

Tuesday

Chapter 1

Bam! I hit a speed bump. Didn't expect it. My new Mini Cooper, bright red with a white top and white stripes on the hood, takes the bumps kinda hard. You shouldn't be driving so fast, Ernestine.

I'm nervous, doing something new, poking my nose in other people's business. Not that I don't do that all the time, being a PI, but this is personal.

I just started helping birth mothers find their kids that were adopted, and I've located two. It was pretty easy since the kids were searching for their moms too. It's fun, getting people together. I wasn't at the reunions, but from what they tell me, they were happy get-togethers with lots of tears and laughter. Nice. So I added it to the list of things I do.

This time it went the other way—finding a birth mom for a woman who was adopted. With the others, I did all the work online, looked up records, and sent emails. But this mom lives right here in Fort Myers, Florida, and I decided to contact her in person. She may not want to see me or hear about her daughter. After all, she's been avoiding her for forty-three years, not even

looking as far as I can tell. Don't think I could do that—give up a child and ignore her for the rest of my life. But, I'll probably never be a mother since I'm almost thirty and not married.

I find the house, a typical small Florida ranch, built in the fifties or sixties, cinder block, probably two or three bedrooms. It's a peachy color, reminds me of a creamsicle. The front yard's a little dry. Bet she doesn't have a sprinkler system. Haven't had any rain yet and it's May already. Her flowers look pretty. She pays more attention to the plants than the grass. Who am I to criticize? I have no lawn; my plants are more weeds than flowers. I live on an island; no one notices.

I ring the doorbell but don't hear anything. I knock on the front door. Nothing. Parked in the carport, there's a white Accord, eight or ten years old I'd guess. She's probably home. I knock again. Well, maybe I bang on it.

I'm about ready to leave when a woman comes around the corner of the house wearing pink shorts, yellow tee, bright green muddy Crocs, dirt-covered gloves—Saturday gardening. I should probably be doing the same instead of digging up old dirt about this woman.

Except for her pure white hair, she looks mid-forties, maybe fifty. If she's the woman I'm looking for, she's sixty. She's shorter than me, but then most women are. She's maybe five-six or seven, tan, healthy, none of the roundness or wrinkles that seem to come with age. She's in good shape for a sixty-year-old.

“Ms. Tipton?”

“Yes?” She smiles, but there's a question in her green eyes.

“My name is Ernestine Pratt from Pratt Associates.” I hold out a card. “I’m a private investigator.”

“What can I do for you?” She starts to reach, then pulls back her hand to remove the dirty glove, wiping her hand on her shorts before taking the card.

“A woman named Geraldine Adams hired me to look for her birth mother.”

The smile on her face disappears. “I don’t know any woman named Geraldine Adams.”

“That’s her married name. Her adopted name was Geraldine Graham, and her birth name was Missy Tipton.”

“Oh.” Ms. Tipton leans, almost falls, against the wall of her house. Her face goes pale. Now she looks all of her sixty years. I don’t think she wanted to be found.

“Are you OK?” Stupid question, Pratt. Of course, she’s not OK. She probably feels like I punched her in the gut.

“I’ll be fine in a minute.” She straightens and kind of shakes herself. “Come inside. I’ll make us some iced tea.” She doesn’t ask if I want any.

I trail after her through the carport and into the spotless kitchen—white tile floors, older cupboards, new appliances. She takes off her crocs at the door, I slip my sandals off and stand there, not knowing what to do with myself.

“Go sit. Make yourself at home.” She waves a hand at me like she’s saying, “Get out of my way.”

The living room is nothing fancy, but it’s comfortable. There are plants in a large window and more in the corners with lights shining on them. Furniture is mix and match, old and new. Nice pictures on the walls—no photos that I can see. I park on the couch, and a fat gray

cat jumps into my lap from nowhere. I scratch, he purrs, and my discomfort disappears.

Ms. Tipton plunks two glasses of tea on the coffee table and sits at the opposite end of the couch. "It's not sweetened. I don't have any sugar."

"Fine by me. I like it this way." I take a sip to prove it.

"Ms. Tipton, about your daughter..."

"The name's Eleanor. People call me Ellie or El."

"Ellie, your daughter has been looking for you for years. She'd like to meet you."

She gazes across the room like she's watching something on the blank TV screen, saying nothing. I sip my tea and pet the cat, waiting her out.

She turns and looks at me. "You must be a cat person. Sam doesn't go near most people."

"I have two at home." We talk about the antics of cats for a while.

"Sam's adopted," she says, "like my daughter." Back to the subject at last. "I don't think about her at all. That's what you have to do, you know. Put her out of your mind. When she was born, if you put a child up for adoption, there wasn't much chance of ever seeing her again. You learn not to think about it. Wipe the whole incident from your memory.

"I tried to find her once when I was still young. Couldn't find the adoption agency that placed her, as if they never existed."

That's strange. I can track adoption agencies that have been closed for years. But I don't mention it.

"I wanted to name her Mistake, but the social worker wouldn't let me, so I called her Missy." Ellie again

stares at the TV. Maybe she's seeing her past life play out on the tube.

"Seventeen years old, way too young to raise a child." More silence.

I'm starting to fidget; I'm not the patient type. Sam jumps off my lap and disappears. I guess he's not patient, either.

I break into her contemplation. "Do you want to meet her?"

"Not really, but I suppose she has the right to meet me if she wants."

"I can bring her by, or you two could meet somewhere for lunch."

More silence.

Banging on the front door interrupts our non-conversation.

Ellie leaves the couch and opens the door. Much to my surprise, Geraldine Adams/Missy Tipton stands there. She looks like her mother except for reddish-brown hair instead of white. Same height, same build, same green eyes...almost the same face. They even look about the same age.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I followed you. Got tired of waiting."

"That's not the way it's supposed to work."

"Is this my mother?" She points, her finger an inch from Ellie Tipton's chest.

"Yes, I'm your mother, Missy."

"Bitch!" Missy screams. Then swings her huge, fully loaded purse and hits Eleanor Tipton on the side of her head, knocking her on her ass.

This is definitely not the way it's supposed to work.