

CHAPTER 3



“I need to go to the station to give Jake my statement.” Mac rose. “You two finish going through the photos and see if anything grabs you. I should be back in an hour.”

“Tell my brother hello for me.” Sam waved a hand at her. “We’ll have this all figured out by the time you get back.”

“Uh-huh.” Mac pulled on her coat and realized she still had on her sweats from her walk this morning, no makeup, and she hadn’t washed her hair. “Sam, do me a favor. Call Jake and tell him I’ll need another half hour. I’m going home to clean up.”

“Why don’t you call him?”

“Because he’ll argue with me. If you call, what can he say?” Mac grinned and shut the door.

Her phone rang halfway to her house. Jake. She ignored it. Once home, she jumped into the shower, changed, and was back on the road in twenty minutes. A record for her. She texted Jake that she was on her way.

He met her at the glass doors to the Public Safety Building where the police department had its offices, along with the communications center, holding cells, and areas for training.

“I’m sorry, but I couldn’t stand being grubby any longer.” Mac put a hand up to silence him. “The important thing is I’m here now, and I feel so much better.”

“After you.” Jake sighed and opened the door.

At the top of the stairs, Mac stopped. A man stood talking to an officer down the hall. “What’s Brandon Fischer doing here?”

“He’s using our files to help with his search for Rosa Lombardi’s heirs.”

Mac’s mouth went dry. “Is he having any luck?”

“Nothing so far.” Jake led the way into his office. “I thought we might grab some lunch after I take your statement. If you have time.”

No luck so far. But what could he possibly find here? She massaged her forehead.

“Mackenzie? What’s wrong?”

The concern in Jake’s voice broke through and brought her back to the here and now.

“I’m sorry. I zoned out for a minute.” She smiled at him. “What were you saying?”

“I asked if you’d want to have lunch after we talk, but if you’re not feeling well, we can do it another day.”

“No.” She waved a dismissive hand at him. “I’m fine. I’d love to have lunch with you.”

“Okay.” Jake pulled his computer over. “Let’s get started. When did you arrive at the park?”

“Around six-thirty.”

“Did you notice any other cars?”

“I parked in the lower lot. There weren’t any where I was, but I didn’t pay any attention to the upper lot.”

“You took the river trail. Right?” Jake asked.

She nodded.

Jake continued to question her, and she answered, leaving

out the fact she took photos of the scene. Or that she intended to investigate on her own.

“I think that’s all we need for now.” He closed his laptop. “Where would you like to go for lunch?”

“The Tilted Skillet. I love their burger and fries.” Mac licked her lips.

“Let’s go.”

They arrived at a busy time, but a couple walked away from a window table, and they pounced on it. The busboy hurried over.

“Hi, Detective, Mac.” He piled dishes onto a tray. “You guys lucked out. I’ll tell your waiter to get over here.”

“No rush.” Jake reached for Mac’s hand across the small table. “I know you’re going to look into the robbery and murder on your own.”

He knew her so well. Was that good or bad?

“I’d rather we work together. You tell me if you find anything, and I’ll do the same.”

“Okay.” She withdrew her hand. “Whose van was it?”

“Good question. The plates were stolen. They came back to a Cadillac.” Jake rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Probably the van was stolen as well.”

Her spirits fell. Putting a name to the dead man wasn’t going to be so easy.

“Have you identified the body yet?” she asked.

“No.” Jake shook his head. “Vic’s checking fingerprints, but if he’s not in the system, we’ll have to rely on missing persons and maybe dental records.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” A waitress with a mass of blonde curls pulled back in a ponytail bustled over. “What can I get for you?” She looked up from her order book. “Mac? Is that you?”

“Zoe?” Mac jumped up and hugged the woman. “This is Detective Jake Sanders.”

“I know Jake.” The blonde woman winked at him. “I’ve waited on him a time or two.”

Mac cast a curious glance at Jake, who hadn’t seemed to notice. Hmm. She returned her attention to Zoe. “I thought you’d got married and moved away.”

“I did, but the jerk left me, and now I’m back. Waitressing.” The woman indicated her T-shirt with the Tilted Skillet logo stretched over an ample chest.

“I’m sorry to hear that, but it’s good to see you.” Mac picked up her menu. “I’ll have a burger, medium well, and sidewinder fries with salt and pepper. Easy on the pepper. And an iced tea.”

“Got it.” The waitress turned to Jake with a broad smile. “Your usual, Detective?”

“I’ll have what Mac’s having.”

The smile faded from Zoe’s face, and she closed her order book. “I’ll get that right out.”

Mac watched her high school friend walk away. “I think you have an admirer, Jake.”

“Who?” He glanced around.

“Zoe, you goofball.” Men could be so dense.

“She’s a nice girl, but she’s nice to everybody.” He gave a half shrug. “Besides, I’m taken.”

Warmth climbed her neck to her cheeks.

“Here you go.” Zoe appeared at their table with the ice teas. “What are you doing these days, Mac?”

“Samantha Majors, Jake’s sister, and I are private investigators. We have our own business.”

“Wow. I’ve always been interested in that kind of work.” She looked at Jake. “In fact, I’ve applied to the police force.”

“Good for you,” Jake said.

“I hope I get in.” Zoe glanced over her shoulder. “I’m not sure how much longer this job will last. Since Covid, things have been tight, and the landlord raised the rent on the building.”

Mac looked around the restaurant. Almost every table was full, but it probably wasn’t always like this. So many businesses closed during the pandemic, and afterwards, many that thought they could make it ended up in receivership. Could Zoe be right about the Tilted Skillet? Or was she just spreading gossip?

Mac spied another customer staring their way. “I think they need you over there.” She nodded in the direction of the other table.

Zoe raised a finger at the man to indicate she’d be there in a minute. “We’ll have to get together some time when I’m not working.” She grinned at Mac.

“That would be great.” Mac smiled back but felt a stone in the pit of her stomach. Was she ready to renew the relationship? They hadn’t been close before, and now that she was single again, it seemed like Zoe might be interested in Jake. That would never do.

But on the other hand, the woman had moved back after a nasty divorce and could use a friend. “I’ll give you my number.”

Zoe’s grin became a smile that lit up her face. “I’ll be back soon with your food.”

Mac stared out the window. *Lord, help me. I don’t have the strength to take on another woman’s personal problems right now.*

“Hey.” Jake touched her hand. “What’s up?”

“It’s just ...” She sighed. “I’m feeling pretty overwhelmed with my own stuff right now.”

“It’s up to you how much time you spend with her,” Jake said. “Or how close you get.”

“But I don’t want to be mean.”

“I’m not saying be mean. I’m saying set healthy boundaries.”

Mac met Jake’s steady gaze. “How did you get so wise?”

Their food arrived in a savory cloud of aromas that made her mouth water, and she forgot about her woes and work for a brief time. Another thing she liked about Jake. When the food came, all talk stopped, and they enjoyed their meal.

As he swallowed his last bite, Jake snatched his cellphone from his pocket. “Sanders.” He flashed a look at Mac. “Be there in twenty minutes.”