

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The doors to the underground club flew open, and cops rushed in. “Freeze!” They yelled, pulling guns, chasing people who had began to run.

I looked up at the octagon to see Bruiser climbing off Utotiz. Our little dynamo had just defeated the world title holder in mixed martial arts.

“Team,” David spoke, “come back to the locker rooms.”

Nalani joined me and Chapling, and together we made our way around the club toward the PRIVATE archway. None of the cops bothered us, probably because they had our pictures and knew we were one of the good guys.

People screamed and ran, but really, how stupid was that? This was an underground club. There *was* no place to run.

Off to the side, a cop had Harry pinned against the wall as he searched him. That was the least he deserved. This night of Demise Chain events was probably the cleanest ever. Only one person had died.

We rallied back in the locker room area and from there exited to an awaiting van that Red drove. Mystic had regained consciousness, but his face was badly beaten. All of my team members had gotten their share of nicks and bruises from missions, but Mystic looked the worse. It hurt my heart to see his lumpy eyes, gashed cheeks, and split lip.

My poor, peaceful, non-violent Mystic.

I moved to sit beside him as the van bumped along, and I reached out and took his hand. He smiled through his swollen face to assure me all was okay.

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No one spoke as the van continued moving along. A while later we pulled off the main road and wound our way through a heavily wooded path. The van pushed through a blanket of dark greenery and came to a stop in front of a one story log cabin.

I peeked at my watch. 5:00 a.m.

Red jumped out and came around to open the back of the van. My team filed out and into the log cabin.

“This is a safe house,” TL informed us as he turned on a few lamps.

We all took seats around the living room of the log cabin.

Chapling got his laptop out and I followed his lead.

“You’re up,” TL told Mystic.

“I saw it in Utotiz’s eyes,” Mystic spoke from my right. “He’s the brother of the kidnapper. His sister took Zandra as retribution to something that happened to her in the past. I don’t know what that event was, but it was incredibly significant in her life. Utotiz only just found out about the kidnapping, which explains why I didn’t see anything in him while I was studying film footage of his fights.”

“Zandra’s unharmed,” Mystic assured TL and Nalani. “She’s scared. But she’s unharmed. She’s right here in Washington State. Utotiz has a cabin on Mount Mission. That is where his sister is holding Zandra.”

David turned to me and Chapling. “Get us a satellite image of the cabin. And get us everything you know about this sister. I want a picture ASAP.”

With a nod, Chapling and I dove into cyberspace. While we clicked away, our team continued discussing the situation. I blocked out their voices and concentrated on my work . . .

“Okay,” Chapling announced. “Satellite image secured.”

He depressed a button on the side of his laptop, and out slid a slim three-by-one inch projector. He pointed the projector to the wall above the fireplace and an image appeared. He manipulated the picture, rotating it, zooming in, until a small cabin came into view.

Supported by stilts and tucked into the side of the mountain, the cabin sat surrounded by thick Washington trees. A wall of glass spanned the front of the cabin, looking out over the mountain, the trees, and the valley below.

Chapling manipulated the satellite and zoomed through the early morning shadows to view through that wall of glass. Darkness filled the interior of the cabin, and Chapling switched to infrared.

An image of a woman came into view as she slept on the couch. Beside her was a shotgun.

Chapling scanned the loft of the cabin, zooming in on a double bed. An image of a little girl came into view as she slept with her arms wrapped around a stuffed doll. Her foot stuck out the bottom of the blanket displaying a rope tied around her ankle and secured to the bed.

Nalani gasped, and I glanced over at her. With her hands over her mouth, she stared at the image of her daughter and her eyes welled with tears.

“She’s okay,” Nalani whispered, looking over to TL.

Nodding, he didn’t return Nalani’s glance, just kept staring at the image of his daughter.

My laptop dinged, and I checked it. “I have the background. Her name is Kimberly Tanner and she is Utotiz’s older sister.” I emailed Chapling her image and he projected it up onto the wall as well.

“Kimberly is thirty-eight years old,” I continued. “Five foot three inches. One hundred and thirty pounds. Brown hair. Hazel eyes. She has been in and out of mental institutions since

the age of twenty-one when a freak accident took her baby girl. She's recently been released from a private facility in Georgia. She was released just days before Zandra was taken. She received a computer science degree from the University of Georgia. And it says here, she's married to an IPNC agent." I looked up at my team. "That's weird."

TL pushed out a heavy breath. "I know her."

Every person in the room gave TL their full attention.

"Kimberly Tanner?" Nalani closed her eyes. "Oh my God."

Rubbing his head, TL slowly lowered himself to the corner of the couch. Slumping forward, he braced his elbows on his knees and stared at the wood floor beneath his boots. "I was twenty-one years old. Brand new to the IPNC. We were on a mission right here in the states. Kimberly Tanner was in the wrong place at the wrong time. With her baby in her arms, She stepped right into the line of fire. *My* line of fire."

"And you killed her baby?" Bruiser whispered.

TL nodded, still not looking at any of us. "Yes, I killed her baby. She was only four months old."

No one said a word as it all sank in. I thought about the missions I'd been on and the situations I'd been in. Accidents could happen at any time. Accidents *had* happened. But killing a baby? Oh my God. How had TL dealt with that tragedy?

"The IPNC paid her money. *I* paid her money. I've checked in on her throughout the years. Made sure she had the best treatment." TL shook his head. "It wasn't enough. I didn't do enough. I thought she'd come through everything okay."

“Well, her computer degree and her marriage to an IPNC agent explains how she knows about Zandra.” David motioned for Chapling to turn off the projector. “How in the world did she end up marrying an IPNC agent?”

TL pressed his fingers into his temples. “It happened shortly after the accident. One of the agents got emotionally caught up in the situation, visited her at the hospital, ended up marrying her.”

Out of pity? I wondered. Or out of love?

“That IPNC agent isn’t involved in this,” Mystic spoke up from beside me. I turned to see him staring at Kimberly’s picture on my laptop.

“How do you want to handle this?” David asked.

Finally, TL looked up. “I’m going in alone.”

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It took us four hours to cross the state and weave our way up Mount Mission to where Kimberly Tanner was holding Zandra. A half mile away we stopped the van on a dirt lane that led to the cabin. I imagined in the winter these switch-back roads would be impassible.

Me, Chapling, Mystic, and Bruiser stayed in the van. Jonathan, Red, David, and Nalani got out and quietly made their way through the trees to surround the small house.

We still wore our mole earpieces for communication. No one carried a weapon. TL had insisted. He was going in alone.

In the van we brought up satellite imaging and zoomed in on the house. Kimberly Tanner was up now and sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. Up in the loft, I didn’t see Zandra on the bed. The rope that had been tied around her ankle dangled free. The bathroom door was closed, so I assumed she was in there.

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Chapling detailed everything we were seeing for the benefit of our team.

On our laptop screen, we watched as TL stepped from the woods, approached the front door, and knocked.

Kimberly jumped up, grabbed the shotgun from the couch, and ran over to the door.

“She’s got her shotgun,” Chapling reported.

Kimberly peeked through the side window to see who it was, caught sight of TL, and ducked down. Cradling the shotgun, she crouched below the window, wide eyed, trying to be very quiet.

TL knocked again. “Kimberly,” he spoke softly, “I know you’re in there. I’ve come unarmed. Put the shotgun down. Let’s talk.”

Kimberly blinked a few times, swallowed. Then in one quick movement, she stood up, cocked the gun, swung the door open, and pointed it right at TL’s head.

He didn’t move. I knew TL. He could have easily disarmed her and gotten this whole thing over with. But he cared for Kimberly. It mattered to him what he had done to her. It still haunted both of them. That one horrible event had changed their lives forever.

“Where’s Zandra?” he asked in that same calm tone.

“In the bathroom.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yes.”

TL moved forward, and Kimberly backed up, still holding the gun to his forehead. Once inside, he closed the door.

“Where’re all your people?” She nodded toward the bank of windows that looked out over the mountain. “I thought for sure you’d railroad in here with your entourage.”

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“They’re out there,” he spoke truthfully. “They can hear everything we’re saying. But no one is armed. I assure you.”

Kimberly snorted. “So you’re here to talk me off the ledge, so to speak?”

TL didn’t answer that question. “Kimberly, I want my daughter back. I know why you took her. You wanted me to feel the pain that you felt when I killed your daughter.”

Kimberly squeezed her eyes closed. “Shut up.”

“I did kill your daughter, Kimberly, and I’m so sorry. You and I both have lived with that tragedy for seventeen years. If I could rewind the time, that is the absolute one thing I would change. But I can’t rewind the time. And taking my daughter won’t make you feel better.”

“YES IT WILL!” she screamed, startling everybody in the van.

TL didn’t even blink at the outburst.

Kimberly’s eyes shot open, and she pressed the gun firmer to TL’s forehead.

He got down on his knees and looked up at her. “You want to kill someone. Kill me. Let my daughter go. My wife is here. She wants our daughter back, too. Take me. Let Zandra go.”

Shaking, Kimberly stared down at TL. Her finger twitched on the trigger as she gazed into his eyes.

“No,” she whispered. “No. No. No.” Tears began streaming down her face. “N-n-no.”

Shaking violently now, Kimberly continued pressing the gun to his head, holding his stare. “NO! NO! NO! NO!” She let out a gut wrenching scream and swung the gun away.

A shot boomed and glass shattered. Everyone in the van flinched. I immediately brought my attention back to the satellite image on the laptop screen.

The cabin’s wall of glass had a huge gaping hole in it. Kimberly stood with her back to TL, gripping the shot gun.

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Still on his knees, TL reached a hand out. “Kimberly, give me the gun.”

She didn’t respond.

“Kimberly.”

With a calmness she hadn’t had seconds ago, she turned around, pointed the shot gun at TL, and pulled the trigger.

I gasped. Then immediately I realized nothing had happened.

TL remained on his knees, silently gazing up at her.

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a shot gun shell. Keeping her eyes leveled on TL’s, she reloaded the gun.

“Kimberly,” TL softly requested, “don’t do this.”

I got the impression TL had seen something in her eyes that we couldn’t see.

Kimberly turned her back to him, swung the barrel up and into her mouth, and squeezed the trigger.

Bruiser sucked in a breath.

“No,” TL whispered.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Daddy?” Zandra cried.