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TRUE BLUE MYSTERIES • BOOK THREE

# Persian Blue Puzzle



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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# 1



“Who’s Louanne Vane?” Bill McBride looked up from the envelope in his hand.

His daughter Campbell paused in setting the table for their breakfast. “Oh, we’re getting mail here already?”

“Apparently not. The only item is for someone who doesn’t live here. A Louanne Vane.”

“Ah. Isn’t she the lady who lives in the gray house? You know, beyond Ben Tatton’s old house,” Campbell said.

“Oh, right. You interviewed her during the Harrison case.”

“I sure did. She’s a very nice, very chatty woman, probably about eighty, and she has a huge Persian cat.”

“Would you like to visit her this morning and take her this letter?” Bill asked.

“Sure, I’ll take it over.” Campbell reached for the letter and laid it to one side.

“Great. I’ve got a lot of errands to run, and I don’t want to get sidetracked with a chatty neighbor, nice though she may be.”

“The coffee’s ready, but I forgot to get orange juice.” They’d

just moved into a large Victorian three times the size of her father's old house a few blocks away. It would take Campbell a while to recover from emptying the old refrigerator and stocking the new one.

"Add it to the grocery list. I'll stop at Kroger after my other errands."

"That's great, if I can find the grocery list."

After their breakfast of pancakes and coffee, Campbell ransacked the kitchen drawers and finally found the list pad in with the potholders. Just when she was getting used to her dad's old house, she had to relocate everything in this one. With a sigh, she sent her father on his way and had their dishes washed by the time Nick Emerson, Bill's other employee, arrived.

"So, what's up?" he asked, plopping his laptop down on his desk in the old living room they'd designated the new outer office. The largest room downstairs, it seemed the most logical place for the two junior investigators to work and interview clients, while Bill got something he'd long dreamed of—a private office.

"Dad's out running errands. I guess we work on those background checks for the university." Campbell sat down at her desk and opened her laptop just as a knock sounded on the old house's front door. She looked across the room at Nick.

He made a face and pushed back his chair. "I'll get it, but we're going to have to get us a receptionist."

"Thanks." Moving True Blue Investigations into the house from the cramped one-room office Campbell's father had maintained for years was stressful for all of them, but mostly in a good way. Still, the new space seemed almost too large for the three of them.

Nick returned to the office with a neighbor in tow. Vera Hill

and her husband lived diagonally across Willow Street, and she'd shown an avid interest in their move.

"Hi, Mrs. Hill," Campbell said.

"Hello. Are you all moved in?" The older woman brushed back a strand of straight, gray hair.

"Yeah, pretty much. Last night was the first night Dad and I slept here."

"No bad dreams?"

"Not so far." Campbell was sure she was alluding to some nightmare-worthy events that happened in the house before they moved in, but the sooner they forgot all that, the better.

"Oh, well, I brought you some supper, so you won't have to cook tonight," Mrs. Hill said.

Nick was standing uncertainly, holding a covered dish with potholders. "Where do you want this, Professor?"

"Oh, in the fridge. There should be plenty of room."

Nick nodded and headed for the kitchen.

"Thank you." Campbell stood and walked closer to Mrs. Hill. "That was really sweet of you."

"Hope you like cheesy grits with sausage."

"Sounds yummy." Campbell grinned and tried not to think what that dish would do to her waistline and her dad's arteries. Maybe they could send part of it home with Nick.

"My, my, my, this looks official." Mrs. Hill looked around at the spacious room, her gaze resting on the desks, oak file cabinets, and inviting seating area near the fireplace, where they could interview clients in comfort. "So much brighter than Katherine's décor."

"Thanks. We wanted it nice and light for work and for our clients." Campbell had gladly thrown away the dark drapes and replaced the rather gloomy art prints that had graced the walls. After several attempts at persuasion, she convinced her

dad to let her paint over the fifty-year-old wallpaper, and now their backdrop was a light but warm gray.

“I’m so glad we got nice new neighbors, not—” Mrs. Hill broke off, but Campbell could guess what she was thinking. Not murderers or blackmailers. The case that involved the former owner and the man who’d lived in the house next door had shocked the Hills. But Vera was resilient, and she seemed to have recovered.

As Nick returned, she glanced toward the doorway. “Is Mr. McBride around?”

“Bill’s out,” Nick said. “He should be back pretty soon, though. Can we help you?”

“I just wanted to ask him something. See, I’m not sure if it’s the kind of thing anyone would hire a private investigator for.”

Nick glanced at Campbell. “Want to run it by us?”

Campbell doubted Mrs. Hill would turn out to be a client. Middle-aged women seemed drawn to her father and loved chatting with him, and she couldn’t blame them. He was extremely likable. A widow down the street had brought them cookies yesterday while they unloaded the office furniture, and another one from their church always made a point of talking to Bill after services.

But Vera’s husband, Frank, was still very much a part of the neighborhood. Campbell didn’t see Vera as the flirtatious kind. Maybe she had a legitimate concern.

Nick waved the older woman to the sofa near the fireplace, and Campbell joined them, taking one of the armchairs.

Mrs. Hill eyed them both soberly. “Well, see, our daughter Dorothy is divorced. Has been for four or five years. And she’s got this new fella. I don’t know as I’d call him a boyfriend exactly—not yet. Anyway, he’s trying to interest my husband and me in investing in a fund he’s keen on.”

“What does Dorothy say?” Campbell asked.

“Oh, she thinks he’s terrific. Says she’s invested, and if she had any extra cash she’d put that in too.”

“So, what do you think we could do for you?” Nick asked.

“I don’t really know. Maybe find out if it’s legitimate? I don’t expect you to be able to tell if the investment would pay off or anything like that.”

Nick chuckled. “It would take a psychic for that, Mrs. H.”

“Oh, don’t get me started on psychics.” Mrs. Hill rolled her eyes. “I leave that to my friends. Anyway, uh, do you have an hourly fee?”

Campbell started to open her mouth about the usual retainer, but Nick jumped in.

“Tell you what, how much is your budget?”

“Oh, uh ...” She looked around the corners of the room as if embarrassed. “Maybe a hundred dollars? I’d think it would be worth that to find out if he’s honest or not.”

“Okay. Why don’t you give us his name and any details you have on this investment plan,” Nick said. “We’ll give it a day and see what we can do.”

Campbell sat there watching him wide-eyed, wondering if her father would sanction this huge discount for a neighbor.

The wrinkles on Mrs. Hill’s forehead deepened. “What could you learn in that time?”

“For one thing, we could find out if this guy has a criminal record.”

Good thought, Campbell decided, but she knew they usually charged more than a hundred dollars for a background check.

“And if you’ve got the name of the fund or business, or whatever it is, we can check into that too,” Nick added.

“Oh, would you? It would be such a load off my mind. I’m a natural skeptic, I guess, but Frank thinks we should give the

guy a chance. I mean, Dorothy seems to like him real well. He could end up our son-in-law.”

“Tell you what,” Campbell said, shooting Nick a don’t-get-ahead-of-yourself look, “why don’t you come back in an hour or so and talk to my father about this. He’s got a lot of experience, and he’d have a pretty good idea how much we could find out for you.”

Mrs. Hill gazed at Nick, and his eyes flickered, but he didn’t contradict Campbell, for which she was thankful. Nick was a good investigator in a lot of ways, but she wasn’t sure yet just how much leeway her dad gave him with clients.

“Okay, I’ll do that,” Mrs. Hill said. “I’ll get going now and let you get back to work.”

“Thanks for the casserole.” Campbell walked with her into the entry, “Bring us any details you can when you come later.” She closed the door behind the older woman and went back into the office.

Nick was already typing away rapidly on his keyboard. Without looking up, he said, “If we can’t afford a receptionist, we should at least have a doorbell installed.”

“Dad’s already working on it,” Campbell said. “Someone’s coming in a couple of days. Meanwhile, I suggested a sign we can hang out front during businesses hours. *Walk right in*, or something like that.”

Nick’s dark eyebrows lowered in a frown. “I don’t know. This house has a history of people walking in without being invited. If you forgot to take the sign in, you might have trespassers. Again.”

Campbell chuckled, but he had a point. The hundred-year-old house had a lot of quirks she and her father would have to get used to. She couldn’t easily forget being attacked in the darkness just down the hallway when a former client owned the house.



A stray thought hit her, and she clapped a hand to her mouth.

“What?” Nick said.

“A letter was delivered here by mistake, and Dad asked me to take it to the right house.”

“Put it in the mailbox tomorrow,” Nick said.

“No, it’s just down the street, and I promised him I’d do it.”

Nick shrugged and focused on his computer screen.

Campbell hurried to the dining room and retrieved the letter. The sun was blazing outside, so she didn’t worry about a jacket. At quarter past nine in the morning, the temperature had already risen to nearly ninety degrees. She slowed her steps. No sense arriving at Mrs. Vane’s house all sweaty.

She rang the bell at the gray frame house, and after a short wait, the elderly owner opened the door.

“Oh, Miss McBride, come on in.”

Campbell smiled and stepped inside. “I can’t stay long. We had a letter for you delivered at our place this morning, and I thought you’d want it, so I brought it over.” She held out the envelope.

“Oh, thank you. My daughter in Arkansas.”

“That’s nice. Most people don’t write letters anymore.”

Mrs. Vane waved a dismissive hand. “Well, she’s probably trying to talk some sense into me, as she’d call it.”

“I wasn’t aware you needed that,” Campbell said with a laugh. “You seem plenty sensible to me.”

The old woman’s eyes sharpened. “Can you sit down for a minute? Would you like a glass of tea?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t.” Campbell saw the disappointment in her eyes. Her dad had been right about getting sidetracked with neighbors. She hadn’t done any work yet this morning, but she wavered. “Maybe for just a minute.”

“Come into the parlor.” Mrs. Vane walked her into a cozy

living room full of patchwork cushions and framed family photos. Her enormous Persian blue cat sprawled on a rocking chair.

“My goodness, you’re a big fellow.” Campbell stepped closer. “I love cats.”

“Well, he’s not too friendly,” Mrs. Vane said just as its paw darted toward Campbell’s outstretched hand.

She pulled back, but not quickly enough to avoid a scratch on her thumb.

“Blue Boy! Naughty!” Mrs. Vane smiled apologetically. “I hope he didn’t get you.”

“It’s not bad.” A few drops of blood oozed through the claw marks, but Campbell thought she could get away without a bandage.

“Here.” Mrs. Vane brought over a box of tissues, and she took one.

“Thanks. I should have known better.”

“Oh, he’s like that with strangers. Much better with people he knows. In fact, if you sit down, he’ll probably be over in a few minutes, expecting you to scratch his belly.”

Campbell wasn’t sure she wanted to do that, but she managed a smile and took a seat on the sofa. “What did you want to tell me?”

Mrs. Vane settled into her favorite chair and adjusted the tail of her pullover top. “Have you ever heard of Miss Tryphenia? She’s down on Second Street.”

“I ... don’t think so.”

“Oh. Well, she’s been there several years. She gives readings.”

Campbell straightened and studied her hostess. “You mean, psychic readings?”

“I guess you could call them that. But she helps people.”

Her mind clicking back to her earlier conversation with Mrs. Hill, Campbell tried to sort things out. Was Louanne Vane one of the friends Vera had mentioned in connection with psychics?

“Let me just get that tea.”

Campbell couldn't see a graceful way out of it and decided to chalk this experience up as one she'd missed out on with family. Both her grandmothers were deceased, and she had fond memories of them. Maybe she'd find some surrogate grandparents here in Murray, where there seemed to be a disproportionate number of retired people.

Blue Boy hopped down from his chair and followed Mrs. Vane out of the room, his fluffy tail swaying with arrogance.

The hostess was soon back with two frosty glasses of tea. Campbell took a long swallow and relished the cool, sweet taste.

“Mmm. Thank you. That's really good. Now, what were you saying about your daughter and this woman who gives readings?”

“Oh, Elena. She thinks I've gone batty to visit Miss Tryphenia. But after my Leland died, my doctor recommended a grief support group. I went to it a few times, but it was so depressing.”

“I guess it didn't help you to be around others who'd just had a loss too?”

“Not a bit. After the third meeting, I quit. But one of the gals there chatted with me during the refreshment time. She said she got more consolation out of a session with Miss Tryphenia. To hear her tell it, the reading was much more encouraging than the grief support group. So I thought, why not? My husband was dead, and my children all live at least three hundred miles away. Why shouldn't I find new friends in the community?”

“Why not?” Campbell smiled. “So, Miss Tryphenia is a friend.”

Mrs. Vane’s expression clouded. “I wouldn’t say that exactly. It’s a business relationship. But she does cheer me up.”

“I see. So ... you go to her, and she gives you uplifting news?”

“Not always news, but encouraging thoughts, I’d say. Last week she told me something good would land on my doorstep.”

“And did it?”

Mrs. Vane paused with her glass nearly to her lips and smiled. “Well, you’re here.”

Campbell chuckled. “I’m glad I can be considered something good.”

“You did bring me Elena’s letter, which the post office might have taken days to deliver.”

She had a point, but Campbell figured any self-proclaimed psychic could hit the nail on the head fairly often, so long as she kept her predications vague and maintained a loose definition of terms like *good* and *bad*.

“What other kinds of things has she told you?”

“She told me where to find my lost glasses.”

“Really?”

“She asked me where I’d looked already and suggested a few places. Sure enough, when I got home, I found them under a magazine on the nightstand, one of the exact places she’d mentioned.”

Campbell nodded, working hard not to smile. “How long have you been consulting her?”

“About four months now. I go every couple of weeks. I’d go more often, but ...” Her eyes flickered, and she took a quick sip of tea.

“I suppose you have to pay her each time.”

“Well, yes. The first few times it wasn’t so much. Only twenty dollars for a reading.”

“And now?”

“Now it’s fifty.” She frowned, but added quickly, “But we have longer sessions, and she’s told me some amazing things. She said it requires more energy for her to seek them out.”

“What sort of things?”

“Oh, private stuff mostly. Some has to do with my husband—things he thought and did that I had no inkling of.”

“I see.” Campbell was afraid she did see, indeed. The psychic was bleeding Mrs. Vane for as much as she thought she could get by making up tales about poor Leland. “I guess Elena isn’t too happy about the money, is that it?”

“Sort of. And ... well, she was upset when I told her one of the things Miss Tryphenia told me about her father.”

Campbell wanted to ask what that was, but she didn’t want to violate the old woman’s privacy. She drained her glass.

“That was delicious, Mrs. Vane. Now I should go back to the office, but maybe I can visit you again sometime.”

“I’d like that. I don’t get out much anymore, and it’s nice to have visitors.”

Campbell smiled and clasped her hand gently. “I’ll try to stop in again soon.” Blue Boy strolled in from the kitchen, and she scooted out the front door, careful to avoid the cantankerous cat.