

Chapter 1

My granddaughter seems to think you're the right person for this job."

Linnea Ranta quailed under the elderly woman's skeptical look. "I've worked for my dad's landscaping business since I was in high school. I'm sure I can make your dreams a reality." At least, if Marietta Santoro could put those ideas into words or even sketches. So far it had been mostly hand-waving.

"Humph." The woman pointed to the weed-filled lot beyond the wire-mesh fence. Every inch of this side was packed with flowers and vegetables with every tidy row pointing due north. It was no wonder Marietta couldn't stand the sight of the disaster next door. "I want a fence around that. I want raised beds for the neighbors to grow vegetables. I want a watering system and a bench over in that corner under the sycamore."

Maybe Linnea didn't want the job after all. She wasn't a carpenter, and it didn't sound like Marietta had any vision for aesthetics. But it was the first time anyone had approached Linnea directly. Usually clients came to Dad, and he assigned her the jobs he thought were suited to her abilities, like mowing grass. This was her chance.

She ducked as a hummingbird zinged to an overhead feeder. Wings flashed as another one chased it away. "I see you like birds."

"Si. Who does not?"

"If you're keeping the sycamore — which I'm definitely a fan of — we could create a bit of a bird habitat in that area. Add some seed-bearing plants and maybe a birdbath." Linnea snuck a glance at the older woman.

Marietta nodded thoughtfully as she stared through the fence. "That is a possibility. The little ones would like to watch birds."

Maybe this was going to work out after all. “I like your ideas, Marietta. Do you need me to find a builder for the structural parts, or do you have someone in mind?”

The old woman smiled. “Did I not tell you already? That boy who plays the piano at church. He will do it.”

Linnea froze. Logan Dermott? He’d started attending Bridgeview Bible Church about six weeks back and had volunteered to play when the regular pianist was sick. Every time his hands touched the keyboard, the world faded away and Linnea was transported to heavenly realms. He felt the music. He lived the music. In some ways, he *was* the music.

And she’d never missed a Sunday since, just in case he was playing.

“You’ll be in charge, if you take this on. It will be up to you to tell him where to put all those raised beds. There’s a slope...” Marietta scrunched her face thoughtfully. “Well, you

figure it out. When you come up with a cost list, please show it to Raimondo, and he will give approval or offer suggestions.”

In charge? Tell Logan what to do? Linnea gulped. Answering to Marietta’s son Ray was nothing compared to spending time with Logan Dermott for weeks to come. She tried to imagine giving him orders. Her hands turned clammy. Maybe she should turn Marietta down. Tell her she was too busy. She’d been asked to volunteer, and this was a mighty big job. But it would be worth it if Marietta would give her a good recommendation at the other end.

“Sounds good.”

Had that been her voice? Linnea’s innards trembled. No, she should have declined, not agreed. Still, Logan Dermott? But what if he already had a girlfriend? Oh, there was no one in Spokane or surely she’d have come to church with him, but maybe somewhere else. A guy like him, so good-looking, confident, and talented,

must have women hanging onto him wherever he went.

“He should be here at any time.” Marietta checked her watch, clucking impatiently. “He is late.”

Linnea took a deep shuddering breath. There wouldn't be time to brace herself for this meeting unless she hurried away right now. But what would that gain? Nothing. She'd agreed to work with him, and it would only prolong her suffering if she put off their first meeting. She wiped her hands down her denim pants.

Cheerful whistling came from behind her.

She whirled to see Logan Dermott rounding the corner of Marietta's white stucco home, wearing faded jeans threadbare in one knee. A white T-shirt, looking a little the worse for wear, stretched over his muscular torso. Tousled hair skimmed his shoulders, and he hadn't shaved for several days by the look of the scruff on his chin.

Linnea swallowed hard. He looked amazing in dark wash jeans and a button-down shirt for church, but a real man who worked for a living was so much more attractive.

“Logan Dermott. You are late.” Marietta sounded reproachful.

He grinned at her, a dimple flashing in his right cheek. “I beg your pardon.” He took the old woman’s hand and kissed it as he bowed over it. Then his gaze rested on Linnea. “I have not had the pleasure of meeting this lovely lady. Where have you been hiding her, Marietta? Is she another of your granddaughters?”

Oh, he was good.

“Not my granddaughter, no.” Marietta patted his face. “This is Linnea Ranta from over on Riverside Avenue. She works with her father in his landscaping business. She is going to oversee the community garden project next door. Linnea, this is Logan. He is new to Bridgeview.”

His smile widened as he slowly looked Linnea over and finally met her gaze again. “It is my pleasure to meet you, but to work with you on this garden?” He clasped her hand in both of his. “I am looking forward to every moment.”

“I, um, it’s nice to meet you, too.” Somehow she got the words past her lips. His hands were warm and callused. Both his thumbs caressed hers. He was way over the top in his intensity, but somehow it didn’t seem too much. Not when warmth that had nothing to do with the July sunshine radiated through her body.

She tugged her hand free. A cloud came over the sun, though there wasn’t a single one in the brilliant blue sky, reflected in his twinkling eyes.

“Linnea is as talented as she is *bella*,” Marietta said, resting her hand on Logan’s arm. “I think I have made a good choice with the two of you.”

The smug smile on the old woman’s face did nothing to reassure Linnea. Was she really

wanting a garden created, or was she playing matchmaker? Because a self-assured man like Logan wouldn't take something like that sitting down. He'd make his own choices, and it wouldn't likely be someone like Linnea. She'd been a shadowed hosta all her life and, though she longed for the light, he'd be looking for a showy flower that danced in the sunshine.



What was Marietta up to? The neighborhood matriarch looked like she'd swallowed the proverbial canary. So she was setting them up for more than a garden. Did she do this kind of thing often? Well, there was no harm in playing along for now. Linnea looked a little shy, but she was certainly pretty enough. Plus he'd already agreed to help with the garden. It didn't much matter with whom he worked. A bit of flirting wouldn't go amiss.

Logan turned to Marietta. “How do you expect me to get any work done with such a beautiful woman nearby? I’m sure I’ll be too distracted.”

“There is no rush. It is too late to grow most things yet this summer. We only need to be ready for springtime.”

He didn’t miss the sharp look Linnea gave Marietta. So he wasn’t the only one noticing. Interesting.

“Would you like to walk around the space with us?” Logan gestured to the gate leading through the wire-mesh fence to the unkempt lot next door. “Perhaps give some ideas as to what you’d like to see where?”

Marietta set her hand over her heart. “No, I am tired. You two go ahead. When you’ve had a chance to draw some preliminary plans, bring them to me. If my son Raimondo approves, you may present him with a list of materials to purchase.”

Logan had met Ray Santoro several times around the neighborhood and at church. The man would definitely be easier to deal with than his eccentric mother. “Sounds good.” He turned to Linnea. “Do you have a few minutes now, or shall we set another time to do a walk about?”

Linnea’s gaze flicked to his then away. “We could take a few minutes now if you have time.”

“Always time for a beautiful woman.” He took Linnea’s arm and nodded at Marietta. “We’ll get back to you later.”

Marietta touched her thumb and forefinger together as she smiled. “I will wait in eagerness.”

Logan steered Linnea toward the gate and ushered her into the other yard. “Marietta is something else, isn’t she,” he murmured, angling his head close to hers. “She wants more than a garden.”

Linnea’s long blond hair brushed against his arm like a rippling breeze as she turned to face

him. “I don’t have to do this. She can find someone else.”

She wasn’t his usual type being so near his own height and really quite thin. Her white tank top showed off minimal assets, and now he knew where the term skinny jeans had come from. But the face was definitely pretty, and the blue eyes seemed shadowed with something deeper.

“Or we can play along for now. I am definitely in need of something to do, and working with you to transform this space sounds like a terrific way to spend time.” Logan grinned. “Who knows? Maybe her fond wishes will come true.”

Was that a pink flush shooting across her face? Interesting. He’d have to be careful. Hurting someone was never part of the package.

Linnea pulled away from his touch and strode to the middle of the lot. “She wants sixteen four-by-twelve-foot raised beds, so those will take up

almost half of the area. We'll need to do some terracing, though."

He wandered closer, careful to leave some distance between them. "It's not much of a slope. I'm sure we can manage that."

"We'll need paths between them wide enough for a wheelbarrow." She spread her hands apart. "So, a good three feet. Maybe four."

Logan nodded. "Makes sense."

"I'm not sure what she's told you. I know she wants you to construct a picket fence around to keep the neighborhood dogs out."

"And the raised beds themselves, as well as some benches and a gazebo."

"A gazebo? She didn't mention that to me."

"I think she wants to keep me busy for a while." He grinned wryly.

Linnea shot him an unreadable glance.

"But I'm in it for whatever you need. I can help with the terracing. Digging. Laying sod. Whatever you need." Transforming ninety-

thousand square feet would take a lot of digging. A lot of time. He could think of worse ways to spend it, especially since his housemate was dating the girl next door and seemed to never be home.

“I can bring in Dad’s Bobcat to do the heavy lifting.”

His eyebrows rose. “You can drive a Bobcat?”

“And why not?” Her fists landed on her narrow hips. “I’ve been working with my dad since I was in high school. This isn’t the first time I’ve encountered real work.”

Logan could see definition in those biceps, small as they were. “Okay, I believe you.” He raised both hands. “You’re the boss. I’m just the serf, here to do your bidding. Whatever you want done, I am at your command.”

Her face reddened again. It was going to be far too easy to fluster this woman, but walking on eggshells belied his very personality.