

The pub was an establishment like many others of its kind with a bar of dark wood and dozens of filled tables. It had friendly, distinctly neighborhood feel and there was an enticing aroma of freshly cooked meat pies. Cecil walked through and spotted Kassel in a back booth watching him, as relaxed as could be.

“Counselor,” Kassel greeted when Cecil reached him.

“Mr. Kassel,” Cecil returned. He scooted into the seat across from him. “I appreciate you meeting me.”

“Glad to. Join me in a drink?”

There was a half-full pitcher of ale with a clean glass beside it. “Yes, thank you.”

Tom poured, slid the glass to him and then lifted his own glass. “I can hardly wait to hear this.”

Cecil took a drink and found the amber ale smooth and tasty. “That’s good.”

Tom nodded. “They also have an excellent pork pie if you’re hungry. I’m going to have one.”

“I am, actually.”

Tom looked up, made eye contact with someone and held up two fingers.

“Are you currently available for hire?” Cecil asked.

“Depends on the case, I suppose. What sort of job is it?”

“Investigating whether a man committed his wife to an insane asylum unjustifiably in order to gain control of her fortune.”

Kassel made a face. “How grim.”

“Yes, it is. The lady’s physician, well, former physician, who is also a lady, came to me, believing it’s so. She, the doctor, I mean, cannot afford to pursue the case, but a well-heeled friend of hers has agreed to foot the bill if indeed there is a case. That’s what I need to determine.” He paused. “May I be so blunt as to inquire what you charge?”

“It varies. On a short term job, I usually charge two fifty an hour.”

Cecil nearly choked. “Two dollars and fifty cents? An hour? I just had work done on my home and the bricklayer made three and a half dollars for the entire day!”

“I’m not a bricklayer.”

Cecil wondered if Kassel was pulling his leg. “Who can pay that?” Cecil asked testily.

“Parties who want to win and who *can* afford to pursue cases. Not to be glib.”

Cecil shook his head in astonishment. “I fear I’ve wasted your time.”

“Maybe not,” Kassel said. “I’m intrigued.”

“Intrigued enough to cut your rates to something more affordable?”

Kassel grinned. “My main client is a large insurance firm. I would have to work your job around whatever might come up with them ... should we come to a meeting of the minds regarding my rate.”

“You’re being perfectly serious? About your rate?”

“I never joke about money. Not mine, anyway.” He took another drink. “But you’re here and food is coming.” He shrugged. “Tell me more.”

Kassel had a point. “All right. Over the years, I have done some pro-bono work for hospitals and other civic organizations when I felt the cause was merited. I’d worked with Dr. Jack Werthing before, which is why he thought of me, I suppose. He contacted me, briefly explained the case and said that a Dr. Viola Ripley would provide more information, which she did.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s ... lovely. Not that it has anything to do with it.”

Tom gave an unconcerned wave, but a smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

“Dr. Ripley had treated Ms. Heyer for a ruptured appendix.” Cecil took a folded piece of paper from his pocket. “Here are the salient points from our conversation.” He passed it over. “If you care to see. I did not know you cost two fifty an hour when I wrote it.”

Tom lifted a brow. “I fear you’re going to have nightmares over it tonight.”

“I may!”

Tom grinned as he opened the paper and looked it over. “The lady’s husband is an attorney.”

“Yes. He doesn’t appear to have a thriving practice. He’s only been in town some four or five years, but that’s time enough to build a decent practice if you work at it. But, getting back to the story, I went the day after my meeting with Dr. Ripley to see the patient.”

“At the asylum,” Tom said as he read it. He looked up. “At least it’s the best of them. None of the patients are chained, at least. ”

“True, but the lady has been drugged to mindlessness. I was thinking of speaking with her husband, but I can’t compel him to provide answers.”

“Plus, you risk alerting him that you may be onto him if there is wrongdoing involved. In my opinion, the better way to proceed is to quietly discern if there’s fire causing the smoke.”

Cecil found himself enjoying the conversation. “Where there’s smoke, there is fire,” Cecil rejoined. “What other kind of smoke is there?”

“What if it’s fog and not smoke? Things can appear one way and be another.”

Cecil bobbed his head, taking the point. He took a drink. “How would one go about finding out the truth of the matter? In a clandestine way?”

“How would ...one?” Tom said, tapping his chest on the last word.

Cecil grinned.

“One would ingratiate one’s way into the Heyer household to start,” Tom replied mischievously.

“How *do* you manage to do what you do? How do you unearth secrets?”

Tom poured the last of the ale into their glasses. “If I told you my secrets, what’s to keep you from getting into my line of work and putting me out of business?”

Cecil laughed. “My practice keeps me busy enough. I’m simply curious. And oddly fascinated.”

Tom held out his hands as if in concession. “I’m oddly fascinating. Almost everyone says so.”

Piping hot food arrived and it looked as delicious as it smelled. “I wish I could hire you this very minute,” Cecil said when the barmaid had walked on. “But I have to get permission and your cost is high.”

“But you’re beginning to see why.”

“Perhaps I am.” Cecil cut into the crisp crust of the pie and his mouth watered as steam poured out. “I can take facts and work with them. I can interpret the law and argue with passion. But how to get those facts when they’re well hidden, that’s the quandary.”

“It is. By the way, have you ever determined what you cost an hour?”

“I don’t charge by the hour.”

“It’s not difficult to figure out though. You should do it. Put it all in context.”

“*Hmm*. Maybe I will.” He tasted the pie and it was delicious.

Midway through the meal, Tom sat back. “Why don’t I sniff around a bit? If your lady doctor is right and Mrs. Heyer has been wrongly incarcerated, she’ll be grateful when we get her out and she can pay me.”

“I like your optimism. *When* we get her out and not if.”

“But if I think it is fog and not smoke, I’ll let you know that, too.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Cecil said sincerely.

Kassel nodded. “It will be a pro bono hour or two of my time.”

“An hour or two,” Cecil repeated wryly. “You are confident.”

“I am that.”

