

CHAPTER EIGHT

I stared at David's bare, sweaty, muscular, tanned chest.

I stared.

And I stared some more.

I only slightly registered everyone else taking off their shirts, and Bruiser tucking her tank top in the elastic of her shorts, leaving her standing in a black sports bra.

I think I must have forgotten how scrumptious David's body was. How I could have forgotten, I had no idea. This body of his was most definitely *not* one a person should or could forget.

"GiGi?" David said.

I blinked—*oh!*—and snapped to attention. "Sorry." Idiot. I was *such* an idiot. "Okay." I held up the Influence Sway Skins. "I'm going to attach these square pads to various spots on each of your bodies and take muscular recordings. I'll compare the results to the base line reading Chapling took of each of you. The range of the data will help us put the finishing touches on the Combat Thrash Program. I'll organize the program's code to recognize David and Mystic's output, tweak it, and identify them as superior fighters, resulting in Harry Noor picking them for Demise Chain."

I ran my gaze over the whole group. "Got it?"

They all nodded.

I brought the Combat Thrash Program up on my laptop. It took a second for the program to boot and detect the wireless skins. It beeped, signaling me it was ready for muscular readings.

Here went nothing.

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I walked across the grass to David and stopped right in front of him. Up close and personal with his bare chest was almost more than I could handle. Purposefully focusing all my attention on the Influence Sway Skins, I peeled the protective, hygienic back off of each square pad and began placing them at key points on David's body.

His stomach. His chest. His biceps and triceps. His thighs. His hamstrings. And ended with his calves.

I walked back over to my laptop, *click, click, clicked*, and it began recording his body. I watched my screen as the Influence Sway Skins x-rayed through his epidermis and brought up a 3-D image of his muscular skeletal. I smiled as I watched electrical pulses run up and down his body, recording his inner workings.

A box popped up in the bottom left corner comparing the current recordings to his base line data. Another box popped up in the upper right hand corner showing a video image of David doing the Greek style conditioning. Another box popped up in the upper left hand corner displaying a 3-D image of what David was capable of in a fictitious fight. I, of course, would tweak that part to make David and Mystic stand out above all the others. And the only thing missing was the hologram image, which I knew would be our slam dunk in securing this job.

I finished with David and used new pads each time I did the others: Mystic, Bruiser, TL, and then Red. I'd get a baseline reading on Red later to round out the data. I'd lie and tell Harry Noor I'd traveled around the world to obtain data on the best fighters. It'd give me a one up on the other programmers.

And it wasn't a total lie. Red and Bruiser *were* some of the world's best fighters. I just hadn't traveled for the information. It'd been conveniently right here at my disposal.

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Plus Chapling had been working hard hacking into the computers of the most renowned competitors, obtaining their medical records, training schedules, eating diaries . . . anything to give more validity to our program and make us stand out above the other designers.

*We* were definitely going to kick butt.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon I strode toward the barn with some last minute questions for Bruiser. Chapling and I had a mere three days left until we went in front of Harry Noor. Mystic and David had only five.

I pulled the barn door open and stepped inside. Sounds of classic rock surrounded me, and I stood for a second letting my eyes adjust to the dim interior.

I realized then that someone had covered the windows with dark cloth, and candles flickered in the corner on a table. Bruiser and Mystic sat across from each other having . . . a romantic lunch?

What the . . . ?

“Um,” I took a step back. “Sorry. Sorry to interrupt.”

Bruiser glanced up, looking so put out that I almost laughed.

I looked between them. “What are you two doing?” This definitely wasn’t right. Mystic and Bruiser didn’t like each other *that* way.

Bruiser rolled her eyes. “Wasting valuable training time playing boyfriend and girlfriend.”

I laughed. “You’re doing what?”

Mystic swatted at a fly. “TL said if we were going to be boyfriend and girlfriend on the mission, then we had to have a few lovey dovey moments.”

I laughed again. “Oh, this is too good.”

Bruiser scowled.

Mystic picked up a piece of paper from the table. “Okay, it says we have to make polite conversation while eating a meal.”

I nodded to the paper. “What is that? And who set up all this candlelight and fancy stuff?”

Mystic swatted at the fly again. “This is a list of things TL wants us to do on this quote-unquote date. And the candlelight stuff was here when we got here.” He swatted the fly again.

Bruiser leaned forward and snatched the fly from mid air. “Would you leave the poor thing alone?”

Mystic and I exchanged a surprised glance.

“TL’s list of things.” Bruiser snorted as she walked over to the window and let the fly go. “Who’s going to know anyway? I say we tell TL we did it and move on with our lives.”

“I’ll know,” Adam announced as he stepped into the barn carrying a tray.

Bruiser turned from the window. “What are you doing here?”

“TL sent me.” Adam held up the tray. “I’m your waiter.”

“Our *what?*” Bruiser almost shouted.

Oh, yeah, this was too good. Bruiser’s crush, Adam, serving her and Mystic while they played lovey-dovey. This—I sat down on the floor—I had to watch.

Mystic looked at me. “What are you doing?”

I smiled. “Watching.”

Bruiser scowled again. “Is that allowed?”

We all looked at Adam, and he shrugged. “Sure, why not.”

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I batted my lashes at Bruiser, and she narrowed her eyes.

Hey, it was the least I deserved after all the stuff she'd seen me be put through. Model training, cheerleading prep, endless horrible PT's . . .

All in waiter role, Adam crossed the floor. He put the tray down on a smaller, linen covered table that sat off to the side. Then he pulled Bruiser's chair out. "Madam."

She plopped down in it, and ignoring Adam's help, scooted her own self up.

Adam took Bruiser's folded napkin from the table, snapped it open, and laid it across her lap. He did Mystic's next. "According to that list," Adam began all proper, "you are to have polite conversation. You are to eat a meal together. You are to hold hands. You are to exchange one kiss. You are," he glanced between them, "going to act like you adore each other. And I will determine when that goal is met." He looked at Bruiser. "And *you* are to act girly and sweet and innocent." Adam smiled. "Got it?"

Mystic nodded, and Bruiser scowled again.

"You look like Beaker," I told her, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

I laughed. Bruiser was a tomboy through and through, a girl that would rather punch out her problems than talk through them. This 'date' had to be mild torture for her.

Adam pointed to a blue disc clipped to his shirt. "I'll press this," he pressed it and a buzzer went off, "when you're not doing things correctly."

Straightening his back, Adam walked over to the tray and picked up a carafe of what looked like apple juice. He took each of their wine glasses and filled them up. "Polite conversation," he reminded them.

"What lovely," Mystic started, "green eyes you have, my dear Bruiser."

She scoffed.

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*Buzz.*

“Your hair,” Mystic tried again, “glows vibrant in the light.”

She rolled her eyes.

*Buzz.*

Adam put plates down in front of each of them. “We’ll stay here all day,” he sweetly reminded Bruiser, “if need be.”

Bruiser looked down at her plate. “Peanut butter and jelly?”

Adam waved his hand through the air. “We pull out all the stops here at restaurant de Adam.”

Using his fork and knife, Mystic cut a chunk of his sandwich, very much in proper role. “What beautiful weather we’re having today.”

Bruiser grabbed her sandwich and took a purposefully huge bite.

*Buzz.*

I put my hand over my mouth. This was too funny.

Mystic took a sip of his apple juice. “Did you sleep well last night, my sweets?”

Bruiser just looked at him.

*Buzz.*

Mystic delicately wiped the sides of his mouth. “I heard you downloaded some new music. Tell me about it.”

Bruiser glanced at her watch, shoved back from her chair, and tossed her wadded napkin on top of her sandwich.

*Buzz.*

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She planted a sweet, dimpled smile on her face, and both guys watched in suspicious curiosity.

I watched, too. What was she up to?

Gently, very ladylike, she pushed her chair in. She took her wadded napkin, folded it nice and neat, and placed it beside her plate. “Silly napkin. I’m not sure how it got so wadded.”

I chuckled silently. I knew Bruiser, and I think I knew what she was up to.

Batting her lashes, holding her innocent grin, she rounded the table to where Mystic sat. She ran her fingers through his short, sandy blonde hair. “I’m so fortunate you’re in my life.” Cupping his cheek, she tilted his face up to hers. “You are the best boyfriend in the whole world, and I’m so silly to have ignored your pleasant conversation.”

She placed a kiss to his forehead. “Thank you for telling me I have lovely green eyes and vibrant red hair.” She traced her finger down his nose. “Yes, it is beautiful weather we’re having today.” She pressed a feathery kiss on his cheek. “And, my *sweets*, I slept very well last night. Thank you for asking.”

Trailing her hand down his arm, she linked fingers with him and brought his hand to her lips. She put a soft kiss on each knuckle. “You’re right. I did download some music. Just some nature sounds to meditate by.”

Bruiser meditate? Not likely.

“So let’s see,” Bruiser delicately traced her finger over the top of his hand, “the list said polite conversation. Check. Act girly and sweet. Check. Hold hands. Check. And exchange one kiss.” She let go of his hand, gently cupped his face, and placed a tender kiss to his lips.

“Check.”

“And you,” she turned to Adam, closing the small distance between them. “You should expand your menu at restaurant de Adam.” She traced her finger down his chest, poked his belly, and then pressed the blue button.

*Buzz.*

Bruiser spun on her heel, strutted straight past me, across the barn, and out the door. I watched her go, her small hips swaying in exaggeration, and then turned back to the guys.

Neither one of them had moved from their spots, Mystic sitting and Adam standing, staring at the path Bruiser had just taken.

I studied Adam’s face and got the distinct impression he’d just seen Bruiser in a new light. A definitely feminine, attractive light.

I pushed myself up, remembering why I came here to begin with, and told the guys, “See ya later.” I needed to track Bruiser down for a few quick questions.

I left the barn, saw Bruiser in the distance stepping inside the house, and took off after her.

I heard a rustling noise to my left and whipped around. I searched the pool and the yard beyond all the way to the tree line and the fence that bordered our property. It might have been my imagination, but I thought I saw a shadow move. “Who’s out there?” I yelled, feeling a bit silly, wishing instead I would have yelled, *is it you, sister?*

Mystic stepped from the barn. “Did you say something?”

I shook my head. “No. I keep feeling like someone’s watching me. Weird, huh?”

“Nah, it’s not weird. It’s called the theory of shadow scrutiny. It’s your psyche, body, and spirit all speaking with your outer organization.”

“Huh?”

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Mystic arched his arm through the air. “Basically, if you feel someone’s watching you, then someone probably is.”

I glanced around. “My sister?”

He shrugged. “Couldn’t tell you.”

“Can’t you use your psychic ability to figure it out?”

Mystic laughed. “It doesn’t work that way, GiGi.”

With a sigh, I turned and started back across the yard. Mystic fell into step beside me, and seconds later we entered the house.

A giggle had me glancing right into the rec room where Beaker and Randy sat playing cards. Wait a minute, Beaker and Randy?

She giggled. He laughed. And I narrowed my eyes. *What* was going on?

Smiling, they both glanced up at me and Mystic.

“Hey,” Beaker greeted us.

“Hey,” we both responded.

Randy held his cards up. “Uno. Anyone up for a game?”

We both shook our heads, and Randy and Beaker went back to playing.

Mystic and I continued on down the hall, past the cafeteria, rounded the corner and saw Bruiser standing with her ear to TL’s door.

“What are you doing?” I whispered.

She put her finger to her lips and shook her head.

I heard it then, TL and Nalani arguing behind his door.

“You told me,” Nalani said, “when I got pregnant that we’d leave this life.”

“Keep your voice down,” TL responded.

“You told me,” Nalani repeated, her voice cracking.

“Neither one of us,” TL pointed out, “expected you to get pregnant.”

“And what exactly does that mean? God, Thomas, we both know you only married me because of Zandra.”

“I was trying to do the right thing,” TL defended himself.

“Why?” Nalani asked. “Why did you even bother marrying me?”

*Because I love you*, I hoped TL would say.

“Why?” Nalani repeated.

He paused. “Because I wasn’t about to bring a bastard child into this world.”

Nalani scoffed. “What, like you were? Get over it, Thomas. So you had a crappy childhood. Every one of these kids here did. *I* did. That’s how we met. Or have you forgotten that?”

“Keep. Your. Voice. Down,” TL gritted.

“I don’t want to keep my voice down,” Nalani fired back. “I’m *tired* of ‘keeping my voice down.’ I’m *tired* of hiding. I’m *tired* of slinking around trying to keep things secret. I want a real life now. I want to live with my husband and my daughter.”

“We decided together,” TL came back, “that your mother should raise Zandra.”

“And that’s a decision I’ve regretted nearly every day of Zandra’s life.”

“Oh, yeah?” TL’s voice finally pitched loud. “How many enemies do you have? How many enemies do I have? We chose this life early on and with that comes consequences. We couldn’t chance Zandra’s life, your life, my life. Do you think I like keeping it hidden that you’re my wife and that I have a daughter? I have to. I can’t chance that someone will take their anger for me out on you.”

Silence.

“Do you realize,” Nalani softly replied, “that’s the first semi-loving thing you’ve said to me in a long while.”

More silence.

*Go to her*, I willed TL. Hug her. Tell her you love her.

“I wasn’t the one who left,” TL finally responded, his voice back low.

Nalani sucked in a breath. “How dare you. How dare you bring that up. You know why I left. I *had* to.”

“You didn’t *have* to do anything. I would have helped you. Between the two of us, we had the connections needed.”

Me and Mystic and Bruiser all exchanged a curious glance. What were they talking about?

“It’s your fault,” TL spoke, every syllable riddled with emotion. “Your fault our daughter’s gone. And I’ll never forgive you.”

I put my hand over my mouth. Oh my God. How horrible. They loved each other. They did. I’d seen them together on missions. I’d witnessed the love. This awful thing that had happened to them was making them nasty to one another. Couldn’t they see that? They should be united over this, not driven apart.

“My fault?” Nalani’s voice broke, and my heart hurt for her, for him, for them both. “You son of a bitch,” she cried. “How dare you blame this on me?”

“Zandra was in *your* care,” TL shouted, “when she was taken.”

“I know!” Nalani yelled back. “Don’t you think that’s killing me?”

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Her footsteps echoed across the room, and we realized too late she was heading toward the door. She wrenched it open with tears streaking her face and caught sight of all of us.

Immediately, I felt guilty for having intruded.

Firming her jaw, Nalani walked right past us, down the hall, and out the front door.

Me, Mystic, and Bruiser exchanged a pained look before turning to TL.

He stood with his back to us, staring at the wall. “Get me David,” he quietly spoke.