

Chapter 1

Sitting in her car at the curb was not going to get Makenna Johnson this position. She took a deep breath and stared at the white stucco house. Four women waited inside to see if she passed muster as an acceptable caregiver for their mother-in-law's convalescence.

Marietta Santoro. The world's bossiest busybody.

Makenna's late husband's derisive voice echoed in her head. But then, Maurice Hamelin never had anything good to say about anyone, his wife included. She'd stuck with him, though, a man thirty years her senior. If she could handle Maurice, she could handle Marietta.

And she needed this job.

Show time.

She breathed a quick prayer, slid out of her car, and strode up the walk. Before she could reach for the doorbell, the door swung open, and a woman of about sixty offered a bright smile.

"Hi. You must be Makenna? I'm Genevera Santoro. Come on in."

Makenna gave the woman's hand a firm shake. "Yes, that's me. Pleased to meet you."

Genevera introduced her cohorts: Grace, Winnie, and Betta. Together, they made up the local contingent of the old lady's daughters-in-law.

Makenna smiled and nodded at each of them in turn before taking in the living room packed with the evidence of a full life. Furniture, knick knacks, and two walls crammed with ornately framed photos of graduations and weddings and babies.

Maurice had rejected her notion of hanging anything, even an old painting from the thrift store. Certainly not portraits of his sons, since he'd despised them. The feeling had been mutual.

"Please, have a seat." Genevera motioned toward a club chair. "Can I get you a coffee?"

"No, thank you." This wasn't a social call. Makenna perched on the edge of the seat and launched into her spiel. "I achieved my Bachelor of Nursing at Gonzaga U ten years ago and worked at the nursing home for several years before taking time away to nurse my late husband through his final days. Since then, I've picked up shifts at Deaconess Hospital, but nothing permanent full-time, so I applied with the home-care agency."

"Your references are impeccable," Winnie assured her. "And the agency highly recommended you."

They'd better have.

"Tell us a bit about yourself." Grace leaned forward. "What are your hobbies?"

Makenna blinked. Hobbies? Who had time for anything like that? "I prefer to work."

Genevera smiled. "You can't work all the time, though. Do you enjoy reading? Knitting? Gardening?"

Right, the Bridgeview area of Spokane was particularly big on gardening. Makenna had circled the block earlier and caught glimpses of Marietta's lush backyard through the tall fence. She'd probably be expected to help with the old lady's yard. Marietta sure wouldn't be doing much over the next few months, not with a cracked pelvis, broken ribs, and her arm in a cast after a nasty fall a couple of weeks ago.

"Sure, I like gardening." Makenna liked whatever would get her this position. Anything to get away from the head nurse on her ward, who seemed to have it in for her. As if Makenna could help attracting crude remarks from little old men. Maurice had been adept at them, too.

"And you're okay with moving in for a few months? From what the doctor at the rehab center said, Mamma will need assistance through the remainder of the year."

“Yes, I’m fine with that. I can sub-let my apartment.”

“It entails more than nursing.” Winnie eyed her. “Cooking, cleaning, running the household...”

“No problem.” She might not be the most inventive cook, but she could get meals on the table. It would work out. And cleaning? That filled any spare time. She already itched to dust the baseboards and straighten a crooked frame. “Which is your mother-in-law’s favorite chair? Will she be able to access it from her wheelchair?”

Winnie pointed to a wide armchair with low arms. “She loves to sit there where she can watch the street. She usually has a knitting project on the go, but I guess she won’t be doing that for a while. Not with her arm in a cast.”

“You’ll need to remove one of the side tables by her chair.” Makenna glanced around the living room. “The entire space is too crowded for a wheelchair.”

“Yes, the agency did a home study.” Genevera nodded. “We have a list of requirements from a ramp to the front door to grab bars in her bathroom to... well, the list is long.”

“We have a family work day planned,” put in Grace.

“Good. What day do they expect to discharge her?” As in, what would Makenna’s start date be?

“Wednesday afternoon, if we’re ready. It will be a push for us, but they need the rehab bed for someone else.”

“Does that work for you?” asked Winnie. “The agency said they could provide a wheelchair-accessible van to bring her home.”

Today was Friday. Makenna nodded. “Wednesday is fine. I can pick her up from the unit and bring her here. I’d prefer to move in the day before if at all possible. At least, if I’ve met with your approval, and you’d like to hire me?” She held her breath a moment, watching the women glance at each other. *Please, please, please.*

“May I show you around the house?” asked Betta. She’d been rather quiet through the whole interview.

“Sure.” That would give the others time to consult behind her back. Whatever. Makenna rose and followed Betta into a large kitchen lined with granite countertops. “This is nice.” More than nice. It was a dream kitchen for a serious cook, probably four or five times the size of the one in Makenna’s apartment. But then, she normally made do with quick, basic meals.

“Mamma loves to cook.” Betta pointed out the doors to a patio where grapes dangled from the roof supports. Beyond it lay a yard lined with raised beds filled with tomato plants and others Makenna didn’t recognize. “And she loves her fresh ingredients.”

Don't worry, her grandchildren will take care of most of this garden."

Whew. The sound of a gate clicking caught her attention, and a man in denim shorts and a gray T-shirt rounded the corner of the house.

"There's Tony now. Have you met him before?"

Makenna shook her head, but she wasn't sure. All the Santoro guys looked a lot alike with their wiry builds, dark curly hair, and striking blue eyes.

"Tony lives in the basement right now. He's very busy with his new restaurant. You may have noticed Antonio's just a few blocks away?"

Makenna blinked. She'd driven by at times over the winter and watched the transformation of a nondescript building to an inviting Mediterranean-style villa. She should have guessed it was a Santoro enterprise. "Yes, I've seen it."

"Don't worry. My nephew isn't here much. He won't be in your way."

Just the thought of someone else coming and going at odd hours was enough to be in Makenna's way.

Betta opened the patio door and leaned out. "Tony! I'd like you to meet one of the applicants for nursing Nonna."

His head came up, and he met her gaze with assessing eyes. "Hi, there." He came inside the back door. "I'm Tony. And you are...?"

“Makenna Johnson,” supplied Betta.

His eyebrows rose. “Johnson? That’s not what I heard.”

Makenna straightened her shoulders and stared back. “I go by Johnson again.” There was no keeping Maurice a secret, not when she’d lived less than a mile from here for six years as his wife. Besides, Grace Santoro, at least, knew who she was. “It’s the name on my nursing diploma.”

Betta’s gaze zipped between them. “Is there a problem, Tony?”

“I don’t know. Is there a problem... Ms. Johnson?”



What had come over him? His words sounded challenging. Mean, even. So not like him.

Tony Santoro had known his aunts were hiring a nurse for Nonna. His cousin Jasmine had told him her late father-in-law’s fourth and final wife was on the short list of prospects. She’d even mentioned that Makenna was quite a lot younger than Maurice had been.

He hadn’t been prepared for a blond bombshell.

Back when he and his sister had been kids, Gina had been obsessed with her fashion doll collection.

This nurse jogged his memory with her long wavy hair, tanned skin, and hourglass figure.

Her chin came up and steely gray eyes bored into his. “There is no problem, Mr. Santoro.”

“Tony?” Aunt Betta was all but wringing her hands. “What’s going on?”

He hadn’t reacted this strongly to anyone in years, negatively or positively. And this was definitely negative. How could someone who looked so... perfect... take good care of his beloved grandmother? How many hours did she spend on those fingernails, anyway?

Tony turned away. “I need to pick the tomatoes before I head down to the restaurant. We’re featuring Caprese tonight.”

“Tony?” asked Aunt Betta again.

“He may have known me as Makenna Hamelin.” The nurse’s words clipped out. “I believe my resume mentions my time as Maurice Hamelin’s nurse through his final days.” She took a deep breath. “Your sister-in-law Grace knew I was married to him.”

Tony couldn’t resist one last poke. “What did he die of, Ms. Johnson?”

“Cirrhosis of the liver, Mr. Santoro. He was a heavy drinker, and it caught up to him.” She leaned a little closer, her heels putting her eyes on level with his. “If you think I married him for his money or helped him to his death, you accuse me unjustly.”

“From what I heard, he had no money.”

“Exactly.”

“So why did you marry a man old enough to be your father?”

He’d thought her gaze direct and steely before, but it sharpened considerably. “I don’t see it as any of your business, Mr. Santoro.”

“You’re right. Excuse me.” He meant from the rudeness of his question as well as from Nonna’s breakfast room. Tony reached for the knob on the patio door behind him.

Makenna turned to Aunt Betta. “The information truly didn’t seem to be necessary on a professional document. My marital history has no bearing on whether or not I’m a good nurse.”

Aunt Grace strode around the table, hooked her hand around Tony’s arm, and guided him outside. The door clicked shut behind them.

Tony felt like a little kid who’d been caught misbehaving as he looked down into his aunt’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“We need a nurse for your nonna, Tony.”

He braced himself. “I know.”

“And, frankly, she’s the best of the lot who applied. I knew she’d been Maurice’s wife. If anything, I applaud her for staying with him until the end. The man cannot have been easy to live with.”

That was a different spin, but it made sense. Tony nodded.

“However, we’ll keep looking if there’s going to be a problem between you and her. There was another woman closer to my age who applied, but she had back surgery three years ago, and I’m worried she might not be strong enough to assist Nonna. Plus, she doesn’t wish to move in.”

Nonna wasn’t a tiny woman. Sturdy might be the most polite way to put it.

“So we need to know if it’s a problem. Because we need the best possible person for your nonna, but you do live here, too.”

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m really not here very much. The restaurant takes up so much of my time.”

Aunt Grace nodded. Waited.

He shoved his hands through his hair. “Do what’s best for Nonna. It’s just for a few months. I’ll stay out of Makenna’s way.”

“What about her struck you negatively?”

It seemed petty to say because of her looks. There was only so much a person could do about the... assets... God had given them. Although it looked to him like Makenna was both aware of her features and knew how to use them to her best advantage.

“She reminds me of someone.” A fashion doll, but Aunt Grace didn’t need to know that. Besides,

would a real airhead have a nursing degree? Unlikely. “It’s not her fault. If you truly believe she’s the best person for Nonna, go ahead.”

Aunt Grace squeezed his arm. “Thank you. I’ll let you know what we decide, but we are leaning toward offering her the position. Either way, we’ll have a family workday on Wednesday to arrange things for a wheelchair and a hospital-style bed for Nonna. I hope you’ll be able to spare a few hours to help out, but if not, we understand.”

No doubt all his cousins would take the day off work and show up en force, but could Tony do the same? Nope. Not without closing Antonio’s and giving his staff the night off. “I can pitch in for a couple of hours in the morning. Or I can fix lunch for the work crew if that’s more help.” Nonna’s kitchen was a pleasure to cook in.

“Lunch would be great. Thank you.” Aunt Grace turned toward the door then glanced back at him. “You won’t regret having Makenna around, Tony. It will be a relief for all of us, including you, to have someone caring for Nonna.”

He looked through the glass door to see Makenna and the aunts watching him and Aunt Grace. Makenna’s perfect eyebrows rose as she stared coolly at him.

Tony stifled a snort. Relief to have her around? Not hardly.

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