



As soon as she was gone, Bill turned to his daughter. “I’m going to set up the file for this. It has some urgency, so why don’t you jump right into research? Nail down the publisher and agent if you can. I’ll find out how long Ms. Tyler has owned her house and try to find out if she has any large outstanding debt.”

“How can you do that?” Campbell asked. Her father’s eyebrows shot up and she smiled. “Remember, I’m a newbie. You need to teach me all your investigative secrets.”

“I guess I do. It’s nothing underhanded, just a little sneaky. Most people don’t realize how public some of their records are, especially if they’re not careful to conceal them. But judging from what Xina told us, Ms. Tyler may be one of the ones who makes sure everything’s buried in several layers.”

Campbell observed carefully as he prepared the manila file folder and opened a new computer file with the name Xina Harrison as its title.

“I like multiple backups,” he said. “Sometimes paper is better than digital, and I’ll copy this computer file to an external drive too.”

Campbell nodded. She'd lost electronic files more times than she liked.

"And remember, every single word she told us is confidential," Bill said. "In fact, we don't want to reveal to anyone that Xina is our client, or that we're investigating her aunt."

"Right," Campbell said. "Of course, Keith already knows."

"Yeah. So if we need a police consult, he's the man we contact."

"Absolutely. And I thought we might try to contact the old housekeeper, Mrs. Conley."

"Excellent," her father said. "If she's still living in Murray, she could be a gold mine."

Campbell took her chair back to Nick's desk and woke up her laptop. This was the first case she'd worked on for the firm, other than a few boring bits for a law firm that frequently hired True Blue to find details they needed for a legal case. Her dad had walked her through those to familiarize her with some of the online resources he often used.

But this was a real case. An interesting case. And it concerned one of Campbell's favorite authors. Well, besides Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy. One of her favorite contemporary authors. She set to work.

Trying to find Mrs. Conley turned out to be a frustrating exercise, as so many people by that name were listed in the local phone book. And many folks didn't have landlines these days and weren't listed at all.

After half a dozen dead ends, Campbell decided to look for Katherine's friend Pam Rogers instead. To her relief, she located the woman's phone number quickly, and Pam answered on the third ring.

"Katherine?" Mrs. Rogers said. "Oh, dear, I haven't seen her for some time. It's true we used to do a lot of things together, but not for a while now."

"How long is a while?" Campbell asked.

"Years. We used to go to the same church, downtown, but Katherine quit coming. I think she started attending somewhere else. And she dropped out of a women's club we were both in. I phoned her several times, but she seemed to be very busy. We just ... never caught up."

"That's a shame."

"It is," Pam said. "But what is your interest in our friendship?"

"I'm actually inquiring for a family member." Guilt stabbed Campbell. Had she just broken her dad's rule by revealing the client? She glanced over at him, but he was concentrating on his computer file.

"Her niece, I suppose," Mrs. Rogers said. "I remember Xina."

"Well, she went to see her aunt last night, but Katherine wasn't very welcoming."

"Oh, dear, I know the feeling. It was quite hurtful at first, but after a few months of rejection, I moved on. I thought it was just me, though. Is she all right?"

"That's what we're trying to determine."

"Now I feel bad for giving up on her."

"No, you mustn't feel bad," Campbell said quickly. "Xina just wants to make sure she's in good health."

"Maybe I should try to call Katherine again," Pam said.

"Well, we're trying to do this quietly, so if you do contact her, please don't mention Xina or me. We don't want to upset her."

"I see. Maybe I'll hold off a while. I could call her next week."

"That might be good. Give her time to get past whatever made her uneasy last night. She did speak to Xina for a few minutes, but she didn't invite her to stay and visit."

"That doesn't sound like her." Pam sighed. "We're getting older, but Katherine was always on the ball. Still, she's lived alone for so long. And I haven't seen her in years, as I said."

"Well, don't blame yourself." Campbell ended the conversation as quickly and gracefully as she could.

She delved into Katherine's publishing history for the next hour, turning up bits and pieces online.

"Ready for lunch, Soup?" her father called across the room.

Soup was a nickname her dad had bestowed on Campbell when she was a toddler. He'd started tossing it out there again over the last couple of weeks, while she pampered him through a recovery from a physical ordeal and then eased into working at the office with him.

"What? You want soup for lunch?" she asked with a grin.

"Nah, I'm thinking roast beef. How does Cracker Barrel sound?"

"Great." She closed her computer files but grabbed her notebook so they could discuss business over lunch. Her father's routine of eating out on workdays had seemed extravagant at first, but he told her he earned enough to justify it. In the past week he'd scheduled two lunch meetings with clients. Between the business aspect and the need to shop less, his system worked out to be somewhat efficient—and he hated to cook.

Once they'd settled in at the restaurant and given their orders, Bill pulled out his pocket notebook. "Okay, I've wrapped up everything that was urgent as far as the legal case went, and I don't need to start the insurance fraud one until Monday. I learned that Ms. Tyler inherited that house from her parents forty years ago. Thought we might cruise by there when we're done eating and take a look."

"Good." Campbell flipped to her latest notes. "Most of her books were published by Random House, but not the last one."

Bill's eyebrows arched in interest.

"She sold it to a smaller publishing house—one she'd never worked with before," Campbell went on.

"I wonder what that was about."

"Me too. And there was a two-year gap between the release of that one and the last one with Random House."

"Okay," Bill said. "I wonder if we could get a handle on sales figures. How long since that latest book launched?"

“Almost three years. I haven’t been able to find anything new since.”

“Very interesting.”

“I got a name for her agent.” Campbell looked up and smiled at him across the table, proud of herself for her resourcefulness. “It was in the dedication of one of her old books.”

“How old?”

“Ten years or so. Xina did say Katherine switched agents a while back, though. It may do no good to call this one.”

“Only one way to find out,” Bill said. “And may I suggest you check the acknowledgements in all of her books from that point forward. Pick up any names of people she thanks or seems to have worked with closely.”

Campbell nodded. “Editors, professional consultants, publicists, whatever. Xina did mention a researcher.”

“Good point. Find out if Katherine’s stopped using him or her.”

Their meals arrived, distracting them for several minutes. Campbell loved Cracker Barrel. Their pot roast tasted just like her mother’s. She was sure it affected her dad the same way, but she didn’t mention it because she didn’t want to tear up.

When he’d finished his main course and asked for more coffee, Bill sat back and surveyed her. “How about the housekeeper?”

Campbell shook her head with regret. “I haven’t reached her yet, but there are several Conleys listed in the area—Connells too. I’ll keep sorting through them this afternoon.”

“Okay. At this point, I haven’t found that Ms. Tyler has any large debts, but I can say with confidence she hasn’t bought a new car in more than ten years, and she always pays her utilities and taxes on time. Doesn’t seem to use credit cards much, though she has a couple. Tends to pay them off as soon as she gets the bill, on the rare occasion that she uses them.” He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “There’s one other thing I learned that should interest you.”

“What?” Campbell picked up her glass of iced tea.

“That painting Xina talked about.”

“Oh, yeah, the Ramsey. What did you find?”

“An auction house in Atlanta sold it last fall.”

“You’re kidding me.” She set down her glass with a thump.

“Do you think Xina’s right about her aunt’s financial situation?”

“It’s the first thing we’ve found that seems to support that she needed money. But the auctioneer wouldn’t reveal the seller’s name.”

Campbell frowned. “So ... somebody else could have sold it?”

“It’s a possibility, either on Ms. Tyler’s behalf or on their own.”

She thought about that. “If the painting was stolen, wouldn’t Keith know?”

“You’d think so.”

“And if a thief tried to sell it, wouldn’t the auctioneer demand proof of ownership?”

“They should.”

She supposed Ms. Tyler could have commissioned someone to sell it for her. She might even have sold it locally, and then the new owner put it in the auction. “How much did the painting sell for?”

“Thirty-two grand,” her father said. “With Ms. Tyler’s modest lifestyle, I figure that would keep her going at least a year—if she was the one who got the money.”

“What about her investments?” Campbell asked.

“That’s harder to evaluate, and really hard to get at without bending some laws. She strikes me as the type of person who would let them sit and grow until she needed them. She is past full retirement age, but she still has a paid housekeeper.” He shook his head. “She must have residual income from her older books. I don’t think she’s hurting too badly.”

“And yet she sold a valuable painting.”

Bill shrugged. “Maybe she didn’t like it.”

“And left it hanging over her mantel for forty years?”

“Yeah. Well, what can I say? I’ll send you a link so you can see a photo of it, courtesy of the auction house. It didn’t grab me, but there’s no accounting for other people’s taste, right?” He took out his phone and pushed a few buttons.

Campbell opened the link and studied the picture. The painting showed a wooded path, with light filtering through the foliage.

“It’s okay,” she said.

“Yeah. Thirty-two grand. The auctioneer seemed pleased. He said it was one of the best Ramseys he’d ever seen, and the bidding went higher than he’d expected.”

She smiled. “I think if you were going to spend that much money on art, you’d pick something more exciting.”

“Probably. I’m not much for landscapes. But anyway, who knows what the grandfather paid for it in 1950? That’s when the auctioneer’s blurb said the family bought it.”

“And did Katherine’s bank account reflect a deposit from the auction house?”

“I don’t know.” Bill scratched his chin. “It should have, but I don’t expect we’ll find out.”

“So what now?” Campbell asked.

“So far, we have no indication that Ms. Tyler’s physical or mental health has declined, and we’ve found no reason for her to be upset with her niece. I say we take a look at the house, and then we keep doing what we’re doing.”

“Dad, do you think Xina was honest with us about their relationship?”

“I thought so. She seemed open and genuinely concerned, but that is something to keep in mind. We have only her word for the things she says happened.”

They turned down dessert, and he paid the check. A few minutes later, he drove slowly down a residential street and Campbell watched the house numbers.

“There it is.”

He pulled in at the curb. “Nice old house.”

“Yeah.” She stared at the two-and-a-half-story wood-frame structure. It blended in with the others of the neighborhood. Probably they had all stood there several decades, hunkered silently on the shady street. Anything that old and large would require frequent maintenance. Why would a single woman choose to live there so long? Drapes or blinds were drawn at every window. “She doesn’t like sunlight, does she?”

“Or nosy neighbors is more like it.”

The lawn had been mowed recently, but there was no evidence of gardening. While a few low evergreens lined the walk, no one had added flowerbeds or ornamental plants.

“Hmm. A car in the driveway.” Bill pulled out his cell phone.

Campbell hadn’t thought about it, but now she studied the blue compact. “That’s not Xina’s car.”

“No, she’s halfway back to Asheville by now.” He leaned past Campbell and snapped a couple of photos.

“Can you trace the license plate?” she asked.

“Yeah, hold on.” He worked on his phone for a minute then looked up at her. “Caleb Henry. How do you feel about ringing the doorbell?”

“I thought we were going to be discreet.”

“We are. If Katherine Tyler answers, you can be a fan who just learned she lived here.”

“I would have brought along a book for her to sign.”

“Okay. Well, anyhow, I figure someone else will open the door.”

“Who?”

“Her new housekeeper.”

“Riiight. Didn’t Xina say today was Rita’s day off?”

Her dad shrugged. “Well, somebody’s in there.”

Campbell pulled in a deep breath and walked slowly up the driveway, watching the windows. No one looked out at her. She took the flagstone walk to the porch. No doorbell. She looked back at her father’s car and gulped before knocking. She waited a few seconds. Should she knock again?



The door opened, and a woman of about thirty, wearing stretchy pants and a T-shirt, gazed out at her. "Hello."

"Hi," Campbell said. "Are you Mrs. Conley?"

"No, I'm Rita Henry."

"Oh. Well, I'm trying to find a Mrs. Conley."

The young woman said softly, "She doesn't work here anymore."

"Oh. Sorry. Do you happen to know where she is now?"

"Uh ..." Rita glanced over her shoulder and then said, "She worked here before I came, but I think she lives down in Hazel."

"Okay. Was there a problem when she left?"

"I don't know, but ..."

"Well, maybe it's best if you don't tell your employer I was here."

"Right." She started to shut the door.

Campbell said quickly, "May I ask how you got this job?"

Rita frowned but said, "There was a newspaper ad in the *Ledger & Times*."

"Thanks." Campbell couldn't see much past her, but the inside of the house looked dim and gloomy. All she could see in the entry besides a narrow side table was an umbrella stand with a black cane and a furred umbrella sticking out of it. The cane's handle was a brass duck's head. She smiled at Rita. "I'm out of your hair now." She turned and walked quickly back to the car.

"Well?" her father asked, throwing the transmission into gear.

"You were right, it's the new housekeeper. She says she thinks Mrs. Conley lives in Hazel now. Where's that?"

"Just down 641, between here and the Tennessee border. It's not far."

"I'll get online again and see if I can locate some Conleys down there, then. Rita was a little nervous talking to me about it."

"You look for Mrs. Conley, and I'll keep working on Ms. Tyler's financials."

Back at the office, Campbell was surprised to see a Jeep sitting in their small parking lot.

“Nick’s here.”

“Ah, that kid.” Bill parked, and they both went to the door. It was unlocked, and they walked in to find Nick Emerson sitting at his desk looking at Campbell’s laptop. His left arm was still in a cast, but he’d graduated from the bandage on his head, and the hair shaved by the hospital staff was growing in around the scar on the left side.

“Hey, Nick!” Bill strode over to shake his hand. “You’re supposed to stay home and rest until Monday, man.”

“He just came in into snoop on my computer,” Campbell said in a snarky but not-too-upset voice. She tugged the laptop away and snapped it shut.

“Hey,” Nick cried in mock offense. “You just wrecked my solitaire game. Where y’all been?”

“Just getting some lunch,” Bill said. “But seriously, the doctor says with that head injury you shouldn’t try to do much for a few more days. Did you drive over here?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m telling you, I’m fine now. Really. No double vision, and the headache is gone so long as I keep on top of the Tylenol schedule.”

“Got your short-term memory back?” Campbell asked. It was a sore spot with Nick, and he hadn’t accepted the possibility that it might not come back.

“I remember everything,” he said firmly. “Well, everything except the exact moment when that jerk whacked me over the head.”

“That may be a blessing,” Bill said.

Nick grimaced. “Yeah, I’m not sure I want to remember the impact in great detail. That guy’s staying in jail, right?”

“You bet.” Bill moseyed to his own desk and sat down. “Tell you what, Nick. We’ve got a new case, and there are lots of things to check out by closing time tomorrow. How about if we give you a few of them, and you can go home and putter away

when you feel like it? That way, if your mother calls here to see if you sneaked in to work, I can honestly tell her you're not here."

Campbell tucked her laptop under one arm and reached out gingerly with the other hand and picked up an open bag of barbecue chips from the desktop with her fingertips. "What's this? I've never seen you eat these before."

Nick gave her a smile that may have been an attempt at omniscience or seduction but failed either way. "There's a lot you don't know about me, Professor."

"Ew." She dropped the bag, and orange potato chips sprinkled across the desk.

"Hey," Nick cried, snatching the bag. "I've just been craving those lately."

That sounded crazy, but maybe his head injury had something to do with it.

Nick scowled at her. "You gotta get you a desk of your own."

She could see the wisdom of that, especially if Nick was coming back to work soon.

"What do you think, Dad?" she asked.

Bill had begun checking his phone messages, and he said absently, "It'd be pretty crowded."

Campbell frowned. Was he saying he didn't want the three of them working together in here? She looked around. It would be a little snug, but if they moved the file cabinets a foot to the right ...

Her dad was punching in a phone number. Obviously this wasn't the time to discuss the office floor plan.

"Oh, by the way," Nick said as he picked the chips one by one off the desk and popped them into his mouth, "some guy named Steve wants to know if you want him to ship your boxes, or if he can drive down next weekend with them."

"He called the office?" She blinked at Nick in confusion. She hadn't given this phone number out to any of her friends in the Iowa college town where she'd lived for the last two years.

"No, he sent you an email."

Her jaw dropped. The glare she tried to pin him with had no visible effect. “You read my email?” It was nearly a scream, and her father jerked his head up and waved frantically for her to quiet down.

“Yes, Ryan,” he said smoothly into the phone. “Sorry about that. Just a little office skirmish. I think we can work that out.”

Campbell’s cheeks felt as if Nick had taken a blowtorch to them. She leaned over his desk and hissed, “How could you?”

“Easy. You hadn’t—”

“I don’t mean technically, you troglodyte. I mean morally.” She straightened, trying to excise her mind of the non sequitur she’d just uttered. “Oh, excuse me. I forgot—you don’t have morals.”

“Is that fair? I ask you.”

They locked gazes for a long moment. Campbell sensed she wasn’t going to win. If his arm wasn’t in a cast ...