

TRUE BLUE MYSTERIES • BOOK TWO

Ice Cold BLUE

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

SUSAN PAGE DAVIS



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Murray, Kentucky
Late June

Xina Harrison wasn't used to having doors slammed in her face.

She stared at the paneled oak door and tried to make sense of what had just happened. After nearly twelve hours on the road, her mind might be a bit frazzled, but this wasn't right. Nothing lined up the way it should, so she raised her fist and pounded again.

"Aunt Katherine, please! It's me, Xina. I just want to talk to you."

"Go away." The old woman's voice came faint but distinct through the thick door.

"I drove all this way," Xina shouted. "Please let me in."

The door opened a crack and her aunt peered out at her. "I told you, I don't want any visitors tonight."

"But I drove all day, Auntie. It's almost your birthday, and I brought you a present."

"Don't want any presents."

Tears sprang into Xina's eyes, and her throat ached. "Please! I

don't have to stay here. I can get a hotel. Just let me step in for a minute and say hello. It's been so long."

Finally her aunt opened the door a grudging foot. Xina took that as a sign of acceptance and stepped forward, pushing the door open just enough to let her in. She shut it quickly behind her, so there was no doubt she was staying for at least a short time.

She blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust in the gloomy house. The living room drapes were closed. Just one lamp gleamed, and no lights shone in the kitchen beyond. The air was nearly as warm as the muggy evening outside, and she wished the air conditioning could be bumped down a couple of degrees, but she said nothing. Instead, she summoned up a big smile and held out the gift bag she'd brought.

"I hope you like this."

Katherine gazed at the bag for a moment then took it and almost robotically transferred it to a side table by the door. Without a word, she turned and walked across the living room to a stuffed recliner and sat. Xina gulped and followed her.

She took a seat on the sofa, noticing that the throw pillow Aunt Katherine's long-haired cat favored wasn't in evidence. "Where's Sasha?"

Katherine gazed at her for a long moment. "Gone."

"Oh. I'm so sorry." Xina swallowed hard and wished she'd thought before speaking. The last time she'd visited her aunt, the cheerful housekeeper had showed her in and gossiped about the neighborhood while she fixed Xina and Aunt Katherine a cup of tea. After the monosyllabic implication about the cat, Xina didn't dare ask about Mrs. Conley.

"So." She tried for another smile but it felt like a near miss. "How are you?"

"Why are you here?"

"To see you. I wanted to come at Christmas, but you said you weren't feeling well." And the time before that, Aunt Katherine had put her off by claiming to be on a pressing deadline for her

publisher. “You know, it’s been a very long time since I’ve seen you. Are you well now?”

“I’m fine.”

“Good, I’m glad.” Xina wanted to get closer to her aunt and have a good view of her. She looked pale in the low lamplight, and very thin. Xina glanced around. The room looked the same, mostly. Her gaze paused at the mantelpiece. The framed painting above was different, and ... “Oh, where’s the photo of Grandpa and Grandmother?”

Katherine paused for a moment before answering. “I put it up in my room.”

Xina nodded, but something felt off. That framed family photo had sat on the mantel shelf for as long as she could recall, beneath the painting Grandfather had splurged on long before Xina’s birth, and maybe before Katherine’s. She tried to remember what else had been on display when she’d last visited, and beyond that, back to her teen years.

“I suppose you expected to stay here,” Katherine said in flat tones.

“Oh, well, I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Good. I’m really very busy, and tomorrow is Rita’s day off.”

“Rita?”

Katherine brushed a hand through the air. “My current housekeeper.”

“Ah, so Mrs. Conley’s gone, then.”

“I had to let her go.”

“Oh.” Xina frowned. “I’m sorry. I really liked her.”

“She passed her usefulness.”

Xina swallowed hard. Surely Mrs. Conley wasn’t any older than her aunt. In fact, in Xina’s mind, she was several years younger.

She’d wanted to say, “Don’t worry, I can make up my own bed, and I don’t need a big breakfast.” But Aunt Katherine’s manner told her the suggestion would not be welcome. She noted that, as far as the poor lighting revealed, the place looked

clean, so she didn't doubt that there was actually a new housekeeper.

"Well, I'll take a hotel room in town," she said. "It's no problem."

Katherine gave a brisk nod. "All right then." She shifted forward in her chair as though about to rise.

"Uh, will you go out to have dinner with me?" Xina asked.

"I've eaten."

"Oh." It was a little late, but Xina was disappointed. In the old days, her aunt would have scraped up a light supper for her or come along with her just for the company.

"There are some restaurants on Twelfth Street and a couple on Chestnut."

"I remember." Xina stood uncertainly. "May I come back in the morning?"

"I'm very busy."

"Working on your next book?" Xina tried to keep her tone light.

"Always," Katherine said.

Xina wanted to ask a score of questions, but Katherine was edging her toward the entry.

"Well, it was nice to see you."

Katherine opened the door and stood with her hand on the knob. Xina leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. Her aunt's skin felt papery and cool. *She's aged since I've seen her.*

"Maybe we can catch up a bit tomorrow."

"Perhaps," her aunt said.

That didn't sound promising. Xina stepped out onto the porch. She turned back, but the door was already closing. She heard the deadbolt slide into place.

KEITH FULLER COULDN'T HELP OVERHEARING the conversation when he went out to the front desk to check the overnight log.

A striking woman of about forty stood talking to Patrol Officer Denise Mills, who had desk duty this morning.

“She was just so cold,” the woman said. “She’s never treated me that way before. Ever. And I’d driven all day to see her.”

“When was the last time you saw her?” Officer Mills asked.

“Five years ago, but I was living in California at the time and flew back here on my vacation, mostly to see Aunt Katherine. I spent a week with her and had a lovely time.”

“And you stayed at her house?”

“Yes. I moved to Asheville about two years ago, and I’ve tried to get over and see her twice since then, but she put me off both times. This time, I figured I’d just come and surprise her. She couldn’t ignore me, right? But that’s practically what she did last night. And this morning I knocked and knocked, but she didn’t come to the door.”

“Well, ma’am,” Mills said carefully, “we can’t do anything if a relative simply doesn’t want to see you.”

“Of course,” the woman said quickly. “It’s just ... well, she is getting older. I wondered if she’s all right. And I didn’t see anything beyond the living room, but there appeared to be some things missing that had always been there before. An old family picture, for instance. I admit, I’m worried.”

“What sort of worries?” Mills asked.

Keith stood still, his back to the two women, listening for the answer.

“I wondered if she’s in financial straits. Or whether someone else has been taking things. She’s changed housekeepers—got rid of one she had for decades. I’m afraid something’s going on, and she needs help but won’t admit it.”

Keith turned and walked over with a smile. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t help hearing what you said.” He nodded to Mills to let her know his intention was not to undermine her. “I’m Detective Keith Fuller. It might be possible for the police department to do a wellness check.”

The woman nodded, a flicker of relief in her eyes. "That might be helpful. What would it entail?"

"We'd go to the house and tell her we were checking to make sure she was all right. We'd ask some general questions."

"Based on what you've told us, we can't get too specific unless she offers more information or seems in distress," Mills put in.

"Of course. Well, yes, that sounds good to me. If she says everything's okay and still doesn't want to see me, I guess I'll go home to North Carolina."

Keith looked at the form Mills had begun to fill out and said, "Why don't you give Officer Mills your contact information, and I'll line up another female officer to go with me. We'll come and let you know how it goes afterward."

"All right. I'm staying at the Marriott."

"Oh, Detective," Mills said, "I think I'm the only female on duty this morning."

Keith wasn't surprised. They only had two women in uniform. Murray was a small college town, and right now they didn't have any female detectives, though he knew Mills hoped to take the test soon.

"Can you get someone else to take over desk duty?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Okay. I'll go get ready, and I'll meet you in the parking lot in five minutes."

A TIMID KNOCK sounded on the office door, and Campbell McBride looked toward it and set down the coffee carafe.

"Come right in," her father, Bill, called from where he was seated at his desk. The True Blue Investigations office consisted of one large room and a tiny bathroom, so the staff was of necessity very informal.

Campbell walked toward the door, which opened and revealed a smartly dressed woman with a decidedly nervous air.

“Hi. I’m Campbell, and this is the boss and my father, Bill McBride. Won’t you come in.”

“Thank you. My name is Xina Harrison.”

Bill stood and nodded. “How can we help you, Ms. Harrison?”

“Well, I went to the police with a small matter this morning, and a very kind detective recommended I hire a discreet private investigator. He gave me directions here.”

“That was very good of him,” Bill said. “Detective Fuller, right?”

Campbell smiled. Keith Fuller was a friend of her dad’s, and he’d become a special friend to her when her father went missing a few weeks earlier and she attempted to find him.

“Yes, it was Detective Fuller. He and Officer Mills were very nice to me.”

Bill indicated a chair in front of his desk, and while Ms. Harrison settled herself, Campbell wheeled over the desk chair she’d been using while Bill’s employee, Nick Emerson, was out on medical leave.

“May I get you some coffee?” Campbell asked.

“No, thank you, I’m fine.”

Bill studied the woman for a moment. “What’s going on, Ms. Harrison?”

“It’s my aunt.” Out poured the tale of how she’d traveled from North Carolina to see the older woman and been rebuffed. “I’ve never known Aunt Katherine to be so rude before. It was as though she threw ice water in my face.” She shivered. “And the police didn’t even get into the entry. Detective Fuller said she instructed them to tell her snooty niece to go home and leave her alone. They couldn’t do much. She wouldn’t even take his business card.”

“What did you do after she turned you out last night?” Bill asked.

“I got a hotel room and decided to sleep on it. This morning she wouldn’t pick up the phone. I drove to her house and

knocked repeatedly, but she didn't come to the door. That's when I went to the police station. I was afraid something was wrong in that house. I couldn't leave Kentucky without finding out."

"Of course not," Campbell said.

Bill opened one of the small reporter's notebooks he used on the job. "How old is your aunt?"

"Late sixties. Sixty-eight, maybe?"

"Hmm. That's not that old."

"I know, but I hadn't seen her in five years, and she's definitely aged. She looked all right physically, but I didn't know if—" She broke off and took a shaky breath.

"You're afraid she might have early dementia?" Campbell asked gently.

Ms. Harrison shrugged. "Maybe. I just don't know. She definitely *looks* older. Her hair's much grayer, and ... and she wouldn't talk to me. This is so unlike her. If something's not right medically, I want to make sure she gets the care she needs."

"Of course." Bill guided her through the tale of her move to California and her return to the East two years previously, as well as her prior attempts to visit her aunt. Campbell reached for a tablet and jotted some notes of her own.

"She said last night she was working on her next book, but I don't know."

"What do you mean?" Bill asked.

"Well, when I tried to see her last year, she said she was on a deadline, but she hasn't published a new book for about three years now."

"Your aunt's an author?"

"Yes. Romantic suspense. She was putting out a couple of books a year for ... I don't know, decades. I've got an entire bookcase full of her stories."

"What's her name?" Campbell asked.

"Katherine Tyler."

“No! And she lives here in Murray?” Campbell looked at her father. “How could I not know this?”

“What? I don’t know ...” Bill swallowed his words.

“Obviously my dad doesn’t read romantic suspense,” Campbell said with a chuckle.

“And you do?” Xina asked.

“Yes, I’ve read several of her books. It’s a great escape, and she writes with such fascinating detail.”

“My daughter was an English professor,” Bill said drily. “I had no idea she was into romance.”

“Oh, Dad.” Campbell scowled at him. “Ms. Tyler’s books aren’t trash. They’re wonderful. The dramatic tension is first class. I’m amazed she could produce them so frequently.”

“She used to have someone help her with the research. I’m not sure she’s still doing that. The house was empty except for her when I was there yesterday.”

“And that’s not normal?” Bill asked.

“She used to have a lovely full-time housekeeper, Mrs. Conley, but Aunt Katherine said she had to let her go. Now she apparently has someone who comes in a couple days a week to clean.” Ms. Harrison shook her head. “It just doesn’t make sense to me. Unless she’s having money problems, but I find that hard to believe. She’s always been frugal, and I know she invested some of the earnings from her earlier books.”

“The recession impacted the publishing industry,” Campbell mused. “And if she’s not able to write as quickly as she used to, she may have a much smaller income now.”

“I’m afraid maybe someone was—well, you know—taking advantage of her.” Ms. Harrison folded her hands in her lap and hesitated as if her next revelation pained her. “You see, not only hasn’t she launched a new book lately, but some things I remember from her living room were gone. Things that had been there since I was a child.”

“What sort of things?” Bill asked.

“You understand I only had a quick look around the front

parlor—her living room, but ever since I can remember, she'd had a framed landscape hanging over the fireplace, a Milne Ramsey oil. But it's gone now. There's a Winslow Homer print hanging in its place—the sort you could buy in a department store. I could tell at a glance it was a cheap reproduction.”

“You think she sold the genuine painting?”

“Maybe. I don't know.” Xina spread her hands in helplessness. “She wouldn't talk to me, so we never got around to that. When I asked a few questions, trying to make sure she was all right, she got angry and told me she was fine and that I should leave, so I did. But there were other things—little things. The furniture and carpets were the same. A framed picture of her parents had always been on display on the mantelpiece, and it's gone now.”

“Did you mention these things?”

“I asked about the photo of my grandparents, and she said she'd put it in her room. But there was an old match holder with long fireplace matches, and it was missing too. I remember it well because I took a picture of it about ten years ago when I was visiting. It was an advertising piece for an old coal oil company, and I loved it.”

Campbell wrote it down.

“If I had time and could think about it more systematically, perhaps I could tell you about other things in the house. But I know some things are changed.” Xina shrank down in her chair.

“Still, people do change their decorations over time,” Bill said.

“Yes, you're right. I guess it struck me as odd, since Aunt Katherine never did. At least, in my memory she hadn't. I couldn't help wondering if she had to sell some of her things, either for medical expenses or home repairs—or if someone else is draining her funds and getting her to give them money. Or maybe someone's pilfering valuables from her.”

“We'll see what we can find out without upsetting her,” Bill said.

“You can do that?”

“I’m very good at poking around without alerting the person I’m observing.”

“That’s a relief.”

“And this painting that seems to be missing would be quite valuable?” Campbell asked.

“I think it might have been. Some of the older artists like Milne Ramsey sell well these days.”

“What time period was he from?” Bill asked.

“Early Twentieth Century, I think, or late Nineteenth.”

Bill looked at Campbell, and she wrote it down. The artist’s name was vaguely familiar.

“We’ll look into it,” he said.

“Thank you. Of course, she may have just moved it to a different room. I’ll feel ever so much better knowing someone’s doing a little investigating while I go back to work in North Carolina.”

“And what do you do there?” Bill asked.

“I’m human resources director for Simon-Dryer. Their headquarters is in Sacramento, where I worked previously, but I was more than happy to move back to their Asheville division.” She picked up her purse. “I’d like to give you a check before I go.”

“That would be terrific, Ms. Harrison.” Bill told her his usual retainer, and she seemed to think it reasonable. “That will give us a couple of days to see if we can get to the heart of things,” he said.

“Please call me Xina. What else do you need to know?” She took her checkbook from her purse and quickly wrote out the check.

“Could you tell us a little more about Ms. Tyler?” Campbell asked.

“Well, as you know, she’s a successful novelist. I guess you might say she’s a little eccentric. I wouldn’t have said she was reclusive, but now I’m not so sure. She’s changed so.” Xina blew

out a breath. “Oh, she has an agent, but I don’t remember his name. I met him once at a banquet, where Aunt Katherine was receiving an award, but that was at least fifteen years ago.”

“Where did this take place?” Bill asked.

“In Chicago. I was still in Louisville, my hometown, at the time, and Katherine flew me up for the event. It was very exciting.” Xina frowned. “But I seem to recall that he died. A heart attack, I think. I never met her new agent, but she has someone.”

Bill nodded. “And who is her publisher?”

“I’m not sure.”

“We can get that information from her last book,” Campbell said. “Do you know if she has a website?”

“I don’t think so, but I could be wrong.”

“Social media?”

Xina shook her head. “Maybe she’s been more of a recluse than I realized. But she liked her privacy, you know. I suggested that she get online more several years ago, but she resisted the idea.”

“We understand,” Campbell said. “Her books are so popular, I’m sure the publisher does most of the publicity for her.”

“Yes, but she did do speaking engagements last I knew, and she was keynote speaker at a couple of writers’ conferences every year back when I was in college. I’m not sure if she’s still doing that. But she wasn’t a hermit. She used to go to church almost every Sunday. I went with her a few times when I was younger and stayed with her for a few weeks in the summer.” She gave them the name of Katherine’s church.

“What about friends?” Bill asked.

“Hmm, a lot of her friends were other writers. There was one woman who lived in this area. A teacher. Aunt Katherine took me to her house once for lunch. But she’d be retired now. Her name was Pam. I’m sorry, I’m not sure I can recall her last name.” She frowned for a moment. “Rogers, I think. Yes, Pam Rogers.”

Campbell wrote it on her notepad.

“And who does she have for living family, other than you?” Bill asked.

Xina blinked rapidly. “My mother was her sister, but she passed away. There were no other siblings. My grandparents are both gone. I can’t think of any cousins on Mom’s side. I suppose there are some more distant relatives, but if there are, I don’t know them. My father’s alive, but of course, he’s not related to Katherine by blood. He retired to Arizona last year.”

After a few more questions, Xina rose and shook hands with both of them. “Thank you again,” she said. “This is a big load off my mind.”

“We’ll get right into it, and we’ll call you tomorrow night to let you know what progress we’ve made,” Bill said as he led her to the door.