

## CHAPTER THREE

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Silas hustled away from the meeting to gain distance from Nat. Except she'd followed him down the hall. *Pest.* He inhaled another breath of the fresh smell of carpet cleaner, ignoring her calls for him to stop.

Despite his extended strides, she closed the gap between them, putting a hand on his shoulder. "We have to talk," she said breathlessly.

Even as he shrugged her hand off, his steps slowed. "I have an appointment."

"We have to discuss the boat race."

"It's not going anywhere."

"It is for us. We've got to figure out what to do."

He stopped, staring at her. "There's no 'we' to it. I'm looking for a new job."

"You don't mean it." Impatience underscored her words. "You don't want to leave Peeps any more than I do. I'd rather suck up to this silly scheme of theirs than lose my future here. It's your future too. You have to do this with me."

Silas's shoulders slumped. She nailed it, however much it

pinched. Irritation hardly described his feelings about the situation they'd gotten themselves in. The fiasco in the deli had torpedoed their chances with Mr. Spence. Fixing the awful impression they'd made ranked paramount, of course. But using the canoe race to do it seemed bizarre ... meddlesome. The infringement on his personal life stung. He valued his solitary time in the boat. A partner would strip him bare—open to scrutiny. No way he would ever do that again.

“Don't you want to be in charge of the new rehab?”

*More than anything.*

The plea in Nat's light brown eyes frayed his chaotic emotions. Finally, he said, “We can talk.” The only concession he would make at the moment.

Nat's blinding smile nearly undid him. “Good! I'll text you when and where.”

*She's as bossy as her brother, minus the title.* Pivoting back toward the PT rooms, he grunted noncommittally. He had nothing else to give until he could get ... un-frustrated with the whole situation.

As if *un-frustrated* would ever happen around Nat. The woman irked him to the core.

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THE SAME EVENING, Nat walked into the garage where Silas had his homemade paddling system set up. He'd refused to meet her for dinner or any other place she suggested. When she wouldn't give up, he'd consented to letting her come to his place. If his shabby digs and sweaty workout clothes disgusted her, all the better. She could leave or go play with the cats Vi had coaxed him into keeping.

Vi. Much as Silas had enjoyed the petite redhead's company, he'd never had a chance. Not with the way she

looked at Rory. So in the time-honored, male tradition, Silas made the most of any opportunity to aggravate the guy. Hard to resist, since he was everything Silas wasn't. Charming. Successful. A face women flocked to, even if he acted like a hot mess around Vi.

Funny thing was, Silas wasn't upset that Rory got the girl. It seemed inevitable and only confirmed what Silas knew from the beginning. Those two were meant for each other. Who was he to begrudge their happiness? No matter that his end of the deal turned into a nasty dog bite while protecting Vi, and more cats than he knew what to do with. He tried not to picture how cute Nat would look with one of his felines snuggled next to her face.

Silas pushed the irritating thought away. He waved Nat in, disgruntled she'd actually showed up. He'd been hoping she wouldn't. After a quick glance around the tools neatly suspended on the pegboard he'd hung, her eyes landed on his homemade workout gear.

"Impressive." A single blade paddle had a wire cable attached to it just above the blade. The cable stretched, then threaded through a rotating pulley attached to the roof next to the garage doors. The cable wire attached to a five-gallon bucket on the cement floor. He added or subtracted weights to adjust the cable tension.

"You want to try it?" Silas offered, expecting her to chicken out.

"Yes!"

Of course, Nat wouldn't back down. He let the paddle dangle, adjusting the weight in the bucket while she got situated. The temptation to pile the weight on tugged at him, but the desire to see her true capacity won out.

"Okay. Show me your technique. I'll count your stroke rate."

She nodded. Both of her hands were already on the paddle, warming up. “I’ll give it my best shot.” She paddled hard on one side. After seven strokes, she switched to the other side.

Once her strokes shallowed, Silas coached her. His heart rate sped up as he instructed her how to increase the paddle stroke rate and when to switch sides. Nat giving her best made it hard to keep his distance.

After fifteen minutes, he yelled, *stop*. To her credit, she hadn’t given up, though her paddle had slowed. Nowhere near enough strength to reclaim her starting pace. Or keep up with him.

Nat rose slowly from the chair, carefully wrapping her arms around her middle. Rivulets of sweat ran from her temples to her jaws. She gave him a cheeky grin. “Got a way to go. Sweet workout though.”

Silas regarded her in a new light. Possibly admiration. “You have to maintain a consistent stroke rate—fifty-five to sixty strokes a minute—for the entire race, to compete.”

Her lips scooped to one side. “I’m nowhere close. I get it. From what I understand about the TWS, winning is a stretch for first-timers.”

“It matters to me,” Silas retorted.

Her large brown eyes regarded him with a mix of determination and sympathy. “We’re in this together now with a different goal. Nothing’s changed since you told me you want the rehab position, right?”

He stared at her, refusing to answer. She knew perfectly well nothing had changed.

She continued with a smoothness he couldn’t help but envy. Ongoing communication made him want to bite his tongue in half. “So our new goal is to set aside what we want *now* in order to gain what we want *most*—our future with Peeps.”

Nat's ability to parse a thorny issue down to a single thread terrified him.

He wanted no part of her glib tongue or a twosome ride down the river.

But it wouldn't hurt to listen.

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"THE FIRST PROBLEM we have to tackle is the boat. Got any suggestions?" Nat frowned. Silas watched her lean gingerly against the outer garage wall. The soreness from her stroke workout was settling in.

"We'll check with Gramps first. He competed for years and has a boat shed." Silas didn't know why he volunteered the information. This twosome idea would never work.

Relief eased the knot between Nat's brows. "Here's hoping he has a boat we can use. If we can afford it."

"He won't charge us." A slight smile poked at his lips. "More likely, he'll want to tag along and tell stories."

A glint of mischief made Nat's eyes sparkle. "Sounds like fun. Maybe he'll give me the lowdown on you." Her lips screwed into a charming frown. "Have you thought about choosing the team captains?"

"I have someone in mind. Lacy is a nurse who's been coming in for therapy. We've kind of hit it off. I think she'll do a fine job." Too late, he realized how it sounded. In truth, they were fairly new acquaintances, though it wouldn't hurt if Nat thought otherwise. Her stiff posture portended an earful of opinion.

"The nurse part is okay. How do you know she'll go the distance? Team Captain isn't a cush job. I think Jesse should volunteer. He's the one who got us into this mess."

Silas shook his head. "Not Jesse."

“Why not Jesse?” Nat asked, spitfire lacing each word.

“Look, it’s not about him being your brother—not entirely. Nat, you know how ... intense he gets.” Jesse’s reaction to his sister’s physical condition during a grueling canoe race wouldn’t be pretty. “I’m just saying, let’s think about it more.”

Nat’s hands landed on her hips. “I can handle Jesse. Most importantly, I trust him to be there for me. You need to think about your choice too.” The look she gave him left no doubt what she thought of his “choice.”

The race would be difficult enough without Jesse’s glower at every checkpoint. “Have you talked to him about it?”

“No. Have you talked to Lacy?”

“No.”

His brain cramped when Nat opened her mouth again. Her teeth were as straight as a row of pearls. “Good. We both have time. Next item on the agenda. We have to train. Learn how to sync our styles.”

He cast her a dubious eye. “It’s difficult.”

“Thus, the reason we practice. Quit being such a Danny Downer.” Exasperation filled her words.

“What was your solo strategy?” Silas doubted the analytical concept ever entered her flighty brain.

“I planned to follow in your draft. You know, stick as close to you as possible for as far down the river as possible.”

“That was your plan?” Her honesty shocked him.

“Yes. I’m a novice. You’re the participant I know the best. Now that we’re in the same boat, I’ll glean what you know. Even better.”

He didn’t know what worried him the most—her learning from him or the way her eyes sparkled like shiny river rocks.