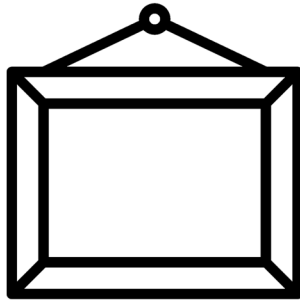


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CHRISTMAS



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

SUSAN PAGE DAVIS



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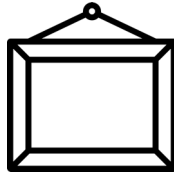
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# 1



Campbell McBride gulped the rest of her coffee, grabbed her purse, and double-checked to make sure her summons was inside.

“Bye, Dad.”

“See you later,” Bill said. “Have fun.”

She laughed and dropped a kiss on his forehead before striding to the garage.

As she backed out, she noticed a car parked on the driveway at the house next door. Nell Calhoun, the real estate agent who’d listed the vacant home, was doing something to the sign out front. Campbell slowed as she drove by and rolled down her passenger window.

“Nell!”

The woman looked up and then straightened. “Hi, Campbell.” She walked toward the car smiling.

“You sold the house?” Campbell stared at the SOLD banner now blazing across the FOR SALE sign.

“I sure did. It took a while, but yeah. You’ll have new

neighbors. We closed yesterday, and they said they plan to move in over Christmas break.”

“Wow, terrific.” Campbell understood the headaches Nell had dealt with, trying to sell a house where a murder had occurred. “Congrats! I’ve got to run.”

“See you around,” Nell called as Campbell pushed the button to raise the window. She wished she’d had more time so she could have asked about the buyers. Maybe there’d be some kids next door. But she couldn’t be late for jury duty.

This wasn’t exactly what she’d planned on for the first week of December. For some reason, she’d had the idea that the courts wouldn’t do much this month. Her father had assured her they’d take Christmas week off, and probably the week after that.

Meanwhile, she had a solid three weeks when she might have to sit in court every day. And then she’d pick it up in January, after the holiday break, possibly for the entire month.

*Could have been worse, I guess. Jury duty in summer would be dreadful.*

As she drove through town, she noted the Christmas decorations on light poles and in store windows. Several downtown businesses displayed seasonal sale announcements. Campbell smiled to herself. One of these days she had to get her Christmas shopping done—but not today.

Parking was always tricky at the judicial building on Fourth Street. With a hundred or so potential jurors reporting this morning, it was worse than usual. After surveying the clogged parking lot, Campbell pulled in across the street at a funeral home. The owners had given permission for jurors to park in their lot if there was no hearse out front, signifying a funeral that day.

She waited half a minute for a break in traffic and dashed across the street. As she entered the imposing building, she

looked at the people standing in line. On Friday, when she'd first reported for orientation, she'd spotted two people she knew—a librarian and a server from the Barn Owl diner. If she played things right, maybe she'd get to sit beside one of them and while away some of the inevitable waiting periods chatting.

“Good morning,” said the woman sitting behind the conveyor belt that led to the X-ray machine.

Campbell smiled at her and laid her purse and jacket on the belt. She walked through the metal detector and paused on the mat to give a deputy time to wave his wand up and down over her body, front and back.

“You're good,” he said.

“Thanks.” She gathered her things and went on to the stairway. Stepping out into the hallway on the second floor, she heard her name and swiveled.

“Campbell! Hey. I thought I saw you in here Friday.”

“Yeah, same here. Good to see you.”

Hallee Rickman, one of the librarians at the city's public library, beckoned to her, and Campbell walked over.

“Go check in. I'll save you a place,” Hallee said.

At least fifty people were lined up against the wall, around the large room. Before the windows on the far side, the city clerk and an assistant were checking off potential jurors. The doors to the courtroom where they would spend their morning were closed.

“Thanks.” Campbell got in line and shuffled with the others until she reached the desk and handed over her summons. The assistant read off her number, and the clerk marked her name on a list. When the assistant handed back her paperwork, Campbell turned to find Hallee again.

“Think we'll be picked today?” her friend asked as she slid into line with her.

“I don’t know. If they’re only selecting a jury for one trial, they’ve got way more than enough people here.”

“Yeah, I figure we have a pretty good chance of not being called,” Hallee said.

Campbell had mixed feelings about that. She’d agreed with her father, private investigator Bill McBride, that this would be good experience for her. She’d have to testify in a couple of court cases sometime in the coming year, and this stint might help allay her nervousness.

On the other hand, she was newly certified as a P.I., and she loved working with her dad. She hoped she wouldn’t miss too many days of work.

They entered the large courtroom and found seats on the benches at the back.

“How are things going at the library?” Campbell whispered.

“Great. We’ve got more people coming in than ever since the renovations were finished.” Hallee’s satisfied smile told Campbell that all of the library employees were tickled the newly expanded building was back in service, bigger and better than ever.

“I love the new computer room and—”

“All rise,” the bailiff intoned.

Everyone jumped up as the judge entered through a doorway behind the bench.

After some instruction on the *voir dire* process of selection, the prospective jurors listened carefully as the clerk called out numbers and names. When the juror numbers skipped from nineteen to thirty-four, Hallee exhaled and grinned.

“I’m number twenty. Looks like today’s not my day.”

Campbell clenched her teeth as the numbers went higher.

“Number 126, Campbell McBride.”

She froze for a moment then looked at Hallee and

shrugged. “That’s me.” She got up and made her way to the end of the row then to the front, where those being called were seated before the judge.

Her cell phone was set on silent. As other names were intoned, she took it out and quickly texted to her father, “I’m picked for *voir dire*.” Her dad would understand that she might still be excused—or she might be here all day. He and his other employee, Nick Emerson, would plan their day as if she wouldn’t be there to help them with the workload.

Soon thirty-two potential jurors had been chosen, and the prosecuting attorney, Mitchell Vaughn, stepped forward to ask them questions. Did any of them know the judge, the prosecutor, the defense attorney, or the defendant personally? A couple of people raised their hands, and the lawyer asked them how they knew the principals. After hearing them out, one was asked to approach the bench, and a few minutes later was dismissed.

Another person was chosen from the pool at the back of the courtroom to fill out their ranks, and the questions continued. Campbell had no inkling that she might be considered a problem until the prosecutor asked if any of them were private investigators.

Her heart pounding, Campbell raised her hand.

“Please approach.”

As she made her way to the end of the row and walked forward, Campbell’s mind raced. Would they send her home immediately? Someone turned on a “white noise” recording so that no one who wasn’t within a few feet of them could hear what they said.

“You’re a private investigator?” the judge asked.

“Yes, Your Honor.” Campbell’s throat was dry, and her voice sounded a little croaky.

The judge looked at the prosecutor.

“Are you licensed in the commonwealth of Kentucky?” Vaughn asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you have your license with you?”

She fumbled with the clasp of her purse and drew out her wallet. Two months ago, she’d been so proud to receive the laminated card in the mail from Frankfort. Now it could keep her off the jury.

Did she really want to be on a jury? She’d gone round and round about the pros and cons. It would be an inconvenience, yet it would help her do her job better. Now that the privilege was perhaps about to be snatched away from her, she realized that she wanted badly to be chosen.

She held out the card. The prosecutor took it, scrutinized it, and handed it to the judge, who looked at it and then passed it to the defense attorney, Robert Soule.

“Are you related to Bill McBride?” he asked.

Campbell turned to face the bearded man. It figured that he knew her father. Bill knew every lawyer in town.

“I’m his daughter.”

“I don’t know McBride well, but I know who he is.” The lawyer leaned in and spoke in low tones with the judge and the prosecutor. After a moment, the judge met her gaze.

“Do you know anything about the Abbott case?”

Campbell shook her head.

“One thing about P.I.s, sometimes they think they can solve the case better than the police can.”

“Oh, I would never think that, Your Honor,” Campbell said.

“You work for your father?”

“Yes.”

“What sort of work do you do for him?” Soule asked.

Campbell shrugged. “A lot of background checks, skip traces, that sort of thing mostly.”



“Have you ever testified in court?” Vaughn asked.

She hesitated. “Not yet, but I’m told I will in a few months.”

“What case?”

“The—the Chase case.”

Vaughn’s eyebrows shot up. “You’ll be a witness?”

“Yes.” Her voice shook as she recalled the terrifying evening she’d spent with the defendant in that case.

“How were you involved?” the judge asked.

Briefly, Campbell explained what had happened six months earlier. Now she was certain they would dismiss her.

The prosecutor gazed at her keenly. “Do you think that experience will impact your ability to be impartial in this case?”

“I don’t.”

The two lawyers huddled with the judge for a moment, and then the prosecutor said, “We’ll allow it for now, unless you wish to be excused.”

“I—I’d like to serve,” Campbell said.

Vaughn looked at Soule, who nodded.

“All right,” said the judge. “Please be seated.”

Campbell could hardly believe it. As she returned to her place, she wondered why they hadn’t questioned her individually when they asked if the prospective jurors knew any local police officers. She knew several, in fact, but she hadn’t elaborated on her relationship with Detective Keith Fuller. If they learned she was dating a local officer, they’d boot her off in the blink of an eye.

Should she tell them now? She didn’t want them to think she was hiding it, but they hadn’t seemed to be concerned when she’d said she’d met several officers through her job. Now she felt guilty. But at the time, she had figured it didn’t matter. Keith wasn’t involved in this case. Or was he?

One officer was in the courtroom, sitting at the prosecutor's table. Vaughn had introduced him earlier as the arresting officer in the Abbott case, and Campbell had assumed Keith had nothing to do with it. Maybe she ought to ask him.

To her surprise, a few minutes later the clerk read off the names of the twelve jurors and two alternates for the trial. Her pulse galloped as names were called out.

"And number 126, Campbell McBride."

She exhaled slowly. They'd chosen her. Why? Maybe one of the lawyers liked the fact that she was involved in investigation.

All of the people at the back of the courtroom were dismissed. When that part of the room had emptied, the clerk announced, "We will now take a one-hour break for lunch. Be back in this room by 12:15 p.m."

Campbell grabbed her purse and jacket and stood. She surveyed the back of the big room, but Hallee was long gone, and she'd never gotten close enough to the diner's server to speak to her. She wondered if she should dash home for lunch but decided to grab a sandwich at a coffee shop a couple of blocks away instead. When she had her lunch in front of her, she called Keith.

"They picked you?" His voice rose in amazement.

"Yes. They asked a lot of questions about my P.I. work, but they didn't go into details about the police officers I told them I knew. I think they got sidetracked on that one by a woman whose son is an officer."

"Wow. I honestly didn't think they'd put you on a jury."

"You didn't tell me that," Campbell said.

"I know. I didn't want to influence your feelings about it."

"Oh." She thought for a moment and decided he'd done the right thing. "Listen, I can't talk to you about the case, but, uh, if

you were involved in it, maybe I should let them know. They did pick two alternates.”

“As far as I know, I’m not involved in any cases coming to trial this month.”

“Okay.”

“But you’re right. We shouldn’t talk about it.”

Something inside Campbell wanted to rebel. Was she going to have to censor everything she said to Keith for the next couple of months? And her dad and Nick too?

“Do they think it will be a long trial?” he asked.

“They haven’t said, but judging by the questions they asked, I suppose it could be. I mean, I don’t think it’s a simple drug possession or something like that, but we haven’t been told the charges yet. We go back in after lunch, and I think that’s when things will get under way.”

“Listen carefully to the opening statements,” he said.

“I will. But I wish we could discuss it later.” She sighed. “Maybe we shouldn’t see each other while this trial’s in session.”

“Too tempting?”

“Maybe.” Campbell wasn’t one to chatter aimlessly or gossip, but she didn’t like being isolated either.

“I’ll call you tonight. You’ll know more then.”

“Thank you.” It was the best they could do at the moment. She signed off and checked the time. After forcing down half her sandwich, she called home.

“Hi, Dad. Looks like I’m on this one. I probably won’t be home until suppertime.”

“Okay, Soup. Focus on that, and we’ll handle things here. See you later.”

“Love you, Dad.”

“Back atcha.”

She closed the connection and finished her scanty meal.

Her stomach was a little unsettled, and she wished she hadn't ordered coffee. She tossed the remaining half a cup and went to the counter for a bottle of water.

Fifteen minutes later, she was back in her seat with the other eleven jurors and two alternates.

The charges were read against Leila Abbott, the defendant. Her main offense seemed to be possession of stolen property.

When the prosecutor began his opening statement, Campbell was hooked.

Vaughn, a man of at least fifty with a mustache and nearly silver hair, stood before them in his charcoal gray suit and red power tie.

"... and we will prove that Ms. Abbott knowingly possessed and tried to sell stolen property, to wit, a valuable painting that she found in the home of her late grandmother."

Campbell studied the defendant curiously. The young woman looked to be in her early twenties. Her face was blotchy, as though she'd done a lot of crying recently. She wore a green-and-white print top with smocking on the yoke—a department store find, Campbell decided—and wire-framed glasses. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was ruffled, and her coral lipstick had been chewed off her bottom lip.

*Poor girl.* Campbell checked herself. She mustn't form an opinion yet, based solely on appearances. But selling stolen property? Could this young woman possibly be guilty? She settled back to listen as the defense attorney stepped forward. This trial might turn out to be more interesting than she'd anticipated.