

PRAISE FOR DEBORAH SPRINKLE

Once again Sprinkle thrills the reader with her masterful plotting. Spellbinding action to the very end with a twist.

— DIANN MILLS, CHRISTY-AWARD WINNING
ROMANTIC SUSPENSE AUTHOR

The Case of the Innocent Husband is a clever and engaging whodunnit in this new series featuring Mackenzie Love and Samantha Majors. Deborah Sprinkle kept me guessing to the very end—I did not see the final twist coming.

— PATRICIA BRADLEY, AUTHOR OF THE
NATCHEZ TRACE PARK RANGERS

THE CASE OF THE
INNOCENT
HUSBAND

a mac & sam
mystery 

A NOVEL BY
DEBORAH SPRINKLE



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To God be the glory.

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When I start to write about who I want to thank for helping put a book together, I always find it a bit overwhelming. When I say it takes a village, I mean it. How do I express my gratitude and my humility adequately?

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To God be the glory.

CHAPTER I



As Private Investigator Mackenzie Love entered Cowan’s Restaurant, eating stopped, and glares from the diners hit her like a barrage of arrows. Her confidence faltered. Should she go somewhere else for breakfast? But what good would that do? It was the same all over town.

Besides, Mac didn’t relish the idea of braving the chilly autumn rain again, and here, at least one person was on her side. She closed her umbrella and wiped her damp shoes on the mat.

A plump red-haired server approached with a smile—Ivy, her good friend since grade school, and a welcome sight. “Come on. Don’t pay any attention to them.” She rolled her eyes. “They’ll get over it.”

Mac followed her to a corner booth. “Thanks, girlfriend.”
“The usual?”

Mac nodded. After Ivy left, she studied the other diners in the restaurant. She’d grown up in Washington, Missouri. These were her friends, her neighbors, the people who’d helped her recover from the death of her parents.

But, when Eleanor Davis was found shot in her garage, Mac's relationship with the townsfolk changed. According to the good citizens of Washington, Connor Davis killed his estranged wife, Eleanor, and that's all there was to it. It didn't matter that twelve men and women of the jury decided there was reasonable doubt. What did they know?

And since Mackenzie discovered the evidence that got Connor Davis acquitted, they put her squarely in the enemy camp. It didn't matter that she was doing her job. As far as they were concerned, Mac should have refused to work for the defense. Never mind a little thing called justice or the fact she had bills to pay.

She straightened and smiled at a neighbor—who averted her eyes.

After college, there was never any question in Mac's mind about where she wanted to live. She headed home as fast as she could. But now ... would they get over it?

Until Mac caught the actual killer, most of her friends and neighbors would have trouble letting go of their original verdict. She flexed her shoulders. Therefore, her single-minded goal became to find who shot Eleanor Davis.

Or she'd have to move.

Finding Eleanor's killer would be a daunting task. She sighed. Eliminating Connor left no other suspects, and, judging from her reception this morning, she wouldn't get much help from the community.

Mac surveyed the patrons again. Her skin itched from darted looks of animosity, but she remained outwardly relaxed. "Never let them see you sweat." That's what her daddy always said.

The door chimed open and a petite woman stepped in. She removed the hood of her raincoat and looked around. When

her sparkling blue eyes lit on Mac, a broad smile spread across her face.

“There you are.” Samantha Masters strode across the room, smiling and nodding to acquaintances—seemingly impervious to the icy stares and murmured epithets.

“What’s up, partner?” Mac relaxed at the sight of her friend.

“I tried calling but got no answer.”

Mac pulled her phone from her purse. “Sorry. It’s on vibrate. Want a coffee?”

“No time.” She tugged on Mac’s arm. “Come on. We have a lead.”

The day seemed to brighten. Maybe they were finally getting somewhere.

At the door, Mac turned. “Have a nice day, everyone.” She exited before any rude replies dampened her mood. “Kill them with kindness.” That’s what her mama always said.

On the sidewalk, Mac opened her umbrella. “Meet you at the office, partner.” She dashed for her car. This lead could be the break they needed.

The office of Mackenzie Love and Samantha Majors, Private Investigators, was at the corner of Second and Johnson, a quaint little house they’d purchased from Mac’s uncle’s estate. After renovations, the living room, dining room, and kitchen became one long room on one side, with two offices separated by a bath on the other.

What was once the living room served as their reception area—not that they ever had any clients that had to wait. Once, Mackenzie left her office door shut on purpose so her next appointment had to sit down, and she could usher him in. It was a pleasant sensation, but she felt too guilty to ever do it again.

The two former bedrooms worked well as offices for

Samantha and Mackenzie. Samantha's was pale yellow, with Danish modern-style furniture she bought at the second-hand store in the next town. Mackenzie preferred a soothing green color on her walls and oak furniture.

Her wooden desk came from the bank when they upgraded to metal ones. She wasn't sure but believed it to be about seventy-five years old. The drawers tended to stick, and she kept a bar of soap handy to use on the runners.

As they came through the front door, Mac hesitated. A man sat in the reception area. "Did we have an appointment today?" she said to Sam in a low voice.

"No. This gentleman is our lead." Sam gestured toward the man with a flourish. "Mr. Reese."

Sam liked a dash of flair now and again, and Mac wouldn't have been surprised if she'd bowed. The man looked as if he was rethinking getting involved with a couple of nutty women. Only he seemed the type to use the word dames.

"Mr. Reese." Mac stuck out her hand. "Thank you for coming."

He rose, and Mac got a better view of him. Overalls, long-sleeve cotton shirt, and well-worn brown boots. Grease ground into every crevice of his hands and nails. A mechanic?

"I heard you was looking into the death of Mrs. Davis." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "She was a nice lady, and I figure if I can help, then it's my duty to tell you what I know."

A tingle of excitement coursed through Mackenzie. Was she about to hear the words that would break this case wide open? "Please, sit down. Would you like some water or a soda?"

He shook his head. "I saw her." He scratched his neck and flashed a look at Mackenzie. "Two days before she died. She was getting on the Thursday train to Kansas City." He sat on the edge of the chair.

Mackenzie and Samantha shared a quick look. Questions flooded her brain. What should she ask first? “You’re certain it was Mrs. Davis?”

“Yeah. She worked for my doctor—until she got married. Doc Yancy, but he retired this year. Got a new guy now.”

Mac grabbed her notepad. “What time did you see Mrs. Davis get on the train?”

He puffed out his cheeks and squinted at the ceiling. “Saw her pull up about four-thirty, I guess. I was working on Mr. Matthews’s car. I own the garage downtown. He’d come back on the noon train, and it wouldn’t start. Battery was dead.” He shrugged. “I told him I’d take care of it, and I was just finishing up when Mrs. Davis and that man walked past me. I was going to call out to her, but ...”

“A man was with her?” Sam scooted her chair closer to Reese.

“Yeah. It wasn’t her husband. I know Connor. This guy was older, with a mustache and beard.”

“How did you know he was older?” Mac leaned forward and gave him her full attention.

“His beard.” Reese stroked his stubbled chin. “Lots of gray in it.”

Sam touched her head. “Could you see his hair?”

“No. He wore a cap. One of those that snap in the front? Don’t know what they’re called.”

“I know the kind.” Mac nodded. “A driving or a golf cap. Did you notice anything else about him?”

Reese fiddled with the buttons on his overalls. “No.” His eyes widened and he raised his left hand. “Yeah. He was missing half his pinky on his left hand. I saw it when he helped Mrs. Davis onto the train.”

“Bravo.” Sam clapped. “Now that’s something we can work with. Thank you, Mr. Reese.”

Mac smiled at her partner's enthusiasm. "Yes, thank you." She turned to the man before them. "But how could you see Mrs. Davis and the man get on the train from the parking lot? Not that I don't believe you. I just want to get the facts straight in my head."

"Mr. Matthews told me to leave his keys with the woman in the gift shop," Reese said. "So, I followed Mrs. Davis and the man to the station. I watched the train board from there."

"That makes sense." Mackenzie smiled. "How about height and weight? For the man."

"Not tall. A couple inches taller than Mrs. Davis." Reese lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Hard to tell weight with coats and all, but I'd guess medium."

"One eighty, one ninety? Around there?" Mac stood. "About my height?"

Reese nodded.

"Why didn't you go to the police with this information?"

"I got my reasons." He pushed to his feet. "If you have to take it to the cops ..." He shrugged. "But don't bring me into it."

"For now, we'll investigate this on our own." Mac took a step toward the door. "But I can't promise we'll be able to keep you out of it in the future. That's the best I can do."

"At least you're honest." He offered his hand. "Hope it helps."

"Can we contact you later if we have some more questions?" She walked him to the door.

He nodded. "I gave your partner my information."

After their visitor left, Sam perched on the arm of the sofa, her blue eyes dancing with excitement. "What do you think? A love affair gone wrong?"

"Possible." Mackenzie picked up her notepad. She worked best putting random ideas on paper. Older man. Half pinky finger missing left hand. Medium weight and height.

“Put down possible affair,” Sam said.

“I’m getting there.” Mac scribbled down the information. “If they took the train to Kansas City on Thursday, maybe she came back by train on Saturday.”

“The same day Connor found her dead in her garage.”

“This is a big breakthrough.” Mac plopped into a chair. “The police assumed the overnight bag in her trunk was because she was getting ready to leave, but what if she’d just returned from the train station when someone attacked her?”

“They didn’t find a ticket.”

“It should have been on her phone,” Mac said. “The killer must have deleted it somehow.”

“The police techs could have recovered it. There must be another reason. One we’re not thinking of.” Sam rose and stretched. “I’ll see if I can find out what hotel she used in Kansas City.”

“There’s a lot of them. We’ll divide them up.”

A knock at the door. Mac raised her eyebrows at her partner. Two people visiting the office in one day? Things were picking up.

“Come in.”

Miss Prudence Freebody, Mac’s high school chemistry teacher, retired now, stood in the open doorway. Mac’s smile froze on her face. The students called her Freezebody because she had a way of looking over her glasses that chilled the blood in a teen’s veins. What was she doing here? Had the town sent her to tell Mac to leave?

CHAPTER 2



Mac gaped at her.

“Mackenzie Love, I’ve come to talk to you.” The tall, skeletal woman marched across the room to the reception area. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Mac caught Sam shrinking into the background. *Thanks a lot, partner.*

“Close your mouth, dear. It’s very unbecoming.” Miss Freebody placed her purse on an end table. “I haven’t spent my precious time teaching you how to reason based on facts just to see you crumble the first time you find your back against a wall.”

Anger rose in a rush. “I’m not crumbling, Miss Freezebody. I’m determined to find who killed Eleanor Davis.” Mac slapped a hand over her mouth. What had she done?

Miss Freebody cocked an eyebrow at her. Then she chuckled. “You’ve grown a spine, Mackenzie. Good.” The older lady sat down. “Hello, Mrs. Majors.”

“Please call me Sam. Short for Samantha.”

Mac feared Sam would curtsy, but she stuck out her hand

instead. Sam hadn't had the dubious pleasure of being in Miss Freebody's class. Her family moved to Washington after she graduated from some fancy high school in St. Louis.

"I prefer Samantha," Miss Freebody said. "My name is Prudence. You may call me Miss P."

Mac and Sam exchanged a look. A laugh was in their future, but not now.

"You may or may not know that I was once a forensic scientist with the state," Miss Freebody said. "I still have some connections there, as well as skills in that area."

Was Miss Freebody offering to help with their investigation? Mac glanced at Sam, who looked as confused as she felt.

"I didn't know that," Mac said.

The expectant look on her teacher's face answered Mac's question ... Miss Freebody wanted to be asked.

"Would you excuse us a moment?" Mac motioned Sam into her office. "I think she's offering her services. How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. If we find anything that needs to be examined, shouldn't we give it to the police?"

"Probably." Mac hated to turn her old teacher away. She seemed so eager to help. "She's got a good mind. And, although she was tough, I always knew she cared about us. We could use her to do research. If she's willing."

Sam gazed at the closed office door. "A third perspective wouldn't hurt. Would we pay her? We aren't flush."

"Good question." Mac bit her lip. "I guess we lay it all out and see what she says."

Mac opened the door. "Miss Freebody—" She was gone.

"In here." Miss Freebody called from the kitchen. "I decided to make coffee."

“Sit down, please.” Mac took her elbow and steered her to the conference table. “We need to talk.”

“Miss Freebody—Miss P.” Sam smiled at her. “We’d like you to help us with our case. There are a few minor problems, though.”

“Yes?”

“One, we really should turn any evidence we find over to the police immediately.” Sam gave a half-shrug of regret. “And two, while we could use someone of your brainpower to help with research, we can’t afford to pay you.”

“I don’t need the money.” Miss Freebody waved a dismissive hand in the air. “If you want my help, I’m sure I can work it into my schedule.”

Mac and Sam nodded at each other. Miss P officially joined the team.

“Now I’ll make us all coffee, and you can bring me up to date on the case.”

Mac’s mouth went dry. She hoped they hadn’t made a big mistake.

“CONNOR DAVIS FOUND his estranged wife Eleanor at four in the afternoon laying on the garage floor. She’d been shot.” Mac passed a copy of the police file to Miss P. “He immediately called 911, and the police and ambulance were there within ten minutes. Eleanor Davis was pronounced dead at four-twenty that Saturday.”

“I heard all that at the trial.” Miss P ran a finger down a page as she read. “It seems the only evidence against Mr. Davis was that Eleanor was shot with a nine-millimeter bullet, and he had a gun that used that caliber ammunition. Connor

claimed he gave the gun to Eleanor for protection because she was living alone.”

“They found the gun in the bushes by the house. It was Connor’s,” Sam said. “It’d been wiped clean. Even the remaining bullets.”

“Plus, Eleanor left an unfinished text that indicated Connor saw her with another man, giving him incentive.”

Miss P glanced at the screenshot of the text and furrowed her brow. “I am behind the times.”

“And, no one could corroborate Connor’s alibi for the time of the shooting.” Mac pointed to a line on the page in front of Miss P. “That’s where I came in. I found the man who had lunch with him.”

“Creating quite a sensation.” Miss P raised an eyebrow at Mac. “You need to solve this one posthaste, young lady. Your reputation depends on it.”

“Our reputation depends on it.” Sam put her arm around Mac’s shoulders.

“As far as motive, young Connor was the only one who benefited from his wife’s death.” Miss P eyed the two women over her glasses. “She stood to inherit a fortune from her father. It was in Connor’s best interest to patch up their differences, or—” She drew a finger across her throat. “Get rid of her before she had the chance to divorce him. Especially if there was another man in the picture.” She sat back in her chair. “We have a difficult job ahead of us. We must find someone who had as much motive to kill Mrs. Davis as her husband.”

Mac and Sam snorted.

“You’re going to fit right in, Miss P.” Mac patted her arm. “As a matter of fact, we may have another suspect. Mr. Reese told us about a man getting on the train with Eleanor a few days before she died.”

“Leonard Reese? He was in the same class as Connor and Eleanor.” Miss P removed her glasses and stared past them. “Not a good chemistry student, but excellent with his hands.”

Sam snickered. Mac gave her a stern look.

“He owns a garage, I believe.” Miss P polished her glasses before replacing them.

“Do you remember every student you ever had in class?” Sam’s tone was one of amazement.

“Of course.”

“If we could get a rough sketch of our mystery man, do you think you could recognize him?” Mac said. “Or the train depot has cameras. Maybe we’ll get lucky and catch him on tape.”

“I’ll do my best.” Miss P’s brow puckered. “You know, I lost another of my students that day. She had a heart attack. I believe she was traveling—”

The crash of breaking glass yanked their attention to the front of the room. Sam grabbed Miss P and pulled her under the table.

“Stay here.” Mac commando crawled into her office and retrieved her pistol.

Standing inside her office doorway, she scanned the reception area. Her hand shook as she checked the magazine. A breeze stirred the curtain near the front door. She entered the room, gripping her gun with both hands and extending her arms in front of her.

Her heart slammed against her chest as she made her way forward. A rock sat on the floor amongst the shards of glass. She peered out the broken window. No one was in sight.

Thank you, Jesus.

Mac and Sam had taken defense classes with Sam’s brother, Jake. He’d become a police officer while they’d started their private investigator firm. Mac prayed every day she’d never have to use her weapon. This was a good day.

“All clear.” She stuck her gun in her waistband at her back and pulled on gloves she kept in a back pocket. “Someone sent us a message the old-fashioned way.”

“What does it say?” Sam helped Miss P regain her seat.

Mac removed the paper tied to the rock.

“Wait.” Miss P rose. “Do you have any large sandwich bags?”

“Good thinking.” She placed the note in the clear bag. Three heads bent to read what it said.

STOP BOTHERING INNOCENT PEOPLE

“Good.” Miss P slapped the table. “We must be on the right track.”

Mac and Sam locked eyes. What had they gotten themselves into?

CHAPTER 3



“There’s no we, Miss P,” Mackenzie said. “This has taken a dangerous turn. We can’t bring you into this.”

“Nonsense.” Miss P stiffened. “I can take care of myself. No small-minded idiot is going to scare me.”

Miss P had been facing down classrooms of teenagers for more years than Mackenzie was alive. Mac and Sam could use her strength and positive attitude if nothing else.

“If I looked up backbone in the dictionary, your name would be there, Miss P.” Mackenzie smiled at her.

“I’m taking that as a compliment,” Miss Freebody’s brow furrowed.

“It is.”

“We should inform the police about this.” Sam headed for her office. “I’m calling my brother.”

Mac’s stomach flipped. Jake was two years older than Mac. When she tried to analyze her reaction to him, she couldn’t figure it out. He wasn’t her usual type. But then, what was her type?

The first guy she’d been involved with was in college. A

long-haired, bearded hippie with a million-dollar name. Nathaniel Xander something. And the last guy she'd been attracted to turned out to be a thief nicknamed Prince Charming.

Jake Sanders wasn't a looker like Prince Charming, nor did he have a beard like Nate. His was a friendly face with a nose that had been broken when he was a kid. A genuine smile that he used a lot and showed teeth left to grow without the restriction of braces.

He wasn't a hunk like Samantha's husband, Alan, who worked as a personal trainer. Mac called *him* Macho Man.

But sometimes when Jake touched her ... there was just something about him. Jake possessed a natural assuredness. Not too full of himself and yet sure of his abilities. Women were drawn to him. But he remained single. Although she'd heard rumors about his dating life. She'd never had the guts to ask Sam if they were true.

Mac had thought about what it would be like to date Jake herself. But what if it didn't work out? He was Sam's brother, and she didn't want to jeopardize her relationship with her partner and friend. Mama always said, "Nothing is worth a broken relationship." Best to let that remain a dream. Besides, Jake never gave her any sign that he was interested in her at all, and she had no wish to become another of his trophies.

"Jake was already on his way. He's got something he wants to talk to us about." Sam walked over to the broken window. "We'll need to get this fixed after he sees it."

"We should take pictures ourselves." Miss Freebody pushed to her feet. "Shall I?"

"Be my guest."

A brisk knock sounded at the door before it opened. "Hello, you—" Detective Jake Sanders took off his hat. "Miss Freebody. I didn't know you were here."

“I forgot to mention that Miss P will be helping us on the case.” Sam rushed over to greet her brother. “She’s had forensics experience.”

“I see.” Jake cocked his head at his sister and mouthed, “Miss P?”

Sam nodded.

“Let’s sit so I can get statements from all of you.” Jake’s eyes found Mackenzie’s, a slight smile on his lips. He nodded his welcome. “We’ll start with Mackenzie.”

A lump formed in her throat, and she went in search of a glass of water.

JAKE FOCUSED on his notes as Mackenzie spoke. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t hear a word she said. He’d be too busy following the movement of her lips and wondering what they would feel like on his. It was getting more difficult to be around her. Harder to hide his attraction to her.

Mac had shown no interest in him, and the last thing he wanted was to cause trouble between her and his sister. What if he asked Mac on a date, and it didn’t work out? Sam told him she’d been hurt once before. He didn’t want to cause her additional pain. No. Best to leave it the way it was. Even if it meant he had to stop coming around and never see Mac again.

“Thanks.” He glanced at his watch. “Let’s break for lunch. I’ll see if I can get some forensics guys in so you can get your window fixed.”

“Detective, I could do the fingerprinting on the rock and the letter if you are amenable to that,” Miss Freebody said. “I have kept up my certification and have a small lab in my home.”

“Thank you for offering, but I’d have to run that by my chief first.”

“Of course.” She clasped her hands on the table and gave him an expectant look.

“Jake,” Sam said. “I think she’s waiting for you to make the call?”

“Gotcha.” Jake pulled his cell from his pocket and walked into Sam’s office. “Chief? I’ve got a situation here.”

“What now?”

“Miss Freebody is here—”

“That woman is still breathing air?”

“Yes, sir, and she claims to be a certified forensics specialist.” Jake glanced at the closed door between him and the women. “She wants to do the fingerprinting on the rock and the note.”

“I believe she could do anything she put her mind to. Give her the okay. Besides, no use wasting the state’s time and money on a prank.”

“So, no forensics?”

“No.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

When he returned, a grin split his face. “It seems my chief knows you, Miss P. Lawrence Baker?”

“Yes, Lawrence. He was a good student. Although prone to daydreaming.”

“He said he trusts you to do the fingerprinting on the rock and the note. He doesn’t see the need to bother with forensics since someone threw the rock from the street, but I’ll arrange to get your window patched until you can order a new one.” Jake rubbed his hands together. “What do you ladies want from Sonic? My treat.”

MAC DOVE into her meal like it was her last. She always ate when she was nervous—and being in the presence of Sam’s brother made her very nervous. But, come to think of it, she ate when she was happy or sad—she just ate. How Mac stayed slim was one of God’s many mysteries that she thanked Him for daily.

“What did you want to talk to us about?” Sam swallowed and glanced across the table at her brother.

“I almost forgot.” Jake wiped his hands and left. When he returned, he laid a file on the table. “I’d like you two to look into a string of burglaries we’ve been having along the river.”

“Burglaries?” Mac pushed her half-eaten sandwich away. “Why haven’t we heard about them before?”

Jake glanced at her. Her hunger spiked, and she pulled her food toward her again.

“We worked hard to keep them quiet,” he said. “We thought we’d get a quick arrest, but nothing so far. That’s when I asked to bring you guys into it.”

“How many have there been?” Sam pulled the file in front of her.

“Four so far. In four different cities, but all of them along the river.”

“We’re swamped trying to find—” Mac said.

“We’ll look at it.” Sam shot Mac *The Look*. “But I can’t promise you anything, bro.”

“That’s all I ask.” Jake smiled all around. “Ladies, it’s been a pleasure. Duty calls.”

Mac went in search of a cookie.

MACKENZIE STARED at her computer screen. Jake was gone, and she was stuffed. Miss P hurried home after lunch to begin work

on the rock and the letter. All was quiet except for the clicking of Sam's nails on her keyboard.

A bang on the door brought Mac to her feet, heart pounding in her throat. She grabbed her revolver, held it at her side, and stood inside the closed door.

"Who is it?"

"Leonard Reese. I come to fix your window."

Mac pulled the door open. "I thought you were a mechanic."

"I do handyman stuff on the side." Reese scuffed his feet on the rug inside the door.

Mac suppressed a giggle as she remembered Miss P's comment about Leonard being good with his hands.

"I brought some plywood for now. You'll have to order a window."

"Thanks." Mac waved toward her office. "I'll be working."

Leonard's face paled. She forgot. She still held her revolver in her hand.

"Sorry. We're a little jumpy around here right now."

"Okay."

But he didn't sound okay. He sounded like a man who wanted to finish his job and get out of there.

"Hi, Leonard." Sam popped her head out of her office.

He gave her a weak smile and got to work, nailing the plywood into place with vigor.

Mac laid her revolver next to her computer and returned to her search. So many hotels in Kansas City. She'd started with those close to the train station and worked her way out in a circle. But no luck so far.

If Eleanor had checked in with someone else, Mac would never find it. Or if someone had picked her up and taken her to their home ... the options were endless. Mac could ask Connor

if Eleanor had a friend in Kansas City. She wouldn't have to tell him why she was asking.

And she could use some exercise. She picked up her phone.

“Connor, it's Mackenzie Love. Are you free? Feel like a walk in Rennick Park?”

