

A Dime A Dozen
by
Mindy Starns Clark

ONE

I'd never been part of a sting before. Sure, I'd blown the whistle on some defrauders in the past, and I had seen more than one person arrested because of felonious deeds I had brought to light. But this time was different. This time the crime was still in the process of being committed. Worse than that, most of the people at this party were involved.

I stood near French doors that led to the patio, holding a soda in my hand and looking out through the glass at the pool sparkling in the cool March afternoon. Behind the pool was a small lawn dotted here and there with ornamental groupings of shrubbery and plants, all surrounded by a high, thick hedge. I knew that a team of cops was on the other side of that hedge, ready to enter from every direction as soon as I gave the signal.

"Callie, would you like a hamburger? Maybe a hot dog?" My hostess appeared in front of me bearing a platter of raw meat shaped into patties, and I assumed she was on her way back outside to the grill. My eyes focused on the marbled beef, and then back at her expectant face. She was the very picture of charm and hospitality. Oh, and theft.

"No, thank you," I said, forcing a smile. "I'm fine." I opened the door to let her out since her hands were full, and music poured into the house, compliments of the large speakers mounted under the eaves outside.

"You should come on out," she urged loudly as she handed the platter off to her husband, Skipper. "It's a gorgeous day."

"In a while, perhaps," I said as I let the door fall shut between us. She turned her attention to a group of guests near the pool, and as she worked the crowd I thought, You don't want me to go outside, Winnie. The last thing you want me to do is go outside.

I glanced at my watch, wondering how much longer this would take. The police had instructed me to wait until all of the elements had fallen

into place, and so far that hadn't happened. The tension was getting to me, so I set my glass on a nearby countertop and made my way through the small crowd in the kitchen to the upstairs bathroom. I needed to be alone, to catch my breath, to make a call.

Once I was locked inside, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed the number of the police captain. He knew it was me and that I couldn't say much on my end for fear of being overheard.

"Looks like things are moving along as expected," he said. "Yes."

"Have they brought out the hamburgers yet?" "Oh, yes. Everything's in full swing."

He chuckled into the phone. "I hope they're enjoying it while they can," he said. "They seem to be."

"We're all set on our end. Soon as the guy shows up, we'll call you."
"I'll be ready."

"You found the garage?" he asked. "Yep."

"Empty?"

"Except for the boxes in the freezer."

"Perfect. Simply perfect. Hang in there, kid. We're on the home-stretch."

I hung up the phone and slid it into my pocket, wondering if all would go off as planned once they called me back. There were so many elements coming into play here, and it was important that they close in at the moment when we could nab the greatest number of guilty parties. I shook my head, marveling at the situation I now found myself in. This wasn't how I usually spent my Saturday afternoons!

As the Director of Research for the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation, my job was to investigate charitable organizations in order to verify their suitability for a grant. I had come here to get a closer look at Dinner Time, a food bank and soup kitchen for the homeless in a suburb of San Francisco. I had gone "undercover" by posing as a volunteer to get a good look at the organization from the inside. Almost immediately, however, I realized there was something stinky in the sauce. Dinner Time may have been providing food to the homeless,

but it was also providing a handy second income to its founders and many of its employees by way of food donations that were ending up in places other than on Dinner Time's tables.

Even this party was an appalling, blatant display of theft, and, according to my source, they had similar such events every few months. From the chips and hamburgers to the condiments, most of the food being consumed here today had actually been donated to the charity, intended for the poor. Instead, our hosts had simply loaded many of the boxes into their cars and driven the food home for this impromptu party. Any minute now a local food supplier would show up and collect his share of the take, which was waiting for him in the garage. Unbeknownst to any of them, however, much of the donated food this time was marked, from the codes printed on the bottom of the mustard bottles to the labels on the frozen steaks in the freezer.

A knock on the bathroom door startled me from my thoughts. "Just a minute," I called, and then I washed my hands in the sink and glanced at my reflection in the mirror. My own image still surprised me sometimes, since four months before I had gone from having long hair to short, from wearing my hair in a tight chignon at the back of my neck to having just enough length to frame my face and touch at my collar. I liked the new look, both because of the years it seemed to take from my features and in the way it worked with my usual attire of suits and dresses. I'd spent this week in more casual clothes, however, and today was no exception. I had on jeans and a lightly knit tan shirt, and I felt I looked the part I was playing--that of a woman interested in some simple volunteer work at the local soup kitchen. Little did they know that I was something much more threatening: an investigator with a mission to ferret out the bad guys in the nonprofit world and bring them all to justice!

I opened the bathroom door and found a familiar face waiting to get in, a fellow volunteer named Clement Jackson.

"Oh, hey, Callie," he said, "I didn't realize that was you in there."

"No problem."

I moved out of the way so that he could pass me and go into the bathroom. As he closed the door behind him, I made my way back downstairs to the kitchen.

Clement was such a dear man, a tireless worker who served full time at the food bank for a salary so low I didn't know how he managed to make ends meet. He wasn't aware that I knew his salary rate or anything about him beyond facts he had mentioned to me in casual conversation. He had told me about his lovely wife of 36 years, his five grown children, his eight grandchildren. But the scope of my investigation had included all of the employees and volunteers of Dinner Time, so I also knew his address, his work record, and much more. In the end, he had turned out to be one of only three people connected to the center who apparently weren't involved in the theft of the food.

I was so glad, because it confirmed what I had felt to be true about him all week, that he was a wonderful person with a true heart for charity. His personal side mission was to collect and distribute free used books to all of the children who came to the food bank and, whenever he had time, to sit and read to them and encourage them to read more for themselves.

"Reading can get you through some mighty tough spots," I had heard him say more than once this week. "Even if your feet can't always go somewhere else, your mind sure can." Poor Clement was going to be stunned when this sting came together, for he believed most people were motivated by the same altruism and good faith he himself possessed.

"Callie, can I get you something to drink?"

This time, Winnie's husband, Skipper, was playing the host, walking toward me with a newly filled ice bucket.

"No, thanks," I replied. "My drink's right over here." As if to prove it, I walked to the spot where I had left my soda, picked it up, and swirled the liquid. Skipper's very presence made me so nervous I didn't dare speak for fear I would begin to babble. Unfortunately, he persisted.

"How about a little ice then," he said, using the tongs to load my drink with ice. Holding my tongue, I watched as he clunked ice cubes into the glass that I held in front of me.

"So what do you think of our weather here in California?" he asked. "Winnie said you just recently moved here, right?"

Actually, I hadn't told her that. What I had said was that I had never lived in California before, implying, I guess, that I lived here now. It was the kind of half-truth that going undercover necessitated and the very reason I hated playing a role. As a Christian, lying was hard for me to rationalize, even when the ends seemed to justify the means.

"It's certainly a beautiful day today!" I said, glancing toward the window. I was desperately trying to think of some other sort of socially acceptable patter when I was saved by the bell--or the ring, to be exact, because Skipper's cell phone began ringing from his hip pocket.

With a smile, he thrust the ice bucket at me, extricated the phone, and turned it on.

"Skipper here," he said amiably, winking at me as he did so. Clutching the ice in front of me, I took a step back, wondering if I could seize the moment and get away before his conversation was finished. Unfortunately, it seemed to last all of about 15 seconds. He said, "Yep. Okay. See ya," and then hung up the phone.

"You'll excuse me, won't you, Callie?" he asked smoothly, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

"Of course." I held the ice bucket toward him, but he didn't take it. "Um, could you take that ice out to Winnie?" he asked. "I need to get something from the garage."

He turned and walked down the hall without waiting for a reply. I stood frozen, trying to decide how to get the ice "out to Winnie" without taking a step outside myself. Suddenly my own phone began ringing. I took the opportunity to pass the ice off to someone else, asking a nearby man to please take it out to our hostess as I had a phone call.

"Yes?" I asked into the receiver once I was able to step away from the crowd and into the empty dining room.

"Our guy just turned into the driveway," the captain told me. "Give it about two minutes and then take a peek at the garage."

"Okay." I hung up the phone, glanced at my watch, and waited, my heart suddenly pounding in my chest. For an absurd moment, I wondered if there was any hidden firepower here, if perhaps Skipper and Winnie kept a Colt .45 tucked in the nearest flowerpot or

something. Just because their crimes of theft were of a nonviolent nature didn't mean they didn't know how to defend themselves when push came to shove. As it was about to.

At one minute, forty-three seconds, I heard my name called from the other room. I looked through the doorway to see Clement just coming down the stairs on the other side of the kitchen. Clement, who could be in the line of fire if things went down in a nasty way. Clement, who was heading toward me with a genial smile, eager to start a chat just when it was time for me to move.

"I need a favor!" I said urgently, walking forward to meet him. "I can't find my contact lens. I'm afraid it came out in the bathroom. Do you think you could go back up and look for me? Check all over the floor, the sink, you know."

"Well, I'll try, Callie," he said, nodding his head, the tightly-curved gray hair a sharp contrast to his brown skin. "But my eyesight's not so good myself. Come up and we'll look for it together."

I glanced at my watch. Two and a half minutes. "You go on up," I said. "I'll be there in just a bit."

"Okay."

"And, listen, if you can't find it, at least stay there and guard the door until I get there. I don't want someone else stepping on it and breaking it."

"All right." He dutifully trudged back up the stairs as I slipped from the kitchen, walking toward the long side hall Skipper had gone down less than three minutes before. I reached the door of the garage at the end, put my hand on the knob, and turned it.

The door swung open to reveal Skipper and another man lifting boxes into the open trunk of a black Cadillac. Both men looked up to see me, their faces about as guilty as two boys caught dipping their fingers in the peanut butter.

In a way, that's exactly what they were doing. The men recovered quickly. Both put the boxes into the trunk, but the man I didn't know turned and stepped away where I couldn't see his face. Skipper, on the other hand, took a step toward me, putting on a wide, fake smile.

"Can I help you, Callie?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was looking for some more soda. Maybe root beer?"

"There's nothing like that out here," he replied. "Try the pantry, off the kitchen."

"Okay, thanks," I said, returning his fake smile before stepping back out of the garage and pulling the door shut.

I turned on my heel and walked up the hall with my heart pounding loudly in my head. Despite the chatter and confusion around me, I made straight for the French doors, opened them, and stepped outside. This was my signal to the police who were in hiding on the other side of the hedge, watching the party, waiting to pounce. Once on the patio, I simply kept walking through the loud music, heading around the pool and toward the backyard.

"Callie, can I help you with something?" I heard Winnie call after me.

Suddenly, before I could reply, there were shouts and screams and the sight of at least 20 police officers descending on the partygoers on the patio. I heard the words "freeze" and "raid" and "you have the right to remain silent." Once I finally turned around and looked at the scene, all I could do was pray that Clement was safe, that the cops had apprehended the men in the garage before anyone could do anything stupid.

I waited at the back of the yard until I saw the captain come to the kitchen door and give the "all clear" signal to the cops outside. Breathing a great big sigh of relief, I headed back toward the house, allowing myself to be herded into the corner of the patio where they were sorting everyone out. Counting heads, I realized they had managed to nab almost every single person who was on the list of those who had either stolen food or accepted food they knew was stolen. The cops didn't single me out but merely pointed me in the direction of the innocent parties, the few standing near the garden shed who hadn't the slightest idea what was going on.

Eventually, Clement was sent out from the house to join us. I gave him a big hug, certainly much bigger than our seemingly casual acquaintance would allow. Obviously shaken, he hugged me back even tighter.

When the police told us we were free to leave, I thought it would be best to stick with Clement, perhaps even offer to take him home. He accepted that offer, sitting in a sort of daze in the passenger seat of my rental car as I gently tried to explain all that he had just seen.

By the time we reached his house, he was still quite shaken. He invited me inside and I accepted, eager to see him safely delivered into the arms of his wife.

She wasn't home, however, so I insisted that he call one of his children, perhaps Trey, since I knew he lived right down the street and could be here in a matter of minutes. While we waited, I heated some water on the stove for tea and essentially made myself at home in the kitchen. The house was small but tidy, and everything was easy to find in the neatly organized cabinets. As the water began to bubble on the stove, Clement took a seat at the table, silent, looking every bit of his 59 years. As I was setting his tea in front of him, Trey burst through the door, concern evident on his face.

"Pop?"

Short but muscular, with his father's coffee-colored skin and deep brown eyes, Trey was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, both of which were covered with spatters of blue.

"We were painting the baby's room," he added, sounding breathless, looking from me to his father. "What's going on?"

Clement didn't answer, so I introduced myself and tried to explain the situation as best I could. The place where Clement worked, I said, had been busted for fraud and theft. Clement was in the clear, but he had been fairly traumatized by the whole event.

"And who are you, exactly?" Trey asked, looking at me as if this were all my fault. In a way, it was.

"My name is Callie Webber," I said, carrying over two more cups of tea and taking a seat at the table. "I'm a private investigator."

Clement turned toward me, his face suddenly registering disbelief rather than shock.

"You're a what?" he asked.

"A private investigator."

"Since when?"

"Since I was old enough to get certified in the state of Virginia," I said. "I'm also a lawyer. I work for the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation out of Washington, DC."

Clement shook his head, as if to shake off the confusion. Before he could launch into more questions, I continued.

"I live in Maryland now," I explained, "and I just came to California to investigate Dinner Time on behalf of my employer. Dinner Time had requested a grant, and it's my job to verify eligibility."

"You don't even live here?" Clement asked me, still incredulous. "You mean you've been pretending all week?"

"I'm sorry, Clement," I said. "Sometimes that's the only way I can really see what's going on."

Trey slid into the seat across from me, ignoring the tea I had put there for him.

"So what happened today?" he asked. "I'm still confused."

"In the course of the investigation of Dinner Time, I uncovered fraud, theft, tax evasion, distribution of stolen property, you name it. I took that information to the police, only to learn that they already knew about it and that they were very close to making some arrests. We worked together on a sting operation, and today we caught most of the guilty parties red-handed."

"I can't believe they were stealing food," Clement said, shaking his head sadly.

"I always told you there was something slick about that Skipper person," Trey said to his father. "'Skipper and Winnie,' good grief. Sounds like a pair of Barbie dolls."

"Will Dinner Time have to close down?" Clement asked.

"Probably," I answered. "Even if someone were to try to keep the place up and running, I doubt it will be able to stay open for very long. Between the bad publicity and the incarcerated principals, I think it'll soon fold. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," Clement said. "I'm sorry I was so blind, so stupid." Trey put a reassuring hand on his father's arm.

"C'mon, Pop," he said. "You couldn't know. You were just doing your job."

"Oh, yeah, my job," Clement said. "Guess I'm out of a job now."

"We'll find you something," Trey said. "Maybe Tanisha can get you on over at the grocery store."

"I liked working at a nonprofit," Clement said, shaking his head. "I liked feeling that my efforts were making just a little difference in the world."

I reached into my pocket, grasping the familiar square of paper there. I pulled it out and set it on the table in front of me, still folded in half.

"I'd like to talk to you about that," I said. "And I'm glad Trey is here, because this would involve him too."

Both men looked at me, their faces somber. "In the course of my investigation," I continued, "I had to check into everybody's background. Including yours, Clement. Your life story paints a picture of a good man, a steady reliable worker who knows the value of a dollar."

"That's my dad," Trey said suspiciously. "But what are you getting at?"

"Well, I've watched you this week reading to the children down at the food bank, Clement. I've heard you talk about the benefits of reading, of being read to. I want you to think about starting a charity of your own. Something that lets you go around and give away books and have regular reading times with homeless children."

"Like a bookmobile?" Clement asked.

"Perhaps," I said. "Or maybe you could get some space in the recreation center or a homeless shelter or another food bank."

Somewhere that you could set up a little reading corner filled with books and beanbag chairs and stuffed animals. It's not hard to get people to donate children's books to a charity. You could provide reading times, give the books to the children who seem to want them, encourage their parents to read with them..."

I let my voice trail off, seeing that a spark was lighting up behind Clement's eyes.

"What do I have to do with this?" Trey asked. "Your father told me that you're an accountant," I said. "Maybe you can help him get started and then keep the books for him."

"Well, yeah, I could do that."

"And I understand your sister is a graphic artist? Maybe she could put together some brochures and promotional materials. You'd be surprised how many resources are available, usually right at your own fingertips."

I looked at Trey and then at Clement, surprised to see the fire quickly fading from the older man's eyes.

"As good as our intentions may be," he said, shaking his head, "There's one thing standing in the way. I can't afford it."

I smiled, fingering the square of paper in front of me. "Well, then let me take it a step further," I said. "My job allows me a certain amount of leeway with small monetary grants. What would you think if I gave you a check to get started? You could get yourself incorporated as a nonprofit, file for federal tax exemption, and cover your basic start-up costs. Once you've got that tax exemption, I would encourage you to fill out a grant application from the J.O.S.H.U.A. Foundation for a much larger amount of money. We believe strongly in what you could accomplish, Clement, and we would like to have some small part in furthering your efforts."

I sat back, thinking that in the two and a half years I had worked for the foundation, this was the first time I had to talk someone into taking our money!

"Still, I don't see how it would work," Trey said. "He'd need at least a thousand dollars just to get set up."

"How does five thousand sound?" I asked, unfolding the check and handing it to them. It was already made out to Clement Jackson, who picked it up and studied it as if it were a ticket to somewhere important. "And, like I said, once you've got that tax exemption and your policies and procedures in place, you can apply to us for more. I have a feeling we'll be very generous as long as you can show you've got a good business plan."

The two men looked at each other and grinned, and not for the first time I wished my boss, Tom, the philanthropist behind all J.O.S.H.U.A. grants, could be here to witness their joy. Tom was half a world away right now, and though later I would recount this entire scene for him over the phone, it still made me sad that he wasn't here experiencing it for himself.

Then again, he never was. Tom always donated anonymously through the foundation and then enjoyed the moment of presentation vicariously through me. I was happy to recreate every word, every detail, but I had never understood why he chose to remain so removed from the whole process.

Of course, he and I talked frequently during every investigation, and in fact it was the time we spent on the phone that had allowed us to become friends and then eventually something much more than friends. Four months ago, after several years of a phone-only relationship, Tom and I had finally been able to meet face-to-face.

At the time, he had been out of the country for his work, but he had surprised me by flying back to the States and showing up at my home. We had spent exactly 12 hours together--12 amazing hours that I had relived again and again in my memories ever since--and then he had to leave, returning to Singapore and the urgent business that awaited him.

Now, four months later, Tom was still in Singapore, though his business there was quickly drawing to a close and soon he would be coming home for good. His home was in California and mine was in Maryland, but our plan was to meet somewhere between the two in exactly seven days at some quiet place where we would finally, finally be able to spend some real quality time together--time getting to know each other even better, time exploring the possibilities of a relationship that had gone from friendship to something much more in the space of one 12-hour visit. I was already counting the minutes until we could be together again, knowing that once he returned, a

new chapter in my life would begin in earnest. Tom was handling the logistics of our reunion, and my primary concern was to wrap up my next investigation by the following Sunday, because I didn't want work or anything else to detract from the time we were going to spend together.

Clement spoke, snapping me out of my thoughts and back to the moment at hand.

"I've been praying for something like this for quite a while," he was saying, looking at his son, and I realized there were tears in his eyes. "For so long," he repeated, blinking. "I didn't think the Lord was hearing me. But He was. Because He sent me an angel."

I held up one hand to stop him, emotion surging in my heart as well.

"Now, don't--"

"I'm not kidding, girl. You are an angel. A very generous angel."

"So you'll take the money and start your own charity?" I asked.

"Oh, thank You, Lord," he said, grinning up toward the ceiling. Then he looked back at me. "Yes, Callie. Yes. Most definitely yes."

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