

## CHAPTER TWO

---



“**W**hat made you think this prank was a good idea, Nat?” Jesse’s dark eyes sparked with irritation. “The part where you poured glitter into Silas’s gym bag or when you lost control of your smoothie.” Outrage spiked his words.

“The smoothie part was an accident—” she protested, then clamped her mouth shut. Explaining how Silas’s proximity had squeezed it out of her hand wouldn’t help their case.

Shortly after the fiasco in the deli, she’d barely had time to change her shirt before she’d received a text from Jesse. Obviously, Silas had received a summons too. Now they sat in his office like two recalcitrant school kids.

She gazed at the picture of her and Jesse on his bookshelf, the only decorative item in the small room. The photo, nestled amid stacks of manuals on how to run Peeps, reminded her of when she’d had her handsome brother all to herself. They’d been close, not counting today. Nat had given him the photo to help ward off forward females.

At one time, they were together so much, people often concluded they were a couple. Before he’d fallen head over

heels in love with Brenna, his accountant. Nat liked Brenna. The sweet-natured woman classified as the perfect match for her competitive brother. Since their engagement, though, he hung out with her all the time, leaving Nat to herself more often than not. Nat pushed the prick of jealousy away and tuned back in to Jesse's clipped speech.

"And you." Jesse's hot gaze landed on Silas, who was making a career out of staring at the floor. "Since when do paybacks ever happen on the job? Or at all, despite the provocation?"

The sharp comeback on the tip of Nat's tongue melted into something more palatable. "It was my fault, Jess. I started it." She caught a whiff of her hair. Ugh. It'd be a while before she could stomach peanut butter again.

For the first time since they entered the room, Silas spoke. "No, I'm to blame. If I'd let it go, nothing else would have happened."

Nat doubted that. She would have made something else happen even if he'd ignored the glitter prank. Once on a roll, she rarely stopped until she'd gained her goal—or in this case, desired reaction. Hence the mess they were in.

Her voice thready with fear, she asked, "Have we lost our jobs?" This couldn't be happening. One dumb prank and her future at Peeps was in jeopardy. A future she desperately wanted. She cast a side eye at Silas. The beaded sweat on his forehead betrayed his nervousness. The stoicism he wore like a badge had vanished. Because of her foolish actions, his future was also in peril.

Jesse tossed his pen onto the desk and plopped back in his chair. Exasperation thinned his lips. "You certainly should have." He let those awful words dangle until they both squirmed. "Mr. Spence barreled in here, spitting fire. He wanted me to sack both of you. Fortunately, his quick response

to the baby—a *baby*—falling on the slippery floor you created,” his voice rose with each jab of his finger, “probably saved us a lawsuit.”

“How much?” Silas asked.

“What?” Confusion colored Nat’s understanding.

“How much did his quick response cost Peeps?”

Cost? She bit her lip. Why did it always come down to money? It hadn’t crossed her mind this shenanigan would cause a payout.

“Three months of free membership with childcare fees.” Jesse looked at them. “It’s coming out of your paychecks.”

Nat hung her head. Ramen noodles for the next month she could handle. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to ask the most important thing again.

Her reticence didn’t affect Silas. “What about our jobs?”

THE GLARE JESSE shot him pressed on Silas’s last nerve. Still, he needed to know. He swallowed hard. They both deserved the boot for the way they’d acted. Sheer stupidity. Only he didn’t want Nat to suffer for his lapse. They both got caught up in the prank ... and forgot they were at work.

For Pete’s sake, he’d survived a war zone. Been shot at more times than he remembered. Taken lives in the line of duty. Talk about a lapse in judgment. He’d chased a woman down and rubbed her with a shiny shirt. Over this, he would lose his future?

The only future he cared about. He couldn’t move to another city. Gramps and Petey needed him. Silas wouldn’t leave them again.

“Your jobs still hang in the balance. However, with some fast-talking, I finagled a second chance for both of you—if

you'll quit acting like juveniles long enough to take it." Jesse's grim tone should have been a warning. However, the reference to a second chance piqued Silas's interest.

"What are the terms?" Nat asked. Good. She sounded engaged. He swallowed the huff rising in his throat. She possessed great skill for flying off to Never Never Land. Whether she could stay the course when things got tough remained unknown.

The crease in Jesse's forehead deepened. "You're both serious paddlers, right? I mean, it's how this 'friendly rivalry' got started."

Silas cut a side look at Nat's guilt-ridden face. Jesse couldn't have known about the "friendly rivalry" unless she'd blabbed it. She glared back at him in challenge.

"So here's what I proposed to Mr. Spence," Jesse said. "You guys are in the running for executive positions once the new rehab wing goes up." The last words turned hard as chips as he motioned to Nat. "You are a strong contender for business CEO." His thumb and forefinger pointed gun-style at Silas's chest. "You're slated to head up the actual rehab." He appeared to be considering his words. "Mr. Spence was horrified over your lack of professional behavior. He wants to make sure you two can hold it together for Peeps' sake. You need to show beyond any doubt you're committed to cooperation—for the long haul."

Silas and Nat exchanged uneasy looks. What did this have to do with canoe racing?

"To that end, I suggested you two put your paddling skills to work. Prove you'll do anything necessary to get the job done."

Jesse continued, as if his communication made perfect sense. *Far from it.* "The Texas Water Safari is right around the

corner. You both excelled at the prelim. Now you're doing practice runs for the big race. Am I right?"

Nat's head bobbed with eagerness. For a moment, Silas wished he had an ounce of her passion. They had been training for the TWS for months, each doing their solo runs. Whenever they spied each other on the river, it became a competition to see who would finish first.

Silas waited warily. He sensed a trap.

"In order to keep your jobs *and* stay in the running for future promotions, you're gonna have to change your focus. Mr. Spence wants you to enter and finish the TWS together." The hard grooves on Jesse's forehead eased as his gaze settled on Nat. Boss or not, he adored her. Rumor had it he'd instigated a fight because her boyfriend treated her shabbily.

The look Jesse gave Silas reinforced his musings. Only ... the man couldn't have said what Silas heard.

"It's all good, Jess," Nat chirped far too cheerily.

Jesse cracked his knuckles, a sure sign of impatience. "Competing as one unit, bug."

The brotherly term of endearment didn't help. Nat's face reflected Silas's conflicting emotions. Stunned into a one-syllable answer, she whispered, "Oh."

Silas spoke past the ever-growing lump in his throat. "Jesse, we've been training solo for months. I'm not sure you understand what you're asking. A twosome is a whole different deal ..."

Jesse regarded him with a mix of steel and compassion. "I understand, but I'm not asking."

"That's not fair! Silas is a serious contender in the solo event. He could win it. You can't do this ... I've never ... we can't ..." Nat's protests shut down at Jesse's stern countenance.

Fierce river rapids had nothing on Silas's churning stomach.

Even if Nat's silver-tongued brother convinced her to go along with his terrible idea, Silas wouldn't agree. His time on the river had become sacred. There, he could forget the past. Recharge his ever-waning spiritual battery. Soak in the goodness of God. He'd never have a moment's peace in the same boat with Nat for two-hundred and sixty miles. Jesse had just prescribed nuclear war. It wouldn't come to physical blows, but words were terrible weapons. Nat talked too much. It sliced through him like cheese in a grater.