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CERTAIN MAN

THE CASE OF THE
STOLEN
MEMORIES

a mac & sam
mystery 

A NOVEL BY
DEBORAH SPRINKLE



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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-414-7

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-415-4

Editors: Erin R. Howard and Heidi Glick

Cover design by Linda Fulkerson - www.bookmarketinggraphics.com

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To Elizabeth, our beautiful daughter

CHAPTER I



A voice inside whispered for her to turn around and go back home. Instead, she pulled into a space in the lower parking lot at James W. Rennick Riverfront Park. The world outside was painted in shades of gray, from the slate-colored river gliding past on its way to join the Mississippi above St. Louis to the ashen clouds hanging low on the horizon.

The leafless tree limbs stirred, and Mac shivered. Why did she make New Year's resolutions that required her to get up at the crack of dawn? This year, she resolved to walk two miles three times a week before work. So far, she'd made it a week. If she gave up now ... She got out before she could change her mind.

Mac shrugged into her coat and gloves and headed for the path along the river. As the rhythm of her stride took over, her mind returned to the problem she and her sisters had been wrestling with since November.

Should they claim the inheritance left to them by Rosa Lombardi? It still amazed her how her family's unfortunate history ended up linked to her case of mistaken identity. She'd

felt a connection to Rosa beyond their remarkable resemblance, and now she knew why.

The rumble of cars and trucks snapped her back to the present, and the Highway Forty-Seven bridge appeared a quarter mile away. She entered the shadow of the bridge. The familiar noise of the occasional car and the flex of the concrete sounded above her, but today, there was something else—something that made her uneasy. The unease from earlier flooded back, and she slid her hand into the pocket where she kept her pepper spray.

She'd come far enough for today and doubled her tempo until she was well away from the bridge. Where the trail swerved down toward the river and back to her car, she continued straight, into the trees of Rennick Park.

As she passed the old waterworks building, a figure by the Time Capsule Garden caught sight of her, grabbed what looked like a pillowcase, and ran for the parking lot.

"Hey. What are you doing?" Mac charged after him, but he was too far ahead.

He jumped into a dark SUV and peeled out. She let her heart rate settle down before returning to the place where she'd seen him. What was he doing?

The marble top of the Washington, Missouri, Sesquicentennial Time Capsule had been pried off, and the time capsule was empty.

"Peachy. Just peachy." Mac yanked her gloves off and dug her phone out of her sweatpants pocket.

"Nine-one-one. What is your emergency?"

"I'd like to report a robbery."

DETECTIVE JAKE SANDERS wasn't going to respond to the 911 call. In fact, he'd assigned it to Detective Victor Young. But when he heard Mackenzie was the one who called it in, he changed his mind. There were two things he knew about his girlfriend. She couldn't pass up a case, and if she was involved, the case was bound to get messy. He intended to be there to make sure the investigation stayed as orderly as possible.

When he pulled into the park, everything seemed under control for once. Detective Young and Mackenzie were talking to one side, an officer was stringing yellow crime scene tape around the area, and another officer was walking the parking lot, head down, searching for anything useful.

He strolled over to his detective and his girlfriend. "About done?"

"I think I've got everything."

Vic thumbed through his notes and gave Mac a grim smile. "Thanks, Mac. I know you wish you'd been able to catch him in the act, but I'm glad you didn't. The guy had a crowbar. You could have been seriously hurt."

"I guess." She furrowed her brow in the direction of the empty time capsule.

Jake groaned inwardly. Mac would not let this go. "It's cold out here. Let's sit in my car."

She nodded and followed him to his police-issued SUV. Inside, she pulled her gloves off and grabbed a tissue from the box he kept in the console. "The cold makes my nose run. Sorry."

"That's why they're here." A strand of her wavy brown hair kept falling across her face. He leaned over and smoothed it behind her ear.

"You're staring, Jake."

"Can't help it." He grinned as a blush highlighted her cheek bones.

“You just like to get me fluster—”

“Ten fifty-four at the Highway Forty-Seven bridge.” Jake’s police radio squawked. “All units respond to the lot off Missouri Avenue in back of the Riverview Guesthouse.”

“I need to go.” Jake buckled his seatbelt.

“I’m coming with you.”

“No. Ten fifty-four means a possible dead body.”

“I know what it means.” She snapped her belt in place. “I want to see if it’s related to the robbery.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I just have a feeling.”

Another one of her feelings. Jake threw the car into gear. Was it always going to be like this? One minute he wanted to kiss her, and the next he wanted to— He shook his head. Nope. Not going there.

Besides, to be honest, many of her feelings turned out to be right. He’d wait to see if this one panned out before starting another argument. Lights and siren on, Jake turned left onto Third Street and prayed he wouldn’t meet any teenagers in trucks who thought they could beat him across the intersection.

Across Highway Forty-Seven at the light, a left onto Madison, and another onto Missouri Avenue, and he was there. Several police cars sat in the lot, along with a few other vehicles.

As they pulled to a stop, Mac pointed out the window. “There it is. The SUV I saw this morning.” She unfastened her seatbelt and leaped out.

“Are you sure?” Jake raced after her. “Don’t touch anything.”

She threw him *the Look* before pausing several feet from the vehicle. “I noticed the cracked taillight. See.”

Jake greeted the other officers. “What have we got? Man or woman?”

“A man with his head caved in.”

Mac drew a sharp breath beside him.

“Who found him?”

“A guy on a bike. He thought it was a drunk sleeping it off until he saw all the blood.”

“Where’s the guy now?”

“We got his information and let him go. He got sick once and looked pretty shaky.”

“Okay.” Jake stared in the direction the officer had come from. His questions for the man would have to wait.

“The body’s down by the bike path,” one patrol officer said. “It’s tough to get to. You have to cross the railroad tracks and push through lots of brush. I’ve got guys cutting a path.”

“Can we drive on the bike path?”

“Not wide enough. Especially through the trees.”

How did the killer get there? Jake pushed a hand through his hair.

“Have someone search the parking lot for signs of a car leaving in a hurry. Skid marks or something.”

The officer cocked an eyebrow at him. “After we’ve all pulled in here? Do you really think we could tell?”

Jake shrugged. “Worth a shot. The killer had to come from somewhere. Have you taken any photos for the medical examiner?”

“Yeah.” The officer handed his phone to Jake.

Mac moved his arm out of the way. “I’m pretty sure he’s the guy I saw at the park this morning.”

“I thought you didn’t get a good look at him.” He didn’t like guesses.

“I’m good at impressions. I’ll know for sure once I see him in person.”

“You mean his body.” Jake gave her a smug look.

“You know what I meant.” Her expression hardened.

“Now tell me about this feeling you had.” He pinned her with his gaze. “How did you know the dead guy would be associated with the robbery?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Her gaze unfocused as she faced the river.