

DEBORAH ADAMS






ALL

THE GREAT
PRETENDERS

"A delightful mystery."

SHARYN McCRUMB



In the dead-hot
center of summer,
humidity and homicide
go hand in hand.

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Deborah Adams

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He looks exactly like a psychic, Kate Yancy thought when she laid eyes on Owen Komelecki.

"It's a matter," Komelecki said, "of focusing on the psychic energy left behind. In this case I will attempt to glean information from the spiritual traces Miss Hampton left."

"I see," Kate said, although she didn't.

He picked up his bulging garment bag and started out to the hallway, then turned and stared straight through Kate and out the window. "There is a feeling," he said slowly, "of . . . death." He stopped, shuddered almost imperceptibly, and tossed Kate a triumphant smile.

She had begun to feel as if she were the ingenue in a Vincent Price movie. . . .

"Deborah Adams brings the rustic wit and wisdom of Lake Wobegone to the plains of middle Tennessee. A delightful mystery from a promising writer!"

SHARYN MCCRUMB

For EJO, LBL, Glo, and Donald

CHAPTER

1

FROM THE JESUS CREEK HEADLIGHT:

SEARCH FOR MISSING GIRL UNSUCCESSFUL

Police Chief Reb Gassler has called an end to the search for Lynne Hampton after an intensive week-long investigation turned up no new information.

Miss Hampton, who disappeared from the Twin Elms Inn in Jesus Creek, reportedly wandered away from the area during the night. Police Chief Gassler would not say whether he believed Hampton had left alone. He did state, however, that Miss Hampton has a history of emotional disturbance and indicated that this could be a factor in the disappearance.

PLANS BEING MADE FOR CELEBRATION

Jesus Creek residents are preparing for the

Sesquicentennial celebration scheduled to begin in early July. A number of events are being planned, and anyone who wishes to participate should contact Edith Nell Moody at the Chamber of Commerce, 296-4420.

By ten o'clock the temperature outside had climbed to ninety-five degrees. Even by Tennessee standards, that was hot. Kate Yancy peeked through the heavy curtains and smiled when she saw the dozen or so reporters wilting in the heat. She considered offering them a pitcher of iced tea but quickly changed her mind.

Oh, if Tom Brokaw were out there, she might give in. But Kate had developed an intense dislike of reporters in general and the ones on her lawn in particular—ever since the black day three weeks ago when they had arrived in swarms to cover the story of Lynne Hampton's disappearance. Interviewing the police had seemed sensible enough, but when they'd started stalking Kate and guests of the inn she'd put her foot down. After that the reporters had managed to garnish every story with one of her quotes. And not the profound ones, either.

She heard a shout from the crowd as a taxi pulled into the long, tree-shaded driveway. Sighing, Kate set her tea glass on the registration desk and went reluctantly to the door to rescue Owen Komelecki, psychic. It took her only one quick glance to realize how little she was needed.

The heat rays that shimmered above the asphalt

drive made the bizarre scene look even more unreal, as if it might dissolve into a flashback any minute. Komelecki stood on the taxi's hood while the driver cowered inside. Kate figured he had to be Komelecki, because he looked like a psychic. He wore a purple silk shirt with full, flowing sleeves. His beard was neatly trimmed and black, except for two identical gray patches on either side of his mouth, and he had those eyes, commonly described as piercing, that one expects in a psychic.

Cool as a cucumber in this heat, Kate thought. He's a better man than I am.

Holding his arms over the crowd as if to bestow a benediction, Komelecki smiled tolerantly while the reporters fired questions at him.

"What do you expect to find?"

"Have you had any visions about the Hampton girl?"

"Who's gonna win the Super Bowl?"

There's one in every crowd, Kate decided.

From his makeshift platform Komelecki began to address the crowd. His voice was smooth and controlled, as if it were some sort of instrument carefully played. Though he was speaking quietly and competing with the mobile PA system a half block away, he had no trouble making himself heard.

"Please, please," he urged. "I understand that you're eager to find Miss Hampton. And I'll answer all your questions soon. But my first priority is to acquaint myself with this place"—he paused long enough to wave one arm dramatically toward the inn—"and absorb the essence of it. I promise to keep you informed of every development as it occurs."

Komelecki took a moment to look skyward, as if he expected the essence of Twin Elms to fall on his head, then he hopped down off the car like a macho television detective. He threw a garment bag over his shoulder and started up the cobblestoned walk toward the inn. Reporters and curious locals surrounded him, shouting questions and snapping pictures. Komelecki smiled and kept walking.

When he stepped up onto the wide front porch, Kate held out one hand. "Hello, Mr. Komelecki. I'm Kate Yancy."

"Of course," he said, taking the proffered hand and bending forward to kiss it. Kate thought at the time that his mustache tickled. Later she would decide that this pretentious gesture, like almost everything else the man did, had been purely for the benefit of the reporters.

Kate stepped inside and waited in the front hall for Komelecki to follow her. He did, but unfortunately so did the hot, clinging crowd of strangers. Before Kate could recover and slam the door the inn was filled with people, all of them thrusting microphones and cameras at Komelecki.

For one frightening moment Kate stood paralyzed, remembering news reports of innocent bystanders crushed to death by stampeding mobs. "Excuse me," she said politely, trying to wiggle past them, but no one seemed to be paying attention.

"Hey! Excuse me?" she tried again, this time elbowing a photographer out of her way. With all the shouting, and Komelecki's attempts in his soft-

spoken way to calm the maddened media, Kate didn't seem to be making much headway.

"At what point were you called in?" someone asked Komelecki.

"Are you working with the police, or does the family want an independent investigation?"

"Excuse me!" Kate shouted. She'd decided good manners had their limitations. She stomped a foot and pushed someone out of her way. If she could just get enough space cleared so that she could open the door . . . There! At least she could breathe. Now if only she could manage to get them outside.

Inspiration struck. Pointing out the door, she shouted, "Good Lord! Isn't that Lynne Hampton out there?"

Reporters flocked to the porch, forgetting all about Komelecki. "Where? Where?" they demanded, and started snapping pictures without bothering to frame or focus. Kate had only to give the ones in back a good shove and they all toppled out on top of each other. All except one, and he clung stubbornly to the door jamb.

"Out, pal. Before I get nasty." Kate gave him an extra nudge in the back.

"Will you stop that?" he shouted, gripping the door tighter.

"Get out!" Kate shouted back.

"Look, lady. I don't know who the hell you think you are, but I've got a reservation here."

"Reservation?" Kate loosened her grip. "You mean you're a guest?"

"That's about it." He glared at her.

Pulling him inside, Kate slammed the door and

locked it. "I'm sorry. I thought you were one of . . . them." She pointed to the camera hanging around his neck.

"I am. But I also happen to have a reservation. Now are you going to let me check in, or do I have to go to Howard Johnson's?"

Komelecki had watched the whole exchange, smiling like a parent at bickering children. Before Kate could recover, he jumped to her defense.

"Please don't hold Ms. Yancy responsible for this misunderstanding. I'm afraid I've created a bit of chaos."

The photographer examined Komelecki carefully, then turned defiantly to Kate. "Can I check in, or what?"

It wasn't what she'd call a sincere apology, but under the circumstances it would have to do. "Of course. Now are you Carl Jackson? You sounded older on the phone, and I wasn't really expecting you until late."

"I found a shortcut," he snapped.

Ignoring him as best she could, Kate went on. "But we do have your room ready. If you'll both come into the study, I'll get your keys." If she'd been braver—or if she'd been the real manager of the inn instead of the receptionist—she'd have suggested he go elsewhere. Someplace warmer, perhaps. But people weren't exactly lining up to stay at Twin Elms, and her brother would be ill as a hornet if she offended even the rudest of guests. He'd shake his head and lecture her about responsibility, as if she actually *had* any around the place.

Despite Carl Jackson's impatient foot-tapping

and Komelecki's disarming smile, Kate managed to get things squared away. When she held out his room key Jackson snatched it from her hand, grabbed his shabby overnight bag, and stomped out into the hallway and up the stairs.

"I hope he winds up in the linen closet," Kate said between clenched teeth.

Komelecki leaned casually across the counter and smiled. "I'm sure Mr. Jackson will recover."

"I hope so," Kate sighed. "The way this day has started . . ."

"I sense that you're disturbed by my presence." Komelecki was still smiling.

"Oh, no," Kate quickly assured him. "Anything that helps us find Lynne is worth a try, no matter—"

"No matter how crazy? No, don't be embarrassed. Most people are wary at first, but only because they don't fully understand. I hope to change your mind before I'm finished here."

"You don't have to worry about me," Kate said. "I want to find Lynne as much as anyone does."

"I have no doubt we'll discover what happened to Miss Hampton. Were you able to assign me to the room she used?"

"No problem," Kate said and handed him the key. "First door on the right at the top of the stairs. You know, you're the first psychic I've ever met. How does it work? I mean, how do you know about people you've never even seen?"

Komelecki took a moment to consider her questions. "It's a matter," he said slowly while stroking his beard, "of focusing on the psychic energy left

behind. In this case I will attempt to glean information from the spiritual traces Miss Hampton left.”

“I see,” Kate said, although she didn’t. “Do you go into a trance or something?”

He gave her a tolerant smile. “Something like that. Meditation is always useful. It allows me to attune myself, to become more aware of the universe and the powers that surround me. Do you meditate?”

“Who, me? No. I mean, I never have.” Kate stuck her index finger through the wedding band she wore on a chain around her neck and began to twist it. This man was strange. Really strange.

Komelecki nodded. “Perhaps we can arrange instruction for you while I’m here.” He picked up his bulging garment bag and started out to the hallway, then turned and stared straight through Kate and out the window. “There is a feeling,” he said slowly, “of . . . death.” He stopped, shuddered almost imperceptibly, and tossed Kate a triumphant smile.

She had begun to feel as if she were the ingenue in a Vincent Price movie. Any minute now the lights would flicker and—

“It comes to me at odd moments.” Komelecki continued across the room and up the stairs.

What a performance, Kate thought. Could he really have sensed Anne’s death? She shook her head and reminded herself that it was not a good idea to dwell on the ravings of lunatics. Reaching for her tea, she knocked the glass across the desk and watched helplessly as the wet stain spread across the receipts she’d been sorting. She’d just spent an

entire morning separating them into piles, and now she'd have to spend at least that much time drying them. A morning's work shot to hell.

The Jesus Creek Sesquicentennial was expected to be the biggest event since Secession. Residents from all corners of Angela County were planning to attend the celebration, possibly to see just how big a wingding the county seat could pull off.

Jesus Creek had originally been named the county seat because it was centrally located. The fact that the entire town consisted of four miles of main highway intersected by a handful of residential streets concerned no one. It was still the largest town in the county.

The Chamber of Commerce and several community groups had planned at least half a dozen events to coincide with the Sesquicentennial festivities—including the Goober Gala, the first ever Jesus Creek beauty pageant, and a fund-raising auction. Businesses and individuals were getting in on the action, too. Mr. Pate, owner of Pate's Hardware, had festooned the front of his store with red-white-and-blue streamers, while The Drink Tank had introduced a Ladies' Night special: Frontier Beer.

In a rare burst of community spirit Kate had volunteered to head the auction committee. Proceeds, she'd been told, would benefit the City Beautification Fund, sponsored by the Jesus Creek Women's Guild. Mind you, Kate had never been a member of that worthy organization. And the fact that none of the members would take the job should have told her something, she now realized.

Of the ten women who'd cheerfully agreed to help, four had come down with sudden illnesses ranging from appendicitis to "a funny feeling all over," two had had to leave town on unexpected personal business, one gave birth, and two simply refused to answer their phones.

Still, it was a worthy cause. Kate supposed she'd have to make the best of the situation, much like the woman whose husband thought he was a chicken. They both needed the eggs.

Never mind that she was already filling in for the itinerant manager of the inn, one Patrick McCullough, while he roamed the country doing whatever it was small-town mayors did. And never mind that she was taking on a great deal of the maid's duties as well, so that Glenda could prepare for the upcoming Miss Goober Pageant. And forget all about the fact that she had her own job to do, which involved enough work to keep her busy any day. Actually she'd been considering locking herself in her room and putting out a sign reading DEPRESSED, DISTRESSED, AND REGRESSED.

Kate's first stop that afternoon was Eloise's Diner. Eloise, bless her soul, was the tenth and only active auction volunteer. She also served the best corn bread in town.

"Here's my list," she said, shoving a small notebook and a cup of coffee across the counter to Kate. "Pate's Hardware is donating folding chairs, and I'll provide the coffee. Merchants who've offered to donate auction items are listed, along with what they've donated, the retail price, and the suggested starting bid."

"I owe you," Kate said sincerely, and sipped her coffee. "If I had one more like you, I'd be ahead of the game."

"Just remember, you still have to pick all this stuff up and get it to the gym. I feel for you, but not enough to help." Eloise winked her carefully mascaraed eye. "And listen, kid. I know how much free advice is worth, but you ought to get in there and kick a few butts."

Kate nodded in agreement. "I should. I'm a terrible supervisor. How did I get this lousy job, anyway?"

"You're a soft touch. Not that that's so bad. But sooner or later, you've got to put your foot down."

"You're right. And I will. But first, can I have lunch? I haven't eaten all day."

Eloise tossed her Clairol blonde hair and laughed. "When are you going to hire a cook who can cook?"

"I wish I could. But Patrick, curse his name, won't stay home long enough to discuss the problem with me. Besides, he wouldn't dare fire Mrs. Bradford. It wouldn't look good to sack a preacher's wife—and he thinks I should just ignore her, since she only comes in for a few hours in the morning."

"Uhhh. I guess that's one of the drawbacks to being in politics. Gotta stay on everybody's good side."

"Yes, but why should *I* have to suffer? I didn't even vote for him." Kate glanced at the menu. "Meat loaf and browned potatoes."

"You didn't vote for your own brother? What's this world coming to?" Eloise wrote down the order and passed it through the serving window to the

cook, then propped her elbows on the counter. "So. I hear your psychic turned up this morning. What's he like?"

"Outrageous," Kate promised. "He's like something from a cheap movie. You'll have to come over and meet him. He wears silk shirts and he kissed my hand."

"Is he cute?" Eloise was currently single and looking to change that.

"I don't think I'd call him cute. Come see for yourself."

"Maybe I will. Just to take a peek. I've never had my hand kissed. But I want to see which way the wind blows before I start flying."

"What do you mean?" Kate asked.

"Honey, you're crazy if you think the Bradfords will let this go by."

Kate shook her head. "I don't know what you mean. Let what go by?"

"Your psychic. You mean you haven't heard the rumblings?"

"Mrs. Bradford had gone home by the time the excitement started. And just for the record, he's not my psychic. He's the Hamptons'."

"Well, I'm surprised that your distinguished cook hasn't mentioned it already. Their whole congregation has been carrying on about this guy coming into town. I think it's silly, myself, but I get a lot of business from those Traditional Faith folks, so I don't want to make them too mad. You sure Bradford hasn't said something to you?"

"I try my best to avoid her," Kate said. "I wonder if we could start having breakfast catered."