

CHAPTER FIVE

Chapling rapped softly on the closed conference room door, and TL opened it.

Around the table sat everyone going on the mission: Nalani, Jonathan, David, Mystic, and Bruiser.

Chapling and I took seats beside each other to TL's left.

TL ran his gaze over everyone in the room, taking a second to make eye contact with each of us. "I'd like to start out by saying this is an incredible place we live. Regardless of your backgrounds, I hope each of you realize what an honor it is to have been picked for this program. You are an elite, talented, intelligent group, and I'm proud to say you are on my team."

No one uttered a sound as we stared at him. I was sure they were picking up on the same thing as me. While his words were complimentary, his tone came across disappointed.

Pushing back from the table, TL stood, and rolling his chair in, he rested his hands on top of the leather seat back.

My eyes wandered down to his ring finger where he wore no wedding band. I looked across the table to Nalani's finger and saw the same. What kind of relationship did they have that not even in the safety of the ranch did they wear rings? I didn't understand the two of them.

TL took a breath. "David, go ahead."

David hit the remote, and the wall inserted screen flickered. An image of Zandra popped up with a rag tied around her eyes and tears streaking her face.

I sucked in a breath as I stared at the curls matted to her little cheeks.

“This picture arrived today,” David explained. “We traced it and have found out it was mailed a block away from where Zandra was taken. This picture was probably snapped moments after she was kidnapped.” He pressed the remote, and another image came into view.

It was a note, just like the first. FIND HER OR SHE DIES.

David put the remote down. “That message came with the picture.”

“What about prints?” Chapling asked.

David shook his head. “Nothing.” He turned to Mystic. “Do you get anything looking at that?”

Mystic shook his head. “No, I’m sorry. I need to see her eyes.”

“Again,” TL spoke up. “The kidnappers could be anybody. Nalani and I have so many enemies.” TL stopped for a second and rubbed his hand across his forehead. “What do they want? It doesn’t make sense. Do they want me? Nalani? Money? To free someone from prison? I don’t know.” He rubbed his forehead even harder. “At this point, I’m beginning to doubt if they want anything at all. Maybe they’re just playing a game. I’m beginning to doubt their intentions . . . and what exactly their plans are with,” TL swallowed, “with our daughter,” his voice cracked a little.

I swallowed, too, at the raw emotion in his tone. At the horrible things that *could* happen to their daughter.

Dropping his head, TL pressed his fingers into the sides of his temple.

“Please . . .” Nalani squeezed her fingers together so tight her knuckles turned white.

“Please, you all in this room, you’re our only hope.”

My stomach clenched at the desperation in her voice. And I realized this was the first time I’d heard Nalani speak since first seeing her.

She looked first at Mystic and then Bruiser. “TL told me you two are hesitant to do this mission.”

I glanced over at my team members to find them both dropping their heads. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe they’d actually gone to TL. I loved my teammates, but at this point I felt incredibly disappointed in them, too. I didn’t care what hesitancy I might have, it was TL and Nalani’s daughter, for God’s sake. Did Mystic and Bruiser not see this?

“I can’t make you do this,” TL softly spoke, taking his fingers from his temple and dragging his gaze to both Mystic and Bruiser. “I could have gone to anybody. I know people on all levels of the government. But I brought this to you because I know you’re the best, *we’re* the best.”

Mystic and Bruiser kept their heads down. I didn’t know about them, but I would feel very guilty and definitely a little “in trouble” if TL were putting me on the spot right now.

“Look at me,” Nalani requested.

Mystic and Bruiser raised their eyes.

Nalani released her white knuckled fingers and laid them flat on her chest. “I’m here asking you as a mother to find my daughter, *our* daughter.”

That hit home. Although I had very few memories of my mother, I knew she would spare no resource to find me if I’d been kidnapped. Heck, if the roles were reversed, I’d go to the ends of the earth to find *any* missing family member. And I knew my team members would do the same.

Inhaling a long, soft breath, Mystic closed his eyes. It might have been my imagination but I swore he was listening to something.

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A few seconds ticked by and no one said a word as Mystic sat there meditating. I looked around the room to see what everyone thought, and they were all staring at him.

After a few more seconds, he gave a slight nod, opened his eyes and gazed straight into Nalani's. "You may definitely count me in."

With a shaky smile, she nodded. "Thank you." And then she turned to Bruiser.

"I'm sorry," Bruiser immediately apologized, looking from TL to Nalani, and back to TL. "I'm so, so sorry. I can't believe I acted so immature in thinking of myself, when people I love are in need of my talents. Sir, you may unequivocally count on me in any way."

Closing his eyes in what looked like pure relief, TL slowly turned his back to us. "Thank you." Then he opened the door and walked straight from the room with out dismissing us.

I couldn't recall a time I'd seen him struggle so hard to maintain composure.

He'd always been there for us. We would most certainly be there for him.

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I worked the whole next day along side Chapling writing and rewriting code. I just wasn't happy, and neither was Chapling. We had to create one bang up Combat-Thrash (fighting analysis) program and all we had as of now was mediocre at best. Five days was all we had left. Seven was all Mystic and David had.

"Maybe we need to see the training stages of a superior fighter," I suggested. "All we've watched and researched is the end product. I think we need to see exactly, in person, how a fighter becomes a fighter."

Chapling snapped his finger and pointed at me. "Smartgirl. Let's go."

Camera in hand, we made our way up to Sub Floor Two where we knew Bruiser and the guys were training. We texted Bruiser to let her know we were in the elevator, and she let us in.

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Chapling and I found an empty corner, set our camera up, and settled ourselves on a pile of mats. Laptops in front of each of us, we tuned into Bruiser and the guys.

And I tried very hard not to stare at David's sweaty, clingy T-shirt. "Can you recap what you've done so far and what the training schedule will be like until competition day?"

"Conditioning, sparring, specific technique," Bruiser ticked off her fingers.

"Conditioning, sparring, specific technique. We cycle through those three things, spending two hours on each and then starting back over, making for a packed twelve hours. We eat a high protein, high fiber diet to repair muscle tears. And each day I introduce a new technique. A new art. David and Mystic have to be as well rounded as possible. They have to do in seven days what others spends years perfecting."

Bruiser crossed the floor and grabbed up a handful of four-foot bamboo poles. "Kumite is one of the three sections of karate. Its training against an adversary. Balance is a key here and learning the basics by feel. If you get your lights knocked out, you're going to be disorientated. You need to have a mental scope for a guide, a clock in your head to oriente you until your senses come back. *If* they come back."

She handed TL, David, Mystic, and Jonathan each a pole. "Karate involves modification. Its about your senses, muscle memory, and imagery. You have to be able to use your wits with strategy. You have to be unpredictable. One of the key factors in winning or at least holding your own in a fight is the ability to anticipate your opponent's movements."

"Allow me to demonstrate." She pulled a black scarf from the elastic waist band of her shorts and tied it around her eyes. She lifted her hands and waved them on with her fingers. "Hit me."

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Mystic and Jonathan exchanged a glance. TL and David exchanged a glance. Chapling and I exchanged a glance.

Was she serious?

Bruiser waggled her fingers again. “Come on. What are you waiting for?”

“B—” Mystic almost looked pained. “But you’re so small.”

She smirked and waved them on again. “Let’s go. No holding back.”

TL lunged first, bringing the pole back and swinging it at her. I knew TL’s power, and clearly, he was holding back.

Bruiser dodged the swing, grabbed his pole from behind, twisted it free, and tossed it across the gym. “I. Said. Don’t. Hold. Back.”

All the guys smiled at her irritable tone. All the guys, but TL.

In fact, I hadn’t seen any expression on his face over the last couple of days but that of focus and concentration.

He looked stressed to the max.

David went next, stealthily slipping to the left and coming at her from below. She slammed her foot down on the pole, flipped it up with the toe of her running shoe, and jabbed the end into David’s side.

With a grunt, he fell to his knees and grabbed his side. “Man, Bruiser.”

Jonathan attacked next, not giving her a chance to respond to David, and whipped his pole toward the back of her knees. She leapt straight up and flipped backwards over Jonathan, snatched the pole from his grasp, and swept him off his feet.

With a thud, he landed on his butt. “Lord, girl,” he chuckled. “You’re something else.”

Blindfold still on, she turned to Mystic. “Come on, dude, be a man”

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Mystic swallowed. “I think I’m afraid of you.”

Bruiser smiled. “As you should be.” And then she sprinted toward him.

His eyes widened as he held up the pole and backed away. She came to a stop right in front of him, reached out, and bopped him in the side of the head.

Mystic jerked. “Hey!”

She bopped him in the other side of the head. “You’re a sissy. How do you expect to compete in less than two weeks? I’m just a little girl and I’m about to beat you up.” She shoved him in the chest. “You’re going to be up against guys twice your size. And they’re going to laugh in your face if you back away from them.”

Standing on her tiptoes, Bruiser leaned in closer until their faces were mere inches away from each other. “They’re going to laugh, and then they’ll beat you to a bloody pulp. Now,” she butted her forehead into his face, “hit me, you girl.”

Mystic narrowed his eyes, and I swore it was the first time I ever saw him look irritated. He slid his pole up between them and shoved her away.

She took a few steps back. “Good. Come on.”

He lifted the pole, holding it like a spear, and slung it at her.

Bruiser didn’t move, just lifted her hand and caught it. “Didn’t expect you to do that. Not bad.” She tossed the pole back to him.

Looking a little proud of himself, Mystic caught the pole.

Very quietly TL signaled the guys, and they all moved at once, coming at her from opposite directions.

They swatted and jabbed and rushed at her. She dodged and kicked and flipped.

They swung and struck. She punched and blocked.

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They lunged and poked. She disarmed and tossed their weapons.

They reached for her, and Bruiser, looking a bit ‘done with it’, whirled and touched Jonathan in the back of the neck. Spun and flicked David in the hip. Whipped around and poked the tip of her elbow to Mystic’s shoulder. And shot straight up in a split and tapped TL in the chest with her toes.

All four guys fell to the floor, moaning and heaving for breaths.

Bruiser took her blindfold off. “I think I broke a nail.” And then she giggled at her own silly humor.

Chapling and I just sat there, staring at the remnants of the Jackie Chan scene we’d just seen.

I realized then he and I were gripping each other’s hands, and I let go. “Sorry.”

“Wow.” Chapling blinked. “I think Bruiser’s my new idol.”

“I think we need Bruiser on *all* our missions.” I turned to Chapling. “She barely even touched them that last time around.”

He nodded. “Like I said, my idol.”

Bruiser went over and helped each of the guys up, tapping them at different places on their backs.

“What’s she doing?” I asked.

“Resetting our meridian points,” Mystic moaned as Bruiser did him.

I slipped my notepad from my pocket and took a second to jot down everything I’d just seen. In my peripheral I saw Chapling’s fingers begin racing over his laptop keys. This was exactly what both of us needed.

I looked up at the injured guys and they seemed, amazing enough, to be recovering.

“What did it feel like before you guys dropped to the floor?”

TL straightened his shoulders. “Compression.”

*Compression?*

I pondered that for a second and realized to really comprehend that word I would need to feel it. And then—the obligatory light bulb went off in my head—that was what my Combat-Thrash program needed. To incorporate all five senses.

My heart kicked in with that awesome rhythm that comes with solving a problem. I turned to Chapling and he was typing away, the light bulb having gone off in him, too.

“Chap?”

He held up his finger for me to wait, keyed a few more things, and then looked over.

I smiled. “We’re going to make history. First program of its kind. We need—”

“The senses!” Chapling answered for me.

“Oh my God, that’s exactly what I was thinking.”

He clapped his hands. “Of course it was. We’re smart that way.”

I put my laptop aside and stood.

Chapling looked up at me. “What are you doing?”

I straightened my T-shirt. “Feeling compression.”

His bushy red brows lifted an inch. “For real?”

I gave one definitive nod, more to convince me than to assure him. “I’m going in.”

“I changed my mind. *You’re* my idol.”

I took a deep breath. Here went nothing. “Bruiser, do that to me.”

All the guys and Bruiser turned to look at me.

Pulling my shoulders back, I took a few steps toward them. “I’m serious. I really need to be involved in all aspects of training for this mission if I’m going to create a program that will blow Harry Noor out of this world.”

I waved my hand through the air. “This is all so foreign to me, this fighting thing. I’ve spent much of my time swimming through research videos and books and it’s really getting me nowhere. Fighting is a full body sport, and it just occurred to Chapling and I that we need to incorporate all five senses into our Combat-Thrash program. Compression. That’s what TL said. And that’s what I need to feel.”

“She’s taking one for the team,” Chapling said from behind me. “Because *I’m* definitely not volunteering my little self for a compression experiment.”

“Combat-Thrash program?” Bruiser asked.

I shrugged. “That’s what I’ve decided to call it.”

She snorted. “It’s a stupid name.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you going to show me compression or what?”

Bruiser glanced over at TL, and he nodded her ahead.

She smirked, looking at little *too* happy if you asked me.

Perhaps I should have apologized to her *before* I asked her to compress me.

Bruiser waved me over, and I crossed the mat to her, getting this odd feeling I was walking the plank or something.

I came to a stop right in front of her and looked down. “I’m sorry for not being a very good friend to you and Mystic and getting cranky and all that.”

One side of her lip curled up. “Apology accepted.”

And then she reached out and touched my neck and my whole world went black.

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Sounds of classical music drifted through my brain and my eyelids fluttered open. A blurry image of Dr. Gretchen with her salt and pepper hair stepped into view.

She smiled. “Welcome back.”

I tried to sit up, and she patted my shoulder.

“I suggest you lay right there for a minute or two. You’re in the infirmary. It’s eleven at night. You’ve been out,” she peeked at her watch, “for nearly two hours.”

She brought a cup to me and held a straw to my lips. I took a long sip.

“What happened,” I asked a few seconds later.

“You don’t remember?”

I thought for a second . . . “Oh, compression. That’s right.” Bruiser’s fingers had felt like rocks. “Wait a minute . . .” my brain trailed off as I recalled everything. “Why didn’t she ‘reset my meridian points’?” I asked, using Mystic’s term.

Dr. Gretchen chuckled. “She did. You didn’t respond.”

I closed my eyes. Of course I didn’t respond. Leave it to me to be the dork that doesn’t respond right to something.

Dr. Gretchen sat down in the chair beside my bed. “GiGi,” she sighed. “You’ve got to be more careful. Some of us are made for combat, and some of us are, well, like you.”

I opened my eyes. “What does that mean?”

She gave me a tolerant look. “You know exactly what that means.”

Sadly, I did.

“You’ve been here more than anyone else,” she reminded me.

I held my hand up. “Point taken.” I swung my legs over the side of the bed to get up and closed my eyes on a wave of nausea. “Maybe I’ll just,” I scooted back on the bed and stretched out, “lay down a little while longer.”

Dr. Gretchen smiled a little. “Brilliant idea.” She settled back in her chair. “You know, David came to see you while you were out.”

I perked up. “He did?”

She nodded.

My stomach flippity-flopped at the thought of him looking in on me. What did that mean exactly? Was he looking in on me as a friend? Or as an I-might-want-to-get-back-together-with-you sort of thing? And then it occurred to me . . . had I been *drooling*? I had been in a coma after all.

“Why don’t we visit for a while?” Dr. Gretchen suggested.

I nodded, completely sidetracked by the fact David had been here, and waited for her to start the conversation.

She didn’t.

“Um,” I searched my brain for something to say . . . my thoughts drifted through the time I’d known Dr. Gretchen . . . and suddenly it hit me. “Hey, I’ve been dying to ask you a question.”

She waved me on. “Shoot.”

“Why do you and Jonathan hate each other so much?”