeo days: Bull O’Malley.

“I can’t do that, Nana.”

Eula pursed her thin lips and wrinkled her nose. “Don’t know why not. Knowing Bull, I’d bet my first-born daughter he’d go.”

“You didn’t have a daughter. I’m not going to ask him to go with me, and that’s final.”

“Bad move.” Eula sighed. “But I guess good judgment is learned from bad judgment.” She rocked quietly for a few moments. “You could call him up and ask him out. Then say you have to make a quick stop.”

“I’m not going to call him up and ask him out.”

“Mistake. He’s blue-ribbon quality. Somebody’s gonna put a bridle on him if you don’t.”

Crystal sighed.

The only chance to end this conversation was to remain silent. Ever since Eula met Mark last fall, she had been after Crystal to go out with him. In truth, Crystal and Mark *were* going out, a fact she chose not to share with her grandmother

just yet. Nana would start planning a wedding and talking grandkids.

But Crystal had involved Mark in her problems last year and almost got him killed. As comforting as it would be to have him along, she would not ask him to go to Hunter Blackwood's with her. Besides, Mark had his own problems right now. His mother was terminally ill and, at least while his sister was in Europe, he had the full responsibility of caring for her. Crystal would not add to his load.

Eula refused to drop the subject. "I've watched him around you. He really--"

The jangling of the telephone saved her.

"I'll get it." Crystal ran into the kitchen and answered the phone.

"Hello, Crystal. This is Dr. Krupe."

Dear God. Her hand shook and her knees felt weak. She slumped onto a stool.

She still vividly remembered the man from her past who nearly succeeded in crushing her. Against her will, her mind replayed visions of Dr. Krupe's sexual assault when she was just months from finishing a Ph.D. at Stanford. She successfully rebuffed him, but the very next day, he began an attack that drove her out of school. Crystal had believed him to be the world's greatest authority on information retrieval. When he said her research was worthless—that she had no ability for graduate school—she lost all self-confidence and left. She had worked long and hard toward a doctorate, only to have it snatched away because she refused to go to bed with her dissertation advisor, Dr. Lester Krupe. It had taken her until last year, with a lot of help from Brandi Brewer, her housemate, to regain her self-esteem.

She took a deep breath and spoke carefully, afraid her voice might betray her. "How did you find me?"

He laughed. "I *am* the leading authority on information

retrieval.”

Of course. All her school records would have included Nana’s phone number. She visualized his striking patrician profile, laughing in his condescending way.

“So why are you calling me?” Their last meeting, nearly a year ago, had ended with her accusing him of trying to steal her research, and pass it off as his own at a presentation at the University of Texas in Dallas. He had cost her a Ph.D. She had cost him a lucrative consultancy job. No, she corrected herself. *He* had cost himself that job.

He continued in his usual, self-confident manner. “In the face of your blistering attack on me when I was at IRS last fall, I didn’t get to give my side of the story. You were so upset and out of control I felt it best *for you* that I not respond fully. But, we do need to clear the air.”

“It’s history. There’s no need to rehash it.”

Krupe continued, “It is customary that the advisor’s name appears on the papers of his students. After all, the professor often provides the idea and always the guidance necessary to bring the idea into a publishable paper.”

“My name was not on the paper. You did not provide the idea, and you provided extremely little guidance.” Crystal tried to keep her voice level, even as her blood pressure rose.

“Oh, I’m sure both our names were on the opening slide.” His manner remained as smooth as always.

“No. I was there, remember. Mark was there. Shall we ask him? Better yet, I’m sure I can find several faculty members at UT/Dallas who can verify it. Shall I go out and explain the situation to them and ask what they remember about it?”

Krupe hesitated. “Well, possibly the secretary made a mistake. You know how they are. Only thinking about quitting time and payday. I will check the slides. If she left your name off, I will reprimand her. Will that make you feel better about things?”

Crystal bit her lip. Had she opened her mouth, she was certain she would have yelled at the man.

“What I’m saying to you, Crystal, is I will try to set things right, make certain your name is clearly listed. But I ask you not spread any more misinformation around that I was not sharing credit. You know I would not knowingly—”

“Dr. Krupe, I’m not spreading anything around. I’ve put it behind me. But I will certainly use my paper when and where I choose. And you know how secretaries are. They might forget to put your name on it.”

“Now Crystal, let’s try to keep this on a professional level.”

Her skin crawled as the memory of him groping her breasts and kissing her neck materialized.

“Will you agree,” he continued, “if I personally guarantee your name is on the very first slide, you won’t rehash the problem you perceived to have existed when I presented the paper last year?”

“I haven’t been talking about it. I’m happy to forget about it completely. Just don’t give my paper again.”

For several seconds, Krupe remained silent. “I have been asked to speak at Carnegie Mellon University. You do know CMU is an important school for IR, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“They heard about the presentation in Dallas and a Dr. Jamie Patrick at CMU has asked me to come and present it to the students and faculty.”

Crystal had met Jamie at a conference. She judged him to be honest, reliable, and extremely bright. She chose not to share that information with Krupe.

“You can be absolutely certain your name will appear immediately below mine. I’ll even make sure it is in the same size type as mine. Will that be agreeable to you? I promise your

name will be on the paper when I present it at CMU.”

Crystal was silent. Krupe had tried to take full credit for it in Dallas. Then, when she called him on it, he tried to claim it had really been his idea, his work. Now, the secretary caused the problem.

Having her work presented at CMU would be good for her professional standing. Except, Krupe would be doing the presentation.

“Crystal?”

“When?”

“Just about a month from now.”

“I’ll think about it.”

He does not intimidate me. He does not intimidate me.
But her hand was quivering as she hung up the telephone.

Chapter 5

SUNDAY morning, Crystal turned on her computer and tapped into her resources at Intelligent Retrieval Systems. An hour later, she had a picture of Hunter Blackwood, one that did not look dark or evil or threatening. Nor did it show any warmth.

He served on the Board of Directors for the Dallas Symphony plus several charities. Dallas society circles considered him a desirable and eligible bachelor. He appeared to be a one-man financial consulting service, who paid taxes—a lot of taxes—but had no office outside his home. A house with a property value of six million, he didn't need one..

The only thing remotely strange concerned the death of his wife four years ago. While the police classified it as murder, Crystal could find no resolution to the case. Otherwise, the man appeared as unremarkable as store-bought bread. Of course, to really ferret out information, she needed to be at her office.

She left The Park just after lunch, heading back to her apartment in Dallas. She had listened to Rosa's warnings and Nana's cautions. She had taken note of her grandmother's repeated suggestions that Mark accompany her, and silently dismissed them.

Though she tried to think of more pleasant things, her mind refused to dwell on any topic except Lucita and her children. When Rosa had first used the word "*esclava*," Crystal hadn't really believed anybody was enslaved. Not in this day and age. Not in Dallas, for God's sake. The United States was the land of freedom. True, certain prejudices lingered, maybe even

flourished in some places. But slavery did not exist. People used the word "*slave*" to stir emotions.

But the more she learned about what had happened to Rosa and Miguel, the more she began to believe. Rosa had not been held by chains, but by something stronger: the love for her husband.

Crystal slammed a hand against the steering wheel. Should she go straight to her friend Tom Hawkins—Brandi's boyfriend and a detective with the Dallas Police Department? Maybe he could talk to Blackwood. But at this point, what proof could she present? Crystal knew, could feel it in her bones, Rosa was telling the truth. Tom would say he needed concrete evidence. Lots of people thought they were not paid enough and exaggerated how little money they made. Certainly Lucita should pay room and board. He'd say the problem was for immigration, not the Dallas police.

By the time Crystal reached her apartment, she was thoroughly confused. What would she say to Blackwood? But she was positive about one thing: she *would* talk to Lucita.

In the apartment her housemate, Brandi Brewer, lay in the middle of the living room floor, her feet on a chair, a pillow covering her head.

"Let me guess," Crystal said. "Some new fitness routine Tom's talked you into."

"No." Brandi's voice seeped through the pillow. "I'm trying to get in touch with my subconscious, my inner self."

"And when you do?"

"I tell it what I want and it takes over from there."

"Sounds good to me."

"I thought so. 'Course, Tom, being the practical detective, said it was all a bunch of hogwash." The pillow came off Brandi's face, revealing copper-colored hair and bright, aqua eyes. "Have a good time at your grandmother's?"

Crystal dropped onto the couch. "I don't think 'good' quite catches the flavor of it. But interesting."

"Eula fixed you up with the preacher's son?"

"No. Believe it or not, that would have been better."

"Better?" Brandi sat up. "This I gotta hear."

Crystal filled Brandi in on Rosa's arrival and the story the Mexican girl had told them. Brandi sat, mouth open, not saying a word—an unusual state for her.

When Crystal finished, Brandi asked, "And you're going over there?"

"Yes, I am."

Brandi shook her head and sighed. "Okay. Give me five minutes." She picked up her petite, size four body and headed toward her bedroom.

"You don't—"

"Course I do."

#

Brandi drove. Crystal gave directions off the GPS.

"Almost there. Take the second right and you should find Hunter Circle," Crystal said. "You really didn't have to come. Nothing's going to happen." *But I'm glad you did.*

"Good. And don't think I'm going in with you. I'm not that stupid."

"Then, why did you come?"

"I'm sitting in the car, doors locked, motor running, cell phone in my hot little hand. Anything doesn't look right to me, Mother Brewer calls in reinforcements."

"Motor running?"

"You bet. Doors locked. The way you told it, I believe these guys can make a person disappear. And I think two could

disappear as fast as one. They come after me, I'm gone - for help, of course. The worst thing that can happen is for you to disappear and nobody knows how or who snatched you. I'm going to know. And they're gonna know I know."

Crystal laughed. "I've read those books. 'If I'm not back in an hour, the police will receive a letter telling all about you crooks.'"

Brandi's eyes turned serious and she raised her chin. "Just 'cause it's in a book doesn't mean it won't work. I'm just modernizing it a bit. Motor running, cell phone in hand."

Brandi turned the car into a cul-de-sac. "Wow."

Hunter Circle had but a single residence, an expensive, sprawling house that exuded all the warmth of a codfish. One-story wings extended on each side of a massive, two-story center section. The house presented no architectural interest other than its size. Bricks, trim, doors, and windows were a uniform off-white, more on the gray side than a warmer, yellow tint. Crystal could see no shutters, in fact, no ornamentation at all. *Looks like a prison.* Instinctively, she looked up to see if there were any guards on the roof.

A number of small, uniformly green shrubs hid the foundation, but offered no charm to the featureless building. They were clipped so perfectly they might have been plastic. The neatly trimmed grass looked lifeless, in keeping with its surroundings. Not a single flower graced the property. Not even a dandelion.

A black, wrought-iron fence surrounded the yard. Crystal shook her head. It added to the general impersonal, sterile feel of the place. As for security, it might keep out a boy chasing an errant football.

Today, the gate stood ajar. They would park on the street, and Crystal could simply walk up to the front door and ring the bell. A chill caused her to shiver.

"Now, there's digs that say 'I've got money.'" Brandi

giggled. "Not old money, mind you. Definitely new money. Old Blackie didn't want it to look like a plantation. Might give people ideas."

She stopped the car opposite the flagstone walk that curved up to the mammoth structure. "Gives me the creeps." She leaned over to look out Crystal's window. "You know I can't stand anything that's too neat. Reminds me of that movie, *The Devil House*. Remember that one? The house was possessed or something. People would go in and never be seen again. Couldn't even find bones or anything."

"You're not helping, Brandi." In spite of the bright, sunny day, Crystal felt as though she were about to enter a graveyard at midnight on a cold, moonless night. Even the hairs on the back of her neck stood on alert. "There's not even a bird anywhere around this place."

Brandi put a hand on Crystal's shoulder. "You don't have to do this, you know. In fact, I don't know *anyone* who wants you to."

With an effort, Crystal forced her gaze to shift from the house to her friend. "If I believe Rosa, then I have to do this. And I do believe her." She sighed. "It isn't going to get any easier if I wait." She opened the door, but her feet did not move.

"How long do you think you'll be in there? When should I panic and call in back-up?"

"Give me ten minutes. Probably won't be that long." She forced a little laugh. "I may not get past the front door." With that, she pulled herself out, closed the door, and headed for the house. The door lock clicked behind her.

Crystal rang the bell and waited. Up close, the house appeared no better. Millions of dollars and still it looked as appealing as day-old coffee.

She grasped her hands tightly behind her back and hoped her knees did not buckle. She clinched her teeth so tightly her jaw throbbed. She could hear a rapid thumping

noise. Was somebody running in the house? *Dummy, that's your heart beating. Calm down. Relax. Breathe.*

The door opened and there stood a young Mexican woman. "Si?"

It took a moment for Crystal to find her voice. "Are you Lucita?"

The woman's black eyes narrowed and a frown creased her young face. A simple dress hung from her shoulders. Her sandals looked much the same as Rosa's. A plain, silver clasp held black hair away from her round face. Her features were as delicate as spun glass. She jerked her head to glance behind her, then looked back at Crystal. She nodded once, so slightly Crystal almost missed it.

Crystal took a deep breath and reminded herself to speak slowly and distinctly. "If you would like to leave now, I can help you. We will go and get your children back. Rosa is with my grandmother. I will take you there. And we *will* get your children. But you need to come with me right now. *Ahora.*"

Lucita tilted her head to one side. She gave no response, no real indication she understood except her eyes grew even darker.

Crystal tried again. "Do you want to leave this house?"

Still the young woman made no sound, but her breathing accelerated and stress lines formed between her eyebrows. She took a small half-step away from Crystal.

From nearby in the house a male voice said, "Lucita. ¿*Quien es?*"

Crystal stiffened. Before she regained her composure, a man appeared behind Lucita and placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. She moved aside and Crystal was facing a man probably in his late forties, well over six feet tall. His brown hair had only a little gray at the temples. Despite handsome features, he appeared unattractive. Perhaps it was the cold that radiated from his dull, grey eyes. The slight smile on his face added no

warmth. In his left hand he held a large metal casting of some sort.

“May I help you?”

Once again, Crystal found it difficult to speak. She had wanted to talk to this man, to accuse him of cruelty to these Mexican women. Now, her voice failed her. When she managed to speak, the words rushed out of her mouth. “Are you Mr. Blackwood? Hunter Blackwood?”

“Yes, I am. And who are you?”

A simple question. One she didn’t want to answer. But she was the one who had come here asking questions. “Ah, Ms. Moore. I was asking Lucita if she wanted to leave. I wanted to know if she was being held here against her will.” Her voice betrayed her and cracked like a teenage boy’s.

Hunter Blackwood studied Crystal for several seconds. If her accusations offended him, no indication showed in his manner. But the look in his eyes hardened. He turned and took Lucita by the hand and guided her up beside him. “Lucita. *¿Esta usted aqui contra su voluntad?*”

She shook her head violently from side to side. “No. No. *Estoy muy a gusto aquí.*” Her eyes opened wide and deep creases formed across her brow. She continued shaking her head in short, jerky movements.

Blackwood turned back to Crystal and raised his well-trimmed eyebrows. “I don’t know where you got the idea she wanted to leave. But you heard for yourself. She said she liked it here. Do you understand Spanish?”

“Enough.”

“Then you know what she said. Was there anything else?”

Crystal didn’t know what else to say. To verbally attack Blackwood would do no good. He seemed too cool to lose his temper and say something that might help her. She could tell

him Rosa was at The Park and had revealed what he did to her. What would that accomplish? Simply tell Blackwood where Rosa was. Where to look for her.

His cold smile returned and he stood there waiting for her to answer. Her gaze wandered to the piece of bronze he held, shaped like a huge dollar sign, probably a foot long, and from the way he held it, heavy.

She blinked several times to break her stare and looked back up at Blackwood's icy eyes. "No. I just wanted to hear her say she was here of her own free will."

"Well, you did. Is there anything else?"

Crystal stood there, not knowing exactly what to do next. Anger overtook her brain and she wanted to lash out at this evil man. But fear was rising just as fast. Fear won out. "No."

"Then, good day." And he shut the door.

#

Crystal got in the passenger's side and Brandi had the car moving before the door closed.

"Well?" Brandi drove, but her attention stayed on Crystal.

"Just get us out of here. That guy and that place give me the creeps."

"I'll say. I was shaking out here in the car."

"Besides, I don't want to give him a chance to get your license plate number."

Brandi's eyes opened wide and she glanced at her friend. "Wow. He really did spook you." She whipped the car around the corner and sped down several blocks before making another turn, heading for the freeway.

Crystal let out a long breath. "I'm sure you saw the woman who opened the door. That was Lucita. I asked her if she wanted to leave right now. I told her we would get her

children." Crystal shook her head. "She didn't say a word."

"Are you sure it was Lucita?"

"She nodded when I asked her. Then Blackwood came to the door."

"I saw a man." Thin traffic allowed Brandi to concentrate most of her attention on Crystal. "Nice looking, from what I could see. What did you say to him?"

"I said I wanted to know if Lucita was there of her own free will or if she was being held against her wishes."

"Wow." Brandi slammed her hand on the steering wheel, accidentally honking the horn. "Crystal Moore, woman of steel nerves."

"Yeah. I was shaking in my shoes."

After a moment of silence, Brandi said, "Well, come on, gal. Don't leave me hanging. What'd he say? Or do?"

Crystal furrowed her eyebrows. "Strange. I thought that question would get some sort of rise out of him. But he just turned to Lucita and asked her, in Spanish, if she was there against her will."

"And?"

"She said no. She liked it there."

"In Spanish?"

"Yes. But simply and slowly enough I understood her."

They drove another block. "How'd he ask it? I mean, did he say it in such a way she knew what she'd better answer?"

"No. He asked it as easily as you might say, 'Is dinner ready?'" Crystal rubbed the side of her nose. "But she was terrified. I could see it in her eyes. She was afraid to say anything else. I'm more convinced than ever. She is a slave. *Ella es una esclava.*"

"And how'd he treat you? Particularly after you asked

him that?”

“He was as pleasant as could be.” Crystal shook her head. “No, not pleasant. Cold. Neutral. No emotion at all. He didn’t seem to be upset with my question. Of course he wasn’t upset with Lucita’s answer. Then he asked if there was anything else. I said no and he said good day. He didn’t get angry or even show any displeasure. He just smiled. A chilling smile.”

Brandi squinted her eyes and half-turned to Crystal “That’s it? He didn’t ask you why you were there or who sent you?”

“No. Nothing. Well, he asked my name.”

Brandi glanced at Crystal, lines of concern etched into her face. “Did you tell him?”

“I stammered and said I was Ms. Moore.”

“I’d have told him I was Joan Doe or Sara Jane Smith. Or Hillary Rodham. I thought I’d taught you better.”

Crystal remained silent. *That was a mistake. What was I thinking. Did I really think Lucita would just bolt out the door with someone she’d never seen before? Stupid. Nana was right. Dumb idea.*

Once more, Crystal shifted her head so she could see in the outside mirror. The street behind them was empty. The hand clamped on her purse relaxed ever so slightly.

Chapter 6

AT 1 Hunter Circle, Blackwood returned to his study and closed the door. Burgundy carpet and mahogany paneling gave the room its dark appearance. The desk and several low, lateral file cabinets were made of the same wood. He placed the bronze dollar sign on the desk, then sat in a high-backed, burgundy leather chair and placed his well-manicured hands on the desk. Three focused spotlights in the ceiling illuminated the desktop and the chair in front of the desk, but left him in the shadows.

“Her name is Moore. Brown eyes, black hair, late twenties. Get her picture from the security camera. Find her.” He began sorting through some papers on the desktop. His well-modulated voice had revealed no anger.

The man seated before him nodded.

“I do not want to see or hear about her again.”

Blackwood raised his head slightly, fixing the man with a steel-cold stare. “Ever.”

Chapter 7

CRYSTAL sat in an overstuffed chair, upholstered in a nubby material of a color she called champagne and Brandi called granny white. A magazine lay open in her lap, but she was staring into space.

Brandi lounged on the couch, feet curled under her, flipping through a Dillard's catalogue and munching an apple. "Now, here's a little number that would grab Tom's attention. What do you think?" Brandi turned the catalogue toward her housemate. When Crystal didn't look, Brandi waved the page at her. "Hey, are you home, or having an out-of-body experience?"

Crystal blinked twice and looked at the cocktail dress vividly displayed in the catalogue. "Yeah. That would look good on you."

"Okay. Forget the sexy dress. Can't afford it anyway. What's sucking up all your brain waves?"

Crystal's dark mood saturated the room. "He scares me."

Brandi screwed her face into a question mark, then quickly changed to understanding. "Blackwood. Fortunately, you don't have to see him again."

"What about Lucita?"

"Did you ask her to leave with you? On the spot?"

"Yes, but— "

"But nothing. You gave her a chance. She said she liked it there. End of story."

"I can't ignore her, or her situation."

Brandi dropped the catalogue. "Look, you marched right into the tiger's den. You confronted the beast in his lair. That's hardly ignoring the situation. You went far beyond the call of duty and tried to get her to leave. She wouldn't. You can't force her. You don't need to feel guilty." Brandi crunched into the apple again.

Nothing Blackwood said sounded threatening. Bland or bored best described his look. Yet, his attitude, his eyes, his very being radiated such cold Crystal had felt chilled standing three feet away. Without saying a single menacing word, the man had terrified her. And made her angrier than she'd been in years.

"Who's going to help Lucita?"

"The same person who would of if Rosa had rummaged through somebody else's garbage can instead of Eula's." Brandi exhaled loudly. "She's not your responsibility, Crystal. And we are in agreement: you don't want to tangle with Blackheart." Brandi reached out and took her friend's hand. "What's happening with Rosa?"

"She's staying at Nana's. We'll work something out for her, get her some jobs. I've got to see about getting her a green card or visa or something."

"Okay. So, you're working to save Rosa, improve her life, maybe make her legal here. You gave Lucita a chance to escape. You confronted Blackwood. You've done a lot. You're not at fault 'cause you haven't done *everything*. You can't right all the wrongs in the world. Lucita won't leave." She hunched her shoulders. "Maybe she *shouldn't* leave."

For a long time, neither woman said anything. Finally, Crystal let out a long breath. "You're right. I can't force Lucita to leave. And we *are* helping Rosa."

But to herself, Crystal acknowledged her fear of Blackwood outweighed the other factors.

Crystal spent the next morning working on her current IRS project, a computer program capable of constantly analyzing all records in a hospital database to determine if any correlations existed between a disease and patient characteristics. Instead of long, drawn-out studies, her system would instantly check when new data was entered. She met with each member of her team, got reports, made suggestions, updated her progress chart, and adjusted her targets.

She spent the afternoon on Lucita and her children. Not that she planned it that way. But everything else got crowded out of her mind by pictures of imprisoned children. Nightmares plagued her all last night—images of mistreated girls, crying for their mother, not knowing if they would ever see her again, not knowing if she were alive or dead; visions of the mother, growing old under cruel conditions, weeping for her lost babies; pictures of Crystal at her parents' grave.

She threw her pencil down. "It's not my problem." *Let someone else deal with it, someone more prepared to handle this sort of thing.* She went back to her project notes. But neither her eyes nor her mind could focus on the project. Scenes of the children growing up as slaves for José blotted out everything else. What would they have to do? Work eighteen-hour days cleaning or working in the fields? Maybe they would be forced into prostitution when they were twelve. Her dark mood deepened.

When she left the office at 6:15, the grey drizzle only added to her depression. Brandi was working the late shift, so Crystal fixed a salad and plopped down in front of the TV, channel surfing, trying to find something, anything, to take her mind off Lucita's children. The comedies were insipid. A police show featuring kidnapped children, and she quickly flipped past that. She tried a game show, a pop psychologist, and a reality show. Finally, at nine she switched the set off, left her plate in the sink, and went to bed.

Crystal woke with a start. Light perspiration covered her skin and she felt chilled, but the trembling was not from cold. The dream had been so real her ankles hurt and she reached down to rub them. Legs chained, she had been forced to work, with no time to rest. Hunter Blackwood held a bronze piece, shaped like a dollar sign. Any time she slowed, he would touch her with it, blistering her skin. She couldn't remember what the work was, but she couldn't do it fast enough to suit him. After awhile, he no longer needed to touch her with the bronze. Just pointing it in her direction would cause immense pain. Even now, awake, she felt as though her arms were blistered.

She focused on the soft glow of the digital clock sitting on the dresser. Four-thirty. This made five nightmares that had terrified her since going to bed at nine last night. Children in chains; dead parents; Crystal as a child crying in an empty, dark room. She dreaded going back to sleep and facing yet another frightening vision. She switched on the light, went into the bathroom, and splashed cold water on her feverish face.

She considered going to her office to think this through, but opted for the kitchen instead. A few minutes and she would have this sorted out in her mind, be back in bed, and fast asleep.

An hour later, she determined her analytical skills, so carefully honed during years of graduate study, completely failed her now. Without thinking, she glanced in the direction of Brandi's room. She had helped Crystal sort things out in the past. Though Brandi had only a high school education, she amazed Crystal with her ability to cut through all the chaff and pick out the kernel of insight. Brandi's common sense was uncommonly good.

Crystal tapped lightly on the door. "Brandi. Are you awake?" She recognized that was a stupid question but it was the first thing that came to mind. When her housemate didn't respond, she tried again: "Brandi."

The lump under the covers stirred. Then a hand emerged, followed by a head. "Of course I'm awake. What else

would I be at..." She squinted at the clock on the wall opposite her bed. "At 5:35? That's 5:35 a.m. on a day when I go to work in the afternoon."

"I can't sleep."

"Funny, I don't seem to be able to sleep either. Was somebody talking to you, too?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to do."

"About?"

"Lucita. And her children. I've had nightmares about them — all night."

"That's the topic for the 5:35 discussion group? Your nightmares?" She sat up. "Is this a quick consultation, or should I plan for extended care?"

"Unless you have some marvelous wisdom that usually only comes in a thirty-second commercial, I'll make a pot of coffee."

#

Ten minutes later, the aroma of fresh-brewed French-roast coffee filled the kitchen. Crystal sat on a stool at the marble-topped bar separating the kitchen from the dining room, a steaming mug nestled between her hands.

Brandi stood beside the microwave, waiting for a doughnut to warm. "Okay. Where do we start? Being such an analytical person, you probably want to make a list."

"Good idea. We can make a table showing all possible options, plus the good and bad points of each."

Brandi settled on a stool, doughnut in one hand, coffee mug in the other. "First entry: forget all about it." She took a bite of the doughnut and smiled. "Good points: we can go back to sleep. And we can stay away from the Devil House."

Crystal sighed. "I honestly wish I could." Her mind automatically listed the good and bad points. If she could forget

about Lucita and the children, she could get back to a normal life, forget about modern-day slaves and dead husbands and children kept from their mother. And maybe get rid of the nightmares. *Not likely.*

One nightmare early this morning had brought back into sharp focus the instant when her own warm, safe, happy family had been snatched from her. First came sadness, quickly compounded by fright, loneliness, and then anger. Why did this happen to her? Why had her parents deserted her? She needed them. What had she done to cause them to go away, to abandon her? Why wouldn't anybody help her? Why couldn't someone see her pain, step forward, keep her from a life without parents?

Nana and Granddad had tried to comfort her, but Crystal had been beyond help. Her parents were dead. No one could bring them back.

Now, more than twenty years later, she still felt the pain.

But Lucita was not dead. Something *could* be done for her children. As much as Crystal might like to walk away, she knew as certainly as she knew how to boil water, she could not turn her back.

"No. That's out. I have to help her," said Crystal.

"Go to the police."

"A possibility. What are the pluses and minuses?"

Brandi held up a half eaten doughnut. "I'll give the pluses. It might get us back to bed and get rid of your nightmares. Shifts the problem to someone else, always a good thing. And, they have the resources—translate: muscle—to deal with Blackheart."

"On the minus side," Crystal countered, "we have no proof, no hard evidence, to induce the police to investigate. Tom will tell us there isn't enough information for them to do anything. Even if we got the police to go see her, Lucita would say she was happy there, she didn't want to leave. And of course, both Rosa and Lucita would be subject to deportation."

"Deportation might be better than staying with Blackheart. And it might get Lucita back to her children."

"Maybe. More likely, whoever has the children would just take Lucita as his slave. Or kill her for causing trouble." Crystal pressed her lips into a fine line and shook her head. "I don't have a clue what the police would do. They're not immigration, but they are the law."

"I'll ask Tom about it tomorrow." Brandi pushed the last of the doughnut into her mouth.

"I could go back and talk to Hunter Blackwood again, explain that I know what's going on and will expose him if he doesn't correct the injustices."

"Correct the injustices? You sound like a lawyer." Brandi snapped her fingers, sending powdered sugar across the bar. "That's it. Take a lawyer with you. Maybe a legal beagle could convince him to let Lucita go, help her get her children back."

Crystal took a sip of coffee. "If it worked, that would be great. But the probability of that happening is about the same as making a perfect soufflé during an earthquake. I have a better chance just spiriting her away."

"I like it. Quick, neat, and we can get some sleep."

"But the negatives are too great to enumerate. We'd probably have to drag her off. And what would happen to her children?"

"Good point. You save her and the guy in Mexico kills the kids." Brandi made a sound like a buzzer. "Wrong."

Sighing, Crystal said, "As appealing as it sounds, I'm afraid we have to rule that one out."

An idea had been floating around in the back of her mind for several minutes. Now, it waved a hand, demanding attention.

"I could go down to Mexico and get the children. That would solve both problems at once. The children would be safe

and Blackwood would have no hold over Lucita. She'd be happy to leave under those circumstances." Crystal sipped her coffee, eyeing her housemate over the rim of the cup.

"What? Are you nuts? Go into a foreign country and kidnap children. And not just any country. Mexico. The cartels kill people every day." She shook her head. "You thought there were lots of negatives for snatching Lucita. This swamps that. Bad idea. Bad, bad idea. Where's the father?"

"Rosa said he's dead." She wondered briefly if the father had worked for, or had been killed by José. "It's a *great* idea. Not necessarily an easy one to carry out, but a great idea. I like it. Can you imagine the look on Lucita's face when I return with the children?"

"I'm imagining the immigration officer's look when you try to bring them back."

The night had been miserable. Now she had a plan. Crystal's eyes sparkled and energy flowed through her body. "I've got to talk to Lucita again. I've got to get more information on her kids. I don't even know their names right now, or what they look like or anything."

Brandi just shook her head. "Dumb idea, Crystal. Think this through again. This is the kind of stunt I'd pull. And you'd tell me it was—how would you put it—*ill-conceived*. That's what you'd say. I know I'm not as smart or educated as you, but I can tell a dumb idea when I smell one."

Crystal's mind played a picture of the two young girls, weeping for their lost mother. Only now, a third young girl wept with them, a seven-year-old, motherless Crystal. Even now, her eyes misted over. Crystal made a solemn vow: *these children will be reunited with their mother*. "I'd better talk to Mark tomorrow," she said. "I guess that's really today, isn't it? Thanks for the help."

"Think nothing of it. But I've got three favors to ask in return. One, give this a lot more consideration before you buy

tickets. And double check on the father. Maybe he's not dead. Maybe he can handle this."

"Okay. And number three?"

"Don't wake me up again this morning."

A Silver Medallion, A Crystal Moore Suspense, Book #2

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