

Chapter 1

Chelsea Riehl heard the voices before she rounded the corner on her way to the straw bale house across the yard.

“No, it’s fine. I’m glad to help.” Keanan Welsh? Who was he speaking with? He hadn’t been at Green Acres Farm much longer than Chelsea had and was more than a little strange. “It will be good for her to get some use. We’ve been together in the Andes several times.”

Who was *she*, and why had she been to South America? Chelsea frowned, turning toward the voices. Keanan towered over a guy she didn’t know as they stood next to a beat-up truck. Both men had hair past their shoulders, only Keanan’s was tied back with a strand of leather. The other guy had dreads.

Seriously? Hadn’t she left all that behind in Portland?

The shorter guy pumped Keanan’s hand. “I’ll take good care of it. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Shoot me an email from time to time. Photos, man. I will enjoy it through you.”

Which still didn’t explain who *she* was.

The guy tossed a long nylon bag into the back of the truck.

“My prayers go with you, my friend. God will bless you.” Keanan clamped a large hand on the other man’s shoulder and began to pray.

Chelsea was so out of there. Not that she didn’t believe in God or prayer. She absolutely did. But, in the week she’d known him, Keanan repelled her as much as he fascinated her. He might be sort of good-looking underneath that mass

of hair. He might be a really nice guy as her sister said. He didn't even smell bad like she'd thought he might. But what made a guy like him tick?

His upbringing was obviously vastly different from hers. Polar opposite from the upper-middle-class Portland home she'd lived in with two parents who loved each other and their three kids. Who took them to church on Sunday and a private Christian school five other days of the week. She couldn't even imagine the hippie commune he must've lived on. He probably had a wardrobe of tie-dye — not that she'd seen any yet — and a best friend named Starshine Harmony.

She slipped into the relative coolness of the straw bale house that served as Green Acres' headquarters. This whole communal farm thing was right up her alley. Chelsea had been trying to get onboard for three years, almost since the beginning. Now she was finally in Idaho, but so was that irritating Keanan Welsh.

Her sister, Sierra, glanced over at her across the peninsula separating the kitchen from the dining area. “Whew, glad you're here. The guys just dropped off four more boxes of Italian plums. They're trying to get them all picked before the starlings beat them to it.”

The raucous black birds had descended like a plague of grasshoppers yesterday. Apparently that meant the plums were ripe, and it was now a race to the finish line to see if the humans could get their fair share before the scavengers pecked a hole in each one.

Chelsea rolled her shoulders as she crossed the space and into the kitchen. “Well, I'm ready to start.” The words trailed off as the reality of the fruit invasion slammed her brain like

a landslide. Boxes of purple fruit covered every horizontal surface. “Whoa.”

Her sister grinned, brandishing a knife. “There’s more coming, but also more help. You get a choice. Washing or pitting.”

“I thought everything was organic. Why do we have to wash them?” Chelsea took a large bite from a crisp plum. Just green enough to balance the juicy sweetness of it. Warm still from the early September sun.

“It’s true we haven’t sprayed the trees. Plums are amazingly resilient to disease and pests.”

“Other than starlings.”

“Birds know ripe fruit when they see it.” Sierra split a plum, placed both halves cut-side-up on a dehydrator tray, and dropped the pit in a bucket. “But anyway, there’s still the possibility of exhaust from the vehicles creating a film on them. And wildlife in the trees. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I’ll start with washing, I guess.” Chelsea eyed the deep sink full of dark purple golf balls.

“We can trade off. We’ll have more hands soon. It will go quickly, I promise.”

Promises wouldn’t make it happen. She’d hoped to use her organizational talent more than her knife-wielding skill but, so far, she’d barely cracked open her laptop even to answer emails let alone create any new processes. Of course, it took a lot of work to feed ten adults and several kids a varied, healthy, and mostly homegrown diet. She’d bet it had been a lot easier the first year or so when it had been only her sister and her two girlfriends.

Chelsea sighed and walked over to the sink. “Just rub them and put them in the other sink?”

“Yep. There’s a basket there to fill.”

Catchy praise music breezed in via the house’s wireless sound system. Chelsea caught herself humming along as she turned the faucet to little more than a dribble. She knew the rule. *Don’t waste water.*

“Considering you moved in right next door, I hardly see you,” Sierra commented from the island behind her. Plink, plink went fruit onto the trays. “Are you settling in okay?”

“Sure, I’m fine. The duplex has lots of room for one person. Well, you know.”

Sierra chuckled. “Yes, I felt the same when I moved into the other half. Hard to believe it was a year ago already. For the record, the unit is still plenty big enough for *two* people.”

Chelsea wouldn’t tease her newlywed sister about how they’d fit when babies came along. Not when Sierra’s endometriosis made pregnancy a long shot.

“You can splash some paint in there, you know,” Sierra went on. “You don’t have to keep it to Allison’s rather austere taste.”

Allison Hart had lived in Chelsea’s unit for the past several months, but now her adorable timber-frame house had been completed on the hillside, and she and her young nephew had moved up there. That’d opened a space for Chelsea.

Too bad for Keanan. He’d lived in his tent since spring. Not that anything seemed to faze him, and he’d welcomed her as warmly as everyone else. No talk about how he’d been here first or anything like that. Last spring the guy had just

ridden his bicycle onto the property, pitched his tent, and stayed.

Unfathomable.

What had they been talking about? Right. “The gray walls provide a terrific backdrop, though.” That would get a reaction.

“Gray?” sputtered Sierra. “A great backdrop for what? Talk about a depressing color. I’m not even sure it’s an improvement over white or beige.”

Yep, Chelsea still knew her big sister’s buttons. There was strange comfort in that. “For art, silly, though I wouldn’t mind having at least one wall of my bedroom pink. And then there’s the spare room. I know the farm mural was painted for Allison’s nephew, but it’s a little much for me.” She hesitated. “I hate to hurt anyone’s feelings the first week I’m here. I can live with it.”

“It’s your home now.” Sierra plunked a basket beside the sink and began filling it with washed fruit. “Besides, Brent did another mural for Finnley in the new house. I see no reason why you can’t cover it. In fact, I’ll give you a hand, but it might have to wait until we’re finished with the garden.”

“Now why does that sound so ominous?” muttered Chelsea.

“Ominous? Girl, if you have the energy to paint after a fourteen-hour day of canning tomatoes or cutting and wrapping meat, you’re way ahead of the rest of us. Today is nothing compared to what’s coming.”

And she was bored after ten minutes of washing plums. Why again had she signed up for this?

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Keanan Welsh pushed open the door to the straw bale house. This building welcomed him as few ever had, following the ideas of a book on pattern language he'd studied in college. Everything from the deep windowsills to the sunlight flowing in from various angles to the nook by the fireplace had been designed to ease the human spirit at a subconscious level. Even knowing how it was done didn't diminish his pleasure in the result.

The two sisters worked in the kitchen, chatting about fashion. Keanan steeled himself and crossed the dining room to enter the space. "I'm here to help."

Whoa. The fruit-pickers hadn't been kidding when they said the kitchen was backlogged.

Sierra glanced up, her face wreathed in a grin. "Grab a knife. We have all three dehydrators to load in the sunroom."

He lifted a paring knife. "It's a welcome change to face plums instead of peaches like last week."

Sierra's sister shot him a strange look from over at the sink. A pink flowered scarf held her curly hair off her face. "So what do we do with all of these?" she asked.

Good question. There had been few plums in the diet since he'd arrived at Green Acres in May. He angled a glance at Sierra across the island as he pitted.

"We have them for breakfast in smoothies or stewed fruit. We eat the dry ones plain as snacks. We layer the frozen ones into desserts like cakes and crumbles. We go through a lot of plum sauce on meat." Sierra set a loaded tray

aside and began filling another. “Noel will make a batch of mead with some of them.”

“I didn’t realize they were so versatile.” Keanan nodded. “What happens to any excess plums? Do we process them all no matter what?” He had visions of the boxes Noel and Gabe were filling outside. A truckload of plums seemed excessive, even for this community.

“The chickens and pigs will get any we don’t use.”

“Ah, I wondered if there were folks in Galena Landing who might like some.”

Sierra eyed him. “Possibly. But a lot of them have a tree or two in the backyard. I doubt anyone hankering plums doesn’t have access.”

“Would it be all right take a few boxes into town with my bike and trailer and ask around? Not to deny the chickens, of course. But what if there are people who might enjoy them?”

“We can ask what the group thinks.” Sierra scooted another tray over. “Want to slide these into the dehydrator?”

“No problem.” He balanced several trays on top of each other and rounded the stone fireplace wall to the sunroom doors. A moment later, mission completed, he headed back to the kitchen.

“...weird,” said Chelsea.

“Shh,” replied Sierra.

Keanan frowned. They’d been talking about him, no doubt, and the farm’s newcomer didn’t approve of him. Well, he didn’t exactly approve of her, either, with her penchant for makeup and fashion. Even now she wore a pink top to match that scarf, below-the-knee beige pants, and

sandals with heels. Oh, and a chunky necklace like the kind Mother designed. For working in the kitchen.

He glanced her way as he walked past.

Her head was bent over the sink, curls all but hiding her face. “Who was that guy outside?”

A nice break from talking about plums. “Logan Dermott. I met him just the other day, but he’s been in the valley picking fruit much of the summer.”

“Oh? Where’s he from?”

Keanan sliced open another plum. “I’m not sure.”

He heard or sensed Chelsea turning from the sink, but he didn’t look at her. “Then what did you give him?”

“Oh, that?” He chuckled. “My tent. He’s going on a trip to Argentina, talking with mission groups about helping the indigenous people regain food security.”

“You *gave* your tent to some guy you don’t even know? Seriously?”

That was strange, how? Keanan met Chelsea’s gaze. Not only were the frames of her glasses pink, she apparently looked at life through rose tints as well. “Why not? He needs it. I don’t.”

“But—” She shook her head hard, and those curls flew out sideways like so many corkscrews.

“Why is that a problem?” Not that it was any of her business. His tent, his decision. End of story.

“Where are you going to sleep?”

“Not to worry. I won’t force myself into the spare bedroom in your duplex.”

Her eyes grew large. “You better believe you won’t.”

This was a woman who could get under his skin. Keanan

took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then again. “My grain bins will be arriving on the weekend, and I’ll be staying next door in Zach’s parents’ spare room until my home is insulated and ready for me to move into.”

Chelsea took a step closer. “I think I’m not hearing you correctly. You plan to live in a *grain bin*?”

Sierra snickered, but Keanan had no trouble ignoring that. “I do, in fact. It will be quite snug. It will have solar panels for electricity. Even a bathroom so I needn’t cross the yard to shower or brush my teeth.”

“You’re serious.”

“Uh... yes?”

“A grain bin. Wait, you said plural.”

“Yes. One is fitted inside the other with straw tamped between them for insulation.”

Chelsea looked at her sister then back at him. “Okay, joke’s over. What are your real plans?”

“To live in a grain bin.” Keanan’s patience ebbed. “Which, honestly, is no business of yours. You don’t need to look at it. You don’t need to visit. It will be tucked away on the hillside where my tent was, and you can ignore its very existence. You can ignore *my* very existence. It’s all the same to me.”

Her eyes grew wide behind those ridiculous glasses, and her painted lips pursed. She whirled back to the sink, her curls flying out sideways.

Perhaps it *wasn’t* all the same to him. But it might as well be.