

Chapter 1

"This is the most absurd thing I have ever done," I muttered to myself as I clomped up the stairs to the tidy blue and white ranch house. "And believe me, I know a lot about absurd things. Actually, probably too much."

It had only been a few weeks since I'd moved to Redemption, Wisconsin, to live with my Aunt Tilde and help her get her new business, The Redemption Detective Agency, off the ground. Never mind that my aunt was a retired nurse who knew absolutely nothing about solving cases. Nor did any of the other so-called "detectives" who also worked at the agency—Mildred, the retired schoolteacher, and Nora, the owner of a used bookstore in the same strip mall. Not to mention that none of them had any knowledge about running a business (including Nora, surprisingly enough, who technically DID own a business and really ought to know better).

But when you lose everything (and by "everything," I mean your job, your apartment, your car, your fiancé, AND your money), sometimes you find yourself doing completely unexpected things.

Like moving in with your aunt at thirty-one years old.

And searching for a dog that's been missing for over a year.

"A missing dog. Seriously?" I continued my muttering as I made way across the carefully swept stoop to the dark-blue front door. Colorful pots filled with red, purple, and pink geraniums and a cheery pink and purple "Welcome" mat decorated the entrance. "Are these the types of cases The Redemption Detective Agency really wants to focus on?"

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to drag them back in. I had a dreadful feeling that no, a missing dog would actually *not* be the most absurd case we would take on.

Likely not by a long shot.

How did this ever become my life? Just a few weeks before, I had a high-level

job managing one of the top brokerage and investment firms in the state of Wisconsin. I was more or less running the place.

And now? I basically spent my days metaphorically herding cats while trying to manage what was *supposed* to be a business. Except it wasn't really a business. A business makes money, and that seemed to be the last thing anyone at The Redemption Detective Agency was interested in.

Which was how I found myself standing on a stranger's front stoop getting ready to open an investigation into a case involving a missing dog.

The dog's owner happened to be Trisha's aunt, and Trisha was our agency's attorney, Nick's, girlfriend. At least I assumed that was his official title, even though he wasn't getting paid. Not that it was any of my business. Nor was his relationship status. He was free to date whoever he pleased.

On second thought, maybe it should have been my business. Well, not the dating part. I didn't care about that ... at all. Especially since I actually had my own someone to date. Jerome. In fact, I had a date with him that very night. So whatever Nick's relationship with Trisha was really didn't matter to me.

No, I was thinking about the money part—or, more specifically, the lack of money part. The more I contemplated it, the more I began to think that was probably the main reason Aunt Tilde wanted us to take the case. She probably thought helping out Nick's girlfriend's aunt would be a nice gesture ... a way to pay him back for his time and energy, so to speak. Of course, she had given me a totally different reason.

"Think of the PR," she said as she straightened her orange-rimmed glasses, which perfectly matched her bright-orange hair. Neither matched her neon-orange blouse, though, which she had paired with a dark-green shawl to combat the temperature, thanks to the air conditioner being on the fritz and running way too cold. "Everyone loves a good dog story ... especially one with a happy ending."

"What if it isn't a happy ending?" I asked sourly. Not that I wanted anything to happen to the dog, mind you. I truly hoped he was alive and well and living

his best life in someone else's backyard. But the unfortunate reality was that tracking down a dog that's been missing for a year was highly unlikely. I also didn't particularly want anything to do with Trisha, her aunt, or her aunt's pet, but that was beside the point.

Aunt Tilde's eyes widened, and she put both her hands over Scout's ears. "Hush, don't say that so loud. You don't want to give him nightmares."

I rolled my eyes. Scout was my yellow lab mix, and even if he hadn't been currently sleeping on his pillow, I suspected my comment wouldn't have phased him. Despite her worry about his mental health, he seemed relatively unconcerned about the conversation. "I'm serious."

Aunt Tilde gave me a disapproving look. "So am I. You know about his past. There's no reason to remind him of it."

Scout was a stray who had been hanging out in my aunt's backyard until I took him in. "Oh, for Pete's sake. This isn't about Scout. It's about reality. You know as well as I do how difficult it is to find a lost dog after a few days, much less a year."

Aunt Tilde shook her head as she gave Scout an ear rub. He opened his eyes, lifted his head, and licked her face in return. "We can at least try. That's why our motto is 'Solving the unsolvable.'"

I winced, which is what I pretty much always did when I was reminded of our very unfortunate slogan. I was convinced it was a lawsuit waiting to happen. Aunt Tilde told me I was overthinking things again, and besides, if we DID solve the unsolvable, it would be a perfectly true claim.

Needless to say, that explanation didn't keep me from "overthinking."

"Just go talk to her," Aunt Tilde said before I could argue any more. "If you think it's really a lost cause, then fine. We can at least say we tried. But maybe you'll discover a clue she missed, and that clue will lead to us finding her dog."

That seemed completely preposterous for a whole bunch of reasons, but I could already tell by Aunt Tilde's set expression that anything I said would fall on deaf ears. Better for me to just agree and get it over with, as Aunt Tilde wasn't

going to take “no” for an answer.

I just hoped my fear would prove unfounded, and it wouldn't be the total disaster I anxiously anticipated.

Regardless, I needed to do something other than stand there on her front porch fretting about all the ways the situation could go south. I took a deep breath of warm, geranium-scented summer air, squared my shoulders, and stepped toward the door. Might as well get it over with.

The neighborhood was eerily quiet, the sounds of cars, lawnmowers, even a child playing were completely non-existent. I wondered if the silence inside the house meant no one was home, and I couldn't decide if that would be good or bad. Good that I wouldn't have to have what I was sure would be a ridiculous conversation, but bad because it would mean I'd likely have to return and do the whole visit all over again. Ugh.

Well, enough stalling. I raised my hand and knocked briskly on the door.

Immediately, I was greeted with the sound of a dog yapping and toenails clicking across a tile floor. I frowned and took a step back, wondering if, after all my angst, I was at the wrong house. But before I could double-check the address, the door swung open.

“Can I help you?”

The woman standing in front of me looked like an older, flatter, less attractive version of Trisha. While Trisha was drop-dead gorgeous, with long, black, curly hair that reached halfway down her back, dark-blue eyes, and porcelain skin, this woman's wrinkles made her look tired, and her black-turning-silver hair was much shorter. Her dark-blue eyes, however, looked exactly the same as Trisha's. In her arms was a small, wriggling, snow-white dog who was trying very hard to free itself ... probably so he could bite me. I'd never had much luck with other people's pets, or animals in general. Even the nicest ones, the ones whose owners swore would never hurt a fly, wanted to attack me. I found it was easier for everyone if I simply kept my distance.

Scout, of course, was the exception.

“Um.” I eyed the dog, who I swore was staring at me like he knew how tasty I would be. In my experience, the smaller the dog, the more bloodthirsty they were. “Are you ...” I suddenly realized I didn’t know the woman’s name. Only that she was Trisha’s aunt. Trisha had jotted down the address on the back of an electric bill and handed it to Aunt Tilde, and neither of them thought to add her aunt’s name. Although I was hardly blameless, as it didn’t occur to me to ask, either. Mentally, I kicked myself. What was I thinking? “Do you have a niece named Trisha?” I also realized I had no idea what Trisha’s last name was. Why did I ever think I could be a detective? And, for that matter, what kind of detective agency sent its detectives out without providing the client’s name?

I knew what kind — the kind that would end up getting sued over their ridiculous slogan, “Solving the unsolvable.”

Ugh.

“I do.” Her eyes widened. “Oh no. Did something happen to her?”

Oh geez. “No, no. I mean, she’s fine,” I quickly amended when I saw the look of horror spreading across her face. Man, this was not going well. “I’m here because she told me about your dog.”

She looked surprised. “My dog? You mean little Rocky here?” She gently shook the dog, who seemed desperate to get down. I took a careful step back, wanting to be out of range of those little sharp teeth. “Are you thinking about getting a Maltese as well?”

“Ah, no. Your other dog.”

Her face jerked up. “Other dog?”

It was like a door had slammed shut. Her entire manner instantly shifted. Her face went from cautiously friendly to completely shuttered. “Your other dog. The one who disappeared a year ago. She was wondering if we could ... um ...” I swallowed hard. “Maybe help look for him for you?” I sounded even more ridiculous than I had imagined, and her staring at me so warily wasn’t helping.

If anything, her expression became even more stony. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t have a dog a year ago.”

I blinked. Of all the ways I had imagined this conversation going, this was not one of them. "Um, but Trisha ..."

"Trisha is wrong," she interrupted, her voice brusque. "This little guy is my dog. My *only* dog."

"Okay," I said, confused. I was starting to feel like I had stumbled into some sort of forbidden conversation topic, which made zero sense to me. I was asking about a missing dog. Why would that be so bad? "But why would Trisha think you had another dog?"

"Oh, who knows with Trisha," she snapped. Rocky, sensing the shift in her mood, stopped trying to wiggle away so he could attack me and instead started licking her face. It seemed to work, because her voice softened. "Oh, you're a good boy." She straightened up and started to step back into the house. "She probably got confused. Rocky did run away from me a few weeks ago. Scared me to death. The backyard gate was open, and I didn't realize it. It took me a couple hours to find him, but he was fine. As you can see. Anyway, it was nice meeting you ..."

"Emily," I said. "And you're ..."

She didn't take the hint. Instead, she forced a smile on her face. "Emily. It's nice, Trisha having such good friends. Not everyone would help out someone's old aunt with a lost dog. But as you can see, everything is fine. Rocky is doing great." She gave him a big kiss as she backed into the house. "Thanks again for stopping by."

"Um, wait," I tried to say, but she was already closing the door, leaving me standing outside on her tidy stoop, surrounded by cheery geraniums and wondering what exactly had just happened.