

# **A Silver Medallion**

## **A Crystal Moore Suspense**

**by James R. Callan**

### **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.

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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.

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