



“Don’t touch that!”

Too late. Nick obviously didn’t think Campbell’s orders carried any weight. He’d already picked up the cell phone that lay on the floor beside Darrin’s body and was clicking buttons. Some detective. She punched in 911 while Nick went on snooping on Darrin’s phone.

“What is your emergency?”

Campbell gulped. “My friend and I found a dead body.” Okay, so Nick wasn’t technically her friend, but explaining what they were doing in Darrin’s house would be too complicated. She hung up after telling where they were, even though the dispatcher said not to, and looked back into the living room. “They want us to stay until someone gets here.”

“That’s standard.”

“Yeah. What are you doing?”

He was scrolling on Darrin’s phone, that much was obvious.

“He didn’t have a password, so I’m checking his recent calls. Looks like he called Bill last night—probably while he was at the Barn Owl eating supper. He also called another number

immediately before that.” Nick looked up at her. “It’s the police station’s non-emergency number.”

“What?” Campbell took a step forward, avoiding looking at the corpse and the dark pool of blood that seemed to have come from the poor man’s head. Her stomach churned, and she turned away. “He called the police and then he called Dad?”

“Yeah. Maybe it was like I told you—the police brushed him off, so he called Bill, hoping for some cred with him.”

She glanced around the dimly-lit room, noting more clutter including several empty food containers and a chair with only three legs—but a large-screen television mounted on the wall opposite the sagging sofa. She wondered what Darrin had hit his head on.

“We should go outside,” she said.

“Yeah, maybe.” Nick slowly rose to his feet.

He put down Darrin’s phone, and they sidled their way to the back door. Stepping out into the fresh, clear night Campbell pulled in a ragged breath. The stars were gleaming now, and a light breeze ruffled her hair. The entire situation felt unreal, but she knew it was true. She and Nick had just found a dead man.

*Lord, what have we gotten into?*

The unspoken words shocked her. How long since she’d prayed? Far too long. She added another silent petition—*God, keep my father safe.*

They waited on the driveway, both wrapped in their own thoughts. After a couple of minutes, she heard a faint siren. The wailing grew louder. “That was fast.”

“Well, we’re not that far from the station,” Nick said.

They walked a few yards to meet the patrolman as he climbed out of his squad car. By the time they’d explained the situation, an unmarked car and an ambulance had pulled in.

“You won’t need the ambulance,” Nick told the officer. “You’ll need a hearse.”

They waited outside while the police did whatever they did.

Campbell gave the rabbits more grass. After about ten minutes, the EMTs came out of the house empty-handed and left. The detective emerged next. He walked over to them, his expression sober and his eyes alert and considerate.

“Thanks for staying, folks.”

As if we had a choice, Campbell thought, but she appreciated his supportive manner.

“I’m Detective Fuller. How do you two know Darrin Beresford?”

“Everyone in town knows Darrin,” Nick said.

Fuller took out a pocket notebook and flipped it open. “And you are?”

“Nick Emerson. I work for Bill McBride at True Blue Investigations. I think we’ve met before.”

“I think you’re right.” He made a note then quirked his eyebrows at Campbell.

“I’m Bill’s daughter, Campbell. I teach at Feldman University, and I just arrived today to visit my father.”

“I know Bill.” Fuller’s nod seemed favorable, which soothed Campbell’s nerves a bit. He asked for their phone numbers and home addresses.

“I’ll be at my dad’s.” Campbell gave her father’s address and her own cell phone number.

“And how did the two of you come to visit Mr. Beresford?”

Campbell glanced at Nick and decided to take the lead. “My father hasn’t been to his office all day, and I don’t think he went home last night, either. Nick talked to him early yesterday evening, but that’s the last we’ve heard from him. We found Darrin’s phone number on my father’s desk, so we thought we’d ask him if he’d talked to Dad recently. But now this has happened, and I want to make a missing person’s report on my dad.”

Fuller’s eyes squinted a little narrower. “So, Bill McBride is missing?”

“Yes,” Campbell said.

“It’s over twenty-four hours now,” Nick said. “We’re both concerned.”

“Hmm. Bill’s known to stick to a case for days sometimes.”

“Yes, but he always checks in with me,” Nick said.

Campbell nodded. “And the way things were left at the house, I’m sure he intended to come home last night.” She explained about the thawed meat and the composting laundry.

“Okay. Well, Bill’s a capable guy. Let’s take care of business here first. We’ll have a lot of processing to do here.” Fuller looked toward the street, where a sedan was pulling in. “Oh, there’s the M.E. Listen, if Bill hasn’t checked in by morning, then we should probably get him on the missing persons list. I agree with you there. Why don’t you check his house again? He may have just put in a long day.”

“Yeah,” Nick said. “So, are we done?”

Fuller nodded. “I’ll contact you if we need anything else. But stay in town.”

“Do you know the cause of death?” Campbell asked.

“Not yet. The medical examiner may be able to tell us something tonight, but the autopsy report probably won’t be available for several days. Thanks for calling it in.”

Nick started walking toward his Jeep, and she followed.

“What now?” she asked when they reached it.

“I hope we can get out past the M.E.’s car.” He frowned. “I think we should sleep on it.”

“Well, you can if you want,” Campbell said. “I’m going to talk to some of those people who were at the diner last night. Maybe somebody saw Dad there.”

Nick turned to face her. “Campbell, you’re exhausted, and none of the staff remembered Bill being in the diner. We know Darrin called him from the diner. Your father wasn’t there.”

“Right, but maybe he went over there afterward.”

“Probably not. Shari was the hostess on duty. Don’t you think she’d have noticed if Bill joined Darrin at his table?”

He had a point, but Campbell wasn’t willing to let it go. “I just think someone may have noticed something the staff didn’t. They were busy, right?”

“Okay.” Nick heaved out a sigh. “An hour. No more.”

She got in his Jeep with him. Nick knew a couple of the patrons Shari and Ray had mentioned. They managed to track down Mary Innes, the thrift shop owner, as well as the Barnes sisters, but none of them were much help. They did confirm that Darrin had arrived at the diner at his usual time the previous evening and ordered his meal. He made at least one phone call, and he left without finishing his supper, which Jerusha Barnes deemed unusual.

“Oh, yes,” her sister Paula said. “Darrin always orders dessert.”

“I wonder if he left the waitress a tip last night,” Campbell said.

Back in the Jeep, she buckled up and looked over at Nick. “Maybe we should have told the detective about Darrin leaving the diner early.”

“Too late now.” Nick didn’t argue this time, but his mouth was set in a grim line as he drove back to the Barn Owl.

Shari was still on duty when they arrived. When she saw them come in, her expression looked a little pained, but she greeted them cheerfully.

“I just had a quick question about Darrin for the waitress who served him,” Campbell said. “Is she on tonight?”

“Yeah, I checked on it after you left. It was Lily.”

Shari called over a college-age girl, and Campbell asked, “Did Darrin leave you a tip last night?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Funny,” Shari said. “He’s not much of a tipper. He usually

gives a quarter or two, but we all understand he doesn't have much money, and we're glad he eats here regularly."

Lily glanced at her then said, "Last night, he left half his meatloaf and no tip. He dashed out of here in a hurry. I kept his plate for half an hour or so, in case he came back, but he didn't."

"Thanks," Campbell said. "We'll let you get back to work."

She and Nick walked out into the parking lot.

"Maybe that professor is home now," she said.

"It's getting late." Nick shook his head. "We should call it a night."

"But—"

"Go home." Nick stopped walking and faced her squarely. "Maybe Bill's there now. If he's not, go to sleep, and in the morning, we'll file that report."

"I'm worried."

"I know. But there's really not much we can do tonight. We can't keep bothering people who have to get up early in the morning."

For a long moment, she stared into his eyes. They were nice eyes, blue with a little smoky cast. If he wasn't so annoying, she'd notice that, but she didn't want to notice anything favorable about Nick. Especially not tonight. Not when her father was missing and Nick didn't want to do anything about it.

She looked away. Perhaps she'd been unjust to Nick. He was acting like an adult now, she had to admit. "Okay, but I don't know if I can sleep."

"Warm milk," he said.

"Ick."

Nick smiled. The little dimple near his chin and the five-o'clock shadow didn't help her determination to dislike him.

"Chamomile tea, then. Whatever you find restful. I'll see you in the morning."

NOTHING HAD CHANGED at the house, except Bill's laundry needed drying. Campbell stuck it in the dryer then showered and made up the hide-a-bed. By then the clothes were dry. She hung up her dad's clean shirts and folded the rest.

The only tea in the cupboard was full of caffeine, so she skipped that and went to bed, but sleep eluded her. Her father was out there somewhere, maybe injured or dead, and here she was trying to drift off to dreamland. She punched the pillow.

To be honest, Nick had been helpful today. He'd done the legwork with her and called on his contacts for information. But he was still reluctant to search too hard for Bill, as if he were afraid of stepping on his boss's toes.

After an hour or so, she got up and rummaged around until she found her dad's password list. She got into his home computer, an up-to-date laptop, but she couldn't find anything useful. The most recent emails were business related.

There was one from Mart Brady, his old buddy from the police force in Bowling Green. Before Bill took early retirement, Mart and Dad had worked together for years. Campbell opened the message. Mart wanted to set up a fishing date. It looked like her dad had replied, so she checked the sent box.

'Busy this weekend but soon,' was all he'd said. Had Mart retired, or did he simply have Saturday off? She'd ask her dad when she had the chance.

*If she had the chance.*

If not, she'd contact Mart. In fact, she would get in touch with him tomorrow, no matter what. Why hadn't she thought of him this afternoon when she was killing time at True Blue?

If her father hadn't turned up in the morning, she doubted Mart would be able to tell her much, since he lived a hundred and thirty miles away, near where Campbell grew up. But she

should let him know his friend was missing, and it was just possible her dad had checked in with Mart.

She went back to bed and lay there trying not to imagine all the horrible things that could have happened to her father. If he'd gone east of Land Between the Lakes, he could have called Mart for a place to spend the night, and that comforted her enough to allow her to doze off.

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THE NEXT MORNING, she called Nick at seven.

"Hey." He sounded sleepy. "Anything from Bill?"

"Nothing. Are you going to the office?"

"We usually open at nine."

"Well, I'm going to the police station," she said.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Why don't you come to the office after? We can do some strategizing."

"Right." She hung up trying not to be mad at him. What was wrong with that man? This was her father they were talking about! He ought to be willing to pry himself out of bed at seven and get over to the police station.

She dressed quickly and ate cereal with the last of the milk and a banana that was beginning to get brown spots. Better pick up a few groceries today. A fleeting thought of Darrin Beresford's hungry rabbits crossed her mind.

The young officer on the front desk at the police station had a fresh, military-short haircut and a crisp uniform shirt. His nametag said FERRIS. He nodded when she gave her name, as if he was familiar with it.

"Are you here to see Detective Fuller?"

"If he's here," she said, "but mostly I came to file a missing person's report on my father."



He looked surprised at that but shuffled some paper and passed her a clipboard. She sat down on a plastic chair and filled in the blanks. Name. Address. Age. Description. Vehicle. She didn't know the license plate number, or even the model year, of her dad's blue Toyota. Should've checked with Nick. Surely it was on file at the office.

Oh, well, she was sure the police had access to information like that. She wrote down the names of a few of her father's friends, but most of the ones she knew didn't live in Murray.

When she got to the question on when the person was last seen or contacted, she wrote down the time of his call to Nick. Thirty-seven hours and counting.

She took the clipboard back and passed it across the counter to Officer Ferris.

"Okay." He glanced down at the form. "I told Detective Fuller you're here, and he'll be right out." He frowned. "Bill McBride is your father?"

"Yes. You know him?" Campbell asked.

"Sure. He comes in a couple times a week and checks the log, and I see him around town. He's missing?" His eyes skipped down the page. "I'm sorry to hear this. He's one of the good guys."

"Yeah, he is."

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KEITH FULLER WALKED down the hallway and opened the door behind the front desk. His gaze settled on her right away. Her hair was a shade lighter than Bill's deep brown, but she had his green eyes. "Ms. McBride, step on back."

"Thanks." Campbell nodded at Ferris and walked down the hallway with Keith.

He automatically did a quick physical assessment. Five-eight, a hundred and thirty pounds. She was prettier than he'd

realized last night, but that didn't matter. At least it shouldn't. He'd learned over the years not to let a person's attractiveness or lack of it affect his reactions and assumptions.

They walked through the duty room, where the patrol officers did some of their work and wrote up their reports, and he showed her into the detectives' office. Most of the desks were empty, but the civilian secretary was typing at one.

"I'm sorry to hear your father's still missing." Keith waved Campbell toward a chair and sat down behind one of the desks.

"Thank you," she said. "Did you find anything at Darrin Beresford's house that might indicate Dad had been there?"

"Nothing yet." He didn't mention the coffee mugs in the sink. If Bill McBride's prints turned up on them, he'd notify her then. He didn't want to raise her hopes.

"I'm sorry. I mean, it would have been nice to know more about where Dad's been, but it's a relief in a way."

"Sure." Her mother must have been lovely, he decided. She didn't get that bone structure from Bill.

"It seems Darrin left the diner in a hurry last night."

She held his gaze, which he found a little distracting. People he interviewed often tried to avoid looking at him squarely.

"I wondered if he ran out of there to meet Dad for some reason," she said.

Fuller studied her face for a moment, thinking about how much to reveal. "Nick Emerson said Bill called him that evening about a new case."

"Yes, but he didn't tell him what it was."

He nodded. "Bill's call to Emerson was about a half hour after his call from Beresford. Do you think there's a connection?"

"Don't you?" Campbell asked.

"It's possible. But Darrin has a reputation for trying to get attention. Chances are his reason for calling your father wasn't important."

"You can't know that."

"No, I can't." He huffed out a breath. "You seemed pretty diligent about following up on your interviews at the diner."

Her eyes widened as she realized he'd looked into her activities the day before. Her lashes fell, covering the green eyes. She probably figured he'd tell her next to let the professionals handle it.

"As far as I know." She raised her chin. "Darrin and Nick were the last people to speak to Dad before he dropped off the radar. Nick talked to him on the phone for about thirty seconds. I want to know if Dad met Darrin face-to-face."

"Sure." Keith couldn't blame her there. If it was his father, he'd feel the same way. "The case he mentioned to Emerson could have been totally unrelated."

"Yes, it could." Campbell pressed her lips together.

"Is there something else?" he asked.

"I thought about it a lot last night. After seeing Darrin's house, I'd say he wouldn't have much money to hire a private detective. If Dad *was* interested in what Darrin told him, it wasn't because of the fee he thought he'd get from him."

Good thinking, but Keith didn't say so. Campbell McBride was as intelligent and as direct as her father. After a moment, he stood. "Will you look closely at your father's files and call me if you find anything suggesting he may have met with Darrin?"

"Of course." Campbell picked up her purse and stood. "But I did some looking yesterday. If he only got the call from Darrin Monday evening, I doubt he had time to make a file, and Nick didn't seem to think Dad had done any business with Darrin before."

"Okay."

Campbell hesitated. Genuinely concerned about her father, Keith waited. Bill was a nice guy and did his best not to get in the way of the police when he was working on a private case. When he uncovered evidence of a crime, he brought it to the

department. Keith hoped he'd turn up, and soon, before his daughter reached the panicky stage. But his job was to find Darrin Beresford's killer, not to hunt for Bill.

"Is there something else?" he asked, trying to be patient.

"The rabbits," she said.

He arched his eyebrows in question. "Rabbits? You mean at Beresford's?"

"Yes. They were hungry, as if they hadn't been fed all day, and their water dishes were almost empty. I know you have work to do, but I kept thinking about them."

Keith nodded, relieved it was a topic on which he could offer reassurance. "Don't worry. The M.E. thought Beresford had been dead at least twelve hours when we got there, probably longer, but he needed to do some tests to pinpoint it closer than that."

"So, someone fed the rabbits?"

He smiled. "One of our officers gave them water and pellets last night, and we called the animal control officer. They're sending someone to pick them up this morning."

"And they'll give them to good homes."

"I guess so."

Campbell pulled in a slow breath, frowning and staring at the floor.

"Do you like rabbits?" he asked.

She looked up and smiled for the first time. That made it much harder to ignore her appealing features.

"Not that much," she said. "But they shouldn't suffer. I'm glad someone's seeing to their care. You're going to find my dad, right?"

"I'm investigating the homicide. Someone else will probably be assigned to your father's case, unless we find a link between it and Beresford, but you can bet I'll stay interested."

"But the phone call—"

“Yes, that’s something. But it’s not much. Come on. I’ll walk you out.”

She was disappointed, he could tell. She’d hoped he’d handle her father’s case, but the homicide was urgent, too, and he probably couldn’t do both well and solve either case quickly.

In the lobby, Ferris was talking to a fortyish woman whose face was streaked with tears. Keith waited until Ferris had sent her to a chair with a clipboard and asked, “Who will be handling the McBride case?”

“Oh, Ms. McBride.” Ferris tossed Campbell a perfunctory smile and looked down at the papers on the desk. “I got your father’s license plate number from the DMV, and we’ve put out a BOLO on his car. We’ll send a patrolman out to talk to his neighbors and coworkers.”

“His only coworker is Nick Emerson, and we already know his last contact with my father was a phone call Monday evening. I wrote it on the form.” Campbell spoke slowly, as though trying hard to keep her voice neutral.

“Right.” Ferris sent a floundering gaze at Fuller.

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on this,” Keith said evenly. From the sound of things, none of the detectives had been assigned to the McBride case yet. He handed Campbell a business card. “Call me if you hear from your father.”

“Thank you.” Her shoulders slumped as she left the police station.

Keith watched until the door closed behind her, then let out a sigh. He’d hoped to run out to his folks’ place on the lake after his shift, but he had a feeling he’d be working late. And he wouldn’t feel right relaxing with a killer on the loose in town and a good man missing.

CAMPBELL COULDN'T STAND the thought of going back to her dad's place and hovering in the empty house, so she drove to a coffee shop and then went to the office. Nick's Jeep was in the lot when she pulled in at ten minutes to nine. She carried her coffee inside.

"Hey."

Nick was already on the phone. He nodded at her and grabbed a pen, listening. Checking messages, Campbell guessed. He punched a few buttons and scratched a few notes, then hung up. She just looked at him, waiting.

"Nothing from Bill, but I've got to call back a couple of people. A lawyer we work with sounds like he's got a new case for us, and the insurance company wants an update."

"Okay."

"How'd it go with the cops?" Nick asked.

"They're on it. They're looking for his car, and an officer will probably come around here later to check in."

"Good." Nick leaned back in his chair, frowning. "Look, do you think I should take this new case for the lawyer—assuming there is one?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Well, until we clear this up about your dad..." He couldn't hold her gaze.

*He thinks Dad may be dead.* She clenched her teeth, refusing to go there. "What do you think Bill McBride would do in your situation?"

Nick hesitated only a second. "He'd take the case."

"Can you handle it if Dad's not back, say, by tomorrow?"

"It depends on what it is."

"Maybe you should find out." Campbell looked pointedly at the phone.

"Right." Nick picked up the receiver and hit some buttons.

Campbell sat down at her father's desk and woke up the computer. The first item of business was one she should've

thought of yesterday. She did a search for any mention of Darrin Beresford's name in any of her father's Word files. Nothing. Then she looked for an email contact with either Darrin or Beresford in the addresses. Again, zilch. But then, Darrin probably had an address like Superman1 or rabbitsRgr8. Nothing logical.

She stood and went to the file cabinet. Nick was deep in conversation. He sounded as though trying to project confidence and almost succeeding.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll talk it over with Bill. If he's good with it, one of us can meet with you tomorrow. ... Oh, okay. Three o'clock, then. Got it, Mr. Lyman."

He hung up. Campbell didn't ask him anything as she rifled through the file folders again. One drawer seemed to be all expenses and office-related files.

The two below it held client files, alphabetized by last name or corporate name. She paused on the one labeled LYMAN & NESMITH. A quick glance showed her it was indeed a law firm, and several sheaves of paper were clipped together inside the folder. A repeat customer. It looked as though her dad had worked with the firm since shortly after he opened his office in Murray.

She went back to the desk without anything to show for her rummaging. What was left of her coffee was cold. Nick finished his second call and laid down his pen.

"So. We've got plenty of business lined up for the next two weeks, assuming Bill shows up."

"If not?" Campbell asked.

"I don't know." He frowned and eyed her uneasily. "What happens when your boss disappears? How long should I go on working as if everything's normal?"

Campbell let out a long, slow breath. She didn't want to think about those questions. Should she reassure him by letting him know she was her father's sole heir? But even if the

unthinkable happened and she inherited the business, she wasn't a P.I. She was a college professor. At least, she had been until two days ago. Maybe she should call the schools she'd applied to and assure them she was very interested.

"Listen." Nick leaned forward, clasping his hands on the desktop near his keyboard. "I really don't want to think something bad has happened to Bill, but—"

"Neither do I."

"Right. But maybe you should prepare yourself. I mean, he's never stayed out of contact for a whole day before, let alone two. If he had to be out of the office all day or made an overnight trip, he always checked in with me by phone or email. No exceptions."

Campbell's chest tightened. She nodded slowly. "I understand. We've got to find him."