

AN ITCH FOR DANGER

(IZZIE DI SANTE MYSTERIES BOOK 3)

BY CHRISTA NARDI

CHAPTER 1

I paced around my small apartment above Cenare, the family restaurant I co-owned with my sister Chloe. I'd committed myself to keeping Cenare open and successful when our parents died. Still, my brain itched for a challenge. Feeding my passion for investigative reporting, unfortunately, was hit or miss. Lately, the most promising topics were political as election campaigns ramped up.

For me, digging into cold cases proved much more interesting than gathering dirt on political hopefuls. I grunted when a glance at the clock told me I needed to get downstairs. Although I'd scanned all the newsfeeds of recent murders or suspicious deaths, nothing grabbed my attention or made my pulse race. My search for my next story would have to wait.

Downstairs, I updated our sales data from the night before and projected our monthly sales receipts. We'd changed the menu and Brook was worried that might not be good for business. She was the oldest of our employees and worked at Cenare with my parents before my younger sister, Chloe, or I were born. I smiled at the projections. With Easter behind us and no big holidays coming up, we were back to business as usual with a positive outlook. If anything, business improved with the updated menu.

I switched to inventory as Chloe arrived. "Morning, Chloe."

"Good morning, Izzie. It's going to be a beautiful day." She handed me a plate and began to hum as she pulled out what she needed to prepare for lunch and dinner. Chloe was the foodie of the two of us and the chef for Cenare. Born four years apart, while I went to college for business and investigative journalism, her dream always centered on the restaurant. I'd made sure she followed her dream.

"This breakfast casserole is delish."

"Thanks. Ryan requested something less starchy." She chuckled. "He's gaining weight and doesn't like it. The casserole isn't low calorie, but it is high protein and low carb. Unfortunately, he's not alone dealing with weight gain. Now that I work eight-hour days and sit down for a full dinner, my pants are getting tighter."

I laughed. Of the two of us, she'd always been curvier than me. "Stop eating out?"

"Not unless I take home leftovers from here. Once I leave here, I need a break before I cook anything. Breakfast is about it, I'm afraid."

"You could certainly take home dinner for two."

"I know." She winked and her eyes twinkled. "If we don't eat out, I won't be inspired for new dishes to make Brook crazy. Anyway, we probably need to check inventory. I think there's a few things we need to order. Salmon for one thing. Izzie, there's something we need to talk about, too. But it will wait. Inventory first."

"I'll get started after I eat."

She'd mentioned something on her mind a few times. Then shied away from sharing. She turned and went to work. This was the quiet time of the day and I relished it. By the time I finished the inventory and gave it to Chloe, Brook arrived. Her color seemed off and the wrinkling around her nose with lowered eyebrows suggested she was in pain.

"Are you all right, Brook?"

"My side is bothering me. I'm just stiff."

Chloe and I exchanged glances. Brook was OCD about cleanliness and health safety but I had to ask. "Are you sick?"

She bristled. "Of course not. I wouldn't come to work if I were sick. Pulled a muscle or something."

"Why don't you sit in my office and try some of Chloe's casserole? Take it easy. Did you take anything for the pain?"

"No. I don't do drugs, Izzie. You should know better. I'm stronger than that."

I nodded and pointed her in the direction of my office. Without saying a word, I started the set up for lunch with tablecloths, napkins, and flatware. That left the bread baskets. I chalked off in my head all the things Brook usually handled, including making sure the bread was ready to go in the oven as we opened.

"Psst. Izzie."

I turned to Chloe. She smiled and tilted her head in the direction of my office. Hands together over her left shoulder, Brook's head rested on her hands, her eyes closed. I shook my head. Brook falling asleep was beyond unusual. For someone in her mid-fifties, she usually had as much or more energy than Chloe or me.

Worried, I kept busy and helped Chloe until my phone lit up and Henry's ring tone played.

"Hi, Henry."

Chloe waved me away and I stepped into the restaurant side.

"Hi, Izzie. I may have something for you. I'm not sure. Lucci, the instructor for my class, and Wheeling would sure appreciate some interference."

Henry and I met when I pursued a case in Halcyon Springs. He was my Uber driver once I arrived in Baltimore. Before that he'd been on the police department until he was injured. At loose ends, he'd since opted to get his private detective license. A retired police detective, Catherine Lucci taught the required courses he needed. Initially, I harbored some jealousy when he mentioned her so often. Once I found out she was Brook's age, I stopped worrying.

"Did they ask you to call me?" I wondered why Wheeling wouldn't call me directly. We'd worked together on a previous case and he'd been on the fringes of another case since.

“They didn’t ask me to call. They asked me if I thought the case was something you’d be interested in while they both groused about it.”

“Henry, what’s the story here, already?”

He chuckled. “Some time ago – maybe two months now – a young woman’s body surfaced in the Patapsco River over here. It feeds into the creek behind my house, when there’s enough rain.” Henry lives on the outskirts of Halcyon Springs, south of Baltimore.

“Anyway, the case landed on Wheeling’s desk.”

As he paused, I interrupted. “Did they identify her? What happened to her?”

“They identified her eventually. Her family filed a missing person report and it was shared statewide. The description matched and her sister identified her based on a butterfly tattoo on the small of her back. It was then confirmed with dental records and DNA. Stella Davies, twenty years old.”

“And?”

“No one knows how she ended up here. She’s not from Halcyon Springs. She lives in Crestview, on the west side of Baltimore. Her car was found on a deserted road a few weeks later, the keys in the ignition. Neither her purse, her phone, nor her wallet surfaced yet. Wheeling worked with the police department in Crestview. No one offered an explanation on why she would be at the river around the time she disappeared or who she knew in the area of the Patapsco even up north nearest to where she lived.”

“Did they rule out suicide?”

“Pretty much. Everyone Wheeler talked to said the same thing. First, no signs of suicide or emotional issues. Also, even if she hid it well, she wouldn’t have picked a river or any other body of water. She almost drowned at a camp when she was younger and was terrified of water. She’d have picked another means. Besides, she has a gun permit and a gun, so why go jump in a dirty river?”

“Did they find the gun?”

“At home, in the gun safe. She’s not old enough for a carry permit. From what Wheeling shared, the father made sure both daughters could shoot in case someone broke into the house when the parents weren’t home.”

“What else, Henry?”

“There was evidence she may have been assaulted prior to her death. It’s hard to put a time on when that occurred in relation to her death, though she died before she hit the water. The coroner concluded suspicious death. That shifted the case to homicide and Wheeling.”

“I’m guessing nothing came out of the investigation and this is a cold case. Why are you, Lucci, and Wheeling revisiting it? New evidence?” I couldn’t quite figure out where I fit in the case.

“Definitely a cold case with not much media attention. On the other hand, you might have caught the report of a drowning victim in Florida earlier this week. Also, a young woman, mid-twenties, and signs of a prior assault. No other similarities and they’ve already arrested someone. That initial report, however, brought Carly Davies to Halcyon Springs to ask for an update on her sister’s case. She also posted on social media what information she had and pleaded for anyone who knew anything to contact Wheeling or her. Yesterday, someone assaulted Carly and tried to abduct her.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yes, she’s okay. Shook. Two witnesses intervened as a guy tried to drag her to his car. Now she’s more determined to find out what happened to her sister than ever. With no new evidence and no clear connection between her assault and Stella’s death, Stella’s case remains closed. Wheeling came to talk to our class last night and brought it up. Have I captured your interest yet?”

I chuckled. “You always have my interest, Henry. If Wheeling can arrange it, I’ll be happy to meet with the sister. Not sure what good it will do other than letting her know she’s been heard. Is she still in Halcyon Springs?”

“Yes. If anything, her assault made her mad. When can you take time off? I miss you.” His voice softened with his last few words.

“I’ll try for Wednesday. Brook may be sick and that will complicate scheduling. Talk to you later?”

“Call me.”

I put my phone away as Jennifer and Heather joined me in the dining room, Patrick not far behind. Jennifer and Heather had worked at Cenare part time for the last five years or more. They often filled in if I needed to take time off to investigate a case. Both were hard workers. Patrick had joined us a few months back as Chloe’s assistant. Until then, she’d been working twelve-hour days.

“What’s with Brook?” Jennifer asked.

I shrugged. “We’ll have to work around her and try to keep her in the back.” To myself I added, “and get her to a doctor to be checked out.” In the meantime, on schedule, Cenare opened for lunch.