

Chapter 1

"Do I have kale stuck in my teeth?" Claire Halford twisted in the VW's passenger seat and bared her teeth at her friend.

Sierra Riehl grimaced and plugged her nose. "We haven't had kale all week. Are you telling me you haven't brushed that long?" She fluttered her fingers in front of her face.

To wave away Claire's bad breath? "Of course I brushed." But in all the unaccustomed staring in the mirror that morning, had she truly examined her teeth? She'd taken a dollop of mousse to her short hair and dug makeup nearing its expiration date from her drawer. Once she wouldn't have left the house without either, but the rototiller didn't care.

She'd even allowed Sierra to slather her nails with polish. Of course it was only to cover up the fact she hadn't been able to scrub all the garden dirt from underneath them.

Claire stared at the small-town hotel at the end of the parking lot. It had seen

better days. Probably before she'd been born. Somewhere in there a gray-haired dude had set up a temporary office to hire a chef. Well, maybe he was only middle-aged. Forestry contractors couldn't be too ancient and still hike the nearby mountains every day. Could they?

She puffed out her breath. She needed this contract. Needed to do her part in making the payments on Green Acres Farm. She smoothed her gray slacks. Even for an interview she couldn't do a skirt and heels.

"Look, you're totally going to rock this. Relax." Sierra reached across and turned Claire's necklace.

What if the clasp came around during her interview? "Thanks. It keeps slipping."

"Not a biggie. It's not like you'll lose points for it." Sierra stuck her nose in the air and affected a British accent. "We were going to hire you, my dear, but your necklace clasp shows your true personality is lacking."

Claire couldn't stifle a snicker.

Sierra grinned back. "That's better. Really, how bad can it be? You're applying to cook for a reforestation crew. This is not some swanky restaurant on the pier."

"But I need this job. There isn't another 5-star a block down the waterfront to try next." Though Michel's invitation to operate his newest Seattle restaurant was a temptation. No, it wasn't. Working with him had been inspiring and challenging. Living on Puget Sound was great, but not a place for her to put down roots. Not like she could at Green Acres, at least if she could pay her portion of the mortgage.

"Don't worry. We can manage without it."

Claire stiffened and checked her watch. Five minutes to show time. "Easy for you to say."

Sierra had just come back from three weeks in Mexico with her parents and siblings, for crying out loud. Must be nice to have enough money in the bank to lounge around in the sun, even though Claire had no desire to go anywhere on vacation. This was home. And home was enough.

That didn't mean she could take advantage of Sierra and assume the bills would all get paid on the farm. Claire had to do her part.

"Seriously. It's a nice idea, but cooking for thirty people day in and day out for three months will take a lot of time and energy, and we've just started getting word out that Green Acres is a destination worth coming to."

"Are you trying to talk me out of it? Because it's not working."

"No, of course not." Sierra's eyes belied her quick words. "Just it isn't the only game in town. We can pour our resources directly into the farm instead."

"By resources, you mean cash. And I don't have any." Claire was barely paying her own share of basic expenses out of her wages from The Sizzling Skillet. With the contract from Enterprising Reforestation, she'd be able to quit her job—whew—and get ahead to regroup.

"Earth to Claire. Not just money. You've done a great job on the Green Acres website. It looks totally pro. Any day now we'll start seeing results from it. We just need to get that search engine optimization stuff working in our favor."

Claire shoved the car door open with probably more effort than required and climbed out. "Thanks. I appreciate that." And she did. But what did Sierra know

about scraping to make ends meet?

Her friend leaned across the center console to meet Claire's gaze. "Knock 'em dead, girl. I've got your back."

Claire nodded. "Thanks. Say a prayer." She tucked her folder and purse under her arm and flicked a wave back at Sierra.

She marched forward into The Landing Pad, Galena Landing's premiere—well, only—hotel. It was hard to imagine a town more off the beaten track, even for northern Idaho. Which meant that a tree-planting crew was her best bet at raking in some cash this year.

The front desk attendant sent her to a suite of rooms down the corridor. A hand-scrawled sign stuck to an open door. Enterprising Reforestation.

Please, God. You know I need this job.

Claire pasted on a bright smile and breezed into the room. "Hi, I'm Claire Halford. I have an interview at ten."

A petite woman with a boyish haircut glanced up from her iPad. "Noel will be right with you."

As if on cue, a side door opened and a plump middle-aged woman came out. "Thank you so much, Mr. Kenzie," wafted back over her shoulder. She nodded at the receptionist and took Claire in with narrowed eyes as she swished past.

"Noel will see you now, Ms. Halford."

"Thank you." Claire offered the woman a smile, wishing she could wipe her sweaty hands. Was Sierra serious when she said it might leave stains on her pants? Best not to risk it. She paced to the now-open door, entered the temporary office,

and stilled.

Who had she expected to see? Not a guy of about thirty, his slightly messy brown hair longer than her own, with a hint of stubble on his cheeks and chin.

He looked up and his brown eyes widened.

He had no right to be this cute.

"Noel Kenzie." He got to his feet behind the folding table and reached his hand across to shake hers, giving her a good view of a tan t-shirt stretched across a muscular chest and covering the top of a pair of faded blue jeans. A lethal combination.

Better keep some distance from this one. "Hello, Mr. Kenzie. I'm Claire Halford here about the contract for feeding your tree planting crew." Marks on her pants, nothing. If only she weren't leaving stained creases on the folder she clutched.

He took his time looking her over.

Could he tell this wasn't her style? She didn't do ruffles, but Sierra had insisted.

"Just call me Noel." Through her lashes she could see him watching her, a speculative gleam in his eye. A gleam that better be about the good food she could feed his employees, buster. He sat down and motioned her to the straight chair across from him.

Claire complied, laying her proposal on the edge of the table.

He picked up the papers and glanced through the top few. "Tell me what you can offer that's within our budget, Claire. It looks like you downloaded all the pertinent information regarding crew size and dietary needs."

"Yes. The crew runs about thirty people, with five vegetarians and two celiacs." Hopefully he wasn't one of the vegetarians. Not that it mattered, of course.

"The menu details are on the next pages."

Noel's eyebrows arched as he scanned the sheets. "This doesn't look very exotic."

He wanted haute cuisine? For tree planters? Claire's shoulder muscles tightened. "More like good, healthy meals made from local ingredients wherever possible."

Noel shuffled the papers to glance over a new one. "I don't mind telling you my crew is expecting a bit more flair." He frowned, still reading. "The résumé you sent in said you'd trained in Paris and worked with a French chef in Seattle for several years?"

That had been enough traveling to do her a lifetime. "I did."

He laid the papers down and folded strong, tanned hands over them. "I'm not seeing that influence in your menu, and I must admit those credentials are what led to this interview."

"I don't have easy access to those ingredients here." She met his gaze.

Noel's head was already shaking. "Food service trucks come to northern Idaho. Where do you think the local restaurants get their stuff? I would have thought you'd be aware of that."

Claire forced her jaw to unclench. At least enough to answer him, hopefully civilly. "I'm aware, Mr. Kenzie." Too bad if he didn't want to be called that. She needed the distance. "I've worked as the night chef at The Sizzling Skillet for the past

year and have placed many of the orders. It's really not the same as getting fresh ingredients at Pike's Place Market."

"Then, why. . .?" He raised his palms and tilted his head to one side. His wavy locks slid over one eye, and he didn't bother brushing them out.

It was all Claire could do not to reach across the table and do it for him. Focus. Not on the guy, but on the contract. The contract she was about to lose before she even had a real shot at it, if she wasn't careful.

And then she probably would never see Noel Kenzie again. That would be a good thing. Except she needed the money.

Claire straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eye—the one not hidden. "Your crew puts in long hours of hard physical labor. They need the best possible fuel their chef can provide." She tapped the papers in front of him. "This menu represents a tasty, well-balanced diet to maximize their metabolism."

He pursed his lips. "Thanks for coming in. I'll consider it, and if I have any questions, I'll let you know. Your contact info is in here?" He riffled through the stack.

His body language said he wasn't going to hire her. "Yes, my cell number is on the cover page."

He found the right sheet and slid it on top of the others. "All right, then. Unless there's something more you wanted to add?"

Like she'd sell out to the food service industry? Not hardly. "I'm a good chef, Mr. Kenzie. My entrees got starred reviews in the Seattle newspaper, and I pride myself on finding the best, freshest food I can to work with. You and your crew will

be delighted with the menu."

A glimmer of humor peeked out of his eyes and twitched at the edges of his mouth as he got to his feet. "I'll keep that in mind as I make my decision over the next few days." His gaze swept her body. "Don't worry, Claire. I'll be calling you. Either way."

Yeah, right. She clenched her teeth into the best smile she could. "Thank you, Mr. Kenzie." She gave him a stiff nod as she rose.

Men. Couldn't he keep his personal life out of his business interviews? All she wanted from him was a chance to prove she could earn a decent living here in the boondocks. Not in Seattle. That wasn't the dream she and Jo and Sierra had been building toward for years.

If Claire couldn't work for Enterprising Reforestation, she'd find some other way to pay her share of the farm. There'd be one. She just had to find it.

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Noel raked his hands through his hair. No doubt the whole mass stood on end by now, but even those zillion antennae sticking straight up weren't bringing in the signal he needed to make his choice.

Not that there was one. Polly Solomon's bid offered everything his crew was used to eating, right on budget. The vegetarian items were heavy on tofu, but whatever. They fit the parameters.

No, the problem lay with stinkin' cute Claire Halford. Her dark red top with angled ruffles emphasized curves in all the right places. Not just that, of course. Her face was pretty, too. So earnest.

Only once had she almost smiled. That hint of a gorgeous woman becoming animated was going to haunt him. Almost enough to invite her back, just so he could feast his eyes on her when she relaxed. But while Noel wasn't opposed to a few months' worth of flirting, he couldn't let it get in the way of his crew's culinary needs.

He flipped through her bid again, her earnest brown eyes seeming to beg him for the chance.

Noel frowned and turned the papers over then got to his feet and headed into the adjoining room.

"Any other interviews lined up today?" he asked his foreman.

Jess swiped off her iPad and glanced up. "The guy from Wynnton couldn't make it today. He'll be down tomorrow."

Then he wasn't all that dependable to start with. Noel was stuck with choosing between Polly and Claire. He sure knew which woman he'd rather look at over meals, but that was no way to decide.

"Neither applicant suitable?" Concern lined Jess's voice. Or maybe only curiosity.

Noel grimaced. "No clear winner." He crossed to look out the window into the hotel parking lot. Beyond the pot-hole-ridden concrete marched a band of trees. Long, narrow Galena Lake lay beyond, glistening in the morning light with tree-covered hills watching over it from the eastern shore.

A guy hardly needed food with a view like that. Couldn't even see the clearcuts from town. Clearcuts he'd come to replant with new trees, new life for the

future.

"Oh, come on. That Claire Halford doesn't look like a loser."

"Give it up, Jess. She's too serious. It doesn't look like she's cracked a real smile in years." It would be fun to see if he could get laughter out of her. She wouldn't be one of those girls who flirted and giggled all the time. Her laugh would be quiet but genuine, more like a chuckle. What would it take to make that erupt?

Jess's sharp elbow to his ribs brought him back into the hotel room. "A sense of humor isn't required in a chef, you know. Maybe she's a great cook."

He glanced down at the spunky gal who'd been his foreman the past four seasons. "Not required, perhaps, but it helps. You know how Simon keeps the crew entertained with his one-liners." Too bad his regular chef needed this contract off for a family emergency.

"There's only one Simon."

Did he imagine her wistfulness?

Jess quirked her eyebrows at him. "And Polly has a sense of humor? Somehow I hadn't picked up on that."

"Whatever."

Jess jerked her chin toward the door. "If we're done here, let's check out that farm on Thompson Road."

"Yeah, Elmer's place. It would be a handy to set up the rigs and tents right at the base of the access road."

"Not only that, but Claire Halford lives down that way. Mighty handy for her getting to work on time."

He shot Jess an irritated glare to cover the flicker of interest she'd evoked. "Not a good enough reason. I don't know that she can pull it off. She doesn't have experience with this type of work."

"Only one way to get it. It's not like she's new to the cooking world."

Noel narrowed his gaze. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"Yours." She grinned. "She got your attention, didn't she? You could use a stabilizing influence in your life."

Noel choked back a snort. "Grab your bike, girl. Elmer's is only about five miles out of town. Maybe some wind in your face will scourge those thoughts right out of your head."

And maybe out of his.