

Dead Broke in Jarrett Creek

ALSO BY TERRY SHAMES

A Killing at Cotton Hill

The Last Death of Jack Harbin

A Samuel Craddock Mystery

Dead Broke in Jarrett Creek

Terry Shames



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To my incomparable sister, Sherry

CHAPTER 1

Some people's brains shift into high gear after they climb into bed, and they end up spending the night hashing out their problems. I go on the philosophy that if there's something you can do to take care of a problem, get up and do it. Otherwise, put it out of your mind—it'll still be there in the morning. It's a philosophy that served me well when my wife Jeanne was dying of cancer.

I spend a couple of minutes lying in bed wondering how I could have handled tonight's meeting better and if there's anything to be done about it now, decide there isn't, and the next thing I know Mrs. Summerville's rooster next door is announcing the approach of dawn.

Problems usually seem more manageable in the daylight, but not this morning. While I go through my usual routine feeding and checking on my twenty head of Herefords down in the pasture behind my house, my thoughts bounce between the uproar at last night's meeting and the financial problems that are sinking Jarrett Creek. At least there's one positive development. Monday one of my yearlings looked to be developing pinkeye, so I dosed him good with antibiotics, and today the eye is clear.

I hope it isn't my imagination that when I walk back up to the house my knee seems a little less stiff this morning, despite the cold weather that has our part of Texas in its grip. I try to remind myself to do the exercises the physical therapist assigned me after my surgery, but it doesn't always reach the top of my priority list.

I've just brewed a second pot of coffee when Loretta Singletary raps on the screen door and scoots inside. I can already smell the offering she's bringing. Loretta bakes every morning and then spreads the goodies around town like she's intent on fattening us up. I tear off

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the foil and see four plump sweet buns oozing with dark berries. “What is this, dewberries?”

“I took some out of the freezer. I figured everybody could use a reminder that summer will come around eventually.”

“Would you like some coffee?”

“I can’t stay this morning. I’ve got the ladies’ auxiliary, but I want to come back later and hear about last night’s meeting.”

“Free-for-all is more like it.”

“Samuel, don’t tease me. I’ve got to get out of here.”

I go out on the porch to see her off, biting into one of the pastries while I stand there. Loretta has no sooner turned down the sidewalk toward her house, when a big Chevy Suburban slides to a stop at the curb. The passenger window glides down and Rusty Reinhardt, our mayor for the past six months, leans over to holler at me. “Chief, I need you to come with me. Something bad has happened.”

I grab my hat and jacket, put some coffee in a thermos, and bring along the roll I was eating and one for Reinhardt. Only when I’m climbing into his truck do I realize that it didn’t occur to me to bring my cane. That’s good news. The doctor told me the knee he fixed up is healing exactly the way it ought to, but it seems to be taking a long time.

Reinhardt waves away the roll I offer him and roars away from the curb. He’s a hefty man with a barrel chest. He wears a big, fluffy mustache that makes him look like Deputy Dawg. His eyes are hidden behind sunglasses, but I see by the set of his jaw that he’s upset. “I have bad news and really bad news.”

“What’s up?”

“Gary Dellmore was murdered last night.” His voice is pinched.

It takes a few seconds for his words to sink in. “We just saw him last night! What happened?”

“Lon Carter found him lying outside the American Legion Hall. Somebody had shot him.”

“Shot him! I’ll be damned. He must have stayed behind after

everybody else left the meeting.” Shaken, I stare out the front window, thinking about how things unfolded last night and wondering how something like this could have happened.

Reinhardt convened an emergency meeting last night to discuss how Jarrett Creek is going to pay for a police force now that the town is flat broke. We can only pay for a couple of part-time officers. Reinhardt put me in charge of the meeting and planned to maneuver matters so that someone would suggest that I take over as chief for now, since I don’t need a salary. I told him I’d go along with it. Due to a successful conclusion to an incident when I was chief of police a good number of years ago, the town still thinks of me as the best lawman they ever had. Some people still call me “Chief.”

Reinhardt didn’t want to railroad the idea through because everybody has had enough of that kind of strong-arming from the former mayor. He planned to be subtle. But the meeting never got that far. Gary Dellmore was determined to take over the proceedings and run the meeting his way. Dellmore’s daddy owns Citizens Bank, and because Gary is the heir apparent, he seems to think he has the right to dictate how things are done in town. He ruffled a lot of feathers last night. I don’t want to believe it, but it’s possible he went too far with somebody and that’s how he ended up dead. “How did you find out about Dellmore?”

“I was at the police station when Lon called. I figured I’d better go over to the American Legion Hall and see if there’s anything I can do. I swung by your place hoping to find you home so I could get you to come with me.”

“What was Carter doing at the hall so early this morning?”

“I didn’t ask him. He said he found Dellmore around the side of the building.” Reinhardt rolls his shoulders like he’s trying to release tension.

Reinhardt is driving faster than he ought to. I watch houses slip by. In this bleak time a few weeks after Christmas, it’s hard to believe

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there will ever be green in the landscape again. Everything is gray and brown—the grass dead from nights of hard freeze, the post oaks and pecans bare of all except curled brown leaves. Even the houses look like they've gone gray.

“What were you doing down at the police station?”

“James Harley Krueger called me first thing this morning to meet him at the station.” Krueger is the acting chief of police while the current chief, Rodell Skinner, is off drying out his system from the burden of drinking a case of beer a day. Rumor has it that his liver is not recovering as well as it has in his past rehab stints.

There's something funny in Reinhardt's voice and I turn to look at him. He's got the wheel of the Suburban in a death grip. That's unusual for him. He's a mild-mannered guy. “What did James Harley want?”

“That's the second part of the bad news. He and the other two full-time deputies resigned first thing this morning. They heard they were going to be laid off because the town is broke, and they decided not to wait. I figure they were hoping to shock us into finding money somewhere and begging them to stay on.”

“Apparently they don't understand that we really don't have the money,” I say.

“When I got down to the station this morning, they were already cleaning out their desks. After they left, I was there with that young part-time officer, Bill Odum, when Carter called to say he'd found the body. Odum left right away to get to the scene. He should be there already.”

Reinhardt squeals around the corner onto the road to the American Legion Hall. In the distance I see a Texas Ranger's car in the parking lot.

“You called the Rangers?”

“Odum did. I haven't been mayor long enough to know how it works when somebody is murdered. Odum called the sheriff's office in Bobtail first, and they told him they didn't have the personnel to handle it, that he needed to call the Texas Rangers.”

I understand the sheriff's problem. Although the county is supposed to be the first responder to a crime scene, if he sent an officer out every time one of the small towns in the county had a problem, they'd be chasing their tails up one road and down another. It's almost always up to the Rangers or the highway patrol to step in if a town has a serious crime.

Reinhardt slows and turns onto the long, unpaved driveway that leads to the building. The American Legion Hall is an ugly barn-like structure with the original asbestos siding and a tin roof.

"Odum's a good youngster. He could work into the job," I say. "Besides him, who's still on duty?"

"Zeke Dibble."

"Good. Dibble has the experience to teach Odum a few things."

Zeke Dibble is a retired Houston cop who moved to Jarrett Creek, where his pension would go farther. Apparently being home all the time drove him, or more likely his wife, crazy. He managed to get hired on part-time in our police department.

We park next to the Ranger's vehicle in the parking lot on the east side of the American Legion Hall. I don't see a Jarrett Creek police car and wonder why Odum hasn't arrived yet. When I get out of Reinhardt's Suburban, the air feels so damp and chilled that it feels like it could snow, although I know it isn't actually cold enough.

We walk around to the west side and there's one of Jarrett Creek's two squad cars parked under the trees. Bill Odum is standing next to the building along with Lon Carter and a Texas Ranger I recognize, Luke Schoppe. Schoppe is one of the Rangers assigned to the region that includes our county. I got reacquainted with him a year or so ago when he was called out for a problem here in Jarrett Creek.

Lon Carter takes care of maintenance for the American Legion Hall and is the man who found Dellmore's body. He's a quiet, stoic man. He's standing with his arms crossed, staring down at the ground,

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his face showing no emotion. The three men look over at us as we round the corner.

Schoppe walks toward us and sticks out his hand for me to shake. "I might have known you'd be in the thick of it."

Before I can reply, Bill Odum hustles over to us. He's about twenty-six, with ropy arms, intense blue eyes, and a shock of corn-colored hair that he wears as short as if he were in the military. "Hold on, Schoppe," Odum says. This is the mayor, Rusty Reinhardt, and . . ." he hesitates, unsure of what to say about me.

"I know exactly who he is," Schoppe says. "He's a helluva lawman. How'd you get roped into this, Craddock?"

"Mayor Reinhardt asked me to come out. We were both here at a meeting last night with Dellmore."

"You were with him last night? Any idea what might have happened?"

"He was alive and well last time we saw him," Reinhardt says.

I nod toward Dellmore's body. "Mind if we take a look?"

"Come on over," Schoppe offers. "We're waiting for the crime unit to show up." Odum and I follow Schoppe, Reinhardt lagging behind. I say hello to Lon Carter, who looks like he wants to be anywhere but here.

Dellmore's body is in a fetal position, facing the building. He's dressed in the same clothing he was wearing last night at the meeting, dark slacks and a tan leather jacket over a Western shirt, and black cowboy boots. He was always something of a fancy dresser. From the back there is no evidence of the gunshot wound, so it looks like he just laid down for a nap. But a dark stain of blood has seeped onto the ground around the upper part of the body. The way his legs are drawn up, he must have lived at least a short time after he was shot and pulled his legs up in pain or maybe to comfort himself. There's a vulnerable look to his body that he didn't have in life. I didn't like Dellmore, but I like even less what has happened here.

Rusty Reinhardt walks away, his shoulders hunched. Schoppe

watches him and then turns to me. "Did this man Dellmore have any problems with anybody at the meeting?"

"The meeting was contentious but not out of control. Could this have been a robbery?" I ask. "Maybe somebody was hanging around and caught Dellmore after everybody left."

Schoppe shakes his head. "I checked and his wallet is intact. Has thirty dollars in it. Looks like he knew whoever killed him. It was a close-up shot right through the heart. And no defensive wounds."

I don't like the sound of that. It is possible that somebody stayed behind and got into it with Dellmore. "What kind of evidence you find so far?"

"One bullet casing." He takes an evidence bag out of his vest pocket and shows it to me. "The ground around here is too hard to hold a footprint."

Schoppe is right. We had rain last week, but the clay soil around here doesn't hold moisture and packs up tight as soon it's dry.

"You find anything in his pockets?"

"I didn't want to mess with the body too much," Schoppe says, "so I didn't go through his clothes except to find his wallet. The clothes can be examined when the body gets to the morgue."

"I wonder what he was doing on this side of the building," I say. "Entrance is around back and the parking lot is on the other side." But I remember something from last night. After the meeting, my neighbor Jenny Sandstone and I were headed toward my pickup when we heard Dellmore's insistent voice coming from around this side of the building. At the time it didn't strike me as odd that he'd be on this side where no one was parked.

We heard Dellmore say, "This whole thing was Alton Coldwater's fault and he ought to be held accountable." Coldwater is the town's former mayor, whose big-spending ways have put the town in a financial mess.

Whoever Dellmore was talking to murmured something and then

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Dellmore said, “That old fool! I don’t see why he was in charge of the meeting. Just because he was chief of police back when Roy Rogers was in his prime doesn’t make him any expert.”

Jenny nudged me in the side and whispered, “Who do you suppose he’s talking about?”

At the time I had half a mind to stomp over there and tell Dellmore off, but the smarter half of my mind told me to let it go. Besides I couldn’t help grinning at the line about Roy Rogers. Now I wonder if I could have stopped whatever dust-up got Dellmore killed. The exchange didn’t sound all that serious, but maybe after everyone left, the argument escalated and whoever Dellmore was arguing with pulled out a gun and shot him.

I try to remember who was still there when Jenny and I left, but like everybody else we were hustling to our cars to get out of the cold. The killer didn’t have to be one of the committee members. Someone may have known that Dellmore was going to be here at the American Legion Hall and arranged to meet with him afterward.

“Does Dellmore have a cell phone on him?” I ask. Although I don’t keep one myself, I’m sure the phone shows the last call made or received.

“He didn’t,” Schoppe says. “That’s the first thing I looked for.”

That’s a clue of sorts. Dellmore was around forty. I don’t know any man Dellmore’s age—especially someone as self-important as him—who wouldn’t carry a cell phone. If Dellmore had recently talked by phone to whoever killed him, it’s likely that the killer took the phone to avoid having the call lead back to him.

So far Lon Carter has kept quiet, so I ask him to tell me how he happened to find the body.

He grimaces. “I came to open up the building because some people wanted to look it over for a family reunion. I went inside and straightened a few chairs and made sure the toilets were clean and came outside to empty the trash. When I was walking back

from the trash bin I noticed what looked like boots, sticking out from the side of the building. I went around to see what they were doing there and that's when I found him. I don't mind telling you, I didn't like thinking that the whole time I was inside he was lying out here."

"What did you do about the people who were coming to look over the hall?"

"I called them and told them we'd have to put it off. I didn't tell them I'd found a body, though. That wouldn't sit too well."

In answer to a question from Luke Schoppe, Carter says he didn't touch anything or disturb anything around the body.

"Was the building locked up when you got here?" I ask.

"Yes, sir, it was. The lock sticks when it's cold and this morning I had the devil of a time getting it open."

Schoppe tells Carter he doesn't have to hang around any longer. He looks at his watch and says, "I hope the crime unit and the doc get here before too long."

"We're waiting for Doc Taggart," Odum says to me. His face is pale. From the way he averts his eyes from Dellmore's body, it's clear he has never seen a dead body—at least not one at the scene of a murder.

"What kind of gun you think we're looking for?" I ask Odum.

Schoppe starts to say something, but I nod toward Odum. Schoppe catches on and keeps his mouth shut.

"It's a .45 casing," Odum says eagerly, "so maybe a Colt or a Ruger. In training they told us that the Ruger is pretty popular. Or it could be a Smith & Wesson." As I hoped, being asked to contribute perks Odum up and gets his mind off the nearby body.

Schoppe smiles to himself. He probably thinks like I do that it's more likely the weapon was a Colt or a Smith, tried-and-true guns that don't cost too much. The Ruger is a little exotic for most people around here. But Schoppe doesn't correct Odum. He gets that I'm trying to help the youngster settle down.

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Reinhardt comes back to join us. He looks miserable. "Who could have done this?" he says, his voice bleak.

Suddenly I think of something. "Hold on." I walk around the side of the building to the parking lot and see that Schoppe's vehicle and Reinhardt's SUV are the only two cars there. I go back and say, "Where is Dellmore's car?"

Schoppe says, "I didn't see a car. I figured he came here with somebody or left his vehicle out on the road."

"No, he had it here last night," I tell him. "It's a black Crown Victoria."

"I'll get the description from his records and alert the highway patrol to be on the lookout for it. Could be somebody shot him to get the car."

"I doubt it. Anybody who killed him for his car would have taken the money out of his wallet, too." I notice Odum looking at me. "You got something to say?" I ask him.

He ducks his head. "Probably not my place, but I'd feel better if you were back on the job."

"Yes, sir!" Schoppe says. "Smart youngster."

"I think you're going to get your wish," Reinhardt says, "as soon as I can figure out how to make it happen officially."

"Good," Odum says. "Zeke will be glad to have you on the job, too."

"Zeke Dibble said that?" I say.

He shrugs. "Not exactly. But he has good things to say about you, and I know he'll be glad if you're with us. Zeke isn't a ball of fire, but if you get him talking, you find out he's had a lot of experience, and he told me you fly under the radar, but you know what's what."

"He's got that right," Schoppe says.

Before I can let that go to my head, I remember what I overheard Dellmore say last night after the meeting, comparing me to Roy Rogers.

"Has anybody thought to notify Dellmore's wife?" I ask.

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“Oh, shoot!” Odum says. “I hate to think she’d hear news of what happened by accident before somebody official can get to her.”

“Is it all right with you if we notify Dellmore’s wife?” I say to Schoppe. Technically it’s his investigation and his call to make.

“I wish you would. I’m going to be here a while, and you know what to do.”

“Why don’t we drive to her place and get it over with?” I say to Odum.

“You’ll go with me?”

“I know Barbara a little bit, so I’ll help you out.”