

CHAPTER THREE

*What?!*

*Oh.*

*My.*

*God.*

*What?* TL had a daughter?

I looked at Nalani. TL and Nalani had a daughter?

I put my hands over my mouth. *Oh, no.*

TL pointed his remote at the wall mounted flat screen, and an image of a little girl flashed into view. With huge brown eyes, tiny glasses, and curly black hair, she stared back into the camera with a big toothless grin.

Happy was the first word to pop into my mind.

“This is Zandra,” TL monotoned, completely void of any emotion. “She’s seven years old.”

Zandra was beautiful. Absolutely gorgeous. An incredible mix of Nalani and TL’s best physical qualities.

“She was taken three days ago,” TL continued, “from the back yard of her maternal grandmother’s home. No one saw anything. A note was attached to the ball she was playing with.” TL clicked the remote and a piece of yellow paper flashed onto the screen.

I squinted and made out the one and only typed sentence.

TRY TO FIND HER OR SHE DIES.

My heart paused a beat as I read the last word. DIES.

“Try to find her or she dies,” TL read. “That is all we have received. No ransom, no phone calls, just this one-sentence note. We have no idea who the kidnappers are or what they want in exchange. Through our work with the IPNC, Nalani and I have made a lot of enemies over the years. The kidnapper could be anybody from anywhere in the world.”

I looked between the two of them, puzzling at their stoic, blank expressions. Their daughter had been kidnapped and yet they maintained that ever present control. How? How was that even possible?

I glanced over to Nalani, hoping to send her an encouraging look, but she didn't return my glance. As I stared at her, I saw her jaw flex and realized she was doing everything possible to keep it in control.

“Of course,” TL continued, “we have no intentions of standing peacefully by waiting to be contacted by the kidnappers.” TL put the remote down on the table. “This is where all of you come in.” TL nodded to Mystic. “Unbeknownst to everyone here at the ranch, Mystic is considered a very precious asset to the government.”

Bruiser and I exchanged a curious glance.

“Before Mystic came to us,” TL continued, “he anonymously submitted information to Lost America, our nation's missing person's foundation. When I recruited him, he had successfully helped find two hundred and twenty three people. Since he's been living here at the ranch, he's been working behind the scenes, providing information that has led to the rescue of sixteen more missing people.”

*What?*

Bruiser and I exchanged another surprised look. From her perplexed expression, I gathered she didn't know about this either.

*The Specialists – Fight To The Finish*

Mystic had been working for TL this whole time? Behind the scenes? I hadn't known.

Why hadn't Mystic said anything?

Stupid question. Mystic hadn't said anything because TL didn't want any of us to know.

And—a thought occurred to me—when I'd first met Mystic, he'd said he was taken in for operating a 1-900 psychic scam. It was probably a cover TL had given him.

TL rolled his chair out and took his seat. “Needless to say, we have kept Mystic's identity closely guarded.”

I smiled to myself as he answered my unspoken question.

“Only myself, David, Chapling, and a few high up people in the government know of Mystic's ability.” TL turned to Mystic. “Tell everyone how your specialty works.”

“I need to see into a person's eyes to understand what they're feeling,” Mystic explained. “Unfortunately I see mostly their pain, not their happiness. It can be a picture of them or an image on T.V. Normally, that's all I need to feel them, hear them, to see them.”

No one responded as those words floated in the air. I could only imagine the things Mystic must see on a daily basis just by looking into someone's eyes.

That thought sent a chill racing up my arms. I didn't think I could handle looking into a person's eyes and seeing only pain.

What a burdening ability to have. I wondered if Mystic could block it somehow. And—I suddenly realized—what had he seen in me?

“Tell them,” TL prompted Mystic, “what you saw with Zandra?”

“I saw fighting. But fighting like I've never seen before. It was organized, but not like boxing. There was an octagon, but no cage, and no gloves. Just raw fighting. I heard different languages being spoken. There was a medium sized crowd of people sitting around the octagon.

I'd say about fifty people. And the men, the fighters, they were very bloody. I heard the snap of a bone . . ." Mystic closed his eyes. "That's a sound I never want to hear again."

He took a breath and opened his eyes. "I also got the sense that this fighting is rooted in one place here in the States and has been for years. That people come from all around for this gruesome fighting where money is exchanged."

Mystic looked across the table at Bruiser. "I also got the distinct feeling that many men have died during these fights. That it's almost *preferred* for a man to perish. It's why people bet such big money. In hopes that someone will die . . ." Mystic's voice trailed off as he slowly shook his head.

"I don't have anything else," he continued a few seconds later. "But I know without a doubt in my mind that I need to be around these fights if I'm going to locate Zandra."

"Okay, Bruiser," David cut in. "Tell us what your thoughts are after hearing this description."

For the first time ever, I saw Bruiser in a serious mode. Gone was her perpetual grin and silliness. She was focused as she began speaking. "The type of fighting that Mystic is describing is found more commonly overseas in less regulated countries. You can, however, find underground clubs throughout America. But death of a fighter most certainly is *not* part of the equation, unless, of course, an accident occurs."

She scooted up in her seat. "But here in America there is one very exclusive, underground club where fighters get paid bonuses if they kill their competition. I've never been to this club, but I've heard all about it. The club is called Demise Chain, and it's located in the Pacific Northwest in the little town of Teacup, Washington."

*Teacup?* What an innocent sounding city for such a horrible thing going on.

*The Specialists – Fight To The Finish*

“The worst part of this,” Bruiser continued, “is that less skilled fighters are brought over from other countries with a promise of American citizenship if they compete in Demise Chain. Little do they know that they are the ones that will die during the match.”

“Die?” I gasped, and Bruiser nodded.

It was amazing to me how just a year and a half ago I was in my own little world, completely oblivious to this world. Since joining The Specialists I’d found out way too many disturbing things about the human race.

Bruiser nodded. “Like I said, I’ve never seen one of these fights. But the man who raised me competed in one. He barely made it out alive.” She paused for a second. “We’re talking MMA, here. Everything goes.”

“MMA?” Mystic asked.

Good question. I had no clue either.

“Mixed martial arts,” she answered. “It was made popular by UFC in the early nineties. But it’s been going on a lot longer than that.”

I raised my hand. “UFC?”

“Ultimate Fighting Championship,” Bruiser answered. “You can see it on T.V. now, it’s so popular. MMA. A combination of karate, judo, Wing Chun, and whatever else, all in one fight. Striking, grappling. Basically whatever it takes to win.”

“You all should know,” TL inputted, “that Bruiser was raised and trained by one of the world’s elite fighters. She knows more about martial arts than anybody I’ve ever met, and I’ve been in this business a long time. She is, hands down, the most talented fighter I have ever seen. Her input into this mission is imperative.”

I glanced over at Bruiser to see her shyly look down. Her embarrassment was very out of character for her. TL's kudos had brought a side out in her I'd never seen.

"It is our goal," David carried on the conversation, "to get Mystic in the room where these fights are going on and—"

Bruiser huffed out a humorless laugh, cutting David off. "Good luck on that one. Demise Chain is closely monitored. It's like the mafia, or for that matter, the White House. You don't just walk in the front door. You have to earn your way in."

"Precisely," TL agreed.

Bruiser frowned. "And so how is Mystic going to get in?"

I smiled to myself. I didn't bother informing her that TL could do just about anything. Bruiser would figure that out soon enough.

"As David said," TL continued, "we need to get Mystic in that room. We've looked at it from all angles, and hands down our best bet is to have him be a competitive fighter. That is our objective. From there and what he discovers, we will move onto the next phase of things—finding Zandra."

"Did you say I'm going to be a competitive fighter?" Mystic asked.

"Him, a competitive fighter?" Bruiser balked.

I listened closely, wondering how I factored into all of this?

Ignoring Mystic and Bruiser's outbursts, TL pointed the remote at the screen. A gray haired gentleman popped up. Wearing a coat and tie, he grinned for the camera, coming across adorable and sweet. He looked like what I imagined everyone's grandpa should look like.

"This is Harry Noor." TL announced. "He is the owner of the Demise Chain."

"Him?" Bruiser laughed.

“Harry Noor,” TL went on, “has his own set of fighters called Warriors. Recently, he put the word out he’s looking for some new Warriors. He also put the word out he’s looking for a computer specialist. He wants a program designed exclusively for him that can identify top notch fighters. A program than can also advise competitors during a fight what they should and should not be doing differently.”

“Um, that’s called a coach,” Bruiser identified the obvious. “And how in the world does he expect a program to advise a fighter?”

TL glanced at me. “That’s for the computer specialist to figure out.”

“Harry Noor,” David explained, “is quite the gadget man. He’s got to have the latest and greatest of everything—the first of a kind. He’s also tight with his money and doesn’t want to dish out the dollars needed to hire top notch trainers. And he’s all about having things computerized. He wants a program that will identify his new Warriors. And that is what we’re going to give him.”

“David and Mystic,” TL picked up on the conversation, “are going to be those new Warriors.”

“Wait a minute. I’m not fighting?” Bruiser asked.

“Warrior?” Mystic shook his head. “I’m not fighting.”

I didn’t like the idea of *anybody* fighting, not after the way Bruiser had described it. Wait a minute, did TL just say David’s fighting, too? My heart skipped a beat as I glanced over at David. *No*.

“As of right now,” TL continued, not answering Bruiser or Mystic, “Harry Noor allows each of his Warriors to have a trainer. Jonathan will be David’s trainer, and I will be Mystic’s.” TL looked at his wife. “Nalani has already secured a job as the new hostess of the Demise Chain.

She's in charge, basically, of greeting people when they come in." TL turned his attention to Bruiser. "And you will be Mystic's girlfriend."

"His *girlfriend*?" she nearly squeaked.

"I can't fight," Mystic repeated himself. "It's against everything I believe in."

TL's jaw hardened, and I could tell he was not in the mood to deal with any objections or questions.

David must have picked up on it, too, because he quickly took over the conversation. "Women aren't allowed to compete in the fights," he answered Bruiser. "But we definitely need you there as our fighting consultant. Mystic's girlfriend is the only cover we can give you that will put you close enough to the fights."

Bruiser and Mystic eyed each other across the table. They did not look happy.

"The fighters are kept separate from each other," David went on. "Mystic needs to interact with everyone until he sees what he needs to see regarding Zandra. This makes it imperative that Mystic fight as many competitors as possible."

I raised my finger. "And me and Chapling?"

TL nodded to Chapling. "Chapling, of course, will work from home base."

*Of course.* I remembered a time when *I* was promised *I* would work from home base. But, truth be told, I'd gotten to the point where I sort of liked the traveling, the missions. *Sort of.* Of course, I'd never admit that out loud.

TL looked between me and Chapling. "You two are going to design that state-of-the-art, one-of-a-kind program to identify Harry Noor's new Warriors. And when David and Mystic show up for Warrior tryouts, you need to figure out how your program will identify them as top notch fighters and get them hired on with the Demise Chain. After that, you'll be on hand

working for Harry Noor, advising his fighters. Obviously, if it's anybody other than Mystic, you'll give bad advice. Anything to advance Mystic in the competition."

"Um," *Hello?* Did they not see the fact that I knew absolutely nothing about fighting? For that matter, I'd never even played a fighting video game. Heck, I couldn't even remember the last time I'd played a video game, period. Not that we were talking about video games, but it was all I could think of that related.

Chapling clapped his hands. "No problem. Noprobnoprob. This'll be fun. A little Physics, electricity, throw in some magnetism—Oooh! And we can get those absorption pads from storage and switch out the acceleration wires for recording force faction. Oooh!" He rapid fire clapped. "We should totally get Dr. Gretchen involved. Have you seen what she's got in her cabinets?" He scratched his head, making his brillo pad hair poof out. "Yeahyeahyeahyeahyeah."

He pushed back from the table and jumped down from his seat. "She's got that really cool," he snapped his fingers, "what do you call it . . . oh I can't remember right now." Chapling waddled over to the conference door, opened it, and walked right on out.

Everyone just looked at each other.

David turned to me. "Back on track. Harry Noor is meeting with prospective computer designers in one week. He'll pick the person he wants to work with after seeing their presentation. He *will* pick you."

I lifted my brows and asked the obvious. "And if he doesn't pick me?"

"That's not an option," David responded.

*Great. Talk about pressure.*

"A couple days after that," David continued, "the Warrior try outs will occur, and the following evening will be the night of fighting that Mystic and I will compete in."

TL clicked his pen. “There are a lot of unknown facts here. Who is the person who kidnapped Zandra? What does he or she want? What do the fights have to do with it?” TL clicked his pen again. “We’re working with a lot of indefinite details. And that doesn’t make me comfortable in the least.”

Not to mention the fact his, *their*, daughter’s life was at stake. With that thought I glanced at Nalani again and found her sitting there staring blankly at the table in front of her. Slowly, her eyes closed, and although it was slight, her brows drew together with the stress and sadness of the situation.

“Switching modes.” TL pushed back from the table and stood. “Each of you has a specialty. In order to expand on that talent and further your knowledge, you need materials. You need your own special place to go for privacy, research, and practice.”

I knew he was talking about our special rooms. Only Mystic and Bruiser had not been introduced to their rooms. TL had introduced the rest of us to our rooms right before we went on our first missions.

TL looked at Bruiser. “Bruiser, you are the only member of your team who has not seen your training room.” He nodded. “Time to take a look.”

*What?* I looked across the table at Mystic. *You’ve seen your room?* I mouthed.

He nodded.

Huh. I’d been there every other time my team members had been shown their special area. Why not Mystic?

TL opened the conference room door. “David’s going to take over from here. It’s late. Please do eat. Get some rest. Training starts first thing in the morning. Bruiser, I want you and

David to meet me in my office in one hour. We need to discuss the MMA training needed for this mission.”

Bruiser nodded.

Jonathan and Nalani followed TL out of the conference room, leaving me, Mystic, and Bruiser alone with David.

“When did you all remove your monitoring patches?” I asked, referring to a device we all had to wear when we first moved in.

“About a month into living here,” Bruiser answered.

Mystic shrugged. “About the same time.”

“Same time as me then,” I realized.

“Bruiser,” David cut in, “ready to see your room?”

“Definitely!” She pushed back from the table.

“Can we come?” I asked. “And what about Mystic’s room? Can we see his?”

David nodded. “I don’t have a problem with that.”

He led us from the conference room and down the hall of secret rooms, past all the doors I knew of, and came to a stop at a tall, beige, double wide filing cabinet.

This file cabinet had been here up against the wall from pretty much day one of me arriving to the ranch. I hadn’t given it much attention. I did open it once and found it unlocked, with every drawer empty. I’d figured it was extra storage, and TL would move it somewhere when he was ready.

Stepping to the side, David motioned Mystic forward, and Bruiser and I exchanged a puzzled glance.

Mystic slowly ran his fingers along the top of the cabinet, almost as if he was a magician silently telling it abracadabra. The cabinet shifted out from the wall and slid to the side, revealing a tunnel glowing in a soft blue light. My nostrils flared a little as they picked up a waft of incense.

I stood there for a second, staring at the tunnel, smelling the incense, trying to work through what had just happened.

“There are identity stamp sensors painted into the perimeter of the cabinet,” David explained. “They are rigged to read mine, Mystic’s, Chapling’s, and TL’s prints.”

“Oh.” That made sense.

Mystic stepped into the blue glowing tunnel, and we followed. About six feet in, the tunnel opened into a large circular room I estimated to be fifty feet in diameter.

The walls had been painted light purple, and on the walls scripted with the color teal were the words love, peace, joy, breathe, and harmony. A wooden table stood in the center of the room with a yellow pottery vase. Smoke trailed up from the vase, and I assumed it contained the incense. Oversized, vibrant pillows and cushions piled the area around that table. I guessed that was where Mystic meditated.

Soft music trickled through the air, settling the sound of hollow wind chimes through me. Around the circumference of the room, about every few feet, stood wooden tables with bowls of brightly colored stones.

To our immediate right, there were three glass cabinets with see-through doors. Crystals lined the shelves. Big ones, small ones. Round, jagged, lumpy. Clear, green, red, yellow, and purple. Bowls, too, with various herbs in them. My gaze trailed over the top shelf where a row of pendants lay. I smiled at one shaped like a fairy.

*The Specialists – Fight To The Finish*

Across the circular room I saw a bookshelf with about fifty books. I could only assume they dealt with mystical themes.

Diagonal to where I stood sat a desk with a computer on top. It seemed so out of place in this gypsy world atmosphere. Surrounding the desk and hanging from the ceiling were long beads that acted as the desk's walls. Diagonal in the opposite direction sat another desk surrounded by hanging beads as well. Decks of cards sat on top that desk, and I gathered they were Tarot or something of that nature.

There was so much to look at I couldn't possibly take it all in. But I did notice a telescope off to my left with an extension leading up and through the ceiling. I didn't know a lot about telescopes, but from what I did know that one looked top of the line. And keeping in mind we were on Sub Floor Four, that was one high powered star gazer.

Peaceful. That word definitely described this room.

"Ya know," Bruiser whispered. "This room makes me want to take a nap or meditate or something."

I smiled. Napping and meditating were two words *definitely* not in Bruiser's vocabulary.

She wandered over to one of the tables with the bowls of stones. "What do these do?" She reached out.

"Stop." Mystic commanded. "Don't. They're not ready for the human touch yet."

Bruiser lifted her hands away and glanced over at me. "Ready for the human touch?"

I shrugged.

"Okay," David said, stepping back into the tunnel. "Let's go see Bruiser's room."