

## Chapter One

RINGTONES CAN BE handy in identifying the person calling. But at one forty-five a.m., Mackenzie Bradenton decided the theme to *Cops!* annoyed her. She slapped the cell phone as if it was an alarm clock, and it slid off her nightstand and onto the floor. She tossed her covers away and fished for the phone, silencing it.

"Hello?"

"Mac, it's Pepper. Sorry to call you so late."

"It's early now. What's up?" She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, trying hard to wake up. If Sergeant Troy Pepper of the Cincinnati Police Department called at this hour, it must be important.

"I'm at the scene of a drive-by. Two dead and one injured."

Mac was fully awake now. As the director of the Over-the-Rhine Community Center, she knew he was to be referring to one of the kids she worked with. "Who?"

"Jace Cano."

"Oh shit." Mac got to her feet, grabbed a pair of jeans as she balanced the cell phone between her chin and her shoulder. Her heart hammered against her chest. "How bad is he?"

"Take a deep breath, my friend. He's on his way to University Hospital. He got shot in the leg, but it didn't look too bad."

"Thank God. Where'd it happen?"

"Twelfth and Vine."

"What was he doing there at this hour?" The area was notorious for drug activity.

Pepper hesitated and it made Mac nervous. "One of the boys said something about a birthday party. They'd left the Below Zero Lounge when the shooting occurred. The lead investigator thinks the two dead were part of the Tu Crew and it's a retaliation hit. But no one's sure right now."

"Jace lives with his aunt. Did you guys get a hold of her?"

"Heh. Yeah. She told me, and I quote, 'Tell that white bitch he's her problem now.' Then she hung up on me."

"Nice. He just turned eighteen today. I can't believe she kicked him out so fast. I'll get over to UC and check in on him. Will he be able to go home today if he's not admitted?"

"Probably. I'll let the investigators have your cell number so they can find him if need be. I have a feeling you'll be getting a roommate for a while."

"Looks like. Thanks, Pepper." Mac ended the call, finished dressing, and hurried out the door in record time.

THE DRIVE TO University of Cincinnati Hospital lasted all of fifteen minutes. Hardly a soul on the road at this hour, and Mac took advantage of it and drove faster than normal. Jace's injury scared her. Even worse – he'd been with gangbangers. Once she knew he'd be okay, Mac planned to knock some sense into him.

She'd mentored Jace for a year and continued to work toward getting him into college and out of his deplorable home conditions. Mac always worked hard for her kids, but Jace was special. She connected with him. And to think he'd managed to get involved in a shooting scared her.

Part of her wanted to wrap him in a hug and hide him from the world. The other half was inclined to yell at him until she was out of breath – and then hug him. By the time she got to the hospital Mac was more concerned with making sure Jace was okay. She parked her car and ran through the emergency room entrance.

She identified herself at the nurse's station and was told where to find Jace. He lay on the bed, one leg of his jeans cut off to reveal a stark white bandage against deep brown skin. Traces of blood stained the other leg of his pants. Mac waited until the nurse finished speaking to him before entering the cubicle. She closed the curtain behind her.

"Jace."

He immediately held up a hand to stop her.

"Oh no, young man. You're going to hear the lecture whether you want it or not."

"I already know what you're gonna say. I ain't at fault here. Seriously."

"Seriously?" Mac studied him. "You're lucky to be alive. And you can stop with the gangbanger speak. You know better than that." His eyes pleaded with her, but Mac couldn't give in. "You're lucky the bullet only hit flesh and didn't tear into any muscles or bone. You're lucky it was your lower leg and not your thigh, because otherwise you might have bled out. You're lucky you're not in the morgue with your two buddies."

"Wait, they ain't – aren't my buddies. I didn't know those guys. Honest. We were coming out of the Below –"

"I know. A bar. You're underage."

"I drank one beer."

Mac folded her arms across her chest. "Go on."

"So we were coming out, and these two guys stopped us. I saw one of 'em wearing a blue bandana, and I knew they was – were bangers. I told Oscar we needed to get going, but the one with the bandana, he was a big dude, he says he wants money. I backed away and just then this car comes by and I hear a bunch of pop, pop, pops. Me and Oscar hit the deck. It was over in like a second, and the car took off and the two dudes were dead. Mac, I swear I didn't have anything to do with them."

Tears formed in his eyes and Mac gave in, pulling Jace into a hug. She sat on the edge of his bed and soothed him as he cried. "I believe you. You scared the shit out of me. That's all."

"It scared the shit out of me, too."

"Have you talked to Florence?"

Jace turned his head so it rested on her shoulder. His voice barely a whisper, he said, "She kicked me out. Said I'm eighteen now and I need to get out."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"Oscar was there and gave me a lift to his place. My stuff's over there. I figured I'd call you on Monday when the shelter opens up. No sense in ruining your weekend, too."

Mac held him tighter. "Damn it, Jace. You know better. You have my cell number so you can call me whenever. Promise you won't do that again."

"Which part?" He pulled away from her, and the sincere expression on his face made her smile.

"All of it. No going out with Oscar to a bar. No getting shot, and no deciding to call me on Monday when you need me that minute. Clear?"

"Yeah."

She handed him a tissue and waited as he wiped the tears from his face and blew his nose. "You're coming home with me tonight."

"Why? I can go to Oscar's. They said he could go home after giving a statement. He's probably there now."

"Why is he home when you're here?" Mac asked. "Jace, I know you and Oscar went to grade school together, but Oscar isn't much better for you than your aunt. He got kicked out of school for doing drugs. There's no way I'm going to let you stay with him."

"He ain't that bad, and he don't make me do drugs with him. He knows I'm clean. Besides, I don't got any place to go."

"Yes, you do. We'll go over and get your stuff from Oscar's, then you're coming to my house. You know I've got two guest rooms for this kind of thing."

"You don't have nobody there right now?" Jace raised one eyebrow and gave her a half smile.

"As in a girlfriend? You know better. I don't get why you kids think I'm some kind of female Romeo."

"Well, you're hot. I mean, like, in a good way. Like most dudes would want to do you. So I figured the chicks would feel the same way."

"That's such a guy thing to say." She stood up. "I'm going to get some coffee then find out when we can spring you. I'll be back in a few minutes. Don't go anywhere."

"Funny."

MAC AND JACE got to her home at an ungodly hour. She settled him in her guest bedroom and lay down for a few hours of sleep. When the alarm sounded at seven, she wasn't sure she'd slept at all. Dressed in her T-shirt and undies, Mac dragged herself toward the bathroom. She peaked into the guest room to find that Jace wasn't there.

Panic gripped her, though she tried hard to tamp it down. Mac hurried to the kitchen, where she found Jace eating a bowl of cereal at the table. "Shit."

"What?" He stopped eating, his eyes wide as if he'd done something wrong. "I got hungry and —"

"No, no. It's fine. I didn't realize — I wasn't sure where you were."

"You told me to stay here."

"I know," Mac joined him at the table. "You're up early."

Jace took a long drink of milk before saying, "I always am. It makes Aunt Florence crazy."

"Did you get enough sleep?"

He shrugged. "Guess so. I got a chemistry test today I can't miss. It's okay that I go to school, right?"

"Of course." Mac joined him at the table, watching him shovel in the cereal as though he were starving. "I'll drive you there. No sense in you walking any more than you need to."

"Cool. Can I take some of this cereal with me?"

"You want to take it with you? Why?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead he stared at the bowl. "I get hungry around eleven. I thought it'd be a good snack. It's okay, though."

"Please tell me you have lunch at school." He shook his head, not meeting her eyes. Mac wanted to find that bitch aunt of his and slap the crap out of her. How could she send a growing boy to school without lunch? No wonder he acted starved. "Okay, I'll give you money for lunch today. We can go to the store after I'm off work tonight and get you food, for here and for school."

"I don't want to be trouble. Like I said —"

"You aren't any trouble, and this is what we're doing."

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Finish your cereal. I need a quick shower and we'll take off."

"YOU DID WHAT?" Kristy Baker, Mac's best friend since grade school, shouted into the phone.

Mac's headache increased with each word from Kristy's high-pitched voice. Not the best way to begin her morning.

"Are you insane?" Kristy asked. "You can't have a young boy staying at your house. Mac, that's beyond inappropriate."

"What was I supposed to do? Let him stay with Oscar? Try to get Aunt Florence to take him back? Not a lot of options here."

"But he's in your house. And he's a kid. What are people going to say? What if they decide you're a pedophile?"

Mac took a deep breath and let it out. "I would hope they'll say I'm a good person for making sure he's safe and sound. And he's eighteen now. Nothing illegal about that age so I can't be a pedophile." She heard Kristy take a breath, and cut off her rant. "I sent him to school today with instructions to not be the tough guy about surviving a drive-by. Last thing he needs is to win friends because he got shot and lived to tell about it. I need to make sure he gets through this last semester of school. He's going to NKU in the fall."

"I know, Mac. God love ya, but I worry. Is he staying with you until September?"

"Probably. I'll make sure Child Protective Services knows what's going on in case they get a kid they want me to foster. I'm going to need to focus on Jace for a while." She glanced at her watch. "I need to head to work. Stop by for lunch?"

"Of course."

Mac slipped the phone into her jeans pocket. She couldn't stop focusing on Jace and his future, debating whether to let him stay with her. But Jace didn't have any family worth a damn, and she wasn't going to kick him onto the street. He had a future ahead of him. His partial scholarship to Northern Kentucky University along with the grants he received would set him on the path to a future, one he'd never have with Florence.

Right or wrong, she'd made the decision and Mac planned to take Jace shopping after dinner. He'd need a long list of things, and she hoped her credit card could handle it.

THE OTR COMMUNITY Center was situated on East Liberty Street in the heart of Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati. Mac chose the location to establish her center because it put her closest to the kids she wanted to help. She'd spent ten years working for Hamilton County Human Services before realizing that the long arm of government couldn't do enough to assist kids.

Five and a half years on, the OTR gained influence in the area and a lot of respect from parents and civic leaders, most of it due to the single best decision Mac made – hiring Cindy Hannah as her assistant director and PR manager. She didn't think she could survive without her.

Mac stepped into the lobby and stopped dead in her tracks when Cindy greeted her. To call Cindy a force of nature would be a gross understatement. She was high-spirited and could push through a brick wall if need be. Cindy glowered and Mac cringed. She stood toe-to-toe with Mac, her head tilted back slightly to glare into Mac's eyes. Those grey blue beauties narrowed, and Mac felt the way she did when her dad admonished her for whatever regrettable thing she'd just done.

Cindy planted her hands on her full hips and lit into Mac. "Ever heard of a phone? Since they come in those tiny sizes these days, I figure you must have one in your pocket at all times. All the irresponsible kids have them pretty much sealed into their hands."

"Cindy, I –"

She raised a hand, "No!"

Mac closed her mouth.

"You talk later. I talk now. Don't you ever forget to call me again if something like this happens. In five years, I've never had to hear about anything secondhand but today – first thing this morning – that blowhard, Franklin, at Children's Services leaves a voice mail. Franklin. Not you."

"What –"

"You didn't bother to call."

Mac regretted speaking when Cindy narrowed her eyes at her. It was scary. "I had to hear from him that one of our boys got shot last night? Franklin, that stupid bastard, didn't leave a name or details, but said you signed a juvenile out from the ER. He's all worked up over it, saying you didn't have the right to do that." She sighed, running the fingers of one hand through her short-cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. "He wants you to call him. Immediately."

"If he calls back, hang up on him. Jace is eighteen –"

"Jace?" Cindy's face blanched. "Is he okay? What happened?"

Mac explained what she knew, repeating a few times that Jace was fine. "He's at school, and I'm sorry I didn't call you. We had a long night – well, morning."

Cindy nodded her acceptance of the apology. "Franklin is going to run with this. He's been gunning for you since he found out you and Steph were dating."

"I know." Mac headed to her office. "He can bite me. I'll e-mail Steph and tell her I can't take any foster kids for a while."

"You going to let Jace stay at your house?"

"Yep. It's the only solution that makes sense. Where else is he going to go? And with about six weeks left of school... I can't take away his one chance of making a life for himself."

"You're a good woman, Mackenzie. How 'bout I get you a cup of coffee?"

"Caffeine would be wonderful. I'll love you forever."

"You damn well should. Now get an email sent so that blowhard doesn't call us again. And get a hold of Pepper. He's called here three times. Why don't you get to work at eight? It would make my job easier."

"Because it would make your job easier." Mac ducked the backhanded jab from Cindy and stepped into her office.

THREE HOURS AND a half-dozen calls later, the door to Mac's office opened and Kristy Baker bounced in with a couple of McDonald's carry-out bags.

"Lunch is served." She placed the bags on Mac's desk and flounced her petite frame into a chair. Her feet didn't reach the ground, and Mac found that funny every time. She tried not to giggle, focusing instead on Kristy's expressive brown eyes. Something was wrong, because she wouldn't look at Mac.

Kristy flipped her long golden locks behind her back and crossed her legs at the knees.

When they were little, Mac wanted hair like Kristy's. She considered the reddish brown of her own hair boring. Whenever she'd complain, Kristy would remind Mac that her eyes, which were light brown with tiny yellow flecks in them, were her best feature. Kristy liked to say the flecks were gold, proving the beauty of Mac's soul.

"The usual?" Mac asked.

"Of course. Your ever-boring number one, with a diet coke. Though why you get a diet coke with all that fat is beyond me."

"I'm watching my weight."

"Whatever. Eat up."

"So, how did it go with the oncologist?" Mac asked.

Kristy hesitated long enough that Mac glanced up from her lunch.

"Not as good as I'd hoped it would be."

Mac pushed away her food and leaned back in the chair. "More radiation?" Mac's chest clenched. Kristy's face was colorless, and she wouldn't meet Mac's gaze.

"No. I'm not going through that again." Kristy played with the hem of her skirt. She'd gone through four months of chemo and radiation the previous year to rid her body of aggressive brain cancer. Two weeks ago, the headaches that originally led the doctors to find the cancer had returned.

"Kris, what did he say?"

"It's back." Her deadpan voice disturbed Mac. "And bigger than before."

"Then you've got to do the chemo—"

"No." Kristy raised her eyes, wet with tears. "I can't. I just grew my hair back." She tried to soften her words with that bit of a joke, but Mac knew better. Kristy was frightened.

Mac came around the desk and squatted beside her. "We'll do this together. Same as last time. I'll even shave my head to show support."

Kristy placed a shaky hand on Mac's shoulder. Her lower lip quivered as she spoke. "It won't work. He said I could go through it and maybe get a few more months of life, but that'd be all."

"I—but at least you'd have that much more time."

"Mac, you're my best friend. Have been since we were five years old. But I'm done fighting this. I want to live whatever is left of my life the way I want to. Without being constantly sick and tired. I want to travel, see the world, go to Paris."

"Paris? How can you talk about that right now? If you don't do the treatments you'll die." Mac stood up and paced.

"I'm dying anyway. Don't you get it? I want to do this on my terms." Kristy rose and moved into Mac's path, her hand held up like a traffic warden. Mac gazed down at her. Kristy wasn't quite five feet tall and maybe weighed ninety pounds. She'd always been tiny, but that never stopped her from doing what she wanted. Mac saw the determination in her eyes and understood this time was no different.

"Your terms. I get that, but I don't want you to die." She angrily swiped at her own tears. "Kris, you're too young to die. How can you die before you ever reach fifty? You're all the family I have. What am I supposed to do without you?"

"You still have your brothers and sister."

"None of which I'm close to. You're the most important person in my life. Seriously, Kris. I don't know what to do."

"You'll be fine. I promise. Besides, that's a long way off." Kristy placed her delicate hands on Mac's arms. "And we've got lots to do before then."

"How long?"

"Awhile."

"Kristy Belle Baker, how long did he say?"

Kristy glared at Mac and stepped back from her. "I wouldn't let him. Mackenzie, you know me better than that. You think I'm going to let some doctor put a time limit on my life? Seriously?"

"But how will we know – I mean, how can we –"

"There's a sentence in there dying to come out." Kristy slapped Mac's arm when she didn't laugh.

"Ow!"

"I'm trying to lighten the mood here. A little help would be nice."

"You just told me you're dying. You can't expect me to be in a happy mood now."

"I can and I do. Remember, on my terms. You're either with me or you're not, but I'm not going to go out all sour and depressed. I plan to have fun. Now sit down and finish your lunch."

Mac obliged, but she couldn't find the desire to eat. "I'm serious when I say I don't know what I'm supposed to do here."

"It's okay. You're not any more ready for this than I am, but I do have a plan."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"See, that's better." Kristy reached into her purse and produced a single sheet of paper. "I have a bucket list."

"Bucket list?"

"Yes. Like in that movie. It's a list of things I plan to do. I'll finish the list, and if you're willing, I'd like you to help me."

Mac took the list and scanned it. The first entry mentioned the Eiffel Tower. "You want to go to King's Island? You've been there a million times. And we've been up on the Eiffel Tower a million times, too."

"You're so dense for a woman who's so intelligent. I don't mean the amusement park, I mean the real Eiffel Tower. As in Paris, France."

"You don't even have a passport."

"I'll have it in a few weeks. So, in the meantime, I plan to do some of the stuff a little farther down the list."

"Exactly when are you planning a trip to Paris?"

Kristy shrugged. "I figure we could go in June. It's during tourist season, but that's okay. Everything will be open, plus I have a friend who said she'd meet us there."

"Who do you know in Paris?"

"Actually, she lives in Holland."

Mac set the list aside and folded her hands on the desk. "Lennie? Your Facebook buddy?"

"Will you stop calling her that. I told you the 'e' is pronounced with a long 'a.'"

"That's not how it's spelled," Mac said.

"It is if you speak Dutch." Kristy folded her arms across her chest. "But, yes. She's going to be in Paris."

"You want to go to France with someone you barely know?" Mac clearly thought it a bad idea.

"No. I want to go to France with my best friend and meet my Facebook buddy. Besides, we spent a whole weekend in New York last year. I feel like I know her almost as well as I know you."

"You can't know someone from one weekend and a few chats online."

"Fat lot you know. Lenie and I talk once a week. Her mother died a year ago of the same cancer I have. I'm not looking forward to telling her mine is back." Kristy met Mac's gaze. "So, are you coming with me or not?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really. I already told Cindy I'd be recruiting you and that she should be prepared for you to be gone a whole month." Kristy gave Mac that smile her parents were so proud of. "I have to get moving. I've got plans to make. I'll call you later, okay?"

"I guess so." Mac watched her reach for the door then turn back. "What?"

Kristy said, "Don't make plans for Thursday evening."

"Why not?"

"Karaoke night at The Docks. You're taking me there."

"I have to go to Karaoke?"

"Yep. You'll find it a bit farther down on my list. I always wanted to sing in front of someone who's not from our church, so I'm going to do that Thursday night. See ya."

Kristy swept out of her office and left a stunned Mac to process the news, the bucket list, and an impending trip to Paris, France.

FIVE O'CLOCK CAME and went without Mac making much of a dent in her paperwork. The OTR was on stable financial ground, something Mac hadn't expected to occur for another few years. The big issue now was how to keep it there. Donations, grants, fundraisers, all good ideas, but Mac needed more volunteers to get them done.

She needed to stay late and finish up. But she didn't feel like it. She wanted to get home to check on Jace and figure out how they were going to work out their new living arrangement.

Mac had risen to leave her office when Pepper stepped in. "Going somewhere?"

"Home. You?"

"Hoping to catch you before you leave." Pepper removed his hat and held it in front of him, running his fingers along the brim. "Got a minute?"

"Of course." Mac rested her hip on the edge of the desk. "What's up?"

"Are you really letting that boy stay with you? In your house?"

Mac took a deep breath and considered how to respond. Pepper was a good cop. One of the best she'd ever worked with. His kind eyes held hers as he patiently waited for a response. Pepper was older than Mac, maybe by a good twenty years. If not for his grayish hair, you'd think him younger by how he acted, and not well into his fifties. Years as a cop failed to harden him as it had a lot of his colleagues.

"Yes. Jace is staying in my guest room. He's eighteen, Pepper. Nothing illegal going on there."

"Never said there was." He lowered his tall, bulky frame into one of the chairs in front of her desk. "It doesn't look good, Mac. He's legal, but he's still young."

"And I'm still gay. Not sure there's anyone around here that doesn't know that by now. Especially after Imogene Anderson found out. Hell, there are probably people in Covington who know."

He gave a half-hearted laugh. "Okay. You win. Be careful. You never know if the shooters from that drive-by are still searching for him. I don't want you involved in all that."

"You're a sweetheart, Pepper, but I'm already involved." She slid off the desk as he stood. "Jace didn't know those guys, and I'd be willing to bet they don't know him. Seems to me they got the guys they were looking for. But if it makes you feel better, I promise to be careful."

"It does and you'd better be." He held the door for her as they left the office. "Hey, I got a couple of guys to come help me on Saturday. Figure the group of us can get work done on those back rooms pretty fast. You ought to have one nice big room when we're done."

"Pepper, that's awesome." She stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. She found his blush adorable. "I got twenty-four desks donated to us so we could have a real school room by next week. A teacher friend of Kristy's said he'd donate his time to set up a GED course."

"Congrats then. It'll all be worth it."

"Yeah. Now if we can get more money, I'll feel better."

They reached the front doors, and Pepper waited while Mac locked up. "I thought you got a couple of grants?"

"I did, but these grants are for specific things. That last one was for the computers, PowerPoint projector, and screens for the classroom. Can't spend it on anything besides tech stuff for the students. We need more donations. Something steady coming in."

They walked to the parking lot behind the building. "I can't help you with steady income, but I might have an idea for donations. A buddy of mine arranges the cops versus firefighters hockey game each year. Maybe we can schedule a baseball game at the high school and charge a small fee to attend. I'm sure Cindy can get the reporters out there."

"It can't hurt. You check with your buddy and get back to me. I'll take anything that might help." She put her laptop bag in her car and climbed in. "Anyone ever tell you what a cool guy you are?"

"Yeah. You." He put his hat back on and stood there until she started the engine.

Mac rolled the window down. "Thanks."

He waved her on like he was a traffic cop. "See you Saturday."

MAC OPENED HER back door and called out, "Jace, I'm home." No immediate response. She resisted the urge to yell for the kid. Instead, she put her laptop case on the kitchen table and headed for her guest room.

She heard the game's music long before she got there. Jace was comfortably seated on her floor rocker gaming chair, his leg propped up on the edge of her TV cabinet while he frantically tapped and pushed the buttons on the game controller. Mac stood right behind him, and he clearly didn't see or hear her.

"Jace, I'm home!"

The controller flew out of his hand. He turned a shocked face up at Mac, who doubled over with laughter.

"You scared the crap out of me!"

"Better clean it up then, because I won't."

Jace reached for the controller, but Mac got to it first. He said, "C'mon, Mac. I'm almost through this level."

"I can see that. Get finished up so we can get to the store. We need more food."

"Got it."

They were in and out of the grocery store in under an hour. Mac tried hard to say no to most of the junk food Jace wanted, convincing him to get more healthy options, though she did relent and buy cookies and chocolate milk.

Once back at the house, Mac showed Jace where to store everything. "I'm too tired to cook so I'll buy pizza for dinner. That'll be enough junk food for a few days. We could watch a movie, too. Sound good to you?"

"Cool. Can I pick the movie?"

"I'm probably going to regret this, but sure. What movie do you want?"

"Anything with Vin Diesel. That dude is awesome."

"Done." Mac herded him into the hallway. "Go wash up. I'll order the pizza."

Jace paused at the door to the bathroom. "Mac?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

Mac gave him a sideways smirk. "You're welcome." Being an emergency foster parent was one thing, but those kids stayed a few days while awaiting placement. Jace was a more permanent prospect.

She sat at the table. Mac wasn't entirely certain how that made her feel. She loved being an emergency foster parent. It gave her a chance to make a positive impact on the life of a child in a bad situation.

She'd been working with Jace so long that he already felt like a son. Did he think of her as a parent? Was she ready for that?

Jace sauntered into the kitchen. "How long have you lived here?" he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

"Most of my life. This is my parents' house. You're in their old room."

"Why would they move from here? I mean, this house is huge. I've never seen one with so many rooms."

Mac felt sad at that statement. The house contained three bedrooms, one bath, kitchen, and living room. An average home in an average neighborhood. Then again, raised in one of the city's poorest areas where an efficiency apartment might house a family of five or six, her house must look enormous. "It won't feel so big once you've been here awhile."

"I doubt that," he said, taking a seat at the table. "So, do your parents live nearby?"

A lump formed in her throat, and her chest constricted as it always did when she thought of her mom and dad. "No. They died seven years ago. I have two brothers and a sister, but they didn't want the house so I inherited it. I used the rest of my inheritance to buy the Over-the-Rhine Community Center building." She found him staring at her. His expression made her think he was caught between wanting to cry or ask more questions. "I'm okay to talk about them."

"You're an orphan."

"I am."

"That...they died at the same time?"

She nodded. "And it was very hard for me. Kristy helped me get through it. It wasn't long after that I bought the OTR and quit my job at the county." Mac now wondered who would be there to help her get through losing Kristy. She pushed that thought away as Jace spoke again.

"What'd you do there?"

"Children's Protective Services." She gave him a crooked smile. "I was good at it, too, but I didn't like all the rules. I guess I needed a big change, but I still wanted to help kids like you. So there you go. I opened up the OTR."

"Are you rich now? With the money from your parents?"

His directness surprised Mac, but she found it refreshing. It was the first time they'd talked about such personal things. She never realized Jace could be so curious. "No, I'm not rich. I spent most of the money on the community center so I still worry about money, but I'm better off than most people. I guess I'm lucky that my parents found a way to keep taking care of me after they were gone."

"Wish I'd been that lucky."

Mac stood and pulled him to his feet. "You are that lucky. You got me. Now, I'm going to order dinner. Anything you don't like on pizza?"

"Don't know. We only ever got pepperoni."

"Then let me broaden your horizons."

*THE FAST AND the Furious* kept Jace and Mac entertained through the first half of the evening. While Jace raved about Vin Diesel, Mac kept to herself her thoughts on the super hot Michelle Rodriguez. She'd seen the movie a dozen times, but it never got old. It made her happy Jace enjoyed it, too. The downtime provided Mac with the chance to let her mind relax and not re-live her lunch with Kristy.

While Jace cleaned up the mess they'd made from dinner, Mac decided to call Kristy. She answered on the first ring. "That was fast. Were you sitting on the phone?"

"No."

Mac heard the tears in that single word. "What happened?"

"Mom and Dad just left." Kristy's voice shook. "They don't understand, and nothing I said made any sense to them. Dad – Dad wants to get my medical power of attorney. He's angry that I signed a DNR today."

Mac was stunned. She never expected Kristy would have gone so far as to sign a Do Not Resuscitate order. It brought such reality to the entire situation. "I can't say as I blame him."

"Mac! He has no right to be angry at me. I didn't decide to die."

"Kris, chill out. You're his only daughter. You have to see it from his perspective. I mean, what parent wants to outlive their child?" Silence on the other end of the phone. Were it not for the occasional snuffle, Mac would have thought the connection lost.

"I know," Kristy said. "He doesn't get that I want the rest of my life to be quality. I don't want to just survive. I want to live."

"He'll get it. Give him time. Want me to come over?"

Another bit of sniffing. "No. I think I need to be alone tonight. Maybe I'll call and talk to him."

"Good idea. Call me and I'll be there in ten minutes if you need me."

"You better make it five minutes." Kristy tried to laugh. "Lunch tomorrow?"

"Of course. Later." Mac put her phone down and stared at it, as if that would make it ring. Kristy might have needed to be alone, but Mac needed to be with her.

"Hey."

The soft voice startled her and she turned to meet Jace's face. She'd forgotten that he was there. "Ready for another movie?" she asked.

"If you are." He sat beside Mac on the couch, his expression fearful. "Was that your girlfriend?"

"Were you listening to my phone call?"

"Uh, well, yeah. I mean, it's not like you're quiet."

"Gee, thanks. No. Kristy's been my best friend since we were five."

"Cool. I don't still know anyone since I was five. Well, just my cousin."

He stared at his hands, and Mac saw he had something else on his mind. She waited him out and hoped he'd open up to her. She didn't have to wait long.

"I love my aunt."

"I know."

"Why doesn't she love me, Mac? I never got in trouble. I always did my homework. I got good grades. I did my chores. I mean, I never gave her a minute of trouble." Tears welled up in his young eyes, and Mac put her arm around him.

"I wish I could tell you why. It's not fair and it's not your fault. You can't make someone love you, no matter what you do."

"Do you think my mamma would have loved me?"

Mac closed her eyes, careful of her word choice. Jace's mother, a meth addict, gave birth to him in prison. Florence took him in with the promise of more welfare money. Jace's mother died in a prison fight five months later. "I can't believe a woman could carry a child in her belly and not love him. It must have been hard for her to give you up. In her own way, I'm sure your mother loved you very much."

"Can I stay here?" He wouldn't bring his eyes up to meet hers.

Mac leaned back and regarded him. "I sort of thought that was the plan. You're heading to NKU in September, and you've got six weeks left of high school. Where else you gonna go?"

He shrugged, and again she waited for him to continue. "I don't have any other family. Least none I know about. You sure it's okay for me to stay?"

"It's not only okay, it's mandatory. I'm not letting your ass out of my sight until I drop you off at your dorm in the fall."

The hint of a smile crossed his features.

"I'm going to expect you home for as many weekends as you can manage and all the holidays. Deal?"

"Deal." He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his shirt, and Mac held back a comment. "Can we see another movie?" He asked. "I'm not tired yet."

"Sure. How about *Resident Evil*?"

His eyes lit up and that made Mac laugh. "Seriously? I've always wanted to see that one. I played the game at Oscar's but never seen the movie."

"Movies. Plural. I have them all, so what the hell. But only one tonight. You've got school tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am."