

TRUE BLUE MYSTERIES • BOOK ONE

BLUE PLATE
Special

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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Telling her father what happened was the worst thing about going home.

Campbell pulled up at the small brick ranch house. Her father had moved here near the end of her first year of college. She'd never lived in the house but had visited on school breaks and vacations. His car wasn't in the driveway, but that wasn't surprising. He was probably at his office. She should have called ahead.

Just to be sure, she walked up to the front door and rang the bell. No answer. She had a key but didn't like to go into his space until she'd at least talked to him. It would be different if he still lived at her childhood home.

She walked over to the garage door. Shielding her eyes from the sun's reflection, she peered in through one of the small windows. No car. Dad definitely wasn't home. She went back to her loaded Fusion and backed out of the driveway. Next stop, her father's storefront office, True Blue Investigations.

The only car out front was a Jeep—not her dad's. Great. He was probably off on a stakeout somewhere, and that jerk Nick Emerson was most likely inside the office. The kid was good-

looking, but that didn't cut any ice with her. Although he was only a couple of years her junior, she still thought of him as the brash kid who chafed against authority. The tattoo of a skull and crossbones on his arm didn't help.

But Nick spent a lot more time with her dad now than she ever had. That made her a little uneasy, but she refused to consider that she might be jealous.

She pulled in a deep breath, determined to treat Nick as she would a wisecracking student in one of her freshman comp classes.

"Well, well, well, Campbell McBride. Long time, no see, Professor." Nick gave her his annoying grin as she walked through the doorway.

"Hey. Where's Dad?"

"Not sure." Nick leaned back in his desk chair and locked his fingers behind his head, so his elbows stuck out on either side like elephant ears. "You been to the house?"

"Yeah."

Nick arched an eyebrow. "Well, I haven't seen him today, but he called me last night and said he was picking up a new case."

"What is it?"

"Dunno. He said he was meeting a client and he'd see me today. But he hasn't shown up yet."

"It's almost noon," Campbell said.

"Yeah." A slight frown puckered Nick's brow.

Her father didn't like to be called when he was out on a job, but enough was enough. Campbell took out her phone and punched the speed dial buttons for her dad's number.

"This is Bill McBride of True Blue Investigations. I can't take your call right now, but leave a message and I'll get back to you."

She sighed and waited for the beep. "Dad, it's me. I'm in Murray. Call me when you get this, okay?" She ended the call and sat down in her father's chair. The desktop was neat. One file folder lay on the left side. Her dad's coffee mug sat empty on

a square of memo paper. A few other sheets lay beside the computer keyboard. She shuffled them. Phone numbers. Only one had a name.

Nick seemed to be hard at work on his computer, but from all she could tell from this viewpoint, he could be playing a video game.

Okay, that was a little snarky. True, she'd never liked him much. Nick had been a teenager struggling through his last year of high school when her father had left the Bowling Green Police Department and moved here. The young man had been ticketed for speeding right outside Bill's office. A few weeks later he'd been picked up for running a red light.

By then, her dad had made friends with several local cops, and one of them had confided that Nick was his cousin's boy, and he was concerned about him. His father had abandoned the family, and Nick had been in trouble for several infractions. Nothing huge—one count of underage drinking was the worst. But he showed a general disregard for the law at that point, and his attitude was steering him for bigger problems.

For some reason, her dad had taken a shine to Nick. Maybe he thought he could be a mentor and help him straighten out his life. Avoid jail. Bypass the drug scene. Become a useful citizen. Campbell stopped short of drawing a connection to the fact that Bill had never had a son, just a bookish daughter.

He looked up and caught her staring. "What?"

"Nothing." Campbell picked up a ballpoint pen and clicked it on and off.

Her father probably saw himself as a positive role model for Nick, and there was nothing wrong with that.

But hiring him as an assistant investigator? He'd given Nick a job as soon as he turned twenty and paid for his P.I.'s exam the next year.

"Right." He turned back to his computer screen.

Campbell studied his rugged profile. Maybe Nick had grown

up over the past three years. She hoped so. He'd been impetuous and easily distracted, and her father had worked on helping him focus and take responsibility. Still, she couldn't imagine he was the ideal employee.

He worked for a few minutes and looked over at her again. "So, you're off for the summer?"

"Yeah." She frowned. The summer and the rest of her life. Dad wouldn't be happy.

"You look upset."

She blinked. "My dad is missing, and I just got fired. Wouldn't you be upset?"

"You got fired?" Nick sat up a little straighter. "How come?"

"Oh, not fired exactly. The university's budget was slashed, and they're downsizing. I'd only been there two years, so I got cut."

"Wow. That's rough."

"Tell me about it." She picked up the memo squares and stared at the top one. She'd have to start job hunting right away.

"You didn't see it coming, huh?" Nick asked.

"Well, I thought it *could* happen, but I hoped it wouldn't. I did put my name in at some other schools, but nothing's opened up for me yet."

"Did you try Murray State?"

"Yeah, that's one of three I sent my resumé." She should be home sending out more job applications. She scowled at the small square of paper on top. "So, who's Darrin?"

Nick's brow wrinkled. "Darrin? The only one I know is Darrin Beresford, but you don't mean him, do you?"

"I don't know, do I? There's a phone number here, and it says *Darrin*. Who's this Beresford guy?"

"Oh, he's the town crackpot. He walks all over town and asks a million questions."

"So?" she said.

"He's nosy and annoying. He's got a scanner in his house,

and he goes to every fire or car accident. He used to call the police at least twice a week to tell them something he thought was important, but it was mostly his imagination—that and rumors. Finally they told him never to call them again unless he had some concrete evidence of a crime to show them.”

“Did he stop?”

Nick shrugged. “I guess so. Now he calls the newspaper all the time instead.”

“Why?”

“To give the reporters little tidbits he’s sure will lead to their next big story.”

“And you know this, how?”

“I have a friend at the paper. Nobody there can stand Darrin because he’s such a pest, but once in a great while they find him useful, so they tolerate his calls.”

Campbell considered that. “How is he useful?”

“Sometimes he’ll hear about something newsworthy before the newsroom does. Like things that happen in the middle of the night. He tips them off, and they look into it to see if it’s worth doing a story.”

“So how do we know if this phone number is his?” She glanced at the memo sheet again.

He sent her a look that clearly said she was stupid.

“I guess I could call it, huh?” she asked without enthusiasm.

“Bring it here. I can probably find the number online.”

“Even if it’s a cell phone?”

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Zee private detectives have zee methods.”

“Riiight.” She got up and took him the piece of paper.

Nick was already typing on his keyboard. After a moment, he took the note from her and pecked in the number.

“Yeah, it’s his.”

“Okay. So why would my dad call him?” Campbell asked.

“Who knows. Maybe Darrin called first and your dad took

the message off the voice mail and wrote down the number. Although, Darrin's never called here before, that I know of."

She nodded slowly. It made sense. "Have you checked the messages today?"

"Yeah, first thing this morning. There was nothing from Darrin, but if your dad took it, he probably erased the message."

She sighed.

"Hey, are you hungry?" Nick asked.

She was. Hours had passed since her sketchy breakfast on the road.

"They have pizza and sandwiches at the convenience store on the corner." He closed a couple of programs on his computer and stood. "Come on. My treat."

NICK BOUGHT HER LUNCH, which made Campbell feel a little better, but her dad still hadn't returned when they got back to the office. She sat at his desk and tried his cell phone again.

"Nothing?" Nick asked.

"Nope." She put her phone down. "Pretty quiet around here."

"Well, I'm working a diligent search, and we've got one case for a lawyer's office. Your father may be working on that."

"I guess I expected some people to come in."

"We get most of our cases through connections with insurance companies and lawyers, not from walk-ins."

"Oh." Dad's job was more boring than she'd thought. Watching insurance claimants to see if they were faking their injuries. Yawn.

Nick worked for several minutes without speaking. The desk phone rang, and Campbell snatched it up.

"Hello? True Blue."

"Hi, this is Dr. Aiken's office. Is Mr. McBride in?"

“No, but this is his daughter.” Campbell’s heart raced. Was there some sort of medical emergency?

“Could you please tell him that his reading glasses are ready? He can pick them up anytime.”

“Sure. Thank you.” As she lowered the phone, she noted the number on the display. She checked the memos on the desk and sighed.

“What’s up?” Nick asked.

“Eye doctor. Dad’s new glasses are ready. And one of these phone numbers Dad wrote down matches theirs.”

“That’s one mystery solved. How many numbers you got?”

“Besides Darrin’s, two more.”

He stretched out a hand, and she took them over to him.

A minute later he said, “This one’s for the garage Bill uses. I think he had something done there yesterday. Oil change? Anyway, I doubt it’s significant. This other one ... Oh, that’s for Riverside Insurance. We work for them off and on. I did a surveillance job for them a couple weeks ago.”

“So, maybe they called and gave Dad a new case?” she asked.

“Maybe.” Nick got up and took a canister of coffee from a small cupboard.

“I can do that,” Campbell said.

“It’s okay.”

“No, I need something to keep me busy.”

Nick hesitated then surrendered the carafe. “Look, your dad’s a smart guy. He’s okay.”

“You don’t know that.” She carried the carafe into the tiny bathroom and filled it with water at the sink. When she came out, Nick was working again. She poured the water into the coffeemaker and measured the coffee grounds into a new filter.

“I’m calling that Darrin guy.” She hit the BREW NOW button.

“Sure.” Nick didn’t sound as if he even paid attention to what she’d said.

Campbell sat down, picked up the desk phone’s receiver, and

punched in the number from the memo sheet. It rang, but no one answered.

She puttered around the office while Nick worked on his diligent search. After checking her email, she searched a regional site for job openings. Maybe she could get something temporary for the summer. But most of the openings she qualified for in Murray, even with her master's degree, paid minimum wage—which was pitifully low in Kentucky.

Around three o'clock, she tried her father's cell for about the tenth time, but again, all she got was voice mail. She walked over and stood in front of Nick's desk until he looked up at her.

"It's time to call the police."

"Good luck with that," Nick said drily. "They won't do anything yet."

"That forty-eight-hour rule is hogwash." Campbell scowled at him. "They can start looking for a missing person anytime they think it's warranted."

"Sure," Nick said, "if there's evidence the person is hurt or in trouble. But Bill is an adult. He often stays out all night on the job. They won't start looking for him yet."

Campbell clenched her teeth. "It's been nearly twenty-four hours since you heard from him."

"How about we try to find Darrin and ask him if he's talked to Bill lately." Nick rubbed his eyes and then refocused on her. "It shouldn't be hard to find him. I'm pretty sure he eats supper at the Barn Owl Diner every night."

She thought about that for a few seconds, surprised Nick had offered to help. It was better than nothing. "Okay, let's go."

The Barn Owl was a small, family-owned restaurant off Highway 641, with a gambrel roof and red siding. Inside, they asked for Darrin.

"He's not here right now," the waitress at the cash register said. "Were you supposed to meet him?"

“No,” Nick replied. “We just thought we might catch him here.”

“Well, he’ll be here for sure by five o’clock. He’s always here for an early supper.”

“We’ll come back,” Campbell said.

They walked slowly out to Nick’s Jeep.

“I might as well go home.” Campbell shot him a sidelong glance. “To my dad’s house, I mean.”

“Didn’t you live there before you went to college?” he asked.

She climbed in and buckled up. “I grew up in Warren County. Dad decided to move over here after my mother died about six years ago. He gets more clients here than he did where we were. Less competition.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. We’re the only P.I.s in Murray. Sometimes Bill tells me stories about when he was a cop.” Nick steered back toward the office. “Why don’t you go home and unpack? He may have been there sometime today.”

She nodded, but doubted she’d find her father there. “I can unpack some of my stuff, I guess.” The night before, she’d crammed everything she could fit into her car and left two cartons of books and her microwave with a friend. “I’ll meet you at the diner at five, okay?”

“Yeah,” Nick said as he parked next to Campbell’s car, the only one in the lot in front of True Blue. “I’ll call you if Bill shows up or calls in.”

“Thanks.” She didn’t bother to go into the building, but got in her ten-year-old Fusion and drove the mile and a half to her father’s house. It sat on a quiet street of unpretentious homes.

She let herself in and wandered through the small brick ranch house. Empty, as expected. Mostly neat—her dad couldn’t stand clutter. No pets or house plants. Only one piece of art: her own face smiled at her from a framed photo on the living room wall, taken in her cap and gown the day she’d graduated with her master’s two years ago.

In the small second bedroom he used as a den, she dropped her suitcase and purse. On visits, she always slept on the hide-a-bed there. His orderly desk held a computer, a mug full of pens, a blank notepad, and a photo of her mom in jeans at their old house in Bowling Green.

“Dad, where are you?” She went back to the kitchen. He’d obviously planned to return home last night. A small package of hamburger sat on a plate on the counter. The moisture under it told her he’d left it out to thaw. She stuck in the refrigerator. A small mudroom led off the kitchen to the back door, and she went out there, opened the washing machine, and wrinkled her nose.

“Okay, you left a load of wash that needs to be dried?” Something was wrong. Why had she listened to Nick? She pondered her options as she poured soap and started the washer again. She’d unpack her clothes and then meet Nick at the Barn Owl. But if they didn’t get any satisfaction there, she’d go straight to the police.

AT FIVE, Nick drove into the diner’s parking lot and Campbell got out of her car, where she’d been waiting ten minutes. She walked across the pavement toward him.

“Anything?”

Nick shook his head. “Let’s see if Darrin’s here.”

At least he looked worried, too.

“Hey, Shari,” Nick said to the hostess. “Is Darrin Beresford here?”

“Uh...” she looked around. “I guess not. He’s usually here by now. Orders the blue plate special every Tuesday.”

“What’s that?” Nick asked.

“It’s an old-fashioned term for the special of the day.”

“It goes with your retro décor.” Campbell smiled.

“Do you want a table?” Shari picked up two menus.

“Yeah, sure,” Nick said.

Campbell followed him, looking around as she walked. The diner held six booths along one side and about a dozen square tables. On one wall, a large, stuffed owl held pride of place, and she shuddered. The rest of the decorations included rural antiques, old signs, and a couple of primitive paintings. Could be worse.

A waitress approached the table.

“You want to order?” Nick asked.

“I’m not that hungry.” Campbell shrugged. “But I guess we should get something.”

Nick ordered a burger and a beer.

“Beer?” Campbell almost shrieked. “We’re on business. You don’t know what we’ll need to do tonight, and you’re going to drink?”

“Make that a Coke.” Nick rolled his eyes.

The waitress nodded and wrote on her pad. “Together or separate?”

“Separate,” Campbell said at the same moment Nick said, “Together.”

“Fine,” he said. “Separate.”

“I’ll have a BLT and unsweet tea,” Campbell said.

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

She brought their drinks, and Campbell moodily sipped hers while studying the other patrons.

When the waitress brought their sandwiches, Campbell asked, “Do you know Darrin Beresford?”

“Sure, he’s a regular.”

“Would you tell us when he comes in, please?”

“Okay.”

“I know what he looks like,” Nick said.

Campbell ignored him and ate her BLT without tasting it. When their food was gone, Nick ordered lemon meringue pie

and coffee, but Campbell just had a refill on her iced tea. She checked the time on her phone every few minutes and made a trip to the restroom.

At a minute to six, she frowned at Nick. "We've been here an hour. He's not going to show."

Nick sighed. The waitress came with his change from his bill and Campbell's receipt.

"Excuse me," Campbell said. "Is the owner here tonight?"

"Ray? Sure, he's out back."

"I'd like to see him, please."

"Okay. Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I just want to ask him something."

"Okay." The waitress looked doubtful as she headed for the kitchen.

"You scared her," Nick said.

Campbell only scowled. Nick was probably right, but she wouldn't admit it. Her dad's unexplained absence had her on edge.

A plump, fiftyish man wearing a white apron came out of the kitchen and approached their table.

"How's everything, folks?"

"It was good," Nick said quickly.

"Yes, very good," Campbell said. "We were looking for Darrin Beresford, but he doesn't seem to be here tonight."

Ray took a quick look around. "Doesn't seem to be."

"And that's unusual?" Campbell asked.

"Yeah, he comes in almost every night. He's usually sitting right over there about this time." He pointed to a table near the front window, now occupied by a couple in their twenties.

"Was he here last night?" Campbell asked.

"Yeah, definitely."

She nodded. "I'm Campbell McBride. My father is Bill McBride, of True Blue Investigations. Do you know him?"

"I know who he is. Comes in here once in a while."

“Was he here last night?”

Ray shook his head. “I don’t think so, but then, I’m in the back a lot. But I don’t recall seeing him.”

“Who else was here while Darrin was here?”

He frowned. “Uh ... Brock Wilson ... Dr. Exter ...” He lifted a hand and beckoned to the hostess. Shari came over and eyed the boss questioningly.

“You were on last night. They want to know who was here while Darrin was in. All’s I remember is Brock Wilson and Dr. Exter.”

“Hmm,” Shari said. “Professor Neilson and his wife were here, and some college students. The Barnes sisters came in for spaghetti.”

“Right,” Ray said. “Well, I’ve got to get back to work. Help them as much as you can, Shari. Come in again, folks.” He turned and went back toward the kitchen.

Shari took an order pad from her pocket and flipped to the front. “I only serve the beverages, but—oh, yeah, there was a large party after the ball game. Out-of-towners. And I served Mary Innes, the woman who owns the new thrift shop. Gary West—he’s a regular. There were lots of other people, but I didn’t know them all. There were three waitresses working.”

“Thanks a lot,” Campbell said. She slipped a ten-dollar bill into the woman’s hand.

“Thanks.” Shari looked at her wide-eyed.

Campbell walked toward the table where Darrin had sat when he ate his last meal in the diner. Two women sat at it now, talking and laughing. The table had a good view of the parking lot, she noted, and a couple of businesses across the street. The real estate office and the equipment rental store were both closed for the night.

She walked back to their table and Nick rose.

“Come on,” he said.

“Where are we going?”

“Darrin’s house.”

For once, she liked the way Nick was thinking.

TWILIGHT WAS FALLING as they drove to the house on the edge of town. Campbell had opted to ride with Nick. He pulled in slowly and parked in the driveway behind a twenty-year-old pickup with no tailgate. They got out and walked to the front door of the run-down frame house.

“You ever been here before?” she asked.

“No. Looks like a dump.” He knocked.

As they waited, Campbell looked around the yard. No flowers that she could see, no vegetable garden. The grass was long and unkempt. There was no garage, but off to one side some sort of cages stood a few yards from the house. She caught a glimpse of white moving inside one.

“I guess he’s not home,” Nick said.

Campbell followed the path beaten through the grass to the rectangular cages. Four of them, about three feet by five, were raised off the ground a couple of feet on two-by-four legs.

Rabbits.

Their dishes and water bowls were nearly empty, and they looked hungry. One black-and-white-spotted bunny stood on its hind legs with its front paws against the wire mesh and sniffed at her.

She walked a couple of steps into the overgrown lawn and pulled two handfuls of grass. She poked the blades through the small holes in the mesh, and the spotted rabbit and its cage mate fell eagerly on her offering.

“What are you doing?” Nick was standing right behind her.

“The rabbits are hungry. They look healthy otherwise, though. If he normally takes care of them, would he let their food and water get so low?”

“Maybe he’s been gone all day.”

“Yeah.” Campbell stooped for more grass. “And he missed his regular dinner stop.”

While she pulled more grass and stuffed it into the other cages, Nick wandered off toward the back of the house. After she was sure all the rabbits—seven in all—had something to nibble on, Campbell followed him.

The unmown back yard was full of junk. An old bucket, boxes, a bike with one wheel, a hose that was so deep in the grass she could barely see it. She looked around and saw building debris, parts of machinery, and several cans and bottles.

“Disgusting,” she said.

“Yeah.” Nick ambled to the back door of the house, which hung a bit crooked in its frame. He knocked, waited two seconds, and turned the knob.

“Hey,” Campbell said, but it was too late. Nick was already inside.

Hesitantly, she mounted the creaky step and looked in. Nick fumbled along the nearest wall in the dark. He found a light switch and flipped it. A bare bulb in the ceiling fixture lit up the kitchen—or at least, Campbell supposed it was the kitchen.

Food containers and dishes littered every flat surface. The table was only identifiable because of its legs and the two chairs sitting near it—both of which were piled with magazines, newspapers, and empty cereal boxes. One plastic trashcan overflowed with rubbish, and another contained an open sack of rabbit pellets. The place reeked of spoiled food and mold.

“Darrin?” Nick called. He got no answer, but that didn’t stop him from turning sideways so he could fit between piles of trash and enter the next room.

“Nick, we shouldn’t—”

A loud expletive from Nick cut her off, followed by, “Call the police.”

Campbell felt as though she'd been standing on one of Darrin's rickety chairs and someone kicked it out from under her. She edged into the living room doorway. Nick was kneeling beside a prone form on the floor. For a split second, she wondered if that was her dad, lying there in this filthy place. But that didn't make sense.

"Is it Darrin?" she asked.

"Yeah." Nick looked up at her. "Call 911 now. He's dead."