## Chapter 1

Eden Andrusek stopped so suddenly the screen door slammed her backside. Where was Pansy? Eden shaded her eyes and glanced around the backyard. No way. She'd only been inside a minute.

"Pansy!" she yelled, jogging down the three steps to the barren yard. "Where are you?"

The answer seemed to be... nowhere. Eden's gut clenched. No, no. No, no. This can't be happening.

The gate at the side of the small house was definitely closed. The backyard was completely fenced with no hiding places. Except...

Eden's pulse quickened at the sight of a vertical board in the side fence hanging slightly askew. She ran across the yard, nearly tripping over the metal bucket Pansy had been playing with, and pushed at the errant board. It swung aside. That was definitely enough room for the escape artist.

She crouched and peered through the gap into the neatly mowed lawn of the Victorian next door. A side table with a glass of something clear and red sat beside an empty deck chair facing...

"Pansy! No!"

The goat only glanced over as she chewed the paper dangling from her mouth.

"Drop it, Pansy!" Like that would help. Dogs might be trainable. Goats? Not so much. Eden yanked at the board, but she wasn't as skinny as the Nigerian dwarf. No way was she fitting through that gap. And she definitely wasn't going over the eight-foot fence without a ladder.

Eden dropped the board and bolted through the gate and around to the house next door. Man, they didn't even *have* a side gate. She pounded on the door while jabbing the doorbell. Wasn't there a new renter? Surely someone was home. Somebody had to have left the nearly-full glass out there, to say nothing of the papers.

The papers that were being devoured in present time.

She pounded again. "Let me in!"

No voice. No footsteps.

Eden twisted the doorknob, and it gave beneath her fingers. She hesitated for an instant. Should she do this? Was it breaking in if the door was unlocked? Maybe she should go back to her yard, grab a hammer and remove another board or two. That had to be better than entering someone's house uninvited.

She pushed just a little further. Was there a clear path to the back door from here? Maybe she could scoot through with no one the wiser. After all, if someone were home, they'd surely have come to the door by now.

A set of patio doors was clearly visible past the dimly lit interior. On the other side, Pansy knocked the glass onto the deck chair and began to lap up the liquid.

"Hello?" called Eden, gaze locked on Pansy.

"Hey!" a male voice exploded. "Get out of my yard!"

A guy Eden had never seen before wrenched the glass door open and ran onto the patio, his tanned arms flailing. Whoa. No wonder they called those things muscle shirts. She shouldn't be staring, but she couldn't help herself as he grabbed the remains of the papers off the side table and began to whack Pansy with them.

That did it. No one was going to smack Pansy but her. Not that the goat didn't deserve it. Eden dashed through the house and out onto the back deck, skidding to a stop beside the guy.

"Don't hit her! That's my goat!"

The guy pivoted, hand still holding the sheaf of paper high in the air. His blue eyes blazed at her from beneath damp blond hair that stuck out all over, like he'd been toweling it dry when duty called. "Who are you?"

He was cute. Eden gulped. He was also stinkin' angry, and he had a right to be. She grabbed Pansy's halter and wrenched the slobbery paper fragments from the goat's mouth. She closed her eyes for one brief moment, then straightened and looked the guy in the eye. Although his eyes were much higher than hers.

"My name is Eden Andrusek, and this is

Pansy. We, um, we live next door." She pointed. "She broke through the fence. I'm really sorry. I—" she hesitated, glancing at the remaining papers "—I hope this wasn't anything important."

His eyebrows shot up. "Sorry is a good start, but your hope is misguided." He smacked the sheaf against the table, and Eden jumped. He scrubbed a palm against his forehead and shook his head. "You have no idea."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Eden ventured. She glanced at an architectural drawing on the top page. "Maybe not."

"All you can do is get that stupid animal out of here and fix your fence. I should call animal control on you."

Was this where she told him she worked in that department for the City of Spokane? Probably not the best timing. Besides, if he reported her, she might even lose her job. Animal control officers didn't get as much grace as other residents.

Eden dragged Pansy back a step. "Please

don't. It won't happen again. I'll fix that board and check all the other ones, too. Promise."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know how I'll get this report done before the meeting on Tuesday now."

"I'm really sorry." Yeah, she knew it didn't help.

He flipped through the papers and chewed on his bottom lip. "Some of it I can reprint. But some were longhand notes to go with the sketches I was doodling. I'd just figured out how to mount the panels on the roof."

Eden frowned. "The what on what roof?"

He tossed her an irritated look. "This project is my chance to prove I know what I'm doing with solar energy. Not that easy when the community center is wedged against that bluff and doesn't get much sunshine."

Eden clapped her hand over her mouth. She'd been at the neighborhood meeting that agreed to hire him, but she'd thought he was probably some old guy. What was his name? "Jacob?"

He blinked. "Yes. Have we met?" He looked

her up and down, his narrowed gaze lingering on the tattoos on her left arm. "I'm sure I'd remember if we had."

She lifted her chin. Another person who thought they knew everything about her because of her artistic choices. Well, she wouldn't explain a thing to him as long as he wore that sneer on his face. "No, we haven't met. I heard you'd been hired. I didn't know we were neighbors." Just her luck. Cute guy neighbor, into environmental stuff, but stuck up.

She hoisted Pansy into her arms and eyed the path past him to the door. "I should be going."

"Wait. How did you get back here?" Jacob crossed his arms

Heat flared up her face. "I came through your house," she mumbled. "Sorry. I heard you yelling at Pansy, and I didn't think. I just ran through."

He shook his head. "Let me escort you back the way you came." He gestured at the open patio door. "After you. And don't let her loose in the house." Bang. Thud, thud, bang.

Jacob glared at the fence just ten feet away. The whole structure seemed to vibrate as Eden attacked it with a hammer. At least, he assumed that's what she was doing.

He could just imagine her crouched in the grass on the other side, biting her lip in concentration as she tried to pound the nails in to secure the loose board. Maybe the goat nibbled at her blond-with-a-tinge-of-strawberry ponytail.

A goat in the city.

He'd heard the bleating a few times in the two weeks since he'd moved in next door with his buddy, Logan. They'd looked up the animal bylaws and found that Spokane did, indeed, allow goats and other livestock in this neighborhood near the downtown core. So long as they were well contained, of course.

Too bad this rental was close to both his and Logan's jobs, to say nothing of the community center he'd been hired to outfit with solar panels. His gut soured as he stared at the remains of his

report, due in just three days. The fence had looked solid, but he hadn't walked the length of it and poked every board. Apparently he should have.

Thud. Bang.

Sounded like Eden was missing the nail more often than hitting it. Didn't she know that screws would hold the board tighter?

Thud. Thwack.

"Ow! Ow, ow, ow."

Good to hear his neighbor wasn't one for cursing. Jacob stared at the barricade. Man, he wasn't going to get any peace unless he went over there and fixed it himself.

"Pan-zeeee!" yelled Eden.

That did it. Jacob surged to his feet, scooped the papers off the patio table — who knew if that goat was going to escape again? — and strode into the house. The drill was in the hall closet, right where it belonged. A quick trigger-pull proved it had plenty of juice. He selected a bag of screws from the bin then marched out the front door, around to the side gate next door, and right

in without so much as a knock.

The goat bleated and side-hopped toward him.

Eden whirled and dropped her hammer. "Ouch!" she yelped, rubbing her foot. "You scared me."

"Sorry I didn't knock." Jacob reached behind him for the gate latch. Maybe he shouldn't assume she wanted help. But, no. He was doing it to make sure that menace didn't get back into his space. It wasn't to help Eden so much, and certainly not to get a closer look at her... or her tattoo.

She had dirt on her arms, hair pulling out of its ponytail, and clothes obviously chosen for yard work not glamour. Somehow she managed to be pretty despite the mess, her eyes wild as she retrieved the hammer and stood facing him.

Jacob held up the drill. "I thought maybe you could use a hand."

Her gaze flicked to the fence then back at him as a pinkish tinge crept up her face. "I can manage."

"It's no trouble." Actually, it was, but that was beside the point. He wasn't going to get anything done while listening to her pound the board rather than the nail... or worse, smash her thumb again. "Please. Let me help." He took a few steps closer, trying to keep his eyes on her face, but... roses? Why would she have a ring of roses around her bicep?

Eden crossed her arms and widened her stance.

Guess he hadn't done a good enough job of blanking his expression. "I only want to be neighborly. It sounds like you could use a hand. I have the tools and the ability to use them." Unlike her.

She sighed. "I guess I should be thankful. I prayed for help, so I shouldn't be too picky who God sends my way."

"Am I that bad?" Jacob narrowed his eyes.
"You don't even know me." Then the rest of her words caught up to him. "Did you say you prayed?"

She lifted her chin slightly. "I did. I pray

about nearly everything, but it seems God sometimes has a sense of humor in how He answers."

"What do you mean by that?" He might not like the answer, but he had to know.

"I pray about everything because God hears and cares about me and my troubles."

Jacob waved a hand. "No, I meant about the humor."

"Huh?"

"You said—"

"I know what I said. Are you telling me you're not making fun of the fact that I pray?"

"Why would I? I pray all the time myself, only I never really thought about God laughing at me when He answers." He'd also never thought about a tattooed woman praying.

"Not laughing, exactly." The goat leaned against Eden's leg, and she crouched down to rub the scruffy head. "Just I was so embarrassed about Pansy getting in your yard and eating your papers. Why couldn't God have sent an answer that didn't make me feel even more stupid and

inept?"

Was there supposed to be a valid reply to that? "I'm pretty sure God sent me." It suddenly seemed clear, anyway. "You wouldn't want to tell God you didn't like His answer, would you?"

"I didn't say..." Her words faded away, and her face took on a brighter hue. "Never mind."

Interesting. But he didn't have all day. "Let me at that fence?"

She nodded and backed up a few steps, granting him access.

A quick glance at the boards in the vicinity of the loose one indicated that any of them might work its way loose next. He might as well plan on doing the whole side, just to keep his yard secure.

The goat butted his leg, and Jacob winced. That could leave a bruise. Why would anyone want to own a goat, anyway?

"How can I help?"

"Keep her out of my way." He spied an enclosure farther back, where several hens scratched in the dirt. "Like in there." Man, she had a veritable farm

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"I don't think so." Eden's hands found her hips. "She spends enough time locked up when I'm at work."

Jacob frowned, pointing his drill at the fence. "Isn't that what led to the problem in the first place? She's an animal. Put her in the pen."

"No." Eden leaned a little closer, blue eyes sparking. "She's my family. She'll be fine in the yard."

He could think of all kinds of things to say about someone who looked at a goat as a family member. Her eyes dared him to say them.

Just then, Pansy picked up a metal bucket and tossed it over her shoulder, missing his leg by mere inches. The goat lowered her head and stared at him.

Seemed both females in the space trusted him equally. *Excellent start, Riehl. Excellent start.*