

Chapter One

Maura's cell phone jangled as she came in the back door. She tugged off her gardening gloves and picked it up from the kitchen counter. "Hi, Jan."

"We're at Polly's house. Get over here right away. And be sure to comb your hair first. Hurry."

"What...?" But the call had ended. She went to her front window and looked to where Polly's house sat across the street and catty corner to her house. A moving truck filled the driveway of the house next door and directly across the street from her own. They probably wanted to spy on the new neighbor and gossip with what little they could know. It would do no good to call Janice back and say she wasn't coming, so she grabbed her keys and locked the door behind her.

When she crossed the street, two men carried a sofa from the truck into the house. Polly's front door flew open, and she waved Maura to hurry. "Come on." Polly stared at her. "What were you doing?"

"Gardening."

She followed Polly to where Janice stood at the kitchen window in the back of the house. "What's going on?"

"Someone bought the Jensen house," Polly said.

"I know. And...?"

"He's in the back yard setting up fencing for something. Look at this." Janice pulled her arm and shoved her up to the window.

A man wearing jeans and a fitted tee shirt hoisted sections of metal fencing and anchored it into place. He was tall and tanned, with muscle. "So? They must have a dog, and one of the movers is putting up an outdoor kennel."

"Not one of the movers," Polly said. "They're wearing blue shirts with the company logo."

"I have it on good authority that is the new owner—retired Marine Major Benjamin Ableman." Janice sighed "I wonder how able the man is." Then she turned and stared at Maura. "Oh, for heaven's sake. You have half your flower bed smeared on your face." She licked her thumb and began to wipe away the dirt.

Maura batted her hand away. "Don't rub spit on me."

Polly appeared carrying a tray with a plate of cookies, four glasses, and a pitcher of iced tea. "Here, you take this." She shoved the tray toward Maura. "We're the welcoming committee."

Maura juggled the tray, nearly spilling the pitcher. "No, we're not."

"We are today," Janice said.

"Why do I have to carry the tray?"

"Because I'm married, and Polly's dating someone," Janice said.

Maura closed her eyes and let out breath. "Not this again."

"Trust me, you'll thank us. Ooh, look. He's got the last piece in place. We need to get over there." Polly whipped open her back door, and Janice gave Maura a nudge.

When the three of them stumbled out onto Polly's deck, the man straightened and turned, then smiled and waved.

"Oh, my God," Polly whispered.

"Probably not—but close," Janice added.

“Hi, neighbor.” Polly waved and led the trio across the yard. “Welcome to Forest Glen. You look like you could use a cold drink. Iced tea?”

He walked to the low hedge that separated the properties, removing a pair of work gloves. “Thank you. That would be great.”

Maura held the tray while Polly took a glass and held it for Janice to fill. “I’m Polly Riley. This is my house. And this is Janice Westfield and Maura Carlton. Maura lives right across the street.”

He took the glass and lifted it. “Ben Ableman. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.” He chugged down the tea.

Maura watched his Adam’s apple bobbed. She caught herself swallowing along with him.

“Is your wife with you?” Polly asked. “Perhaps she’d like a glass of tea.”

He shook his head. “Just me and Captain.”

“The captain? Would he want a cold drink?”

He grinned. “Captain is my dog. A German Shepherd. The kennel is temporary until I put up a security fence that he can’t jump. He’s an old guy, so his jumping days are about over. But I want to keep him safe.” He set the glass back onto the tray. “Thanks. That hit the spot. I’d better get back to work. Nice meeting you ladies.”

He strode back to the kennel and picked up a mallet to hammer spikes into the ground to secure the corners. Muscles rippled. The tee shirt stretched and clung. The sheen of perspiration on his arms and in his steel grey hair shimmered in the sunlight. Maura was mesmerized and tucked errant strands of hair behind her ears. That grin of his had exposed an adorable dimple.

“Maura?” Janice snapped her fingers.

“Huh? What?”

Janice glanced at Polly and both women laughed. “Oh, yeah,” Janice said. “She noticed.”

“Noticed what?” Maura asked.

“Everything about that man,” Janice said as she turned for the house again.

The three women refilled their own glasses with tea and sat on stools at the center island.

“So,” Polly said. “We heard the major is single—as he confirmed—retired from the military and does house flipping as a hobby. That means he’s probably very handy.”

Maura despised gossip, so she never engaged in it. She just let Polly and Janice talk while she listened. She got the scoop on all the comings and goings in Forest Glen. She already knew a little about Major Ableman because she was vice-president of the Homeowners Association.

“We probably should have warned him about the HOA. They’ll never let him install a security fence around his back yard. It would have to be at least eight or nine feet high, I’d imagine,” Janice said. “Unless you vouch for him, Maura. You’re the vice-president.”

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