

CHAPTER TEN

At 0900 the next morning, Chapling and I boarded our plane to Washington State.

And he was not okay.

Chapling swallowed. “Gi-GiGi?”

“It’s Gertrude,” I reminded him in a whisper.

“G-Gertrude?”

“Yeah, Charlie?”

“I-I think I’m going to be sick.”

I yanked my attention up from the magazine I held. “*What?* No.” I waved my finger at him. “You’re not going to be sick.”

He swallowed again. “I’m not?”

I shook my head. “No.” *God*, no. Because if he got sick, then I would sure get sick.

“What are you nervous about? You’ve flown before. *I’m* the one who hates flying.” Or at least I used to.

Actually, *hate* flying would have been the operative word. I loathed it. Dreaded it. Wanted to hurl every time I thought of it. And, in fact, had passed out the first time I found out I would be getting on a plane.

My parents died in a plane crash, so it didn’t take a genius to figure out my phobia.

But since joining the Specialists I had flown eight times, and this flight marked my ninth one. I was getting to be a bit of an expert at this flying thing. It wasn’t so bad anymore. Or, at least, that’s what I had convinced myself of.

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My cell buzzed, and I looked at the display. David’s usual preflight message to me.

BREATHE.

Chapling’s cell buzzed, and he looked at his display. BREATHE, C, BREATHE.

Smiling, Chapling held it up for me to see. “David.”

I held mine up. “Me, too.”

And then we both sat there for a second, grinning like goofs.

Chapling tucked his cell away and a few seconds later he began fidgeting again.

“What’s wrong now?”

“It’s not the flying. It’s the,” he looked around before leaning in, “the mission. It’s my first, and I’m really,” he waved his hands, “nervous.”

I gave him what I hoped was a comforting smile, and recalled how TL always talked to me when I felt uneasy—in a sort of talking-me-off-the-ledge way.

I put my magazine aside. “I know its nerve racking. *Believe me*, I know. Not only the travel and the assignment, but the fact this whole thing hinges on us. *And we’re on our own.* There is no TL for guidance.”

Chapling leveled with me a ‘look’. “You call that helping?”

I laughed. “Sorry. Serious, though. Think of everybody back at home base. They’ve got our backs. If anything goes wrong, we simply contact them, and the Army rolls in. Not really, but you know what I mean. TL has more resources than the President, it seems. He won’t let anything happen to us. I couldn’t think of a better person to have on my side. Well, except maybe genius, Adara Hamalitz.”

Chapling’s eyes widened. “Oh, no kidding. Wouldn’t that be cool? Man, I’ve got a whole list of people I’d love to break bread with, and Adara Hamalitz definitely makes my top three.”

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“Break bread with?”

“Lunch. Have lunch.” Chapling snapped his fingers. “You know the first thing I’d ask him?”

I shook my head.

“To explain that experiment he did back in 1899 with movement of molecules.”

My jaw dropped. “I’ve always wondered about that to.”

And so the conversation went, discussing the great minds of the world, both past and present. Their theories, their experiments, their discoveries. We were so into the conversation we never even realized the plane took off, flew through choppy skies, and landed two hours and fifty-three minutes later.

We exited the airport and took a taxi to Harry Noor’s mansion in Tea Cup, Washington. Because this would be a day trip, we brought only our laptops. Roughly forty-five minutes later we pulled into one side of the town and right out the other.

Seriously, we did. It was that small.

I counted a few one story homes, a grocery, a post office, a hardware store, oh, and a lingerie parlor, strange enough.

No red light. Not even a stop sign.

Okay, small would be the operative word.

I did spot a sign that said Harry Noor, Mayor.

The taxi drove down a dirt road lined by huge trees.

“Those are Douglas Firs,” Chapling informed me.

I looked over at him. “I didn’t know you knew about trees.”

He shrugged. “I’m from Washington.”

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“Really?” I’d been working with Chapling over a year and hadn’t even known that small, personal part about him. Frankly, there was a lot we didn’t know about each other. “How long did you live in Washington?”

“’til I got married and moved away.”

“You’ve been married?!” Oh my God. I would have never guessed.

He nodded. “Yeah, but me and Sophia, we were so young.”

“Was Sophia your childhood sweetheart?”

“Nah. She was doing a photo shoot in my home town. That’s how I met her.”

I raised my brows. “Photo shoot?”

“Yeah, Sophia Packard? You ever heard of her?”

My jaw dropped. “Sophia Packard? *The* Sophia Packard? As in the cover model?”

Chapling nodded and glanced out the window. “Oh good.” He clapped his hands. “Looks like we’re here.”

*The* Sophia Packard. Holy cow. I laughed. “We *really* need to have lunch sometime and just talk.”

Smiling, he nodded. “That sounds great.”

The taxi pulled up in front of a mansion, or palace I would think better described it. It sat so out of place in little Tea Cup, Washington that it was purely laughable.

Sprawling a good half acre and towering at three extended height stories, the stone structure probably could have housed the entire population of little Tea Cup *and* the surrounding towns. Why one man needed this monstrosity stretched beyond my comprehension.

As the taxi pulled through the gates, the driver let out a whistle. “What does this person do for a living?”

“Investments,” Chapling and I answered in unison.

And actually, according to our records, that was exactly what Harry Noor filed on his taxes every year. Investment Broker. I supposed there wasn't a category labeled Underground Fight Club Owner and General Abuse of Mankind.

The taxi pulled to a stop and an *enormous* tattooed man opened the door.

Chapling got out first, dropping his head back to look up at the man. “You're big. Reallyreally big. How big are you?”

“Six five,” he answered in an unusually high pitched voice.

Chapling must have thought it, too, because he shot me a humored look.

I paid the driver and slid out next. I was a tall girl, and this guy was huge. But next to Chapling, he looked like a giant.

Chapling held his arms out to his sides. “You're wide, too. You probably shop at one of those big and tall places, don't you? Or is it big and wide?”

I elbowed Chapling to the side. “Ignore him. He doesn't get out much.”

Huge-tattoo man laughed, and it took me off guard. First, because he had all his teeth (for some reason I thought he wouldn't), and second, because I hadn't expected him to laugh. I'd expected a serious, stern nod, or a blank look at least.

I mean, weren't guards supposed to be perpetually angry?

But then, who's to say he was a guard. He could be a visiting relative. The lawn man. The pool man. The—

I gave my head a little shake. I was getting *way* off track.

I held out my hand. “I'm Gertrude and this is Charlie. We're here for the program design demonstration.”

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Huge, tattooed man nodded. “I figured with the laptops and all.” He turned toward the mansion-slash-palace. “Follow me.”

Up the stone entryway we went on steps so wide Chapling had to take two foot steps for every one stone step. Huge-tattoo man opened a wooden front door, and we stepped in behind him right into a narrow hallway.

For some reason I had imagined large open spaces, but as we walked down the long narrow hallway, small rooms opened off the right and the left. Cramped rooms, but incredibly tidy, like no one had ever stepped foot in them: bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens, bathrooms. It was the oddest design I think I’d ever seen. Surely, the small rooms connected somehow to make bigger suites.

And, weird enough, the rooms sat empty. Not that I’d expected anyone, but with such a large house it sure seemed like there should be someone.

We continued on down the eternally long hallway and finally came to another wooden door, much like the front door to this mansion. Huge-tattoo man opened it to reveal a stairwell.

He stepped to the side. “Take those stairs down and you’ll find everybody.”

I smiled at him. “Thanks.”

He grinned back. “You’re very welcome.”

His response made me chuckle. This man just didn’t seem like the type to grin and laugh and be polite.

The door closed behind us, and we descended the steps.

“Nice guy,” Chapling commented, and I nodded.

Fifty two steps later (not kidding, there were a lot, and yes, I really did count), we came to another wooden door.

“Going to be a chore going back up those,” Chapling mumbled as he turned the door’s knob.

It swung open, and we found ourselves in a room I estimated to be about half the size of a football field.

Chapling stepped in. “Good grief this is big.” He looked around. “And dirty.”

I nodded as I stood, taking everything in. The entire place looked like it was in dire need of a good scrubbing. Dingy concrete spanned the entire floor with suspicious stains all over. A non-caged octagon that looked about twenty years old occupied the center of the room with rows of metal chairs surrounding it. Equipment, like Bruiser had back at the ranch, but in much poorer quality, sprawled the back left corner.

“You’d think with all his money,” Chapling mumbled, “he’d clean this place up.”

“You’d think,” I agreed. Honestly, I was afraid to touch anything.

Off to the side was an arched open doorway with PRIVATE posted above it.

Chapling motioned to the back right corner, and I saw Harry Noor there with the other computer programmers. “Looks like we might be the last to have arrived.” Blowing out a nervous breath, Chapling nodded. “Here goes nothing.”

As we made our way around the octagon toward the group, I glanced around, taking everything in. Surely there had to be another way in or out of this place besides those stairs we’d just come down.

We approached the group, and I counted seven program designers plus Mr. Harry Noor.

“I’m giving each of you,” he was saying, “fifteen minutes. No more, no less. At the end of everyone’s presentations, I will immediately make my decision.” He looked straight at me and Chapling. “You’re late.”

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I smiled. “I’m sorry, our—”

Harry Noor flicked his hand through the air. “I don’t care. I hate explanations.”

*O-kay.* For such a sweet-looking-little-old grandpa, he was sure rude.

Off to my left, one of the computer nerds snorted his immature amusement. What was this, competitive elementary school?

Harry Noor looked me up and down first, then Chapling, and then came back to me.

“You don’t look like a program designer.”

I glanced behind him at the myriad of stereotypical geeks, and then with a shrug said, “You’d be surprised what’s in this brain of mine.”

He barked an overly loud laugh, and everyone jumped a little.

Well, at least I’d amused the guy.

Harry Noor motioned for me and Chapling to sit with the others on the floor. “We’ll start with the first to arrive and end with blonde-brainy and her little friend.”

Chapling and I exchanged a glance. We were the last to go—exactly what we had hoped for. We’d sit back, watch all the others, and then make last second adjustments if need be.

Geek #1 went first. Tall, skinny, bald, glasses. He nervously stuttered his way through his presentation, and five quick minutes later, took a bow.

Chapling looked at me. *A bow?* he mouthed, and I held back a smile.

Harry Noor shook his head. “You can go.”

As if he’d been expecting the dismissal, Geek #1 hurriedly mumbled his thank you, packed up his stuff, and scurried off.

I wanted to tell him he’d done an okay job, the poor, insecure, nervous guy. But I figured I’d better just keep my mouth shut.

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Geek #2 went next. Medium height, heavy, long hair, glasses. A little nervous, too, his presentation lasted ten minutes. A presentation I'd grade about a C. Okay, maybe C+

When he was done, Harry Noor flicked his hand through the air. "You can go."

"B-but—"

Harry narrowed his eyes. "Go."

Geek #3 went next. Short, scrawny, shaggy hair, glasses. He took the full fifteen minutes, doing, in my opinion, a bang up job.

But, of course, we knew what kind of job he would do, as well as all the others. I *had* hacked into their computers after all. I knew more about them than they probably did. I even knew their eye glass prescriptions.

Harry Noor motioned for Geek #3 to sit back down. "Stay for now."

Chapling and I exchanged a slightly worried glance.

Geek #4 and 5 did their thing, and Harry Noor sent them home.

Geek #6 stayed—the one who had snorted when we first came in. The dweeb.

Geek #7 went home.

And then it was our turn. We stood, and knowing we only had fifteen minutes, we plunged right in.

"We've traveled all around the world," I fibbed, "obtaining data for our Combat Thrash Program."

"She came up with that name," Chapling happily supplied, and Harry merely looked at him.

Clearing his throat, Chapling gave me a boy-isn't-he-a-fun-one? look to which I launched right back into weaving my excellent introductory tale to Mr. Harry Noor.

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Chapling busied himself setting up the laptops, and when he was ready, he gave me the signal.

We did everything exactly as we had in the conference room yesterday. Using Daisy (that for security purposes we temporarily renamed Darlene), we commanded our laptops to begin the music, video, and animated introduction.

When it finished I asked Geek #6 (the snorter), “Would you mind coming up?”

Geek #6 shook his head. “No thank you.”

“Do it,” Harry Noor commanded, and I couldn’t help but smirk.

We stripped him down to his boney chest and attached the Influence Sway Skins. A 3-D image of his muscular skeletal appeared.

“We’ll measure strapping intensity and cognitive thought processes,” I told Harry Noor, “as he engages in a two minute mock fight with me.”

“*What?*” Geek #6 squeaked.

With a nod, Harry sat forward in his chair.

Geek #6 and I began our mock fight. Or more like I threw punches and kicks and he yelped and dodged. When we finished, I commanded, “Darlene, percentage of match to excellence, please.”

0.25 PERCENT.

Chapling and I both laughed, we couldn’t help ourselves.

Geek #6 tore the Skins off and threw them to the ground. “Not funny.”

I turned to Harry Noor. “As you can see, he clearly is not suited for fighting.”

Harry smiled. “Clearly.”

“During the creation of the Combat Thrash Program,” I explained to Harry Noor, “my data was entered into the system. We’ll use that for the finale.”

Chapling and I exchanged an excited look.

He pointed his laptop toward the octagon in the center of the room. “Darlene, finale please.”

A hologram of me and Geek #6 appeared in the octagon. We approached each other, or rather I approached him, and basically beat him into the ground while he scrambled his weenie little self out of the way. I had to admit, I looked pretty darn good up there.

The hologram fight ended. I turned to Geek #6 and batted my lashes. He sneered back.

Chapling glanced at his watch. “Sorry, we went over our fifteen minutes.”

Harry Noor waved him on. “No problem. Finish up.”

That had to be a good sign.

Quickly, we explained the rest of the program pertaining to the advisement of fighters during an actual competition. Using the same footage from Russia that we’d used yesterday in the conference room, we showed the dark haired man fighting the red haired one. We illustrated the shoulder lock and demonstrated the success of rolling out at a thirty degree angle versus normal.

When we finished I powered down and turned to Harry Noor. “It’s all based on a person’s unique geometrics and the intermolecular attraction of all elements involved.” I smiled. “And that concludes our demonstration.”

Harry didn’t say anything. The two remaining geeks didn’t say anything. I didn’t say anything. Chapling didn’t say anything. Everyone just sort of looked at each other.

More quiet seconds went by and still nobody said anything.

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Finally, Chapling bowed.

And I held back a smile. Leave it to Chapling. I looked down at him, and he gave me an I-thought-maybe-that's-what-I-was-supposed-to-do shrug.

Harry turned to the Geek #3 and #6. “You can go.” He turned to me and Chapling. “Congratulations. You’re hired.”