

CHAPTER 3



As Mac neared the small house at the corner of Second and Johnson, it was all she could do not to turn around and run the other way. She glanced in the mirror at the shiny bags of helium, and frustration turned her stomach.

The little monsters wouldn't get a chance to fly away at this point. Not when she'd gotten them this far. Mac closed the front door to her car before opening the back one.

Sam pulled into the driveway behind her.

"Freedom is not an option." Mac gave the helium balloons her sternest look and transferred them from the backseat to her tightfisted grip.

Sam came behind her. "They're beautiful."

"I guess." Mac peered at them.

"Before we go in, I should let you know Miss P told me about Nate."

Mac's stomach churned. "What did she say?"

"That you dated him in college and have been helping him get settled in Washington," Sam said. "Why didn't you tell me yourself?"

“I don’t know. I guess because Jake’s your brother, and ...”

“I told you before, all I care about is that you and my brother are happy, whether it’s together or with someone else.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure Jake and I aren’t together anymore—at least not as far as he’s concerned.”

“What makes you say that?” Sam pushed her hair behind an ear.

“I could tell. He’s upset because I didn’t call him when the guy attacked me and because I’ve got another bump on the head. He’s probably rethinking getting involved with me.”

“Mac, you’re crazy. You can’t help it if you get hit on the head. He’s upset with himself because he can’t keep you safe. Men are protective. It’s their nature.”

“Is Alan like that?” Mac shrugged her purse on her shoulder.

Sam laughed. “He gets mad if I get a splinter.”

“Yeah, well, let’s see how Jake feels after he meets Nate.” Mac opened the door to their offices. “Miss P, we’re back.” She maneuvered the balloons inside and pulled up short.

“Mac, let me in.” Sam pushed her to one side and let out a low whistle.

Twenty latex balloons in all the colors of the rainbow floated around the room. Where had they come from?

“Aren’t they marvelous?” Miss P waved her hand in the air and set the bright orbs into motion. “Nate bought them for us. I do believe it makes the place more festive.” Miss P took the shiny helium balloons from Mac and tied weights to the ends of their strings. “Oh my, these are perfect.”

It was then Mac noticed him standing a few feet to her left. Nathaniel Xander Westcott III. His smoky gray eyes held their usual gleam, which always made her feel guilty—as if they shared a secret. Did he look at all women like that, or only her?

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” Sam held out her hand. “I’m Samantha Majors.”

Nate shifted his gaze to Sam, and a grin sprang across his face. “I’m glad we finally meet. My aunt has told me so much about you.”

“I know a lot about you as well.” Sam disengaged her hand from his. “Thanks for helping with our party.”

“My pleasure. Mac and I go way back. Did she tell you we dated in college?”

His warm voice washed over Mac, and her pulse ratcheted. She flashed a pleading look at her friend and partner.

Sam nodded and pulled Mac farther into the room. “Let’s see what’s left to be done.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome,” Sam murmured loud enough for her to hear.

“The table looks great.” Mac smoothed a wrinkle on the white tablecloth. “It’s all ready for the food.” She scanned the area. “And I like the way you placed the chairs.”

“That was Nate’s idea.” Miss P beamed at her nephew. “He felt it would be best to put them in sets of two or three, with a small table near each grouping.”

“Good idea.” Samantha flashed a smile at him. “What else needs to be done?”

Miss P surveyed the room. “I’ll dust and run the vacuum one more time Saturday morning, but I don’t see much else. A few last-minute details may arise.”

“Okay.” Sam clapped her hands. “Mac, you and I have work to do.” She shot Mac a work-with-me-here look.

“Yes.” *Sam to the rescue again.* “If you’ll excuse us, we’ll be in our offices. Knock if you need anything.” She hurried across the floor.

“May I speak to you a moment?” Nate stepped between Mac and her office door.

Mac’s heart skipped a beat. She pressed her lips together in frustration at her lack of control.

“But if you don’t have time ...” Nate retreated a step.

“No, no. My head is hurting.” She forced a smile. “Come in. It’s time for more pain medicine.”

“Which brings me to what I want to talk to you about.” He followed her into her office and sat down. “I’m offering you my services as your attorney for free.”

“Why would I need an attorney?” Had the bump on her head addled her brain?

“When the police find this guy—”

“Nate, we have prosecutors for that.”

“I know.” He rolled his eyes. “But you hit the guy, right? He might decide to sue, and if he does, I want to defend you.”

Mac’s mouth dropped open. Was that even a possibility? “Sue *me*?”

“Yes.” Nate placed his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands together. “It happens all the time.”

Mac studied him for a moment. “Nate, I appreciate your concern for me, but I’ll deal with being sued if it happens.” She pushed away from her desk. “Thanks for the offer.”

Nate stood. “You’re welcome.” The corners of his mouth lifted in a cockeyed grin. “Just taking care of old friends. I’ll let you get back to work.” He sauntered out the door.

Mac collapsed into her chair. Why were her times with Nate so emotionally exhausting? Just because they had a thing in college didn’t mean she still cared for him in a romantic way. Did it?

Mackenzie pulled a photo from her top drawer. A girl with long hair lounged in the arms of a boy with a beard, mustache,

and hair almost as long as the girl's. They smiled at the camera as if they didn't have a care in the world.

What they had wasn't love, but they'd been close, and for a time, after she'd graduated, she missed having Nate in her life. He seemed different now—beyond short hair and being clean shaven. He was more self-assured.

In college, despite his looks, Nate was kind and respectful, and she felt safe with him. She glanced at her door. This version of her former boyfriend still had those same traits, but he wasn't a boy any longer. He was a man. And she responded to him as a woman does to a man, whether she wanted to or not.

Miss P stuck her head in the door. "Mr. Fischer's on the line."

"I'll take it in Sam's office." Mac got there as the phone rang. "Mr. Fischer? Hang on. I'm putting you on speaker." She glanced at Sam. "How can we help you?"

"I have a curious problem and could use your expertise."

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"It's hard to explain. Would you be available to meet?"

Sam tapped some keys on her computer and brought up their calendar.

"When did you have in mind?"

"I've got back-to-back meetings tomorrow, and you have your party on Saturday. How is Sunday afternoon for you?"

Mac squinted at the computer screen. "Two o'clock?"

"Good." He paused. "By the way, I may not make it to your party. I'll explain on Sunday."