

Staring at the tables wouldn't put Rennie at one of them.

Nursing a cup of coffee, Troy Fagan wondered if she'd decided to decline the work. Bow out with embarrassment, or beg forgiveness—if Rennie didn't come to her senses, he'd fire her.

How didn't matter. He'd find a way.

Resigned to his decision, Troy returned his attention to the crowd of men converging on the lawn. The air sizzled with excitement as carpenters, masons and specialty trades greeted each other before taking their seats. For men accustomed to meager paychecks and unpredictable stints between jobs, Fagan wealth promised to make the pay generous even if the schedule was tight.

Troy didn't share the men's early morning cheer. Remodeling his parents' mansion filled him with anxiety. Thankfully they'd left early this morning, driving through the crisp April sunshine to the other end of the thousand-acre estate, to the factory, where Fagan's Orchard shipped produce and condiments across the Midwest. He prayed the demands of managing the company would keep them occupied as construction began on the mansion.

This would be the first time the stately rooms and antique furnishings were disturbed since his brother's murder fifteen years ago. He worried about sending his parents back into grief. As saws roared and plaster sifted down, would Jason's ghost whisper across the ruins?

One hundred men would contribute sweat and labor to build the mansion's new south wing. The thirteen-course foundation was already in place. The best Amish carpenters in the county had erected the exterior walls and laid five thousand square feet of base flooring. Now the real work would begin, as the other trades jostled for space inside the two-story structure.

Troy was always tense at the beginning of a new project. Today he was worse than usual—a typical construction schedule would increase to warp speed to beat the arrival of his younger sister's baby. Luckily, the very pregnant Dianne Fagan-Zagorski had left the site at daybreak. Given his own anxiety, he couldn't handle hers this morning.

Striding before the tables, he brought the chatter to a halt. He was about to launch into his speech when Rennie Perini skirted across the lawn and slipped into a chair in

back.

Seeing a woman in the midst of the stubble-faced trades was jarring. What made the situation worse? Rennie looked beautiful today.

Troy grimaced. She always looked beautiful.

Her simple blue work shirt and faded jeans were a mockery. With her classic Italian beauty, she caused a stir on any job site. Troy's throat convulsed with sorrow and longing as she took a seat at the table in back, her whiskey-hued eyes dark with worry.

Returning to the day's business, he launched into an explanation of the construction timeline. Given the size of the mansion's new wing, there wasn't room for scheduling errors. As he emphasized the demand for strict compliance, several of the men shifted uneasily in their chairs.

Finishing, he added, "The schedule is set in stone. Forget about taking side jobs. From now until the finish date, I own you."

At the table in front the lead plumber said, "You don't own my crew. After the 'meet and greet' today, we won't return until next week. I'm taking my men to another job in town."

"Not a problem, Gar. However, once you start here you'll stay put."

"Understood."

Troy looked out over the sea of faces. "We're building the new wing in record time and I expect the best from each of you. If you aren't confident your work will be of the highest caliber, leave now."

Crash, the Amish carpenter in charge of the main crew, tugged his salt and pepper beard. "My men are ready. What assurance can you give that the others won't hold us up?"

"Any man falling behind will be fired. I have a list of subs waiting to come on board. If you can't cut it, you're out."

"The woman won't get special treatment?" Crash swiveled around to glare at Rennie. "My crew can handle tight schedules. I have twenty men. How will she keep up with only one employee?"

The question provided the opportunity Troy needed. Getting rid of Rennie might be easier than he'd imagined. While the trades enjoyed lusting after her on sites across

Liberty, this time was different. They were being paid top dollar to complete the new wing quickly. They didn't want a woman standing in the way.

Troy drilled her with a hard stare. "Crash has an understandable concern. Perini Electric never handles jobs this large. How will you manage?"

Rennie's eyes rounded with fear but only for a moment. "I've gone over the details with my assistant," she said. "We'll keep pace with the carpenters."

"With only one employee, is that realistic?" Troy asked.

"We'll work overtime if needed." She came to her feet. "We can handle the schedule."

"Naturally my sister likes the idea of awarding the electrical contract to a company run by a woman. But this is a big job. You're out of your depth."

Every man in attendance zeroed in on the woman standing in their midst. Several murmured in agreement. Despite Troy's desire to be rid of her, he felt pity. And respect—damn if Rennie wasn't holding her ground.

To sweeten the deal, he added, "The retainer isn't a problem. Keep it."

"I want the job." She layered steel on her voice. "Your sister hired me. We're building her new home. Doesn't she have the final say?"

He set his jaw.

Evidently she sensed triumph in his silence. "Then it's settled." She sat. "I'm staying."

Frustrated, he turned back to the others. She'd won—for now. "I want to meet with each trade this afternoon," he said, getting back on track. "Have your timeline ready. I'll need to coordinate schedules. Spend the morning getting acquainted with each other."

Crash sent Rennie a chilly look before regarding Troy. "Where should we have supplies delivered?" he asked.

"Unload them on the south side of the mansion by noon today. My parents and sister will continue living here as we proceed. Keep the front entrance free of materials so we don't disrupt them more than necessary." Troy rocked back on his heels. "That's it for now."

The men dispersed. He was about to do the same when Rennie cornered him.

"Where do you get off telling me to leave?" She appeared ready to take a swing at

him. “Your sister accepted my bid.”

Her anger came as a surprise. A world of hurt brimmed in her almond-shaped eyes, the kind of pain that brought most women to tears. Yet she’d managed to bring on the fire instead. Did she really want to stay? Her company must be strapped for cash if she’d risk working for him.

“Why did you take so long in supplying the bid?” he countered, and her eyes again rounded. She looked vulnerable and irrepressibly feminine despite the tool belt slung low on her hips. “My sister contacted Perini Electric six weeks ago. You waited until the last minute to provide a quote.”

“I was rechecking my bid. For accuracy.”

“You weren’t stalling? Afraid you were getting in over your head?”

“No!”

Her cheeks flamed and he knew she was lying. “I spoke to three of your competitors and got bids within days. The way you held off has me wondering if you were thinking about turning us down.”

She rubbed her lips together. From the looks of it, she was having trouble reining in her notable temper. The sharp ring of her smartphone spared her from replying. She yanked it from her pocket and swiveled away.

Troy simmered while she whispered tightly into the phone. Keeping the GC waiting sure as hell wasn’t a way to earn Brownie Points. Tapping his foot, he felt his own anger rising.

She snapped the cell shut. “Sorry.” The flush spread engagingly across her face. “I have a problem.”

“What, exactly?”

She greeted the question with a wavering smile. “Where am I on your afternoon schedule? I have to run a few errands.”

The threads of his temper frayed. “Weren’t you listening? No one leaves. Have your supplies delivered. Do so this morning.”

“It’s not about the supplies. They’re here.”

She pursed her lips and the memory of kissing her struck him like a blow. Rennie, arching into the heat of his ardor with the same bold disregard she displayed today. He

wasn't prepared for the raw bolt of pleasure catapulting through his veins.

He fled from the memory as she added, "I won't be gone long. I'll meet with Crash before I leave in case he has any questions."

"What about my sister? Dianne plans to meet with each trade this morning."

"And I'm looking forward to meeting her. I'll return before she arrives."

"You aren't going anywhere." Troy nodded at the men merging into small groups on the lawn. "Get up to speed with the carpenters and the guys on heating and cooling."

"It won't take long—"

"You're staying put." He pointed to the men. "Get to know them. As it is, you've already made a few enemies."

Her eyes blazed. The air gelled between them for ten seconds. Then she stalked away.

* * *

The bruises were an angry purple beneath the girl's toffee colored skin. They marked a passage from her jawbone to her cheek, a distressing series of welts inflicted with brutal force. Sorrow for the child welled in Rennie's chest.

Pushing the emotion down, Rennie glanced at her watch. There wasn't time to feel pity for yet another helpless child dumped into the mire of Jobs & Family Services. There were always children, dozens of them, forced into the system by neglect and abuse. Usually she cared about them deeply. Today would've been the same if her blood pressure weren't approaching dangerous limits after she'd disobeyed Troy's command and quietly left the Fagan job site for an hour.

Shuffling down the corridor toward the approaching child, she wondered at her reckless behavior. She was out of her mind. If Troy discovered her missing, the new job would be over before it began.

With a mix of resignation and worry, she let her gaze drift back to the girl. The child skipped forward with fierce concentration, her expression at odds with her carefree movements. The folds of her dress billowed out like a sail. A Barbie doll dangled in her grip. Rennie stepped aside to allow her to pass. Reaching the juncture where the corridors met in a T, the girl paused.

The ceiling's fluorescent lights gave off a nearly imperceptible hum. Footsteps

echoed further off. The girl turned toward the sound.

Rennie paused, unsure of what to do. Where was the kid's social worker?
"Sweetie, are you lost?"

Out of habit she dug into the pocket of her jacket and rooted around for her antacids. She'd just popped one into her mouth when a woman's voice, soft as rain, called out. The child dashed away.

It took a moment for Rennie to regain her composure. The fleeting exchange was unsettling, an added stress she didn't need this morning.

Grimly, she continued down the corridor. Irritation dogged every step. Not only was she putting the Fagan job at risk. She was doing so because, once again, she couldn't find the courage to stand up to her mother.

In bustling Liberty, Ohio, Lianna Perini was something of a titan. She managed Jobs & Family Services for all of Jeffordsville County, championing children's causes before state judges and local media. In a state with more than its share of poverty and drug abuse, the caseload never diminished. In fact, the sheer number of children rescued by the agency increased with depressing predictability.

Which was probably why she'd demanded to see Rennie.

Pausing at the door to her mother's office, Rennie balled her fists. "No. Can't," she practiced under her breath. "Sorry, big job, maybe some other time."

Inside, her mother bobbed between the file cabinet and the paperwork on her desk.

"Pick one," Rennie said by way of greeting. "If I were you, I'd start with the crap on your desk."

Lianna slammed the cabinet drawer shut. "I'm running a marathon. It seems everyone else has crossed the finish line."

"You have a staff. Delegate more."

"My staff puts in the same hours I do." Sitting, her mother unearthed a manila folder. "Ah. The Korchek case," she added, and the heart-shaped curve of her face relaxed. Time left her features like a private beach washed away by the tide.

The transformation never failed to surprise. In repose, her mother's stern expression gave way to beauty. No wonder children in her care were drawn to her. Kids

living in the tumult of abuse and neglect were skittish creatures. They rarely trusted adults, even those sent to rescue them. Yet most trusted the elegant woman who ran the social agency.

Surely Lianna had such a child fixed in her mind's eye now.

No, not a child. Rennie was better with teenagers. Would her mother ask her to provide a foster home for a kid in junior high? It was probably a juvie case. Or a teenager whose delinquency made his parents seek foster care as a last resort.

The particulars didn't matter. Rennie's thoughts veered to the Fagan job and the demands of wiring the new wing of the mansion. There wasn't room for anything else in her life.

Her stomach coiled into a painful knot when her mother said, "I'm sure you understand why I wanted to see you."

"Actually I'm hoping I don't."

"The Korchek case just came in. Wife deceased, husband clearly grieving—and abusive. I need a short-term foster home while I sort this out."

Rennie studied her work boots. "The Fagan job started this morning. I shouldn't have left the site."

"Well, you're here and I'm glad."

"Mother, I shouldn't have come. I could lose the job." Her comment met with silence. She resisted the urge to glance at her watch. "I can't help now. Ask some other time."