

“You don’t even know her.”

Janey raised an eyebrow. “And you do?”

While he couldn’t argue with that, his gut told him Janey was wrong about Maddie.

“Will you be around for dinner?” Janey asked.

“I’ve got some stuff to do.”

“Come by my place for a beer if you’re in town.”

“I will.”

She hugged him again. “Nice to have you home. I’ve got to get back to the clinic.”

“See ya, brat.”

“Don’t call me that!” she shot over her shoulder as she went back inside.

Mac rested his hands on the rail and fixated on the harbor. When he woke up in the airport hotel that morning, he’d never heard of Maddie Chester. How was it possible that just a few hours later she was all he could think about?



# CHAPTER 3

If the house was his mother's domain, Big Mac ruled over the barn-shaped garage. Linda referred to the barn as "the quicksand," because nothing that went in there to be fixed was ever seen again.

Mac navigated his way through the chaos, batting at spider webs on the way to the back corner, his heart pumping with excitement when he saw the white sheet. Just as he'd left it. A couple of old bicycles blocked his path, and Mac took a quick look to see if either of them would be suitable replacements for Maddie.

Dismissing them both, he said, "I'll get her a new one. That'll make her good and mad." He couldn't say why the idea of making her mad was so appealing, but he liked the spark of life that lit up her caramel-colored eyes when he challenged her.

Tugging on the sheet, he uncovered his first love—an orange Honda 250 motorcycle he'd bought from Ned two months after he got his license. His mother had flipped out—and ripped Ned a new one—but Big Mac had urged Linda to "let the boy be."

The bike was already old when Mac bought it, but with his father's help, he'd lovingly restored it. He ran his hand over the gas tank and came to rest on the leather seat. "What'd ya say, old girl? Still got some life left in you?"

Mac wheeled the motorcycle out of the barn to the crushed-shell driveway

and was checking the oil when his mother came up behind him, letting out a shriek that nearly stopped his heart.

“Jeez, Mom.” He stood up from the crouch he’d been in and hugged her. She was petite with the same fair-haired coloring Janey had inherited. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Oh,” she said, “look at you.”

“Don’t get all mushy.”

“You get more handsome every time I see you.” She caressed his cheek, her sharp blue eyes zeroing in on him. “But why do you look so tired and thin?”

He smiled to himself. Her children hadn’t called her Voodoo Mama for nothing. “Too much work, not enough fun.”

“We’ll have to see about fixing that while you’re home. How long can you stay?”

“A while,” he said, intentionally vague. The McCarthy kids had also learned a long time ago not to give her time for scheming.

“Don’t tell me you’re taking that old rust bucket for a ride.” She shuddered. “I hate that thing. I was always so certain you were going to kill yourself on it.”

Mac flashed his most charming grin. “There’s not one spec of rust on this bike, and I’ve got to get around somehow.”

“Use my car. I just got it out of the shop. I can walk to the hotel or grab a ride into town when I need one.”

Mac glanced at the yellow VW bug convertible in the driveway. “Not in this or any other lifetime, Mother.”

“Oh come on! It’s not that bad.”

“Um, yes, it is.”

She let out a gasp. “What in the name of God did you do to your leg?”

“I had a little accident in town.” He told her about his encounter with Maddie. “So I’ll be staying over there, helping her out with the baby, and covering her shifts at the hotel until she’s back on her feet.”

“You can’t work as a chamber maid! What will people say? You’re a McCarthy!”

Had he ever noticed before that his family thought they were better than other people on the island? Had Maddie tuned into that, too? Is that why she had such a beef with his parents? “So what? She can’t afford to lose the job, and it’s my fault she’s hurt.”

“She won’t lose her job. We’ll get someone else to fill in.”

“She doesn’t want that. I’m taking care of it for her.”

“No son of mine—”

Mac held up his hand to stop her. “Just because we own the place doesn’t mean we’re better than anyone else. I’m filling in for her, and that’s the end of it. Do we still have those old sleeping bags with the camping stuff?” Leaving her fuming in the driveway, he went back into the garage and found the sleeping bags right where he expected them to be, zipped into large plastic bags to protect them from mold.

“What’re you doing with that?”

“I’m sleeping on Maddie’s floor for a couple of nights so I can help her with the baby.”

“This is insanity, Mac. What will people say? She has a sister—”

“Who has a family of her own to care for. Don’t worry, you’ll still get plenty of time to fuss over me while I’m home.”

He strapped a sleeping bag to the back of the motorcycle while his mother watched him. Pretending not to notice her frosty glare, he tinkered with spark plugs and connections before straddling the bike to kick-start it. The engine sputtered and died. He tried twice more before it roared to life with a deafening backfire.

Mac couldn’t wait to open up the bike on the island’s winding roads, just like he used to.

“Where are you going?” his mother hollered over the roar.

“To see Dad and then back to Maddie’s. I’ll be by tomorrow.”

“Mac! *Wait!* We need to talk!”

He turned the bike around and gunned it, sending pieces of crushed shell flying behind him.

“You forgot your helmet!”

Flashing a grin over his shoulder, he pretended he couldn’t hear her. Just like old times.

As Mac coasted down the long, winding hill that led to the marina, he was glad he hadn’t bothered to cut his hair before he left Miami. The wind rushing through it took him right back to high school, and the wild burst of freedom reminded him of a time before life became so complicated.

His thoughts inevitably turned to Maddie and what Janey had told him. They’d grown up just a few miles apart, but light years separated them. While he’d been the hometown hero, she’d been mocked and ridiculed and God knows what else because of something she could neither help nor change.

“It’s not up to you to right all those wrongs,” he muttered to himself. But for some reason, he wanted to do just that. She’d stirred something primal in him and touched a part of him he hadn’t even known existed. The notion both excited and discomfited at the same time.

Even as he decided he should keep his distance, he knew he wouldn’t. In fact, as soon as he said a quick hello to his father, he’d be heading right back to her. Surely the reaction he’d had earlier was the result of the accident and the ensuing burst of adrenaline. Once he saw her again, everything would be back to normal, or at least he hoped so.

Mac zipped into the marina and parked next to one of the Dumpsters.

Thanks to his six-foot, four-inch height, Big Mac’s thatch of wiry gray hair stood out amid the chaos on the main dock. Because the word sunscreen was not, and had never been, in his vocabulary, he was already as tan as most people were by the end of the summer. He wore a blue T-shirt with a faded silkscreen