

## Chapter 1

Josephine Shaw gritted her teeth as she jerked the harvest gold range forward on worn linoleum. A little scratching noise came from somewhere behind it. Mice. Of course the old trailer would have the despicable creatures. It had sat vacant for how long? The beam of her flashlight found half a dozen naked newborns sheltered in a nest of insulation and wood chips. A full-grown rodent shot through the gap she'd created and over her foot. Jo gasped, nearly dropping the light as she jerked back.

Her roommate, Sierra Riehl, shrieked and danced some kind of fierce jig designed, Jo presumed, to fend off an attacking two-inch-high army.

"Whoa! You're going to go right through." A distinct possibility, given the spongy feel to the old trailer's floor.

Sierra's gaze tried to capture every inch of space at once, but at least her feet slowed their tempo. "Th-the mouse..."

Jo tried to get her own heart rate under control. "Long gone." At least, Jo would be if she were in his shoes. If mice wore shoes. Which they didn't.

"Are you sure?"

What was she, some kind of fortuneteller? Oh, wait. There was still the nest, and somebody would have to deal with it. Didn't look like Sierra was up for the job. Never mind,

Jo could do this herself. "Um. You might not want to look."

Sierra dug purple manicured fingernails into Jo's arm, her blue eyes wide. "Why? What's back there?"

"You don't want to know." Jo steered her friend into the vacant living room, clad in musty shag carpet. "Just look out the window for a minute. Admire the view. Dream about the new house." She pointed across the snow-flattened yellow grass to the building site. "Right over there." Pouring the foundation couldn't come fast enough. Even spending one night in this disgusting, moldy trailer would be more than ample. Bad enough without the mice, but *with* them?

Jo shuddered. They weren't going to get the best of her. She grabbed a dustpan, shoved it hard under the nest and gagged at the stench of feces she'd disturbed. Choking down her bile, she hurried to the door, wrenched it open, and flung the dustpan's contents...

...right at a set of chest buttons. Scraps of insulation clung to a shearling-lined suede coat.

Jo froze. What had she done? "Sorry," she gasped. Her eyes jerked up. For an instant she focused on the shocked brown eyes of a tall guy with a closely cropped beard and mustache. Dark blond hair curled from beneath his tweed newsboy cap. His hand, poised to knock, dropped to his side.

At the same instant, the sound of frantic clawing pulled Jo's attention down to a Border collie puppy nearly yanking the leash from his master's hand as he surged at the slug-like blobs. Jo stooped and swept the wiggling mice from the wooden landing with her dustpan. "No! You don't want to eat those."

The dog rewarded her with two paws on her shoulders and a slurp up her cheek, nearly knocking her over.

Jo stifled a giggle then remembered the guy. The totally hunky guy she'd just baptized with rodents. Oh, no. She could use a do-over of this meeting.

He cleared his throat and shortened the leash. "Domino, sit." The pup almost got his rump on the planks but his wagging tail threatened to topple him.

Apparently Jo was stuck with *this* introduction. She took a deep breath, straightened, and stuck out her hand. "Hi. Sorry about that. I'm Josephine Shaw."

The guy stared down.

What had she done now? Jo followed his gaze to the dustpan she still clenched. It dropped from nerveless fingers and clattered against the boards. The pup pounced on it.

Jo closed her eyes, breathed a quick prayer, and wiped her hand on her overalls. Ideal garb for cleaning out an old, filthy trailer, but not so perfect for meeting the cutest guy she'd seen in a while. She summoned a smile and looked up at him again. "Let's try that again. I'm Josephine Shaw, and I'm really sorry I threw mice at you."

A sparkle gleamed in his eyes. "I'm sorry you did, too. Zachary Nemesek, from next door."

"Is someone at the door?" Sierra's footsteps padded up behind Jo. "Oh!"

It was over before it had even begun. Not that it was Sierra's fault. She was so sparkly and confident guys practically tripped over their own big feet to get her attention.

"Sierra, I'd like you to meet our neigh—"

His hand shot past Jo's shoulder. "Zachary Nemesek. My friends call me Zach."

Friends. He hadn't said that to Jo. "Zachary, thi—"

"Hi, I'm Sierra Riehl." Sierra's hand lingered in his longer than was strictly necessary as the two locked gazes.

Jo's smile froze solid on her face. Yep. Over. Stifling a sigh, she stepped aside.

"Nemesek? You must be related to the folks we bought the land from." A dimple punctuated Sierra's smile as she flipped long blond hair over her shoulder.

"My parents handled the sale for my aging grandmother."

Somehow Sierra had managed to avoid any dirt smudges on her designer jeans and pastel blue top. Jo glanced down at her striped t-shirt peeking out from the overalls. She hadn't been so lucky. And it wasn't just the mouse nest, either. Her gaze dropped to the adorable puppy, still tugging at his snug collar. Mutts of various sizes and colors had been her constant playful companions on her grandparents' farm when she was small. This pup was no mongrel, but his silky ears begged for a scratch. She crouched down.

"Oh, this is Domino."

"That suits him, all black and white." Jo was a big fan of black and white. How comforting when things simply were what they were. Nuances made things messy.

Zachary chuckled. "My folks raise and train Border collies as working dogs. Or, at least, they used to."

Sierra nudged Jo. "I met the Nemeseks when I signed the papers a couple months ago. They're wonderful people, and I bet they'll be great neighbors."

She'd sent the contract out to Jo and Claire by courier for them to sign and have notarized. Jo hadn't seen the property until they'd arrived this morning, other than a few photos. Forty acres of mostly mostly flat land at the end of a paved road, with a logging road carrying on up the mountain through the trees. A great place to make a stand and show the world what three women on a mission could do.

Jo scratched the puppy's ears once more and stood. Time to get back in the game. Not that it would do any good after this disastrous beginning.

"I'm sorry the trailer is such a mess," Zach was saying. "My dad got really sick a few

days ago and was sent to Kootenai Health Center in Coeur d'Alene. I know Mom promised to have things ready for you, but she's spent every minute with Dad."

"I wondered," said Sierra. "I told her at the time we'd take the place as is, but she seemed adamant she'd get it cleaned."

Jo glanced up at him. "Is your dad going to be okay?"

His brown eyes clouded over and a muscle twitched in his cheek. "I sure hope so. I think they caught it in time."

Sounded serious. "Any diagnosis?"

"Guillain-Barré Syndrome. I don't suppose you've heard of that."

Guillain-*what?* Jo opened her mouth to ask but Sierra beat her to words, reaching out and touching Zach's arm. "Oh, that's dreadful. They got him on immunoglobulins quickly, I hope?" She turned to Jo. "It's an auto-immune disorder that can actually be quite serious. Affects the peripheral nervous system."

Zach's eyebrows went up as he focused on Sierra. "Yes. Someone you know had it?"

Sierra shrugged, her blond locks swishing over her shoulder. "I studied it in school. My major was holistic medicine."

A smile creased Zach's face then froze. "Holistic?"

"Herbal and natural remedies."

The smile faded as his eyes narrowed. "New Age, then."

His pup whined. Did he feel the chill in the air, too?

Jo bit back a grin of her own. "No, actually. We're Christians. Holistic simply means looking at the whole system and treating it as a unit."

"I understand the definition."

And apparently didn't approve. So be it.

Zach shifted his weight. "Anyway, like I was saying, I'm sorry the place isn't cleaned out for you. Mom's still in the city and won't be back for a few days, but I can give you a hand if you like." His gaze rested on Sierra. "It's the least I can do."

*Gag.* Made Jo want to take his offer and make suggestions about its disposition.

Not surprisingly, Sierra's eyes lit up. "That'd be great. We're expecting the moving truck in a couple of hours or so. We've got buckets and cleaning supplies along."

"But no hot water." Zach peered past them. "Dad turned off the tank and drained it when my grandmother moved out." He took half a step forward.

Jo crossed her arms. "I already got it, thanks."

He pulled his head back and really saw her for the first time since Sierra had come to the door. "*You* turned it on?"

"It's not that hard."

"Oh. Well, then..."

Speechless. Guys couldn't seem to handle a competent female.

Sierra's hand found its way back to his sleeve, purple nail polish gleaming against brown suede. "We could really use help with the mice, though. Jo found this nest..."

Jo bit the insides of her cheeks to keep from laughing.

"We met." Zach didn't manage to hold back his chuckle.

Sierra frowned. "Pardon?"

"We met, the nest and I." Zach brushed the remains of it from his coat.

For the first time, Sierra looked down past the edge of the wooden landing. She gasped and stumbled back.

Zach's eyes twinkled.

Jo couldn't take her gaze off him. So cute and with a sense of humor as well.

"Oh, my! I didn't even see them there." Sierra pressed a hand over her heart.

Not that Jo had a chance to snag a guy like Zach with Sierra on the loose. She took a deep breath. Time to shut down this fiasco. "At any rate, we have a lot of work to do.

Thanks so much for stopping by. It was nice to meet you."

Zach looked from Jo to Sierra and back again. "My offer was sincere. However, I'm thinking I should go home and get some traps first. Anything else I can bring? Window cleaner? Vacuum?"

Oh, the guy was actually willing to get his hands dirty, not just gaze adoringly at Sierra? "Traps would be great. We've got everything else covered."

He nodded. "I'll put the mutt in his run and be back in a few. Domino, heel." Once off the steps, Zach stretched into a brisk stride, the pup trotting at his side.

"Now that is one hot-looking male specimen." Sierra's hands rested on her curvy hips.

As though Jo didn't have eyes.

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Zach dropped his rag into the bucket and settled onto his heels. Who'd have guessed this much dirt could accumulate in only two years? But he'd promised his mother he'd help out—in fact, that he'd do whatever he could to alleviate her worries about the farm so she could focus on Dad.

Handy for them he hadn't landed a permanent job since his graduation from veterinary college. Zach cringed at the memory of his former boss refusing to extend his temporary work assignment, telling Zach he was looking for someone more compatible with the over-all business. Subtext: someone who would please his spoiled-rotten daughter. Well, Zach had tried, but there were games he would not play.

Not that he appreciated what the farm offered, either. But today was a bright spot, hanging out with a cute, shapely blonde. Sierra didn't seem conscious of her beauty like Yvette had been. That disaster ought to have made him wary of women. It didn't matter, though. He wouldn't be around long enough to get serious about Sierra or anyone else, whether they threw mice at him or not.

Jo's backbreaking work detail gave him the munchies. Zach got to his feet and grabbed his pack. "Anyone want some chips?" He pulled a bag out, ripped open the top, and extended it to Sierra, who shook her head. He turned to Jo.

Her forehead creased in a frown. "We have apples and carrot sticks in the cooler, thanks."

Seriously? "Sounds too healthy for a guy like me." Zach poured a few chips into his palm and tossed them in his mouth.

Jo's eyes narrowed. "You'd rather eat junk food made by some multi-national corporation? Not this gal."

"Breakfast of champions." She was kind of cute, all perturbed like that. Some strands of her thick brown hair had pulled free of her tight braid and now frizzled around her head. She looked a bit less intimidating without a dustpan in her hands.

"There's no redeeming value for your body or for the local economy in that stuff."

Never mind about the less intimidating. She was just like those whackos he'd been avoiding at college for the past eight years. "I'm sure it provides jobs for someone somewhere. Just doing my part." He inhaled a couple more handfuls then pulled a pop bottle from his pack and swallowed a deep slug. No point in offering that with his germs all over it. Like either would accept.

He glanced up to catch a scowl pass between the two females. Whatever. If Sierra

turned out to be just as much a health food nut as Jo, no loss.

A cell phone rang, and Zach's hand automatically reached for his pocket before Sierra's voice interrupted him.

"Hey, bro. Where you guys at?"

She'd said something earlier about her dad and brother bringing a U-Haul with furniture.

Jo paused in her effort to scrub out a kitchen drawer and cocked an eyebrow at her friend.

"You'll be here in ten minutes? Good enough. See you." Sierra flipped the phone shut.

Not a chance the scrub detail would be ready that quickly, even if they made some serious moves. Zach tossed the pop bottle toward his pack and reached for the bucket and rag. He'd do what he could.

Jo opened the under-sink cupboard door, gasped, and slammed it shut. "Okay. Apparently there are more of them." Her voice sounded rather pinched.

"More mice?" A chance for him to be indispensable while not getting crap thrown at him. Good deal. Zach leaned over, opened the door and peered in. This litter seemed older than the previous one. "Where's that dustpan?"

Jo shot him a look somewhere between disgust and gratitude and handed it to him.

Zach jammed the pan underneath the mice and lifted it out of the cupboard. One of the nestlings fell off and landed with its feet scrabbling in the air.

Sierra screamed and flung her scrub brush, missing the mouse by half a room. She stared at it, eyes wide.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob and grinned, unable to help himself. "It's

just a baby, Sierra. I'll come back for it after I've dumped these."

"Just?" Her voice caught.

Jo peeled a strip of paper towel off the roll by the window. "I've got it." Her nose wrinkled as she gathered up the squirming mass in at least a triple layer and rushed past him through the open door. "Ick." She threw it, paper towel and all, onto the previous pile.

"Way to go." Zach couldn't resist a dig. "But really, no screaming? No jumping on a chair?"

Amusement flickered in her eyes. "Sierra screams enough for both of us, and there's a distinct shortage of chairs until the truck gets unloaded."

Unexpected response. Or was it? Not much seemed to rattle her. Zach tossed the dustpan's contents. "I'll clean up out here when we know we're done."

"Thank you," Sierra managed to say. "But surely that's the end of them?"

Zach turned aside to hide his grin. If only it were that easy.

Jo laughed out loud. "I hate to break it to you, but baby mice generally have parents. Possibly aunts, uncles, and cousins as well. Getting rid of a nest isn't the same thing as being *done*."

Sierra's eyes grew wide. "But they're so dirty."

Jo knelt beside the cupboard again. "Did we forget to post a sign asking them to wipe their feet on the mat as they came in?"

"Uncalled for, Josephine."

Zach choked on a chuckle. At least having these gals for neighbors would provide a bit of diversion while he was home.