

WITH NEIGHBORS LIKE THESE

by Linda Lovely

EXCERPT

ONE

Kylee Kane

Friday, September 25, 6:30 p.m.

“Mom, are we eating at the kitchen table?”

Silence.

Not again.

I look outside. Mom’s standing by the mailbox, tugging on the blue stocking cap that keeps her nearly-bald head warm.

Crap. I said I’d get the mail. She’s a stubborn old cuss. While her skin now looks like wrinkle-mapped parchment, those cagey blue eyes still flash.

Mom stops midway to the house to read something. A postcard? She looks up. Her expression is one I rarely see. Fear? Distress? Definitely bad news.

Ted’s Mustang pulls into the drive, and Mom stuffs whatever worried her into a pocket. Ted jumps out, and Mom’s thin arms embrace him.

Thirty years ago, Ted was my kid brother’s pimpled, bratty best friend, a snot-nosed pest. Last year, when we met up again in the Lowcountry, I couldn’t believe it. These days he could model for GQ. A lot happens when decades pass between sightings.

I open the front door. Mom’s slightly out of breath as Ted helps her up the stairs. While her cancer’s in retreat, chemo has taken a toll.

Ted glances my way and grins.

“Hi, Kylee. See you’re still having trouble getting your mother to behave. Bet you long for those Coast Guard days when you could give orders and know they’d be obeyed.”

“Yep, some days I’m sorry I retired,” I answer.

Mom waves her hand like she’s shooing flies. “Let’s talk about something interesting. Ted, what do you hear from your son?”

“Grant’s great, sends lots of love. Says your care package made life worth living last week. Freshman year’s tough at the Citadel.”

At six-feet, Ted towers over my five-foot-two mother. Though he’s forty-seven, three years my junior, only a hint of silver threads his thick black hair. His hazel eyes seem to change color with his mood or maybe it’s just the light. Tonight, they’re green.

Ted looks worried as he studies Mom. He was eight when his own mother died. After that Mom included him in all our family activities. He loves Mom as much as I do.

During our kitchen table dinner, he regales us with tales of HOA intrigue to lift Mom’s spirits. Since his management company has more than a dozen homeowner associations as clients, his supply of stories seems endless.

“Once upon a time, there were three neighbors,” he begins. “RulesALot is convinced his neighbor, DoggyDo, is harboring three mutts, one more than the two-pet-per-household limit. Since he can’t see over his hedge to prove it, RulesALot launches a spy drone. A pilot he’s not. His drone crashes in ToplessTina’s backyard, who’s suing him as a Peeping Tom. Of course, there’s only one question on every male owner’s mind: Did the drone snap photos of Tina’s tatas before it nosedived?”

Ted’s eyebrows wiggle up and down, and Mom laughs. “Your HOA stories are certainly entertaining.”

“Believe me, the stories are a lot funnier if you’re not expected to wade into the middle of the skirmishes. Never dreamed HOAs would be tougher to manage than U.S. embassies on hostile soil.”

Mom fiddles with her napkin. “Speaking of neighborhood feuds, I have a confession. I figured you’d be scolding me by now, Ted, since you manage our HOA ...”

Ted and I look at each other. *Uh oh.*

“What did you do?” Ted asks.

“I told the moron Hullis Island directors I’ll sue if they don’t let us vote on what happens to our deer. Emailed copies to all 1,123 owners.”

I reach across the table and squeeze Mom’s hand. Though I agree with her, she needs to focus on regaining strength, not leading a crusade. “Oh, Mom, kicking over a hornets’ nest isn’t part of your cancer recovery regimen.”

Mom’s eyes narrow. “Hey, everyone else bitched and nothing happened. Figured a lawsuit threat might make their little sphincters tighten, and they’d pay attention.”

Mom switches to a fake, shaky geezer voice. “I’m a little old lady, their nightmare plaintiff. Who’s going to go off on some sick, elderly lady?”

Ted's eyebrows lift. "Exactly what did your email say?"

"Told 'em their plan to shoot our almost-tame deer with no vote on who, what, when, or how was plain wrong. Hullis Island is a nature sanctuary. They can't unilaterally declare an open hunting season without an island vote to change our covenants."

Ted shakes his head. "Myrt, I told the board the same thing, though a bit more diplomatically. The directors sided with Cliff, the board president, and his *expert*, some lawyer drinking buddy, who found a no-vote loophole after they'd tipped a few."

He shrugs. "Welch HOA Management offers advice, but we're hired help. Clients call the shots."

"What loophole?" I butt in. "Don't the covenants require a vote on any change to the island's status as a nature sanctuary?"

Ted nods. "Cliff's citing a provision that allows killing protected animals if they pose a threat to human life."

I roll my eyes. "What? They say zombie deer are preparing to ambush humans? That exception allows trapping rabid raccoons or aggressive alligators, not shooting starving deer."

"I cornered Barb Darrin, a director I thought had sense," Mom says. "Her justification? Deer carry ticks, a health hazard, and they can crash into golf carts."

Mom sighs. "Everyone agrees the herd's out of control. Doesn't give these arrogant SOBs the right to sanction a Wild West killing spree. Sure as shoot, some bozo will mistake a human or a big dog for a deer and fire away. You won't be able to throw a rock without hitting some guy in camo with a high-powered rifle."

Ted taps his spoon against his coffee mug. "Myrt, what aren't you telling us?"

"Well..." She shrugs. "Seems one wannabe deer killer has no qualms about threatening old ladies." She pulls the crumpled card from the pocket of her baggy sweater. "Found this love note in my mailbox."

Good grief. That's what she stuffed in her pocket.

Ted snatches what looks like some movie-maker's idea of a ransom note. Black-and-white newsprint cut and pasted on a postcard.

"What a nice closing line." Ted reads, "It's time us hunters declare open season on diseased deer and busybody bitches like Myrtle Kane." He turns the card over to look at the front. "Did this come in an envelope?"

"No, just lying in the box."

“Mom! This is dangerous. Either I’m moving back in with you or you’re coming to live with me.”

“Nonsense,” she scoffs. “It’s pure bluster. Took a year to convince you I’m healthy enough to live alone. Anyway, I get seasick just thinking about sleeping on your boat. No-sir-ee, you can’t dynamite me out of this house.”

Ted raises his palm in a hold-it gesture. “Myrt, do you think Dan Finley pasted this up?”

She shakes her head. “While I’m convinced he’s our Grass Slayer, it’s not his MO to cut up newsprint and issue threats. More his style to use that big commercial sprayer of his to ruin the Quaid’s lawn tonight.”

I frown. “The Quaid’s who live catty-corner? What does Finley have against them?”

“They’re one of the couples leading the ‘Save Bambi’ drive.”

“But why would Finley do something tonight?”

“The Quaid’s are in Savannah for their son’s wedding,” Mom answers.

Ted sets down his mug. “You may be right about Finley seizing the opportunity.”

Mom chimes in. “The deer have cost him big bucks. The poor starving creatures devour plants like I eat chocolates. Plants he’s guaranteed. His nursery and landscaping business is hurting. He blames folks like the Quaid’s, who put out buckets of corn to keep the deer alive.”

“Last week, herbicide messages were left on the lawns of two other deer lovers who were out of town,” Ted adds. “Dead yellow grass shows up quite nicely against a field of green Bermuda blades.”

“What kind of messages?” I ask.

Mom shrugs. “One lawn read, ‘Up yours!’ He was more artistic on the other lawn, drew a fist with an extended middle finger.”

I laugh in spite of my worries that Finley might be Mom’s new enemy.

Mom purses her lips. “Sure, it sounds like juvenile hijinks, but the anger’s palpable. Folks who golfed or played bridge together no longer speak. That’s why I’m adamant we need a vote. Then, win or lose, everyone has a say, and we can move on. It’s called democracy.”

“Speaking of democracy, I propose a kitchen vote,” Ted says. “All in favor of Kylee and me staking out the Quaid’s yard tonight raise your hands. That overgrown lot across the street offers a view of their place. Maybe we can catch Dan Finley at work.”

While I’m skeptical a one-night stakeout will succeed, that vacant lot also offers a perfect view of Mom’s mailbox. And I’m all for hanging around to catch anyone delivering hate mail.

Ted and I raise our hands. Mom harrumphs.

“Just what will you do if Dan Finley does drop by?” she asks.

“Video him doing the evil deed.” Ted smiles. “My new phone takes excellent photos in low light.”

Mom grumbles, but won’t argue with our kitchen table vote, a Kane family tradition.

“Just when do you intend to sneak off in the woods?”

Ted glances at his watch. “Say an hour? I doubt Finley would chance a drive-by while folks are still drifting home from dinner at the club.”

“Good. I’ll change into some old clothes and sneakers I left here before I was *evicted*.”

Ted looks ready for a *Southern Living* picture shoot in his tan chinos, button-down shirt, and polished loafers. “You sacrificing your HOA meeting duds for this outing?”

His hazel eyes twinkle. “Nope,” Ted answers. “I was a Boy Scout. Your dad, our scoutmaster, taught us well. I have running clothes in the trunk.”