

CHAPTER TWO



Jesse Jacobs stood on the broad landing overlooking the gym lobby, electronic tablet in hand. Men and women dressed in workout garb scanned their ID cards at the reception counter. A toddler stumbled toward the fish tank. Positive proof that Jesse's efforts toward a family-friendly gym were working. Then the little guy face-planted. His mother picked him up, pointing to the exotic fish, but he caught his breath and howled. Jesse wanted to howl right along with him. Interviewing job applicants ranked right at the top of his hate-to-do list, but he needed an accountant like a fish needs water.

A few physical therapy clients dressed in street clothes waited for their appointments. The sound of weights thudded on the floor upstairs. Being Director of Operations and co-owner of People's Gym—Peeps—never got old. He scrolled through the résumé on his tablet for his upcoming appointment. This was the first year the gym qualified for the Quality Accredited Fitness Business Award. No way he could pull off accreditation without a number cruncher to keep Peeps in the black.

Across the gym, a young man lay with his back supported by a bench press. He strained to lift a barbell laden with enormous weights. Hector, again. With no spotter. Crazy kid had no idea he was violating every safety rule in the Code of Standard Practices. Or that he could incur serious injury. Jesse jogged over, set his tablet aside, and stood behind Hector's head. The barbell lay on his chest, pinning him like a turtle on its back. Jesse bent his knees, grabbed the bar from underneath, and hooked it into the holder.

"How many reps, Heck?" Jesse asked as Hector drew a ragged breath.

"Made it to five. Trying for eight." He huffed, redness receding from his face.

A rebuke was in order, but Jesse softened it. "That's a lot of weight. Safety first, though. Strong as you are, you still need a spotter. How about you set the example?" He held Hector's gaze.

As the young man nodded, Jesse grabbed his tablet and pounded down the stairs. Emilio, the maintenance person, meandered along the narrow hallway. Jesse blew out an extended breath. The guy should be on the other side of the gym, repairing a faulty hot tub jet, but Jesse would deal with that later.

Once seated at his desk, Jesse studied the résumé again. Paige had said she knew someone who might be perfect. Then lettuce, tomatoes, and onions interrupted them. Before leaving Cowpokes, he'd asked her to set an appointment. Sure enough, this woman possessed the right qualifications on paper, but he'd reserve judgment until after the interview. A growl rose in his throat. The previous candidate had fabricated her skill set.

His mind wandered back to the salad blizzard. Every detail of the moment that stunning woman had tumbled headfirst into his chest. None other than the hot server chick he tried not

to stare at when the group ate there. Then she got up too fast and lost her balance. That punched his default button, and he tugged her into his lap. When he stuck his face inches from hers, those striking green eyes proved even more irresistible. Full red lips opened in a huge “O.” Cute little freckles scattered across the bridge of her pert nose. She’d picked at a blob of salad on his shirt, and his heart tumbled to his toes. But his dumb rescue move had obliterated any chance of getting acquainted. He placed one hand over the other, cracking his knuckles.

A FAMILIAR TREAD SOUNDED, and a sharp knock eased his Jesse’s feeling. As the door pushed open, he asked, “Hey, Co-Owner, what do you know?”

“Hmm. Let’s see. You’re the thirty-year-old king of Peeps on track to win a prestigious award this year.” Rory Spence parked in the chair across from Jesse. He leaned back, clasping hands behind his head.

“King of Peeps? That’s a new one.” Jesse frowned and placed his tablet on a pile of manila folders.

“Oh, come on, Jess. Quarterbacking this gym gig fits you like a second skin. Calling the plays, winning the game.” Rory’s grin twisted to one side.

“Only if you catch my Hail Marys.” In high school, football was the only place Jesse felt the slightest measure of control over his life.

“Got your back, bud.” Rory tucked his hands into his chest, mimicking a catch.

Jesse eyed his long-time friend. An entrepreneur at heart, Rory dealt with investors and development projects for the long-term expansion of Peeps. He referred to his other

business—a flourishing contracting company—as a side hustle.

Deals didn't interest Jesse. He loved winning. Especially when doing what nobody else thought could happen. The opportunity to convert a mediocre gym into the premier health and workout facility in South Texas sparked his passion from the onset. Finally, the goal was within reach, but it didn't stop there. His list of plans for expanding the gym complex turned stomach butterflies into dive-bombers. Still, it started with accreditation. An award or trophy was merely window-dressing.

“What's going on?” Rory's gray eyes grew serious.

The backlight from Jesse's tablet glowed. “Interview for the vacant accounting position. I'm already tired of the process, but it's a must-have position.”

“Ah, yes. Samantha's dramatic exit didn't help matters.” Rory placed a palm over his heart.

Jesse sniffed. “She did all right at the job. In between the you-don't-like-me-I'm-going-to-quit stunts.”

“And drop-dead gorgeous, but her eyes leaked with crazy.” Rory's face scrunched with a “How does that work?” look.

“Now Sam's blowing up my phone. Perfectly normal one minute, then goes off the deep end in the same conversation. It drives me nuts.”

“Don't beat yourself up, Jess. You'll get it right.”

The name on the screen snagged his attention. “For the record, I'm not interested in hiring a young, single, *attractive* woman. What I need is a stable grandmother-type.”

“Sure thing, Jess. Granny on order. When's the appointment?” Rory's eyes gleamed as he stretched a leg.

A timid rap came from outside the door. Jesse answered, “Come in.”

The shuffle came first, then Emilio. The guy's feet were enormous.

"Where are you supposed to be?" Jesse demanded.

"Trash day, Boss Man."

"Not what I asked." Rory's brows climbed at Jesse's sharp tone. "Is the jet repaired in the men's hot tub?"

"No, Boss Man. I—"

Jesse pointed toward the door, his internal thermometer rising. "The men's hot tub is the priority. And call me Jesse, not Boss Man."

The door shut. Cold air blew from the AC vent.

Rory cleared his throat. "Jess, I know Emilio does everything in his power to aggravate you, but your temper needs a permanent vacation."

The "come, let us reason" tone made Jesse's jaw clench. Right. Switch gears when the raging beast inside got triggered. Such an easy fix.

A soft rap on the door startled him. A woman stood in the doorway—a stunningly beautiful one.

Salad Girl? "You!" Jesse's brain raced to catch up, the last of his anger draining away as surprise took over. "And you are?"

Her eyes flashed with shock, then embarrassment, before settling on irritation. He drank in her appearance while his pulse hammered away, all sharp and edgy. Straight chestnut hair gathered on the sides into a cute little topknot thing, showing off pink cheeks and, yeah, those freckles.

She lifted her chin. "Brenna McKinley. And you know perfectly well who I am." Her tart tone quickly softened into chagrin. She stretched out her hand in a conciliatory movement.

Feisty. Jesse liked that. On automatic pilot, he grasped her hand. Soft fingers, but her grip was all business. She released first. He liked that, too, along with her slender waist in a navy

skirt and blouse with a decent neckline. The awkward silence stretched as those eyes unmoored him. Again.

Paige had played him. From Brenna's irked expression, Jesse wasn't the only one. He opened his mouth, then closed it like a fish blowing bubbles. How was he going to handle this? Flying salad cartwheeled through his mind.

The moment broke when Rory cleared his throat. "Since you two have already met—in a manner of speaking"—Leave it to him to remember that night too—"let me introduce myself. I'm Rory Spence." He extended his hand. She shook it, the epitome of grit and grace.

Jesse didn't know whether to smack Rory or thank him for the save. He took a deep breath. His mental equilibrium had headed to parts unknown.

"I'll leave you two to business." Rory strolled to the door, halo firmly in place.

At the doorway, he turned back, brows wagging upward, hands clapping in pantomime, reminiscent of his actions after the salad mess.

EYES LEVEL, Jesse was relieved when the door snicked shut. He glanced at his notepad. "Thank you for coming in." Off his game, he tapped the screen again. "You're Breanna?"

"Um. Yes, but it's *Bren-na*." However polite, she was correcting him.

"*Bren-na*. I got it. You can call me Jesse. Ready to answer some questions?" The boulder in his throat wasn't letting him forget the woman of his daydreams sat across from him.

"Yes, I'll be happy to." Spine ramrod straight, she seemed eager to move on as well.

What was the last thing he'd said? Those full red lips were

an enormous distraction. Her fragrance ignited a boyish memory of fresh cookies. Then he remembered his words to Rory only moments before. This woman was no grandmother. His heart sank. She fit the exact description of his newly minted never-again rule.

“Give me a minute, then we’ll get started.” He tapped his tablet screen. Could she tell it was only a ploy so he could find his brain and plug it in?

A good start might be to address the elephant in the room. “Why don’t we acknowledge the salad fiasco so you can have a good interview?”

The blush that crept up her neck, settling on her cheeks, was adorable.

“I didn’t ... I wouldn’t ...” Her posture stiffened. “I didn’t mean to spill salad on you, *Jesse*.” Vulnerability laced her words.

Jesse let out the breath he’d been holding with a chuckle. “Yeah, I know. So, now that we’re both clear it wasn’t your fault and my help, umm, wasn’t all that helpful, let’s move on.”

When her blush deepened, Jesse’s molars ground together. This interview was getting harder by the second.

“Tell me why you’re interested in working for People’s Gym. Or Peeps, as we call it around here.”

“I like everything I’ve seen about your gym on the website, and I’m a total nerd about numbers.” A brief frown tugged her lips down. “Cowpokes is an in-between-job. Full-time employment will be a welcome relief.”

“Noted. Tell me about your qualifications.”

Once they’d covered her skill set and job basics, Jesse’s comfort level rose. Brenna was a solid candidate, so he sketched an outline of what still needed to happen for accreditation. She leaned forward in her chair, her eyes lit with rapt attention.

When he finished, she asked, “You’ve already said, but what’s the name of the accreditation organization?”

Jesse’s jaw slacked. The only other candidate who’d met his accounting standard had asked if accreditation was part of her job description. Code for “not interested.” Huge contrast between that candidate versus Brenna’s need-to-know mindset.

“Quality Accredited Fitness Business or the acronym, QAF.” If he used big words, maybe she’d think he was more than a dumb jock.

Several questions later, Jesse’s pulse danced. Dare he believe she viewed accreditation the same way he did? A challenging mountain, but worth the climb? If so, this beautiful woman was a kindred spirit.

Finally, Jesse stood, sorry the interview was over.

Partway to the door, Brenna turned back, slender throat rippling. “I hope I’ve established that I’m good with numbers. I’d like very much to help Peeps get accredited.” Her deep green eyes bored into him. Then she left without a backward look.

The slim set of her shoulders imprinted on his soul. *Talk about appealing.* He sat back, almost gasping for air, his mind wholly off balance. Brenna’s spot-on answers sounded as if she’d read his interview-an-accountant playbook.

He scrubbed his face and inhaled deeply. Her warm scent still clung to the air, tickling his nose. He’d listen for hours to her husky voice. Her looks had him teetering on a ledge. She might have spilled the salad, but he was the one falling.

Tablet in hand, Jesse perused subsequent appointments. No way he could work with this woman.