

CHAPTER 3



Mac took a bite of her sandwich. Perhaps Sam was right. Maybe what she was feeling was jealousy. Next to her sisters, Sam knew her best. Possibly even better. They'd shared the ups and downs of daily life for years. Not to mention the fact they'd been knocked down, beat up, and shot at. Those experiences tended to bond people together.

Bam!

Mac jumped. "What was that for?"

"Nothing else was working."

"So, you slammed the table? You could have touched my arm."

"I did." Beth narrowed her eyes. "I had to break you out of your thoughts. I know what you were doing."

"What was I doing?" Mac lifted her chin. Was everyone privy to her thinking? First Sam, then Miss P and Jake. Now Beth?

"You were second-guessing yourself. Thinking Sam might be right." Beth tilted her head. "How'd I do?"

“Why is it everybody can read my mind?” Mac threw her arms in the air.

“You’re pretty easy to read, Sis.” Beth held her eyes in a steady gaze. “Despite that, you shouldn’t doubt yourself. You have excellent instincts.”

“But Sam—”

“I love Sam, but your partner’s a new mom, and her hormones aren’t settled yet. She’s not thinking straight about anything but her sweet baby.”

“What about Jake?”

“Jake is still healing, and he’s trying to catch up from the days he’s missed at work. Along with dealing with the news he and Sam may have a half-brother they never knew about. Who happens to be missing.” Beth shook her head. “The truth is, he loves you, but he’s trusting you to take care of yourself right now. He needs to focus on doing his job—on being a detective.”

“My mind understands, but my heart still hurts.” Mac couldn’t stop the tears. “I’m lonely.”

“The question becomes, is your heartache interfering with your judgment? What is it about Elsie that sets off your alarms?”

Mac took a drink of iced tea. Whatever it was, it was subtle, or Jake and Sam would have noticed it too. Although Elsie’s appearance on Sam’s doorstep was like a right hook to the jaw for them both. She doubted either would have seen an irregularity if a red light flashed when it occurred. “It had something to do with her son running over to Jake, yelling, ‘Daddy,’ and her body language.”

“Have you detected anything more since?” Beth grabbed a bag of chips from the cupboard.

“I’m a nonperson as far as Elsie’s concerned.” Mac grabbed a chip and waved it in the air. “She’s playing up the part of

moms-in-common with Sam, and she's pushing the Uncle Jake role to the hilt. If she's there, I never have a moment alone with him."

"We're going over to Sam and Alan's for dinner, right?"

Mac nodded. "I'm hoping you can help me figure out if I'm being paranoid or if something is off."

"I'll be glad to."

"I knew I could count on you, Sis." Mac stood and drew Beth in for a hug. "You're not just a pretty face with a piece of paper that says doctor of psychiatry."

"Um, thanks. I think." Beth chuckled. "Do I have time for a nap?"

"Yes. And a bath if you want."

She held Mac at arm's length. "Do I need one?"

"Well." Mac waggled her hand.

"You are incorrigible." Beth pushed her away. "I bet you don't know what that means."

"Yes, I do." Mac grinned at Beth. "It means I'm the best sister ever."

"I'll see you later."

MAC POPPED TWO chewable antacid wafers into her mouth and studied her face in the mirror. Should she put on only mascara or eyeliner too? Jake told her she didn't need makeup at all, but

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Since Elsie showed up, Mac hadn't had a minute alone with Jake to know how he felt. Thankfully, Beth would be with Mac tonight. She wouldn't feel like such a stranger around the people who'd been her friends for years. She swiped some mascara onto her lashes and left the room.

"You look nice." Beth stood by the door.

“Thanks.” Mac ushered her out and closed the door behind them. “Thanks for coming, Sis.”

“I’ll always be here for you.” Beth clicked her buckle in place. “I’ve been thinking. Tonight, at some point, why don’t you try to keep Elsie busy? I’d like time to talk to her son on my own.”

Mac raised a brow. What was her sister up to? “You think you might learn something?”

“It’s worth a try.”

“Okay.”

Fifteen minutes later, Mac steered the car onto Sam’s driveway, where two other cars sat.

“Is Elsie here yet?” Beth said.

“Of course.” The sharp edge to Mac’s voice brought instant regret. She closed her eyes and prayed for help with a new attitude. “That’s her white sedan.”

“Good.” Beth got out and waited for Mac to join her. “Remember, you have sound instincts. Jake loves you. Samantha is still your best friend. Nothing has changed. Elsie cannot change how they feel about you.”

Mac swirled her hands in front of her.

Beth giggled. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to use a mind trick on myself.”

“Well, stop it.” Beth slapped her on the arm.

“Hey.” Mac grabbed her sister in a side hug. “You’re the one who made me watch those sci-fi space movies.”

“I thought I heard your car pull up. What are you two doing out here?” Alan stepped out on the porch, followed by Killer, their goldendoodle, who always had a smile.

Mac and Beth stopped mid-laugh and looked at Alan. How could they explain one of those magical moments when the right thing was said at the right instant, and all they could do was give in to the release of laughter?

“Nothing.” Mac waved. “We’re coming.” She dropped to one knee and rubbed the dog’s ears while avoiding his kisses. “Good to see you, too, boy. Let’s go inside.” She brushed off her pants, looped her arm through Beth’s, and headed for the house.

Inside, Mac walked arm-in-arm with Beth and followed Killer down the hall to the kitchen, where Elsie held a spoon of something for Jake to taste.

Beth squeezed Mac’s arm before releasing it. “Steady,” she whispered.

“Let me have a taste.” Mac eased herself between Jake and Elsie.

“Honey, I didn’t see you come in.” He placed a hand on her shoulder.

She glanced back at him. “I know.”

Elsie held out the spoon, and Mac took a dainty sip.

“Yummy. What is it?” She gave Elsie her best smile.

“Tomato soup.” She shifted her gaze from Mac to Jake and back again. “It’s not too much basil?”

“I don’t think so.” Mac swiveled to give Jake a wide-eyed look. “Do you?”

Jake shook his head, while his questioning gaze remained on Mac. “Can I talk to you a minute?”

“Alone?” Mac feigned surprise.

“Ha, ha.” Jake snagged her hand and pulled her into the hallway.

“Killer, crate.” Alan pointed to the spare bedroom door off the front hallway.

The golden dog turned sad eyes toward Mac and Jake before walking away.

“Sorry about that.” Alan walked back to the kitchen.

“What’s with you tonight?” Jake said in a low voice.

“Nothing is with me tonight.” She ran a hand down the

side of his cheek. “Except I miss you. This is the first time I’ve been *alone* with you for weeks. And this is not what I call alone.”

“Sam told me what you said.” He pressed her palm to his mouth. “You have no reason to be jealous.”

“Is that what you think this is?” Mac yanked her hands away. “You don’t miss spending time with me alone.” She jammed her fists on her hips.

“Of course I miss you.” Jake reached for her. “But ...”