

CHAPTER TWO

Neither one of us said a word as we stared into each other's eyes. I was sure his brain was circling the same thought as mine.

What the . . . ?

Quirk's brows lifted. "Kelly? Wh—" He glanced over his shoulder at Chapling and then back to me. "I don't—"

Chapling hobbled up beside him. "GiGi?" He looked between the two of us. "You two know each other?"

Slowly, we nodded, still staring at each other.

What would Quirk be doing here?

I realized my mouth was open and closed it. And then I realized I was still on the floor where I'd stumbled and fell. Quirk must have realized it, too, because he reached forward to help me up.

I took his hand and let him pull me to my feet. "Randy," I said, using his real name.

He smiled, and it shot butterflies right through my stomach.

"You're GiGi?" Randy realized. "Chapling's told me all about you."

Chapling stepped up beside us. "I didn't realize you knew Randy."

I looked down at him. "How do *you* know Randy?"

Chapling bobbed his bushy brows. "Couple of years ago we worked on something together for the IPNC."

"Oh."

"Yeah, he's my bro," Randy commented, elbowing Chapling.

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Chapling giggled. “Yeahyeah, that’s right. Everybody joked we were brothers.”

Smiling, I looked between the two of them, finding that absurdly funny. They looked nothing like brothers. Chapling was a little person with frizzy red hair, freckles, and lots of chub. Randy stood six feet of in shape leanness with dark hair, adorable green eyes, and way too cute wire rimmed glasses.

Wait a minute. Why was I thinking of him as adorable and cute? He was a klutzy nerd.

Well, so was I.

Chapling waddled off and over to his coffee station in the corner of the computer lab.

“How funny. Funnyfunny. You two know each other.”

Randy and I smiled at each other.

Chapling dumped old coffee into the sink. “Where’d you all meet?”

“Junoesque Jungle,” we answered in unison, referring to my last mission.

“The Junoesque?” Chapling poured water into the coffee maker. “Hm.” He glanced across the lab at Randy. “What were you doing in the jungle?”

“He was the glyph expert,” I answered for him.

“Well, what do you know.” Chapling dumped the old grounds and piled in new ones.

“You didn’t know?” I asked.

Chapling shook his head. “Nope.”

This organization continued to amaze me. Chapling was fairly high up in The Specialists and yet he hadn’t had clearance to know his friend Randy was on my last mission.

TL walked in the open door, pressed the button to close it, and it made a suction noise as it slid together. He looked up at me and Randy, and I got the distinct impression he was in a bad mood.

“Did you show Randy around?” TL asked Chapling, and he nodded. “You two know each other, of course, from the Junoesque mission,” TL continued. “I was very impressed with Randy’s work. I’ve asked him to come on board for a few weeks as a historian consult on a few things I have going on.”

“What?!”

Chapling and Randy jumped, and TL just looked at me.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, what?” Holy crap. Joining The Specialists? This wasn’t good. This *so* wasn’t good. I know it was only for a few weeks, but this *so* wasn’t good.

The lab door opened and in walked David.

I swallowed.

TL gave him a brusque nod, and my thoughts went back to wondering why TL seemed so upset. “David meet Randy. He’ll be here for a few weeks as a historian consult. He comes to us from the IPNC.”

David stepped forward and shook Randy’s hand.

I watched it all in a sort of slow motion. My boyfriend meeting the guy that kissed me.

Chapling grabbed the still brewing coffee and poured himself a mug. “Isn’t it weird that GiGi and Randy already know each other?”

David glanced between the two of us. “You two know each other?”

I tried to swallow, but the HUGE lump in my throat prohibited me.

“Yep,” Chapling went on. “From GiGi’s last mission. Randy was the glyph expert.”

David didn’t respond for a second, and I watched as it slowly dawned on him. He turned and stared right into Randy’s eyes. “*You’re the professor? You’re the guy that ‘gets’ my girlfriend?*” I imagined him saying.

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Randy nodded, clearly not picking up on things.

“David,” TL said, “Randy will be staying in the guest room. Take care of getting him settled.” With that, TL walked from the room.

Everyone stood in silence. David staring at Randy. Me looking between the two of them. And Randy looking between me and David.

“Yes!” Chapling smacked his lips. “Nothing like caffeine straight to the veins.” Carrying his coffee mug, he waddled over and climbed up into his computer chair and started clicking away, completely oblivious to the three of us.

“Um,” Randy pushed his glasses up his nose. “Wanna show me to my room?”

Without a glance in my direction, David turned and strode from the computer lab. “Yeah, let’s go.”

Randy gave me a *what’s-going-on?* look to which I sort of smiled and shrugged.

In silence I watched the two of them leave the computer lab. I was in trouble. *Big* trouble.

* * *

Later that night, TL, Mystic, and David left for the mission. No one had a clue where they were going, but all of us were dying to know. Never, in the time I’d been here, had a mission occurred so quickly. Usually there were weeks of preparation before someone left.

Whatever it was, it had to be really important.

David hadn’t even had a chance to said goodbye.

And Mystic hadn’t even received his going away party, tradition for all first missions.

“Did you meet the new guy?” Cat asked.

I glanced up from where I sat in the corner of the rec room, idly watching Bruiser and Parrot across the room playing air hockey while Wirenut cheered.

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I nodded. “Yes.” And went back to watching Bruiser and Parrot.

Cat sat down in the oversized, leather chair beside me. “Cute, huh?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

Beaker plopped down in the other leather chair. “Wonder how old he is.”

“Twenty three,” I answered.

Cat snuggled further down in her chair. “Wonder where he came from.”

“IPNC.” The same organization we used to belong to before going private.

Beaker kicked her legs up on the table in front of us. “I heard he’s a historian.”

I nodded, still watching the air hockey. “Yes.”

“Suppose he has a girlfriend?” Beaker asked.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t.”

No one said anything for a few minutes, and then Cat looked over at me. “You sure know a lot about him.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

They didn’t reply, obviously waiting for me to continue.

I sighed, resigned to the inevitable. “He’s the guy that kissed me.”

Beaker coughed. “*What?!*”

I finally took my eyes off of the air hockey match and drug them over to Beaker and Cat.

“He was on the mission with Parrot and I.”

Cat sat up in her chair. “Does David know?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“What did he say?” Beaker asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

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Cat blinked. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” It wasn’t like I had a lot of experience with this sort of thing. “I don’t suppose either of you have any words of wisdom.”

Beaker shrugged. “Sorry. I’ve never had a boyfriend. Can’t help you.”

Cat shrugged, too. “I’ve never cheated on a boyfriend.”

“I didn’t cheat,” I defended myself.

Beaker narrowed her eyes. “You *kissed* another guy.”

“No. *He* kissed me.”

They just looked at me.

I rolled my eyes. “I guess this is the time when an older sister or mom would come in handy, huh?”

They both nodded.

“Oh and what I said earlier about David being my brother . . .” Beaker waved her hand in the air. “Whatever. You know I’m here for both of you and all that crap.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Gee, thanks.” Leave it to Beaker to be reluctantly supportive. Which, actually, was *tons* better than what she was before.

Randy appeared in the doorway. “Kelly? Can I see you?”

Beaker and Cat exchanged a look. *Kelly?* They mouthed in unison.

The truth was I sort of liked that he called me Kelly instead of GiGi. It had been a long time since my real name had been used.

Slowly, I got to my feet and crossed the rec room to where he stood in the door. I followed him across the hall and into the cafeteria that sat empty at the late hour. He slid into one of the aluminum, picnic type tables and I sat down across from him.

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Quietly, we looked over the table at each other, and the more staring seconds that passed, the more anxious I became.

“You all settled in?” I struck up a conversation.

He nodded.

And then we fell back into the silently-staring-at-each-other thing.

Honestly, conversation was *so* not my strong point.

“I can’t . . .” he let out a nervous chuckle. “I can’t believe you’re here. I’m here. I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

I smiled a little, really not knowing what to say, and thanking God David wasn’t here to walk in on us.

“Um, I kind of got the hint that David’s your boyfriend. And, I, um, also got the hint that he knows about you and me.”

“Did he say anything?” I immediately asked.

Randy didn’t answer me at first, and then his face slowly curved into a sad smile. “He means a lot to you.”

Swallowing, I nodded, feeling like in some way I was hurting Randy’s feelings.

He lowered his gaze to his hands clasped on top the table. “Kelly, the last thing I want to do is come between you and your friends, you and your boyfriend.” He brought his gaze up to mine. “It matters to me what people think. I don’t want to come in and mess things up. And I’m not going to lie to you. I think you’re great. But you and David are together, and there you go.”

Randy got up from the table. “And even if you and David weren’t together, it’s not a good idea for people who work together to date. So,” he held his hand out to me, “friends?”

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I didn't know what to say. David and I weren't together. Or at least we'd never really broken up. And why did it feel like Randy was breaking up with me when we weren't even dating?

Inwardly, I sighed. Life was a lot easier when only computers rocked my world.

I reached out and did the only thing I could. I smiled and took his hand. "Friends."

* * *

Two days later we had just finished up a PT session and were walking out of the barn. Mystic, TL, and David pulled up. The car doors opened, they climbed out, and walked straight into the house without a glance in our direction.

TL and David disappeared into TL's office and shut the door, making it more than obvious that no one was to disturb them. Mystic went straight to his bedroom, and we all followed.

"What's going on?" Wirenut asked him.

Mystic didn't look at any of us, just shook his head.

Bruiser and I exchanged a glance.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Did you get hurt?"

"I'm fine," Mystic mumbled.

Beaker stepped into the room. "Is everything done? Is the mission over?"

Mystic grabbed a purple bag off his dresser. "I really need to be alone." With that, he slipped past all of us and out the door.

Cat turned to Wirenut. "What's in that purple bag?"

"His mo-jo stuff," Wirenut answered. "Ya know, crystals and herbs and whatever else he needs to become one with the universe."

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None of us spoke for a few seconds.

Beaker heaved a sigh. “Well, I guess I’m going to go,” she shrugged, “do whatever.”

Bruiser looked at Parrot. “Wanna go for a ride?” she asked, referring to the horses, and Parrot nodded.

Wirenut grabbed his iPod and he and Cat stretched out on his bed to listen to music, which left me standing in the boy’s room with nothing to do.

“Well,” I headed toward the door, “guess I’ll see you guys later.”

Wirenut and Cat waved bye. I headed down the hall to the hidden elevator and descended to Sub Floor Four. I punched in my code to the computer lab and went on in. As usual, Chapling sat bent over his station clicking away.

I walked up behind him and saw that he was updating our video monitoring software. I glanced at all the black and white images stacked on his screen. They showed where everyone was and what everyone was doing. I saw Jonathan, our PT instructor, go into TL’s office.

I saw an image of TL’s office with him on the phone, David looking through a file, and Jonathan listening to TL’s conversation. All three of them looked incredibly concentrated and definitely stressed.

I was dying, *dying*, to know what was going on.

Then I saw an image of Mystic up on the hill meditating. He’d placed some different colored crystals in front of him, and I found myself curious what each crystal was for.

I touched Chapling on the shoulder, and he jumped.

“Ohmygod. Ohmygodohmygod.” He grabbed the sides of his fuzzy head. “Don’t scare me like that.”

I smiled. “You didn’t hear me come in?” Stupid question, of course he didn’t hear me. I was completely oblivious, too, when I was working.

“Nooo, I didn’t hear you.” Chapling clicked a few keys. “What’s up?”

I pointed to the image of TL’s office. “Any idea what’s going on?”

Chapling shook his head. “Not yet.” He pointed to my station. “I sent you code. We’ve been hired to review it for infections.”

With a nod, I stepped over to my station and sat down. Taped to the side of my flat screen was a picture of me and David as little kids, taken right here at the ranch. I smiled as I looked at the image of him and I holding hands, grinning for the camera.

I missed him.

With a sigh, I keyed in my password, brought up the code, and got down to work. Hours zoomed by as I lost myself in thousands of lines of data. I tagged the deprecations, ascribed the client agents to depiction, and formatted the cipher for essentials. I repeated that process over and over again with each subsection of records and then partitioned the intervals.

“GiGi?”

I focused on the elements and continued—

“*GIGI?!*”

I jerked my head up. “What?”

Chapling stood at the door. “Let’s go. TL wants us.”

“Oh.” I blinked my eyes a few times. As quick as I could, I secured my station and followed Chapling out the lab and down the hall to the conference room.

Around the table sat TL, David, Jonathan, Mystic, Bruiser, and . . . Nalani? What was TL’s wife doing here? I looked straight at her and gave her a huge smile that she did not return.

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Something was wrong. Something was *really* wrong.

I pulled a leather chair out beside Bruiser and sat down. “What are you doing here?” I whispered to Bruiser, and she shrugged.

Chapling closed the door and sat beside David.

No one said a word as we stared at TL, waiting.

Seconds later, he closed a file he’d been studying and stood. “For those of you who do not know, this is Nalani Kai, my wife.”

I blinked, taken aback that he’d just said that. Nalani being his wife was a big time secret I had accidentally found out and TL had sworn me to secrecy on.

TL didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and I got the distinct impression he was trying extremely hard to control his emotions. “Someone . . .” he inhaled and released a quick breath. “Someone has kidnapped our daughter.”