

Prologue

The shopping mall was originally built in the 1970s, when Pecan Springs was still hardly more than a small town on the lip of the Balcones Escarpment, at the eastern edge of the Texas Hill Country. But because of its location—on I-35, halfway between Austin and San Antonio—the town hasn't stayed small.

The Hill Country Mall hasn't, either. It has grown, incrementally, until it is now a sprawling regional shopping center with nearly fifteen acres of retail space surrounded by an asphalt parking lot that is surrounded in turn by the hundreds of acres of housing development that have devoured the native prairie. The mall itself is all very contemporary and up-to-date—except for the parking lot lighting system. The mall's customers park their cars in a glittering lake of bright light, of course, whether they are shopping at 10:00 a.m. or 10:00 p.m. The lights promise security and safety, a place where shoppers can come and go with their packages without being afraid, whatever the time of day.

But on the east side of the mall, where the employees are required to park, it's a different story. The initial installation employed sodium lighting that degraded quickly, so that the lights lost 75 percent of their brightness in the first 25 percent of their life cycle. It hasn't been upgraded and is so poorly maintained that at any time, a third of the lights are out of service.

The woman doesn't know that. All she knows is that when she drives into the lot, the whole area is very dark and there are only a few small puddles of pale blue light soaking into the wet asphalt. She parks the car and turns off the engine, then turns it on again, realizing that killing the engine kills the air conditioner. July is just plain hot, even at ten o'clock at night. It rained earlier in the evening and the air is thick and muggy. She makes sure that the doors are locked, then glances around at the scattered cars, wishing she had thought to suggest meeting in the customer parking lot, where there is plenty of light and shoppers coming and going. Or Starbucks or Gino's or one of the crowded campus coffeehouses. It isn't that she is afraid—she trusts the person she's meeting. As Sharyn said, if there's anybody who knows how to understand the problem and can show them the way out, he's the one. Still, she is just a little nervous about being out here all by herself at this hour of the night. And she wishes she hadn't lied to Felicity in order to get out of the house alone.

But of course this is a very bad business, with many almost frightening implications. She understands the need to talk—to plan, to discuss what to do—without being interrupted or overheard. She understands the urgency, too. The matter has to be settled and the sooner they get out ahead of the situation, the better, especially since it's likely that the documentary is going to rekindle an interest in the Morris collection. Most of her students' work doesn't go beyond the thesis level, but this one—once it has been edited and put together—has a decent chance at national distribution. Which could mean that people will begin looking more critically at the collection, their interest fueled by the sensational facts of Christine Morris' murder.

But the museum board members can't just sit around, twiddling their thumbs and waiting for that to happen. In her opinion, it would be better if they all got together as soon as possible to assess the extent of the damage and the impact on their plans for opening the collection to the public. So far, all

she knows is that one piece is compromised and likely others, and that once the truth gets out, there's going to be some serious fallout. The museum was small and private, yes, but it had a great deal of promise, especially with the new exhibitions program they were planning. And it had always enjoyed an excellent reputation. That was at stake now, as were the reputations of the people who'd helped Morris assemble her collection, like the person she's meeting tonight. Yes, they really ought to sit down together, all of them, and hash it out. One-on-one discussion with individual board members would just slow the process. She makes a noise like a chuckle, low in her throat. And this cloak-and-dagger business—meeting in a dimly lit parking lot at ten o'clock at night—well, it's overkill, that's what it is.

She fiddles with the radio dial, tunes it to KMFA in Austin, which plays classical music around the clock. Playing now: a Telemann concerto for oboes and violins. She sits back in the car seat, listening, and thinks again, with sharp and painful regret, about the Izquierdo painting, *Muerte llega pronto*, her favorite of what she had believed—what everyone believed—to be an excellent collection, a unique collection, entirely beyond reproach. That painting, with its stark and bloody allegory, had reached into her heart and touched her in a way she simply couldn't describe. It had been painted at a time when Izquierdo herself had actively courted death, after being jilted by her artist-lover, Rufino Tamayo.

It is raining a little harder now. She is vaguely aware of a car driving off and another one pulling up not far away, but she doesn't pay attention. She is leaning back in the seat, listening to Telemann, to the somber, statuesque oboes, and thinking of *Muerte llega pronto*, which always seemed to her to portray the very essence of rejection, the truth of love's betrayal. And now to learn that the painting itself—

Her thoughts are abruptly interrupted by a light rap on the driver's-side window. At first she thinks it's the person she's to meet, but when she turns her head, she is blinded by a beam of blazing light. After a couple of seconds, the light slants down toward the pavement. She blinks, and when her vision returns, she sees a man standing beside the car, wearing a dark raincoat and billed cap, his face obscured in the shadows cast by the flashlight. He has put his right hand on the roof of her car and is bending over to peer through the window at her, no doubt wondering what kind of suspicious activity she is involved in at this hour of the night. A drug deal, maybe? An illicit affair? A terrorist plot, or something equally illegal? He gestures to her to turn off the ignition and get out of the car.

Impatient, she jabs the button and rolls the window down a few inches. "I'm waiting for somebody, Officer." She makes a show of looking at her watch. "He's already late. I'm sure he'll be along in a minute."

"No problem, ma'am." She can't see the man's face, but there's a smile in his voice, friendly, polite. He casts a quick look over his shoulder, then lifts his thumb to point in the direction of the retail buildings. "But we've got a little bit of trouble over there. I need you to get out of your car."

"Trouble?" She frowns. "Well, then, why don't I move the car? I can just as easily park on the other side—"

"I said, get out," the guard repeats, still polite but firm now and not quite so friendly. "No argument, please."

“Oh, all right.” With a resigned sigh, she turns off the motor, cutting off Telemann and the air conditioner. She opens the door and gets out. She turns and bends over to get her purse and her umbrella from the seat when, out of the corner of her eye, she sees the man raise his heavy flashlight over his head and bring it down sharply, all of his burly weight behind the blow. She doesn't have time to raise her arm to fend off the attack.

That's all she sees, just the single blow, not the many that follow. All she will ever see, ever know, ever again.

Death does not come quickly. When it finally comes, she is already gone.