

Chapter 1 -----

Allison Hart had perfected the art of staring out the window and checking her watch simultaneously. The contractor said he'd be here by ten, and it was now quarter after. If guys could be on time driving in Portland city traffic, how hard could it be on northern Idaho's rural roads?

Waiting. Who had time for it? She tapped her foot and crossed her arms, not that there was anyone to see her. No one who lived at Green Acres was home today except her, which suited Allison just fine. She'd arrived at the communal farm three days earlier, and she'd already experienced about all the togetherness she could handle.

The rumble of a vehicle grew louder, and a white pickup with the emblem of Timber Framing Plus emblazoned on the side turned into the driveway.

Finally. Allison strode for the door, buttoning her cardigan against the cold March day as she went.

The contractor slammed the truck door and turned toward her, hard hat in hand.

Wait a minute. This wasn't Patrick at all. This guy had a shock of black hair — unlike Patrick's thinning salt-and-pepper — to say nothing of those dark brown eyes, slightly angled. Skin that on anyone else might look tanned but

combined with the rest definitely tagged him of Asian descent.

Japanese? Thai? Didn't matter. He could be Martian for all the difference it made. The biggest problem was, he wasn't Patrick.

The guy tucked his hard hat under his arm and stretched out his hand. "Hi, I'm Brent Callahan from Timber Framing Plus."

An Irish name? Unexpected.

"Allison Hart."

He had a strong grip, like he knew what he was doing, even though he didn't have the other man's years of experience.

"Where's Patrick?"

"Back in the office. He sent me out to check the footings."

The wind had built up speed crossing the Galena Valley to get to her. Would it slam straight into the mountain beside the farm and come to an abrupt halt or find some other direction in which to continue? Either way, she should've worn something without the big holes in her bulky cardigan. She wrapped both arms around herself in an attempt to stay warm. "I was under the impression he was coming himself. I have a list of questions for him."

Brent grinned. "Nothing I can't answer, I'm sure. I've worked for him since high school."

Her eyebrows shot up. When was that, last week?

"Ten years, ma'am." He winked, set the hard hat on his head, and turned toward the construction site, where the perimeter of the new farm school lay outlined in concrete.

Ten years? That made the guy something like twenty-eight. He sure didn't look it. Allison hurried after him. "I'm

sorry. I didn't mean to doubt your experience. I just expected Patrick. It's his business, after all."

Brent turned to face her, dark eyes unreadable. "Timber Framing Plus is a large company. We work on more than one project at a time. Patrick oversees them all, but that doesn't mean he and his two best friends put into place every piece of wood that makes each structure."

"But he said..." Allison's words trailed away as she tried to recall the exact words in their discussion.

"What did he say, ma'am?"

Her temper flared. "My name is Allison, not ma'am." It was a temptation to make him call her Ms. Hart so he'd remember which of them was the real boss on this site. Ma'am made her think of someone old with an unsavory reputation.

He tipped his head. "Allison. What did Patrick say, exactly?"

"He said he'd oversee the project personally."

Brent laughed and shook his head. "And he will. From his office in Coeur d'Alene, where he can keep an eye on all the structures we're erecting this season. Available to any of his foremen, day or night, with whatever questions or problems we might encounter."

"But—" Allison hated losing, but this was obviously not a battle she was going to win. If Patrick's office were any nearer, she'd march right in and give him a piece of her mind. A two-hour drive might be worth the satisfaction.

She looked at Brent, but he was striding away from her. He made a fine figure in navy work pants and shirt. Not a big guy, but not scrawny either. Good looking.

A disaster. She'd counted on Patrick. Somebody with experience. Somebody who was safe.

Not that being older made a man safe to be around. She knew that all too well. Her dad had been nothing but trouble to any woman he came within flirting distance of. And Mom had repaid him in kind. Only a shared desire for convenience and prestige had kept the two of them married all those years.

It hadn't provided any security for her and her sister. Thinking of Lori brought all the old aches surging to the surface. Drinking, sex, and drugs had comprised Lori's life since she was fourteen. She somehow managed to keep things together just enough to keep Child Protection Services at bay and retain custody of her little boy.

Finnley. That poor kid. Allison soaked him up every minute she could, but Lori was always quick to move on to another city, another man, another addiction. The little guy deserved so much better. If only she'd been able to make a difference for Finnley by staying in Portland, but her sister had screamed in her face and dragged the boy off to Tucson with a guy named John. Likely an apt name.

Allison blinked the tears away and straightened. The man over there crouching down and poking at the footings wasn't a loser like the guys her sister hooked up with, even though he was Asian like Finnley's father apparently had been. This guy had a real job. She could trust him to build the farm school she'd proposed to the women of Green Acres when they met last fall.

So everyone in this group she'd joined might think marriage was a great thing, but she'd watched her parents. She would escape the curse. She was absolutely, definitely, for sure here to build herself a spinster house and get herself a big dog.

She blinked. Brent Callahan stood in front of her, eyebrows raised as he looked at her.

No room for a man in her life. So totally not interested. Didn't matter if he was ugly and fifty or gorgeous and close to her age.

She met Brent's gaze evenly. "And the verdict is?"

"The verdict is I'll have a crew out here Monday to get started."

"You?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Yes, me. Didn't I just tell you that Patrick assigned me as the foreman in charge of your project?"

No. No, he had not.

o0o

Thanks, Uncle Patrick. Why couldn't Brent's first gig as foreman be for some middle-aged man? Someone who would swing by the worksite a couple of times a week? Someone who would respect Patrick's decision and trust Brent's experience? After all, his uncle had been grooming him for several years to take over the commercial projects.

He didn't need Allison Hart to question his every breath. He didn't need a female client at all, especially not one near his own age. The girl was almost as tall as he was. Her bulky black cardigan came to mid-thigh, topping black leggings and high black boots. Too skinny for his taste. She was probably anorexic. No one could possibly eat normally and look like that.

Too bad, really. She was kind of pretty under the layer of makeup. And while he liked long hair on a girl as much as the next guy, hers swung nearly to her waist.

Not much softness to Allison Hart. It was like she was careful to give off the persona she wanted. Nah. Brent would

bet this was whom she really was underneath.

He'd been staring. He tried for a natural smile. "It looks like we'll be seeing a lot of each other for the next few months."

Her jaw twitched. "Great. Just what I needed." She glared at him through narrowed eyes.

Brent's spine straightened on its own. "I have the experience and the credentials."

She gathered her hair in both hands and flipped it over her shoulders. "I'd really rather have Patrick."

"I am his fully-qualified representative." He'd nearly said nephew. Bet that wouldn't go over well with skinny Miss Priss. He'd quit calling the man uncle in public years before, when they'd begun working together so closely. It was better on the job site for the crew not to be reminded of their relationship. Most didn't even know, given that Patrick looked totally Irish and Brent... did not.

"I'll be staying at 'The Landing Pad.'" Brent thumbed toward the town of Galena Landing. "Along with the guys who will be my permanent crew. Once we get rolling, we'll be here from eight to five Monday through Friday with an hour off for lunch." He quirked an eyebrow at her. "If that meets your expectations?"

Allison's eyes narrowed until he couldn't see the brown orbs any more. "That will be fine, so long as your crew is disciplined, experienced, and gets the job done as soon as possible." She grimaced. "I can't believe he did this to me."

She was seriously starting to get under his skin, and that took some doing.

"I'm sorry Patrick didn't make it clear."

Her eyebrows rose. "*You're* sorry?"

"Indeed. Do you think I enjoy being treated like a

second-class citizen?” He leaned closer. “Just because I’m not who you were expecting doesn’t mean I am not the right man for the job.”

She took a step back.

Good. She was getting the idea. His cell phone rang with his uncle’s ring tone, and he reached for it, maintaining eye contact with Allison. “Hi, Patrick. Brent here.”

Allison thrust out her hand for his phone, and he turned away.

“How’s it going, Brent? Are the footings ready?”

“We can start Monday. Say, it seems you forgot to mention to Ms. Hart that you wouldn’t be on the job here every day.”

His uncle laughed, but it sounded strained. “She’s not too happy, I take it?”

“You got that right.”

“Well, it gets worse.”

Uh oh. Brent’s hand tightened on his cell as he strode toward the truck. Better be out of earshot for this one. “How’s that?”

“We ordered all the glass for her job from McGowan Windows.”

No secret there. “Yes?”

“The plant burned to the ground yesterday. We have to find another manufacturer.” Patrick paused. “And get in line with everyone else.”

Brent closed his eyes. So many words he’d quit saying a few years ago vied to explode from his mouth. He tightened his jaw to clamp them back and took a few deep breaths.

“Brent?”

“I’m here.” Inhale, exhale. “Please tell me this is your idea of an early April Fool’s joke.”

Patrick's chuckle had a nervous edge to it. "I wish. It's not just the Hart job affected. We've got three other clients who ordered McGowan windows. And of course we're not the only company. Everyone else is scrambling to get on some other manufacturer's list, too."

"Expected delay?"

"Several months, probably. Those Hart structures have a lot of windows. But I don't have anything confirmed yet. Waiting to hear back."

"This is going to go over like a ton of bricks, you know that?"

"I know." His uncle sighed. "Right this minute I have three other lines lit up with incoming calls. I need to go. I'll let you know as soon as I have some answers."

"Just a sec. I assume we're to go ahead as far as we can while we wait?"

"Yes. We'll try not to lay off any guys. It will take some juggling, but we'll make it all happen."

"Okay. Thanks, Patrick." But his uncle had already ended the call.

Now Brent had the joy of explaining this to his client. He turned slowly, but she was right there. She'd followed him to the truck and probably overheard every word.

Both hands rested on what would be hips on a woman with curves. Her dark brown eyes stared straight into his from mere inches away. "Well?"

Good thing Brent had become a praying man. He shot a plea heavenward. "We have a problem."

"So I deduced. What is it? How bad?"

"The window manufacturing plant we'd ordered your windows from burned down yesterday. It's totally destroyed."

Her jaw clenched and she shook her head slowly. "Right.

That's too bad. Just get them from somewhere else."

Brent opened his mouth and closed it again. Another prayer winged away, this one for patience. He managed to smile, so that was progress. "Not as easy as you might expect. McGowan's plant was one of the largest in the US."

Allison raised her finely plucked eyebrows. "And?"

"And there are dozens of contractors with orders placed, many of them with multiple clients. No other plant has the capacity to simply step in and meet the demand."

"So you're telling me we have no windows coming, and no idea when we can get them."

"Basically. But Patrick's on it. He'll let me know as soon as something is confirmed."

Allison jabbed her finger against his chest. "Do you know that this is supposed to be a school?" Poke. "That we have classes booked and students coming in July?" Poke.

"Hey, wait a minute." He grabbed her hand to stop the jabs, and she jerked away. "It's not like I went to Milwaukee and torched the factory to spite you. This situation is totally out of my hands. It makes no difference if Patrick was going to be onsite or me. This is bigger than Timber Framing Plus. We'll do our best, but we're not miracle workers."

If he were, he knew where he'd start, and his first miracle wouldn't be for Allison Hart.

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