

THE CASE OF THE  
**INTENTIONAL**  
ACCIDENT

a mac & sam  
mystery 

A NOVEL BY  
DEBORAH SPRINKLE



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*To all the men and women of the police forces around the world who  
risk their lives in order to keep us safe.*



## CHAPTER I



The soul-piercing scream shattered her concentration a second before the lights went out. Private Investigator Mackenzie Love groped for her cellphone, pressed Flashlight, and did a sweep of the historic museum’s research room, her heart pounding in her chest. Metal shelves filled with books of varying sizes slid in and out of view, but no monsters—human or otherwise—appeared in the narrow ray of light.

Excited voices reached her from the hall outside. She grabbed her bag and went in search of the commotion. As she turned the corner, a flashlight beam hit her square in the face. “Ouch.” She threw her arm up to shade her eyes.

“Oh dear, Mackenzie.” Mrs. White lowered the offending light. “Something terrible has happened.”

“I figured as much.” Mac blinked and rubbed her eyes. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. James has been electrocuted.”

Mac stared at the historian. “But Doug’s been an electrician for twenty years.”

“I know.” The older woman took hold of her arm. “Come

see for yourself. One of our volunteers is a nurse. She's with him now."

A group of men and women stood outside the door to the copy room. At the back, a man in khakis and a blue shirt stood on tiptoe, craning his neck to see over the heads of the crowd.

"I told them not to go in." Mrs. White cleared a path using a firm tone of voice and a touch on a shoulder. "Excuse us, please." She patted Mac on the arm. "While you're in there, I'll see if I can get the lights back on. I feel much better with you here."

An acrid smell made Mac wrinkle her brow. She inspected the space with her flashlight. The room was oblong, with the short ends to the right and left. Two copy machines, a worktable, a bookcase, and a wall of file cabinets filled the space. A metal ladder stood to one side. Wires hung from the ceiling.

Douglas James lay on his back in the glow of a small lantern. A woman performed CPR, and her soft counting rose above the low hum of voices behind Mac.

"Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty." She sat back on her heels and shook out her arms. Her pale blue eyes glinted with unshed tears.

"Want me to take over?"

She started. "Yes. Hurry. I'm tired."

Mac dropped to Doug's side and began the compressions. *Two hands, fingers interlocked, center of the chest, just below the breastbone, press at least two inches down, thirty compressions.* She'd forgotten how hard it was.

She lost count when the lights popped on and paused to examine Doug.

"Show me a glimpse of those warm brown eyes," the nurse muttered under her breath.

But his eyelids didn't flutter, and the skin of his clean-

shaven face and almost bald head seemed to grow paler by the minute.

“We’ll alternate until the paramedics get here,” the woman said, her voice choked with emotion as she started pressing on his chest.

Mac nodded, but she could tell Doug was already gone. She glanced at the woman, so focused on her task. When was it okay to let go? To leave things as they were?

She’d come to the history museum to research the years right before her parents’ deaths because she was determined to find out how they died. But did she truly want to know? Was it worth the effort? Or, now that she was engaged, should she learn to live in the present and look to the future? A woman’s cry of anguish brought her to her feet.

“I want to see him. He’s my husband.”

Laura James. Mac crossed to the door in time to block the stricken woman as she broke through the crowd outside.

“I tried to keep her out.” Mrs. White lifted her arms in a useless gesture. “My dear, let them help Douglas.” She tried in vain to urge the younger woman toward the door.

Mac held her in a tight grip, but the woman was strong. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold her back. “You need to let us take care of him until the ambulance—”

Two EMTs pushed through into the room.

Laura stopped struggling and Mac guided her to a chair in the hall, where the woman buried her face in her hands.

“I’m so sorry.” Mac sat next to her. What should she do? She hated to leave the upset woman alone, but she barely knew her. She searched the small crowd for anyone who looked as if they might be a friend, but saw no one.

Laura sat hunched over, her hair covering her face, for a while. With a sigh, she straightened and brushed her long black hair over her shoulder. “Do you have a tissue?”

“Yes.” Mac dug in her bag and handed it to her. The woman wasn’t wearing a wedding ring. Maybe she dressed in a hurry this morning? Mac eyed Laura’s designer shoes, stylish outfit, and expensive necklace and earrings. Then again ...

She followed Mac’s look. “It’s being cleaned.” She handed the tissue back.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be that obvious.” Mac felt the heat rise on her neck. “I just got engaged. But we haven’t gotten our rings yet.” The crumpled tissue was dry. She tossed it into the trash and continued to study the grieving woman.

For a fortyish woman, she was strikingly beautiful, with the high cheekbones of a model, smooth, tan skin, and large black eyes framed by long lashes. But no trail of tears marred her perfect face.

Mac’s departed mother whispered in her mind’s ear. *“Don’t be too quick to judge. Not everyone cries when they’re grieving.”*

“Good luck.” Laura’s tone was not one of joy. “I mean, congratulations on your engagement.”

A man rushed over, his face filled with compassion. “Laura, what’s happened?”

“Douglas is dead.” Laura rose to greet him. “He’s been electrocuted.”

The hairs stood up on the back of Mac’s neck. How could Laura know her husband was dead? Had she said anything to give the woman that idea? Mac reviewed the brief words they’d shared. No, she hadn’t. Then what made the woman so sure?

Mac got to her feet. The man wore khaki pants and a blue shirt. She’d seen him before—in the hallway outside the copy room just after Doug’s accident. A full head of silver hair over a youthful face made it hard to determine his age.

“Are you sure?” He grasped Laura’s arms.

“No, but he looked so gray.” Laura crossed her arms in front

of her. “And he wasn’t moving.” She turned to Mac. “You were there. What do you think?”

What should she say? Her mama always said it was best to answer with honesty. She was ninety-nine percent sure Doug was dead, but ...

“Jake.” Laura’s eyes brightened, and she rushed down the hall. “Thank you for coming. Did you hear it on your scanner?”

Detective Jake Sanders caught the woman before she could throw her arms around him. “The police are always called out when there’s an accident of this nature. I’m sorry about Doug.”

Mac raised her eyebrows at him. Was this yet another woman besotted with her fiancé? First Zoe and now Laura. Jake came over to Mac and pulled her in for a hug.

“How are you?” He kissed her on the lips, something he never did in public when on duty.

“Oh.” Laura looked from Mac to Jake. “You didn’t say you were engaged to Jake.”

“Yes.” She patted his chest and fluttered her eyelashes at him. Barf.

“Well.” Laura backed away. “Congratulations again.”

“Make way.” The emergency medical personnel pushed through the door to the copy room with Doug strapped to a gurney. An oxygen mask covered his face, and an IV bag lay on his chest. The nurse doing CPR followed close behind.

“Doug.” Laura rushed after them.

“I need to go.” The man in the blue shirt turned to Mac.

For a moment, his public mask slipped, and Mac realized he was older than she’d thought. Maybe in his early forties? And one other thing. He loved Laura James.

He offered her his card. “I’m Thomas Underwood, Doug’s partner. Thanks for all your help.”

Where had Mac heard that name before?