

CHAPTER 1

“Ten million dollars,” the deep male voice intoned as Kayla Hampton’s fingers skimmed across the computer keyboard. “Projected return on investment over five years, twenty-five percent,” continued the male voice.

“Kayla, your three o’clock is here,” said Midge Stanton, her secretary, from the doorway.

Kayla jumped, clasping her hand to her throat. She swiveled in her chair. “Don’t sneak up on me.”

“Sorry. Honestly, I wasn’t sneaking. You were concentrating.”

Kayla pushed the button on her watch, which sounded a ding, then intoned, “It’s two-forty-five p.m.”

“Damn, he’s early. I’m trying to get through this information my dad sent over. Logan Lambert, right?”

“Right. Big man. Real nice looking, but real uptight.”

Kayla wiped her hands on her slacks. “I would imagine so, considering the circumstances of this meeting.”

She took out a bottle of antacids from a drawer next to her and dumped three into her hand. Her stomach had been hurting since her father’s call asking for help. The call had come as a shock. He’d never approved of her going into business for herself, feeling she’d be safer working for someone else. Now her father’s investment in Lambert Construction was in jeopardy and he wanted her to find out what had happened.

She pressed her hand against her stomach, not knowing why dealing with her father always made her stomach hurt. She didn’t need to live up to his expectations, but she always felt like she did.

Maybe her dad had finally realized she could take care of herself and help him out to boot. Maybe he was just desperate and didn’t want to admit to anyone else he’d messed up. Of course, this job came with a crash course in learning current construction regulations.

Kayla sniffed the air. “There’s fresh coffee. Is there a clean cup?”

“Yep.”

“Then give me five minutes and show Mr. Lambert in. I want to get through this section first.” Kayla rubbed her stomach and went back to work. After listening to the last few entries, she swiveled her chair to face the desk. Positioning herself in front of it, she checked the piles with her hands to make sure nothing was out of place.

Kayla heard a knock, then the click of the door knob.

“Mr. Lambert,” announced Midge.

Kayla rose from her desk and extended her hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Lambert. I’m Kayla Hampton.” A tremor ran up her spine and her stomach flipped. Her usual customers were small businesses owners who couldn’t balance their checkbooks. She’d never had to meet someone who would want to thwart her at every turn and, considering the trouble the man was in, he wouldn’t want her to succeed in her investigation.

However, she couldn’t let her father down...not the first

time he'd asked something of her. She steeled her back and refused to let her hands tremble.

Lambert had a strong hand, rough, used to work, with a bandage on the palm. His grip was firm. His rather spicy cologne was strong, as if he had just donned it.

"Please, have a seat?" She pointed to the chair in front of her desk. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yes." His voice was gruff.

Kayla picked up her mug from her desk and walked across the room to pour two cups. "Cream? Sugar?"

"Black."

Kayla set the cup in front of him and heard his chair creak as he reached for it. Returning to the other side, she set down her coffee cup, checking the spot with her fingertips. She settled into the chair, resting her elbows on the top of the desk and suppressed a sigh, readying herself for battle. Her heart was thudding in her ears. She didn't like situations where people got angry. She drew in a deep breath to steady her nerves and her stomach. "As you know, Mr. Lambert, I've been asked by your investors to go over your financial records."

"Everything's in order." His cup clacked against the wood of the desk.

"My clients want to make sure of that, especially after what happened this morning." She liked the sound of his voice, deep and rumbling against her ears, but she detected anger. Her ear strained to pick up the slightest change in tone. She didn't want this to turn into a full-blown confrontation. Her stomach did another flip.

"I have the original accounts and the contracts. I want you to note I'm cooperating. I've nothing to hide." His clipped and angry voice came closer, the leather on the chair squeaking as he shifted.

She tucked her hands into her lap so he wouldn't notice her palms had started to sweat and tremble. "If you have nothing to hide, then there'll be no problems. However, my client doesn't see it that way. He wants to know the reasons why he's losing money and why the building he invested in has become a heap of rubble."

The chair creaked, telling her Logan had leaned closer again. "I don't have an answer to that. If I did, I'd be glad to give it to you," he snapped

"If everything was as it should've been, then this shouldn't have happened." She picked up her pen and clicked it against the desktop, leaning toward him. If he thought he could intimidate her in her own office, he was mistaken. Others had tried it. None had succeeded. She reigned supreme in her domain. She'd designed it that way, and she wouldn't give way now, no matter how angry he became. No matter how hard her heart beat or her hands trembled.

The chair creaked again, and his breath stopped caressing her. "The codes were met. More than met. My buildings don't fall down."

"This one did." Kayla set down her pen and placed her hands on top of the desk, letting the coolness of it seep into her. She took in a long, calming breath. "Do you have all the

inspection reports?"

"Every one," Logan growled. "They're all in order.

Nothing was wrong with that building."

Kayla paused. If he had nothing to hide, why was he so angry? His anger hit her like a wall of water, threatening to swamp her. For a moment, she thought she'd be sick. "I'm sure when I go over the records I'll find out the whys behind this. The truth is very important for my client. He stands to lose a substantial amount of money."

"He's not the only one." He pounded his hand against the desk.

"I know that." Kayla held herself rigid. Her father couldn't afford to lose money. Why he had invested in this project was beyond her, but now she had to do something to make sure his money was returned. Logan Lambert's attitude would make it more difficult.

"Don't worry. The investors will get their money back."

"How can you guarantee that?" She took a sip of coffee, trying to calm herself while she listened to the changing tone of his voice. She heard frustration, anger and...honesty? If he were telling the truth, her job would be so much easier.

"Because I say so." His voice still came in short, clipped tones.

"You say the building was built to code, but..." She let her voice trail off. But what, she wasn't sure.

"I built it to code."

"Maybe so, but it did suffer a great deal of damage in this morning's earthquake." Was he outright lying to her, or did she hear hope in his voice?

"I'll stake my reputation on the fact it was built to code."

"You have."

"I fully realize that."

"So, someone must have cut corners."

"No," he boomed back, but his voice held a hesitancy.

"But..." She picked up her cup again with both hands so her trembling wouldn't slosh coffee over the edge. Arguing with him wouldn't help the situation. "Still, there's no guarantee my client will get his money back."

"I'll guarantee it." The chair creaked as he shifted.

"How?"

"Anyway I have to. No one has ever lost a dime investing in one of my buildings, and it won't happen this time either." It sounded like he was tapping his fingers against the arm of the chair.

She sipped her coffee, trying to calm her nerves and give herself a moment to think. She wanted to press her hand against her aching stomach. "If you leave the records, I'll look over them and get back to you. Everyone is in a hurry so I'll have a preliminary report shortly."

"When?"

"Probably first thing in the morning. May I have the records?" Kayla held up her hands for them.

"They're heavy. I'll put them down somewhere." His voice swirled around her, flooding the room with anger and desperation.

"To the right of the computer will be fine." Kayla

indicated a spot behind her.

Logan's chair creaked and the carpet muffled his ensuing footsteps. He sighed. "I brought everything you asked for."

"Thank you." It didn't sound right, but she wasn't sure what to say to him. She wanted him and his anger out of her office.

"Anything else you need to know, Miss Hampton?"

"Not for the moment. If I need anything or have any questions, I'll be in contact. Make sure my secretary has your number."

"Here's my business card. It has my home number as well."

Kayla continued to rest her hands on her desk. "Please, leave it with my secretary. I have a tendency to lose things on my desk."

"But..." He sounded confused. "Your desk is so neat."

"Small items like business cards tend to get mixed up with other papers." Kayla rose and walked around the desk toward the door. His anger didn't feel so strong, as if it had dissipated with setting down the records. The tension left her shoulders. He would be a difficult man to work with, being of such a mercurial nature, but hopefully not impossible. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Lambert. I'll be in touch soon." She held out her hand to him.

Closing the door behind him, she moved back to her desk. She reached for the antacids, then picked up her coffee cup, tipping it to her lips. She could still smell his cologne in the room. A masculine odor, yet excitingly warm. The palm of her hand still tingled where he had touched it.

She turned, still holding the cup. Setting it beside her computer, she opened a new file. During his ranting, her father had sworn Logan Lambert was a crook. After meeting him, she wasn't sure. She only had one way to find the truth.

* * *

Logan scrutinized the ledger he'd found in his superintendent Arnold's construction trailer, a ledger that should never have been. He looked at the notes he'd scribbled on the paper and grimaced. In the two hours since he'd left Kayla Hampton's office, he'd been going over and over the figures, comparing the official figures to the ones in Arnold's ledger. None of it made sense.

Hitting clear on his calculator, he added up the figures once more and stared at the total. *A million dollars*. Ten percent of the total cost of the MacGregor project. It was impossible.

Logan snapped the pencil between his fingers. Looking at it for a moment, he flung it across the room, listening to it rattle against the wall. *Hell*.

He looked at the dates again, one more time comparing them to the dates on the work schedule. Arnold had listed concrete pours and rebar installation. The dates corresponded with the official paperwork, but what did they mean? Were the figures the amount that had been skimmed from the original contracts? Were they the amounts of money that Arnold had taken? Logan shook his head. The knot in his stomach tightened.

None of this made any sense. If the amounts had been skimmed from the building budget, however, it would explain what had happened this morning.

Everything had been wonderful before that damn earthquake had hit at six-oh-three. He could still see the glass exploding from the windows, raining down in a fiery spray as the sun had glinted off the jagged fragments. As he had watched the top two floors shift, his heart had stopped. Chunks of concrete had crashed to the ground sending up clouds of dust, clogging the air and his lungs. He'd wanted to crumble to the ground like his building had and weep. Something was terribly wrong, no matter what the paperwork said. He knew it. He felt it in his gut that had twisted into a tight knot. He'd watched his building crumble the way no proper building should. Then the ambulance had rushed the night guard to the hospital after Logan had pulled him from the rubble.

He had to find out what happened before that damn CPA did. The only way to save his reputation and be able to rebuild his company after this catastrophe was to find the answers before anyone else placed blame on him.

He was financially ruined no matter what came of this, but the damn investors would get their money back. *One way or another*. If he had to hock everything, he would, but with his reputation intact, he could start over.

The total of the missing money could only be saved by using inferior materials, but how had the inspection reports gone through if everything was so far from spec?

He looked at the signature at the bottom of each of the official documents. They had all been signed by the same person, an Oliver somebody. The man's writing was atrocious. That did seem strange. Usually several inspectors came around during the course of a job. Definitely something he needed to check.

Logan pulled open his desk drawer, looking for another pencil. He proceeded to chew the eraser while he continued studying the ledger. The initials DC were scribbled next to each entry. *DC?*

Shuffling through the papers on his desk, Logan looked for the file folder he had taken from Arnold's desk. There it was. *DC. Dexter Construction*. Had to be the same. He picked up the phone and dialed information.

Disconnecting, he frowned. There was no listing for Dexter Construction, not in Hunt's Park or any of the surrounding areas. That had to be a mistake. How could his company be doing business with a nonexistent company?

Of course, this made as much sense as everything else.

Damn. He had to come up with some answers and quick.

Ms. Hampton would hang him out to dry if he couldn't explain what had happened. He didn't know how to find a company that didn't exist. He didn't know where to find the answers he needed. His head ached and he rubbed his temples. He had to make sure Ms. Hampton didn't find out about the ledger until he had one hell of an explanation to go with it. They were on opposite sides in this. She wanted to protect the investors and he... He wanted to protect the investors also, but

he needed to protect himself and his reputation as well. Maybe Rich, Logan's best friend and project supervisor, knew the answers. He'd spent more time on the MacGregor job than Logan had. Logan had been too busy lately putting together two other bids and getting the jobs started. Maybe Rich could help.

Logan walked to Rich's office and sauntered across the room to lean one hip against the desk. "What happened?" He stared into Rich's soft blue eyes.

"I don't know." A frown creased Rich's tanned face. He tented his hands in front of him and tapped his index fingers together.

Pulling up a chair with his foot, Logan dropped into it.

"The specs were fine. It should've withstood a four-pointthree earthquake." Logan studied his friend's face. His mouth drew into a tight line. The usual smile in Rich's eyes had darkened into anger or, maybe it was worry. Rich's was probably a mirror image of his own expression. "I thought you were watching that job for me while I was getting others started. You were the project supervisor. Didn't you check what was happening?"

"Every step of the way." Rich crossed his arms over his olive silk suit and leaned back.

"None of the surrounding buildings even had the tiniest crack in them." Logan rubbed the side of his face with his bandaged hand, which he'd sliced open breaking into Arnold's desk. He shifted in his seat. The best thing to do would be to change into his work clothes and go out to the work site. The answers would be there. "Got any ideas why?"

Rich pulled a piece of gum from his coat pocket and unwrapped it. After popping the gum into his mouth, he soothed out the wrapper, folded it into a tiny rectangle and tossed it toward the wastepaper basket. "It's like a bad dream."

"A nightmare."

Logan stared at Rich. They'd been friends since they were five. They'd gone to high school and college together. They'd fought over women and sat all night drinking to assuage broken hearts. "Dexter Construction. Why'd we use them?"

"Never heard of them." Rich's eyebrows pulled together.

"You let Arnold change construction companies after I had bids and contracts signed? There should've been paperwork come through on the changes. Weren't you checking it?"

Logan stared at Rich, watching his every move.

Logan knew he should have paid more attention, but he trusted Rich and Arnold. Since the company had started growing, he'd been leaving more and more to Rich. Now he could see that had been a mistake.

Rich, who never sweated, wiped at his forehead. A cold chill crept through Logan. Someone he trusted had to have sabotaged his building. Rich, his best friend? Arnold, who'd been like a father to him? Why? Who wanted to hurt him?

Who had made this personal? Who else could have?

"I didn't let him do anything. I trusted him completely.

You've known Arnold for years. He taught you the business. I never expected him to hire someone behind our backs." Rich

picked up a pen and twirled it in his fingers.

“It doesn’t seem like Arnold, and that doesn’t explain Dexter Construction.” Logan fisted his hands.

Rich let the pen slip from his finger and click against the polished desktop. “Where’d you hear about them?”

“Found papers in Arnold’s desk.”

“Ask Arnold. He’s the only one who’d have had the opportunity to do what was necessary to cause this disaster. He’s the one who was on the job site all the time.” Rich pushed his chair back from the desk. “What’d you’d find in the papers?”

Logan stared at Rich. He’d put Rich in charge of this one project, while he been bidding on others and getting another started. How could he not have known what was happening? He’d also trusted Arnold. They’d both trusted Arnold. He shook his head to clear his mind. Rich couldn’t be involved. Neither could Arnold. Stress was making him distrust those closest to him. He wouldn’t let this destroy his whole life.

“Records.”

“What kind?”

“The kind that need investigating.”

“What did you find out?”

“Nothing yet. I’ve been to a CPA.” Logan started at his hands for a moment. He couldn’t make sense of anything.

“Damn.”

Logan watched Rich for a moment, then rose and walked toward his own office.