

CHAPTER THREE



Jesse paced the length of his small office. When they had moved into their offices, Rory had wanted him to take the bigger of the two executive suites, but Jesse's management style required boots on the ground. Only now, he needed a twenty-mile bike ride to settle his nerves. *Bren-na* was on her way.

When he'd called for a second meeting this morning, her quick acceptance had given him hope. Not that he felt any better equipped to work alongside her. However, her accounting knowledge and enthusiasm for the accreditation process stood out like a peacock in a yard full of chickens. His nose still itched from that earthy perfume the last candidate wore. Samantha continued to ply him with offers, wanting her job back. Getting a hire in place would solve several problems.

After a sorry attempt to finger-comb his hair, he raised his eyes heavenward. *Lord, please help me here. Brenna's so pretty, I'm not sure I can stay focused.*

Why he felt so unbalanced around her puzzled him. Samantha possessed killer-good looks, but he was no more

attracted to her than a bar of soap, whereas Brenna's unique mix of vulnerability and determination tilted him into hyperventilation. Hiring her was crazy.

The soft rap on the door startled him. "Come in." His voice squeaked like a preteen's. Great. He seated himself behind his desk, threw a glance her way, then wished he hadn't. A slammed-to-the-ground tackle was easier than this.

"Good afternoon." Brenna's husky voice rattled up his spine. *Here we go*. Dark slacks with a red blouse highlighted her slender form as she crossed to the same chair she'd occupied during the first interview. She sat as if she belonged there.

His mouth went dry when she tucked stray tendrils behind her ears. Her vanilla scent—he'd finally figured out the cookie smell—washed over him. Light. Airy. Samantha's heavy perfume had always made him feel like spider prey.

You have to make eye contact, Jacobs. His breaths sounded like hiccups. In the span between breaths, his body settled. His prayer must have reached heaven. Her eyes seemed to search his, but beyond the cool greeting, she hadn't said a word. Music throbbed through his office wall from the next-door cycling class. The steady *boom, boom, boom* anchored him.

Brenna's eyes trailed to the framed picture of his sister. Nat had insisted he place it on the shelf behind his desk. To ward off forward females.

Jesse laid his palms on the desk. "Your passion for accounting merited a second interview. I need an accountant. Since you're here, it indicates you need a job." His stomach did a sit-up when she licked her lips. "I called your former professor," Jesse glanced at his tablet, "Dr. Danvers. He gave a glowing recommendation." His lips pressed together. The man had gushed like a teenager.

A smile wreathed her face along with a blush he'd missed

between interviews. “Yes, I helped him develop a math lab. An excellent marketing experience as far as projects go.”

“You did marketing?” Jesse leaned forward, feeling the uptick in his pulse. Her casual nod and facial expression betrayed no hint of stress. Maybe the tasks Jesse despised wouldn’t pose a problem for her.

“We had to get the word out. Signs, social media, word-of-mouth.” Her voice lilted with animation.

His mind whirled with possibilities. “Okay. Change of subject. Tell me about your job at Fitness Stars. The reference you listed, Micah Grom, never returned my calls or email request.”

The horizontal line on her forehead deepened. “I wish that were as easy to talk about as the math lab. I left mostly because I didn’t agree with his business practices.”

When she didn’t volunteer anything else, Jesse prodded. “Can you give me an example? It won’t go any farther than these four walls.”

Reluctance pursed her lips, but she answered readily enough. “Micah, my boss, had a separate account I didn’t have access to. We’d talk about the bills and payroll, but when he transferred money, there was never enough to cover expenses. It gave new meaning to that old phrase ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul.’ I tired of answering calls about unpaid bills, so I left.”

Jesse’s nostrils flared. “That’s unethical. And miserable for you.”

“It was my first proper job after I graduated. I learned the hard way it wasn’t my dream job.” She gave a nonchalant shrug. “The actual accounting was okay, but the atmosphere, um, wasn’t so great.”

In Valiant’s small fitness industry, rumors abounded about Fitness Stars, none of them good. He hated that this Micah character had taken advantage of her newbie status. That

wouldn't happen on his watch. The only issue left to discuss had his foot wiggling like bait at the end of a hook.

"I'm sorry that happened to you. Bear with me while I cover the last base about working at Peeps."

JESSE DESPISED HAVING to go over the next item and "forgot" about it as often as possible, but he didn't dare this time. He had to mention it as much for himself as for her.

"QAF's Code of Practice is the standard at Peeps. The Code recommends a no-dating/no-personal relationship policy between staff. I'm a real stickler about it, so you don't have to worry." One of her brows rose in a you-don't-want-to-go-there arch, but he continued, "No dating between employees at Peeps." He pushed past the rocks rubbing around in his throat. "I think this job will be a better fit for you than Cowpokes or Fitness Stars. The position will utilize your particular skill set, higher pay, with ... a new boss who sticks his foot in his mouth on a regular basis." He looked at her wryly. "So, what do you think? Do you want to work for me, er, Peeps?"

"Well, since there are no salad trays around here," Brenna's lips twitched, "we should be safe."

Hardly breathing, Jesse gazed at her.

Her perky nod encouraged him. "Yes, I'd like to work here very much. Number crunching is my jam. Accreditation will be a super cool achievement. I'll do my best to help you accomplish that goal." Though her hands had clasped and unclasped during her little speech, now they rested in her lap. The music coming through the walls sounded less frantic. Time to cool down.

A sigh of pure relief hissed through Jesse's lips. "Great. An ally in this accreditation quest would help. The last two goals

are a stable membership roster and a mega-event. Later, we'll talk about those in depth."

Jesse's heart soared as they went over housekeeping details. Finally, he held out his hand. "Peeps is a great place to work. Let's shake on a good union." Brenna's eyes grew wide, and warmth shot to his cheeks. "I, uh, warned you about my foot-in-mouth disease."

When she laughed and clasped his hand, he grinned. Ease spread through his tight muscles like syrup on a pancake. "Let me show you where your office is."