

TRUE BLUE MYSTERIES • BOOK FOUR

SCREAM BLUE
Murder



AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

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All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to real people, either factual or historical, is purely coincidental.

1



Campbell McBride opened her top desk drawer to get a paper clip and was confronted by a photograph staring up at her. The four faces smiled as though they knew good things awaited these young people.

Campbell grabbed a black binder clip and shut the drawer more firmly than was necessary. The photo had resided in her desk drawer for nearly a month now, and she still hadn't made a decision.

"Hey, Nell Calhoun just drove in next door," Nick Emerson said.

"She's probably showing the house today." Campbell squeezed the wire handles of the clip and applied it to the stack of papers she'd prepared for her father.

"Let's hope it sells this time," Nick said. "It's been on the market for, like, a month."

"More." Campbell didn't care if the house sold or not. Without close neighbors on the side their office windows overlooked, their days were mostly quiet and productive. Not to say boring.

“People are snapping up houses all over the county.” Nick frowned. “I’m pretty sure no one’s buying Tatton’s place because of what happened to him.”

“Maybe. A lot of people don’t like the idea of sleeping in a house where a murder took place.” Campbell rose and left the airy, pleasant room that had been the former owner’s living room and crossed the hall to her father’s private office. She tapped on the door. “Dad?”

“Come on in, Soup.”

She smiled, resigned to keeping the nickname as long as her father was around. She stepped in and held out her papers. “Here’s the printout you wanted on the Hasseltine case.”

“Great. Thanks, honey. I set up a meeting with Mr. Hasseltine right after lunch.”

“Nick says Nell’s showing Ben Tatton’s house this morning.”

“Good. I hope she snags a buyer.”

“Even if they have noisy kids or drive motorcycles?”

He laughed. “This street is too quiet. We need some young people.”

Campbell scowled in mock offense. “We’re young.”

“No, you’re mistaken there. You might be young, but I can’t make that claim anymore. I’ve passed the half century mark. And if you’re counting Nick, he doesn’t live here.”

She smiled. “Guess you told me.”

“Yep.”

“So, what do you want me to do now?” She’d been working for her father for a couple of months at True Blue Investigations and anticipated taking the exam that would give her credentials for the job of private investigator within a few weeks.

Bill let out his breath in a puff. “Take your pick. We’ve got

four cases we haven't started on. Do you want an insurance case, a background check, or a legal file?"

"Hmm, I don't know as I'm experienced enough to do a legal case on my own. Why don't I take the background check to plug away at while you're out this afternoon? I'm getting pretty comfortable with those." Although she might be wiser to take on something more challenging to get her ready for the exam.

"All right, that's under Lassiter. Start the file and dig into it." He shoved back his chair. "Guess I'll get some coffee."

"We've got pumpkin spice in our office."

His eyebrows drew together. "Nah. Regular for me."

"You should try it."

Bill shook his head. "I want the good stuff, but nothing sweet."

"Okay."

They walked across the hall together.

Nick stood by the window looking out on their driveway and the Tatton house. Without turning around, he said, "Looks like the client's arrived."

"Which client?" Bill asked.

Nick jerked around to look at his boss. "Not ours. Nell's." He nodded toward the window.

"You shouldn't stare at them." Nick always found ways to annoy Campbell. She felt like shutting the drapes, but her dad was already at Nick's side, looking out beside him.

A woman had left her green Toyota and was walking toward the front entrance. The Realtor came down the porch steps and greeted her with a handshake. The two women stood for a moment in front of the light-colored brick house as Nell pointed out a few features, then they climbed the steps and went inside.

"Let's hope she likes it," Campbell said.

“A woman alone. I don’t know.” Nick shook his head. “She may be afraid of ghosts. Think Nell will tell her about the murder?”

“I’d think she’d be obligated.” Campbell turned to her father for his opinion, but he stood gazing out the window with a vacant stare. “Dad?”

“Huh?” His gaze shifted to her face.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just ... I thought that might be someone I know.”

“Who?” Nick asked. “The potential buyer?”

“Exactly. But it’s been a while.”

“So ...” Campbell waited.

“She looked like a friend of your mother’s.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t expected that. Her mom had died almost eight years previously, and she’d never lived over here, on the west side of Land Between the Lakes. “Did I know her?”

“I don’t know. She was an old high school friend.” Her father pulled in a deep breath. “Well, regardless of whether she’s Emily’s old friend or not, this is a good exercise for you. What can you tell me about her, based on what you just saw?”

Campbell wanted to protest but held back. If she was going to be a topnotch investigator, she ought to be noticing details.

“Well, she must be late forties or early fifties ...”

“You could tell that without seeing her, just from my saying she was a friend of your mother’s.”

True. Campbell frowned and concentrated on the memory of the woman who’d met with Nell Calhoun.

“Uh ... short hair, nice blouse, good fit on the pants. Not sloppy. High-heeled sandals, so she’s somewhat fashion conscious.” She scowled deeper, unable to recall if the woman had worn makeup noticeable from this distance, but she must have. Most Southern women did, at least those

who cared about their appearance, especially when going out.

“Nick?” Bill said.

Campbell couldn't hold back a grunt of frustration. She had taken too long.

Leaning on the windowsill, Nick peered across the driveway. “Car's a new model—this year or last year—in the thirty-K range. That says she's not poor. Can't tell if it's a Kentucky plate or not from this angle.”

Ammunition to aid her in the competition came to mind, and Campbell jumped in. “Her handbag. It's rose leather, and from here it looked like a designer bag—could be anywhere from four hundred to a thousand dollars or more.”

Her father pulled back a little and studied her face. “Really? Women will pay a thousand bucks for a pocketbook?”

“You'd be surprised.” Campbell pursed her lips, thinking of the worn vinyl one she'd used for two summers. She didn't believe in blowing your whole paycheck on frivolities, but someday she'd like to have a nice purse.

“I don't think she was overwhelmed by the house,” Nick said.

“Why not?” Bill asked.

With a shrug, Nick turned to face them. “Her body language. She didn't look too enthusiastic when they were looking at the outside.”

“Maybe she hates yellow brick.” Campbell had to agree with him as to the client's demeanor, but she hated that Nick had seen it and put it into words before it had crystalized in her mind.

“Then she should stay away from Oz,” Nick drawled.

“Or maybe Nell told her the last owner was murdered in the kitchen,” Campbell snapped back.

“Children, children.”

Bill's gentle chiding made Campbell's confidence plummet. She was older than Nick, and she had the benefit of loving parents and a great education. Why did she always respond to Nick's baiting in the most juvenile manner? Was it because he'd worked closely with her father for the last three years, while Campbell had been off in another state? It was foolish to think Nick had replaced her in her dad's affections. Or was he the son Bill had always longed for?

The only way to keep herself from falling into that emotional trap and wallowing in depression was to rise above it—above Nick.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "And Nick, I'm sorry. I know this job isn't a competition."

Her father nodded. "You two work well together when you put aside whatever it is you don't like about each other. Now, please do that and get to your assignments."



That evening, Campbell retired to her room to study while her father watched the evening news in their upstairs sitting room. Western Kentucky was usually pretty quiet, and boning up on the law and the regulations for private investigators was more important than learning what Paducah's city council would be voting on next week or which streets in Murray were temporarily closed for repair.

She paused in making a list of privacy lines investigators shouldn't cross when her cell phone rang. Keith Fuller. She smiled and swiped the screen. "Hello, Detective."

"Hi. What are you up to tonight?" His warm voice sent a wave of comfort through Campbell. With Keith in her life, she could overcome most anything—this exam, her mild anxiety

over her father's safety, even her thorny relationship with Nick.

"Just a little studying. How about you?"

"I just got home, but I may be called in again in the wee hours."

"Oh? Why?"

"There's a severe weather watch for our area. We're talking possible tornado threat."

Campbell grimaced. She and her dad had talked about that shortly after moving into their new home—where to take shelter if they got a tornado warning, which was more ominous and urgent than a tornado watch.

When a twister was imminent in the Murray area, a public service message went out to all local phones, warning residents to take shelter immediately. That meant grabbing her go bag and scrambling down to the Victorian house's dark, spooky basement. They'd stored sleeping bags, flashlights, a kerosene lantern, and a few other supplies down there for emergency use. Campbell had even stashed a couple of old favorite books she could reread to help stave off boredom.

"How likely is it?" she asked. Having grown up in Bowling Green and seen some pretty serious aftereffects of storms, she didn't take weather warnings lightly.

"Well, the storm will come through here for sure, but whether any funnel clouds will touch down is anyone's guess."

She gulped. So far, God had spared her family that horror.

"What about your folks?" she asked. Keith's parents had a lovely home on the shore of Kentucky Lake.

"Just talked to Mom. They're aware and ready."

"Do they have a basement?" She'd been out to Nathan and Angela's house a few times, but her introductory tour hadn't included things like a storm shelter.

"Yeah, they do. They're high enough above the shore to

have one, and Dad did it right. The house is sturdy too. But you never know.”

“I’ll throw a few things in my go bag before we go to bed.”

“Good,” he said. “I’ll check in with you in the morning.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, have you talked to Bill yet about that picture you found?”

Campbell scrunched up her cheeks. Keith would remember that. He’d been on hand when she opened the box of her mother’s things. When her father moved to Murray six years ago, he had stored a lot of things from their old home in a storage unit for lack of space in the small ranch house he’d bought. Campbell, who was away at college when the move occurred, had no idea he’d rented the unit.

But now they were living together in the much larger Victorian on Willow Street. When her dad revealed that he’d stored a lot of old things, Campbell was surprised. He was so practical, she’d assumed he’d gotten rid of anything that wasn’t in his small house. They’d gone together several weeks ago and retrieved her grandmother’s rocking chair, some old dishes, boxes of her mom’s books, and a couple of boxes simply marked “Em’s stuff.”

After several days of procrastination, she’d finally opened one of those boxes. When the photo had fluttered from between several envelopes, Keith had snatched it up before it hit the floor.

“Who’s this?” he asked.

Frowning, Campbell took the photo and studied it. Two teenaged boys in suits and two girls between them, gussied up for a big night out, smiled out at her. “Well, that’s my mom. I don’t know who these other people are.”

“Prom night?” Keith suggested.

“Maybe. I guess those are friends of hers.” She paid special

attention to the young man beside her mother. Not Bill, that was certain.

She flipped it over. "Phil, Em, Jackie & Shawn."

"Huh." Keith leaned in close over her shoulder, and she was very aware of his nearness. "Do you know any of them?"

"Nope. Must have been high school friends." Campbell wished for the millionth time that her mother had lived longer. So many questions flooded her mind that she longed to ask.

"You should ask Bill about that picture," Keith said over the phone.

Uncanny how he could almost read her mind. She wished she'd brought the photo up to her room, instead of leaving it in her desk down in the office.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't want to hurt him."

"How would that hurt him? I'd think he'd be glad to talk about your mother."

"Eh. He's been pretty quiet about her. I didn't even know about the storage unit. There's still a lot of stuff over there."

"I thought you brought it all home."

"Not nearly. There's furniture and more books and even some of her old clothes. I know he donated a lot of stuff to a charity shop in Bowling Green, but I was amazed at how much he kept."

"Maybe he did it for you."

"I think some of it he did. I'd been feeling kind of slighted that he'd dumped all of Mom's things without asking me, but we just never talked about it. And then he told me about the storage unit. It was like Christmas."

Keith chuckled. "And you get to open the presents."

She wished fiercely that he was in the room with her. If so, she'd kiss him for sure. She was beyond blushing just from thinking about it. She'd met him about three months ago, when her dad was missing and she desperately need help.

Their relationship had grown to a strong bond of appreciation of each other and even more—contentment. Unless she was mistaken, they both hoped it would continue to grow beyond the few actual dates they'd had.

"I've gone through everything we've brought home and found places in the house for most of it. Maybe it's time to go to the storage unit again and empty it out. We could have a yard sale if there are things we don't want."

"Bill would hate that."

"Oh, I don't know. It might be hard for him to see some family things being sold, but Dad loves going to sales and chatting with the people he meets."

"Think about it," Keith said. "Meanwhile, would you want to go over to the lake Friday? I'm off that day, and we could go to Mom and Dad's and take the boat out."

"Sounds like fun."

"Great. I'll touch base with you again with the time."

They signed off, and she was about to go back to her studying when a soft tap came on her door.

"Come on in." It wouldn't be anyone but her father, or she'd have heard the doorbell or voices in the hall.

Sure enough, Bill opened the door and poked his head in. "Busy?"

"No. Keith and I were talking, but we're done."

"Sounds like we're in for a storm tonight."

Campbell stood. "Yeah, Keith mentioned it. I guess I should check my go bag."

"I think I'll go downstairs and put all our latest files on a flash drive, in case we lose power. That way, we can take our laptops somewhere else and work on them if we have to."

"Good idea." She almost mentioned the storage unit but decided that could wait. If a tornado ripped through Murray, there might not be a storage unit tomorrow.

She wasn't usually so pessimistic. Two things had dragged her down lately. The upcoming exam and the photo.

"I think I'll run downstairs too, and grab a few things from my desk." She definitely didn't want to lose that photo of Mom, from a time she knew little about. If she and her father wound up huddled in the basement tonight, she could ask him about the other kids in the picture with Emily. Maybe. She wasn't sure she was ready.

Why wasn't the picture in her mother's old photo album, along with several others from her teenage years? Campbell didn't enjoy looking at a picture of her mom with another guy. They were kids, but still, it might make her dad feel bad to see it. She didn't want to do that, but she did want to learn about her mom's past. She slid her laptop into its carrying case and headed for the stairs.