

Chapter 1-----

“Do I have anything 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. “The worst offender is kale, and we haven’t had it 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 the back of 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, but 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. Poor thing had seen better days, probably before she’d been born. Somewhere in there a decrepit old 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 and 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. 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 had been great, but not as a place to put down roots. Not like Green Acres, at least if she could pay her portion of the mortgage.

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

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

Sierra just spent 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.

"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." Sierra's family might be able to afford expensive vacations, but that didn't mean Claire could take advantage of her. She'd pay her own way, even if it meant working long days cooking for a demanding work crew.

"No, of course not." Sierra's eyes belied her quick words. "But 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."

“Earth to Claire. Not only 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, at least once we 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 your vote of confidence.” 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. “Don’t worry about it, girl. God’s got it.”

Claire sucked in a breath. “I know. It’s just hard to remember.” 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. Could a town be any more off the beaten track, even in northern Idaho? Which meant 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.*

Deep breath. 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.

What had she expected to see? Not a guy of about thirty with a hint of stubble and slightly messy brown hair longer than hers. He looked up, and his brown eyes widened.

He had no right to be this cute.

“I’m Noel Kenzie.” He rose and reached across the folding table to shake her hand, 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 he watched her, a speculative gleam in his eye. That gleam better be about the good food she could feed his employees.

He sat and motioned her to the straight chair across from him.

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

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

“Yes. The crew runs about thirty people, with five vegetarians and two celiacs.” Hopefully he wasn’t one of the vegetarians, but what did it matter? “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. “Your resumé said you’d trained in Paris and worked with a French chef in Seattle for several years?”

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

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 shook his head. “Food service trucks come to northern Idaho. Where do you think the local restaurants get their stuff? I thought you’d be aware of that.”

Claire forced her jaw to unclench, at least enough to answer 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 the side. His wavy locks slid over one eye, and he didn’t

bother brushing them out.

Claire's fingers itched 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 had a real shot at it, if she wasn't careful. And then she'd never see Noel Kenzie again. That would be a good thing. Except she needed the money.

Claire squared 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 stood. “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 the city. Seattle 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.

oOo

Noel raked his hands through his hair. No doubt the whole mess 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 proposal 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. Her face was pretty, too. So earnest.

Only once had she almost smiled, and that hint of animation was going to haunt him. Almost enough to invite her back, 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 proposal again, her intense brown eyes seeming to beg him for the chance.

Noel frowned and turned the papers over then 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. We rescheduled for tomorrow.”

Then he wasn’t all that dependable. Noel was stuck 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. He couldn’t see any of 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 time off for a family emergency.

“There’s only one Simon.”

Did he imagine her wistfulness?

Jess quirked her eyebrows at him. “Polly has a sense of humor, I’m sure, though I hadn’t picked up on it.”

“Whatever.”

Jess poked 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 handy to set up the rigs and tents right at the base of the access road.”

“I looked up Claire Halford’s address. She 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. “That’s 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.

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