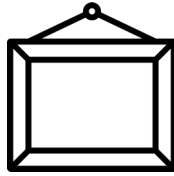


3



K eith hesitated before calling Campbell that evening. Maybe he should keep his distance while she was serving on the jury.

No way. That case could drag on for weeks. After a quick supper at home and a change into casual clothes, he drove to the McBride house.

“Hi!” Campbell had come downstairs to admit him. “Dad’s upstairs watching TV, if you want to see him.”

“What do you think?”

She laughed and accepted a quick kiss. Keith and Bill were friends, but she had no illusions as to the purpose of this visit.

“So, how’s it going?” he asked.

“Can’t talk about it.”

“Oh, I know. I just meant ... your life ... in general.”

“Fine.” Her smile faded. “I admit this c—this thing I’m involved in—has me a little down.”

“Why is that?” Keith asked. He wished he could tell her he’d read Detective Smalley’s case file, but even that would probably be revealing too much. It would be hard to hold back

the fact that he'd found a few rough spots in the investigation—or at least what he considered gaps in the file. Missing bits of information. Things that should have been spelled out but weren't.

“Can't talk about it.”

“Right. Well, let's think of something you *can* talk about.”

“Sounds good.” She led him into the large office she shared with Nick most days. It was the home's former owner's living room, and she took Keith to the comfortable seating area in front of the fireplace. They settled in together on the couch. “Dad says there's a new investigator in town.”

“Yeah, that's right. We were notified that she's open for business.”

“On Chestnut Street.”

“Yup.” They gazed into each other's eyes.

“That's a much busier area than here,” Campbell noted.

Keith nodded. Chestnut Street held the city's post office, a movie theater, some restaurants and garages, among other points of interest. On the far side of Twelfth Street, it wended its way to the Murray State University campus.

“But True Blue's been here—what—six years?”

“Seven, I think.”

“Bill has a lot of clients who trust him and bring him their repeat business,” Keith said.

That was true. Campbell had worked on some of those repeat requests for background checks, locating witnesses and missing family members, and surveillance of lawsuit participants. The attorneys and insurance brokers of Murray trusted Bill McBride.

“Still, there's only so much of this type of work in a town this size. What if she starts advertising and enticing people to her agency? Dad likes to keep a low profile—you know, discreet and efficient.”

“Don’t worry,” Keith said. “Most people who want to hire a P.I. want that too.”

Campbell tried unsuccessfully to quell her misgivings.

“What have *you* been doing today?” she asked.

“Oh, trying to chase down some stolen equipment from MSU.”

“Dad mentioned that at supper. Cameras and stuff?”

“Yeah.” Keith shrugged. “Not much to go on yet. So, I hear you have new neighbors,” he said brightly.

“So I’m told. I haven’t seen them yet.”

“Well, I can tell you that your new neighbor is a middle-aged woman who will have an adult son living with her.”

“How do you know that? Wait!” Campbell pulled back and stared at him. “Don’t tell me he’s a sex offender and had to register with the P.D.”

Keith chuckled. “No, I’m happy to say it’s not that. We would definitely warn you if it was. No, I just happened to run into Nell Calhoun this afternoon, and she told me.”

“Wow. She’s allowed to tell people about her clients?”

“Well, I *am* a police officer. I don’t think she’d tell just anyone. And you’ll find out soon enough, anyhow.”

“Yeah, Dad’s probably done a deep background on both of them by now. That is, if he hasn’t been too busy compiling a file on Marissa Chilton.”

Keith smiled but didn’t comment. She had her father pegged, all right.

“Hey, do you want some coffee or something? I think there’s pie in the fridge.”

“That sounds like a great idea.” He stood and offered his hand to pull her up off the sofa.

Nick came in the next morning before she left for the judicial building.

“Yo, Professor.” He slung his backpack off his shoulder onto his desk. “Heading for court?”

“Yep. Probably every day this week.”

“Oh, it’s a complicated case?”

“Yeah, sort of. Wish I could discuss it, but I can’t.”

He nodded. “Hey, I met the new guy next door. He was outside when I drove in just now.”

“Really?” She took a step toward the window.

“He’s gone now,” Nick said.

Disappointed she wouldn’t get a look, Campbell sighed. “What’s he like?”

“He’s about my age. Or your age.”

“We’re in the same generation, Nick.”

He shrugged. “Okay, early to mid-twenties then. Blond hair, five-ten, looks fit.”

“*Hmm.*” Campbell wiggled her eyebrows. “How interested should I be?”

“Up to you, but I’m gonna tell Keith you said that.”

“Don’t you dare. I was joking, and you know it.”

Nick chuckled as he sat down and unzipped his backpack. “His name’s Greg, and he’s a student at MSU.”

“Oh?” Maybe he wasn’t in her age bracket after all.

“Said his mother moved here from Louisville to be closer to him.”

“Okay. What do you know about her?”

“Zilch.”

“Not even a last name?”

“Nope. Greg and I just said hi. I told him my name was Nick, and I work here. He said, ‘I’m Greg. I’ll probably see ya around.’ Oh, and he did tell me what I said about his mother moving here.”

“Huh. Keith told Dad he’d be living with her. I wonder if he’s been living on campus till now.”

“I don’t know. A lot of college guys wouldn’t be too happy to move out of the dorm or the frat house to move in with Mom.”

“Agreed. Hey, what do you want for Christmas?”

Nick stared at her. “You’re getting me a Christmas present?”

“Sure.” She hesitated. “I mean, we work together every day and ... Doesn’t Dad give you a present?”

“A modest bonus usually.”

“Oh.” She curled her lip. “I wish I knew what to get Dad.”

“Bill’s easy. He’ll like whatever you give him.”

She supposed that was true. Her father always accepted gifts graciously. “But I’d like to get him something really special.”

“I don’t know about that,” Nick said. “He’s been alone so long, if he really wants something, I think he just buys it.”

That was the sad truth.

“What did you get him last year?” Nick asked.

“A shirt and a book.”

“Safe gifts.”

“I suppose.” The designation didn’t sit well with her. Was she a safe-gift giver? She wanted to give the men in her life something they’d really love. That included Nick, as well as her dad and Keith.

Well, I’d better step on it. Can’t be late for court.” She grabbed her purse. “If you want, you can text me your Christmas list.”

“Oh, like a letter to Santa?”

“Kind of. Just don’t expect the elves to get everything on the list.”

He laughed as she headed toward the garage.

As she backed out the driveway, a young man was coming out of the brick house next door, walking toward a black pickup truck in the drive. Campbell recalled Nick's description of the new neighbor, and he fit it to a *T*. This had to be Greg—if he'd left earlier, apparently he'd come back. He glanced her way, and she lifted a hand. Immediately, she transferred her attention back to her side-view mirror, but she was sure he'd waved back.



When she reached her destination, Campbell had to park in the lower lot, as the upper one was full and a hearse sat in front of the funeral home. She hurried up to the entrance, hoping her few minutes of conversation with Nick hadn't made her late.

Once she reached the courtroom, she slid into the seat next to a bearded man about her dad's age.

"Did I miss anything?"

He smiled. "Nope. Cutting it fine, though."

"I know." She determined to leave home earlier the next day. If she arrived after the judge was seated, she wasn't sure what would happen.

"All rise."

She jumped up with the other jurors, scarcely having time to note that the attorneys and their staff, as well as the defendant and court clerk, were in place. The judge came in and took his place at the bench.

The estate attorney took the stand first. Mrs. Abbott had made a will after her husband's death, about ten years previously. In it, she bequeathed her estate to her three children, Randall, Marcella, and Jacob. Jacob was still alive, but the other two children were now deceased.

The attorney explained that in a case such as that of Leila Abbott, as her grandmother's executor, Leila was responsible for distributing the testator's assets.

Since Randall Abbott and his sister, Marcella Smith, had died, their shares would now go to their children, who were Mrs. Abbott's grandchildren, and Leila, her sister, and cousins. One third of the estate would go to Leila's uncle, Jacob Abbott, and the other two thirds was to be equally divided among the five children of Randall and Marcella.

At this point, the prosecutor asked the lawyer if this had gone as instructed.

"There was some disagreement at first," she said. "Jacob Abbott, the testator's only remaining child, thought he should be the one to represent the estate."

"And how was this addressed?" Vaughn asked.

"I told him that the law is clear. Mrs. Abbott had named her granddaughter as executrix, at a time when all three of her children were living. Clearly, it was her wish that Leila be the one to serve."

"And was the estate distributed?"

"The cash and income from some other assets were," the lawyer said. "However, there were some items that Leila felt should be evaluated before being sold."

"Such as the Banitier painting?"

"I don't know." The lawyer darted a glance at the defendant. "She didn't give me a list. She only said there were a few things that should be sold, and that she wanted to make sure they got a fair price for them."

Campbell listened avidly and took notes, drawing a crude family tree in her notebook. Would Leila Abbott take the stand? She was eager to know what other items Leila had held back from the estate.

To her surprise, the next witness was Leila's cousin Anna Irwin, one of the other heirs.

"Did you receive money from your cousin as part of the estate distribution?" Vaughn asked her.

"Yes," Anna replied. "We held an estate sale, where we sold most of Grandma's things, and later we held another, smaller yard sale. The things that were left from that, we donated to a charity store."

"And did you understand that more funds would be coming to you from items that were to be sold individually?"

Anna hesitated. "Leila had said something about Grandma's engagement ring. There were some dishes she sold and gave us money from. I didn't know about the painting at the time."

"Were there other things?"

"If there were, she didn't tell me about them."

"Think carefully, Mrs. Irwin. Did your grandmother have any other things that you felt were somewhat valuable and that were not sold at either of the two sales your family held?"

"No. We sold her furniture and silverware and all her knickknacks. Didn't get much for anything."

"And did you and your siblings and cousins receive any items that had belonged to Mrs. Abbott?"

"We each got to choose one thing, before the estate sale."

"Did you choose something?"

"Yes. I got a flow blue plate she used to display in her dining room."

"Did your cousin Leila get something?"

Anna frowned. "I believe she chose a small lap desk. I know my brother Blaine got Grandma's television, and Corey got something too—I can't remember what. And I'm not sure about Danielle."

"The defendant's sister?"

“Yes. I don’t know what she got.”

“And your uncle, Jacob Abbott?”

“I don’t know.”

“No further questions.”

The defense attorney rose to cross-examine Anna.

“Did Leila ever give you any more money connected to your grandmother’s estate?”

“No.”

Soule’s eyebrows shot up. “What about the engagement ring? Did she ever sell it?”

“Not that I’m aware of. She did tell me she’d taken it to a jeweler, and he said it wasn’t worth a whole lot. Maybe six hundred.”

“But you never received your share of that?”

“No. I assumed she hadn’t actually sold it yet, and that when she did, a third would go to Uncle Jacob and the rest would be split five ways to us cousins. But it wouldn’t be much—probably less than a hundred apiece.”

“I see. And as far as you knew, that was the only asset from which funds had not yet been distributed?”

“That’s correct.”

“And those items each of you chose from among your grandmother’s things—none of them was worth significantly more than the others?”

“No. I think if they were, Leila would have said they needed to be valued, like the ring.”

Soule faced the bench. “No further questions, Your Honor.”

Court was recessed for an hour’s lunch, and the jury was taken into a conference room. Sandwiches, soft drinks, and desserts were waiting for them there, and each member was allowed to go to the restroom, accompanied by a court officer. Campbell assumed it was so that no one would approach the jury members to try to influence them.

Keith closed the computer file and gazed down at the folder on his desk. Unless the reports were incomplete, he could see several ways that case should have been investigated further. Not that Smalley's conclusions weren't reasonable, but there were loose ends. Had the detective stopped following up on tangential leads when he'd found the obvious answers?

With a sigh, he turned back to the cases he was currently investigating. He'd wasted enough time on an old case. It wasn't a cold case, either, but one that was being actively prosecuted in the courts. Not his job to pursue it.

He spent several hours delving into a case of drug dealing and ended up with a suspect in custody. He'd barely sat down to complete the intake paperwork when his desk phone rang.

Detective Sergeant Vickers asked him to come to his office. Keith went, expecting to discuss the drug bust.

As soon as he walked through the door, Vickers looked up at him and said, "Have you been looking at the Abbott case?"

"The ... oh, yes. I glanced at the files this morning."

"Well, someone noticed that you'd opened the electronic files and told the chief."

Keith swallowed hard. "Why?"

"I'm not sure, but what I do know is, the chief says leave it alone. It's out of our hands now."

"Yes, it is. And he doesn't want us reading up on the case?"

"Apparently not."

"I just wanted to inform myself about it."

"And now you have," Vickers said. "So let that be the end of it."

But those loose ends ...

Keith caught a hard glint in the sergeant's gaze.

"Yes, sir."

“When the trial is over, maybe we can talk about it then.”

“I’d like to.” But that might be too late to change anything. Keith rose and returned to his paperwork.

An hour later, he sat in Bill McBride’s office.

“I suppose that technically I shouldn’t even be talking to you about it.”

Bill frowned. “It does seem odd. First of all, that anyone took note of your reading material, and secondly, that the chief stepped in and told you to stop.”

“And Vickers and I usually get along quite well,” Keith noted. “I was surprised, I’ll tell you. I felt like I couldn’t say anything at all.”

“You have misgivings about the way the case was handled.”

“It’s a strange case. Under most circumstances, it wouldn’t have even come to our attention.”

“Why did it?”

“The antique dealer. He thought something was fishy when the girl brought the painting to him, and he reported it. But not right away. He waited several days. Said he’d been mulling it over and decided it was worth advising the police about it.”

“Tell me about these loose ends you mentioned. I take it there were other witnesses Smalley should have talked to and didn’t.”

“If he did, he didn’t leave a record of it in the file. It seems incomplete—or slipshod. But, Bill, if we talk about this in detail, you have to keep mum about it. Campbell can’t know.”

“Absolutely.” A tight smile crossed Bill’s face. “If the court found out her father was looking at the case, there could be fireworks.”

Keith nodded soberly. “This is all unofficial. Between two friends.”