

THE CASE OF THE
OTHER
BROTHER

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 978-1-64917-581-6

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-582-3

Editors: Erin R. Howard and Heidi Glick

Cover design by Linda Fulkerson - www.bookmarketinggraphics.com

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In memory of my brother, Dave Allen.
1954-2017

CHAPTER I



Day 1

The train from Kansas City was late. Again. Patience was not one of Private Investigator Mackenzie Love's strong points. She glared at her phone.

To keep her mind off the empty track, Mac surveyed a group of men and women headed for St. Louis. Queenie, the owner of the best ice cream shop in town, wore a leopard print pantsuit and applied her lipstick like a painter putting the final touch on a masterpiece. Her boyfriend kept one eye on their luggage and the other on her. She'd told Mac they planned a weekend of sightseeing and dancing.

Mrs. White and her sister stared anxiously down the track for any sign of the approaching train. Yesterday, Mac's neighbor proudly showed her a photo of the latest great-nephew born to her favorite niece and mentioned she and her sister were traveling to St. Louis to see him.

As for the other two people in the group, Mac had seen the woman in town but didn't know her. Something was off with

the woman's bite, almost as if she had no chin. A purple overnight bag sat between her legs.

The man standing behind her was a stranger. Between the Cardinals ball cap and a pair of wrap-around sunglasses, Mac couldn't make out his face, and though he stood close to the woman, he didn't appear to be traveling with her. He shoved his hands into his raincoat pockets and shifted his weight from one sneaker-clad foot to the other. Where was his luggage? Maybe he lived in St. Louis and had come to Washington for a visit? But wouldn't he still need a change of clothes?

And what's with the raincoat? They hadn't had precipitation in over a week, and this would be a great weekend. Sunny, but mild with a light breeze. A couple of perfect June days.

A stir of excitement in the group alerted her to the coming train. The steady glow of the headlight slowly grew closer. Her older sister Beth was on this train, and Mac couldn't wait to see her. Ever since Elsie James and her son had entered the picture, Mac's relationship with her best friend, Samantha Majors, and her fiancé, Detective Jake Sanders, had crumbled, and she didn't know how to stop it. She needed Beth's counsel.

"Help me." A woman's cry pierced the air. "I've been stung."

Mac turned to find the unknown woman claspng her neck with one hand and grasping the arm of the strange man with the other.

"Oh, dear." Mrs. White motioned. "Mackenzie, come quickly."

After the adventures they'd shared, her friend acted as if Mac could take care of any problem that arose. No pressure.

"I'm allergic to bee stings." The stricken woman moved her hand to her throat and slid to the sidewalk.

The man lifted her onto a nearby bench.

“Call nine-one-one.” Mac dumped the woman’s purse out on the bench next to her. “Do you have an inhaler? An EpiPen?”

The woman grabbed her inhaler and sucked in a dose of the medicine. She shook her head and gave Mac a wide-eyed look. It hadn’t helped, and her chest struggled to rise and fall with every wheezing breath.

Mac locked eyes with the woman before she yanked the safety cap off an EpiPen, pressed the orange point against her leg, and listened for the click. Three seconds later, she removed the auto-injector. The woman took a deep breath. And Mac did too.

She backed away from the bench, and emergency personnel rushed over and took charge. The train’s noisy engine idled behind her. Someone touched her on the shoulder.

“When we get back, I need to talk to you,” Queenie whispered in her ear.

What did she mean? Mac turned to question her friend, but she and the other passengers were boarding the train. Mac scanned the sidewalk. The woman’s suitcase was gone.

“What are you looking for?” Beth’s voice sounded above the din of the train.

Mac gave Beth a quick hug. “I’ll be back in a minute.” She hurried through the gate to the conductor. “Did a man in a raincoat carrying a purple bag get on the train now? Or did anyone board with a purple suitcase?”

“No, ma’am.” He lifted his chin toward the woman on the bench. “Will she be traveling with us?”

Mac turned her gaze toward the unknown woman. “I don’t think so.”

“Then we best be going.” The conductor spoke into the mic on his shoulder, and the train blew its whistle.

“One more minute and we can go home.” Mac touched

Beth's arm and walked back to where the EMTs loaded the woman onto a gurney. "What's your name?"

"Wanda Woods."

The woman whispered, and Mac leaned closer. "I'll check on you later, Wanda." The ambulance took off, sirens and lights ripping through the midafternoon sky once more. Mac returned to her sister. "Not the best way to start your visit."

"Hey." Beth squeezed Mac's shoulders. "If it weren't for you, that woman wouldn't be alive. You did good, Baby Sis."

"I'd like to know what happened to her luggage." Mac took a bag from Beth. "I scored a parking spot next to the station. A van pulled out as—" She rushed to a nearby trash can and retrieved a purple bag. "This is it." Mac held the item for Beth to see. "This belongs to Wanda Woods."

Beth gave a small smile. "Next stop, Mercy Hospital."

"Do you mind?" Mac clicked open her car. "I'm afraid if I don't catch her at the hospital, I'll have trouble finding her."

"I get it, Sis." Beth waved a hand and chuckled. "I'm not surprised a visit to you would turn into chaos. Problems always find you. But, I hadn't expected it to happen the moment I stepped off the train."

"Not to worry. We'll return Wanda's overnight bag, and she can take it from there." Mac pulled into the hospital parking lot. "Do you want to come in or wait in the car?"

"Oh, I'll come in." Beth smirked. "I wouldn't want to miss the next episode."

"You make it sound like my life is a TV miniseries." Mac huffed.

"If the shoe fits." Beth shrugged.

"Well, you're going to be disappointed." Mac looked down her nose at her. "You'll see."

Mac led Beth into the hospital. As they passed through the front doors into the emergency waiting room, her pulse sped

up. How many times had she rushed into this room, praying for someone she loved? Or how often had she been the one beyond the swinging silver doors getting sewed back together and pumped full of painkillers? This was not her favorite place. Her steps slowed, and she approached the information desk.

“This is a switch,” the nurse said. “Usually, you’re in a room, and someone is coming to see you.”

“Ha, ha.” Mac furrowed her brow. “This time I’m here on an errand.” Mac moved aside and nodded at Beth. “This is my sister, Beth. Her husband’s a lawyer. So, you better be nice to me.”

Beth chuckled. “Thank you for taking excellent care of her.”

“Nice to meet you, Beth, and you’re welcome.”

“If you two are finished getting acquainted.” Mac held up the suitcase. “I need to deliver this to a patient. Wanda Woods.”

“The allergic reaction.” The nurse played with her mouse for a few seconds. “Is she a client?”

“No, but—”

“Then I’m sorry, Mac, I can’t let you back to see her.” The nurse shook her head.

“What’s with that?” Mac pressed her lips together. “You’ve always let me before.”

“When it was someone close to you or a client.”

“I ...” Beth gave Mac a leave-it-alone look. Mac turned to the nurse. “Can you call to see if Wanda will give permission for me to come back?”

The nurse studied Mac. “I’ll call and see how she’s doing.” She lifted her chin toward the chairs. “Please have a seat.”

“Come on.” Beth took Mac’s arm and ushered her away.

A few minutes later, the nurse beckoned Mac back to the desk. “You’re in luck. The doctor released Miss Woods, and she’s coming out to see you.”

Wanda came through the doors chatting with a nurse. When she saw Mac, she smiled and waved.

“How are you?” Mac met them halfway. Relief bubbled inside her to see the woman looking well.

“Okay. Thanks to you.” Wanda pointed to Mac. “This is the woman who saved me.”

“Quick thinking.” The nurse gave her a thumbs up. “Whatever stung her packed quite a wallop. Usually, one sting doesn’t require an Epi.”

“It wasn’t me.” Mac shook her head. “Wanda was prepared. All I did was help her get to her meds.”

“At times like this, that’s a big deal.” The nurse smiled. “Excuse me. I need to take care of the paperwork.”

“I brought your bag.” Mac handed Wanda the purple suitcase.

“Thank you.” She took it over to a chair. “You’ve saved my life a second time.” She opened the bag and gasped. “It’s gone.” She pivoted to Mac. “Where is it?”