

CHAPTER SEVEN

With a smile, I watched Bruiser and Red embrace.

“How’s my spunky Molly?” Red asked, squeezing her tight.

She returned the squeeze. “Oh, Red, I missed you so much.”

Every since I had known her, Bruiser had always been happy go lucky, fun, never took anything serious. And she pretty much wore a perpetual grin on her face. But seeing her here with Red brought out a glow in her that I had never seen before. She seemed to beam with excitement, and for the first time since I’d known her, her body came across relaxed, content.

Which was funny, seeing as how I had never noticed that she seemed *uncontent* in any way until now. It was amazing how much body language showed a person’s emotions.

“How do you feel?” Bruiser asked as she stepped back from Red. “You look great.”

Smiling down at her, he tweaked her chin. “I’m fine. Perfect in fact.”

“How long are you here for?” she asked.

Red glanced over her head to TL. “We’ll find out in a second.”

TL crossed the barn to where Red stood and went straight into his arms. No handshake. No greeting. Just a heartfelt, long hug. Red turned his head and whispered something into TL’s ear, and he nodded his head.

Although TL’s back was to me, I imagined his eyes squeezed tight as he received the warm embrace. I probably didn’t, but I thought I heard TL sniff back tears. That sound, that small snuffle, brought tears to my own eyes, and at that moment, I truly felt TL’s pain.

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And for the first time ever, I saw TL in a different light. I saw him vulnerable, just a man fighting for his family. I saw him human, as weird as that sounds, and not as some sort of super hero immune to pain and able to accomplish anything.

Red whispered something else to TL and gave him a pat on the back. TL discreetly rubbed his face on Red's shirt, took a deep breath, and turned to us.

"Team," TL addressed us. "I'd like you to meet the man who raised both me and Bruiser, our father, Mr. Red Cartlynn."

By 'father' I knew he didn't mean blood related, but it made no difference. Here stood the man who raised both TL and Bruiser. How crazy was that? Every day around this place revealed something new—that was for sure.

"Please feel free to call him Red," TL continued. "You are standing in the presence of one of the most highly decorated veterans in our nation. An Army Ranger, sniper, with four combat tours in Vietnam. Later recruited into the CIA. Went MIA in southeast Asia. Crossed the border into Thailand. Studied under the world's best fighters. He is one of the elite. However, he still suffers from the lingering affects of hepatitis and malaria while he was a POW." TL glanced over to Red. "So he's going to take it easy."

Red chuckled. "Complete burnout and being double crossed by a few unnamed people sent me into hiding. Glad that I did. I would have never met Tommy and Molly."

Tommy? That cute nickname for TL made me smile.

TL pointed to each of us, introducing us. "That's GiGi, our computer specialist. And Mystic, our clairvoyant. David, my right hand. And Jonathan in charge of physical training. You'll the meet the rest tonight at dinner."

We all smiled and nodded hello.

“Red,” TL continued, “has agreed to join us here at the ranch as our warfare specialist.”

“Really?” Bruiser nearly squealed.

Red nodded. “Really. And I’m also going to be assisting in training you all for this mission.”

Her excitement was so evident it nearly vibrated off of her.

Red waved his hand in the air. “Okay, I’ve interrupted you enough. Carry on.”

Straightening her tank top, Bruiser turned to us. “Alrighty, before we move into Greek conditioning, I want to feel the anger. It doesn’t matter what your personality is, when you are competing, you have to maintain a level, thinking head and at the same time channel fury. You want power behind your muscles, and fury, mixed with concentration, is the way to obtain it.”

She turned to Mystic and her face transitioned into obvious doubt. “Are you going to be able to channel fury?”

Mystic shrugged, not looking too convinced. “Sure.”

“Just think of what really pisses you off, and use *that*,” Bruiser slammed her right fist into her other hand, “to put power behind your punch.”

I turned to Mystic, doubting anything ever pissed him off. “Well?”

His jaw clenched. “My foster father.”

His foster father? Hmmm . . . I wondered at the type of man who could get this reaction out of peaceful, in-touch-with-the-world Mystic. His foster father must have been a real jerk.

Bruiser pointed her finger at Mystic. “You’re really irritated. I can see it on your face. That’s good. And sometimes that’s not so good. Depending on your opponent, it’ll work to your advantage to either show that fury or mask it.” She walked straight up to him. “Hit me with your fist.”

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Jaw still clenched, Mystic shook his head.

She got right in his face. “I’m not doing this again with you. When I tell you to do something, you do it. We have a little over a week to train for this fight. So enough already. Think of your foster father and hit me.”

Mystic reared back and slammed his fist into Bruiser’s gut.

I sucked in a breath.

Mystic sucked in a breath.

And Bruiser smiled. “Not bad.”

Not bad? I’d be bent over moaning from that. Mystic wasn’t exactly a small dude.

He reached for her. “I’m sorry. Oh my God, Bruiser, I’m so sorry.”

She smiled even bigger. “Felt good, didn’t it?”

Mystic frowned. “No.”

Bruiser wagged her finger in his face. “Liar. You know that felt good. Come on, admit it.”

Mystic just looked at her.

“Come on,” she egged him on, “admit it.”

He shrugged. “Okay, a little.”

She jabbed her finger in the air. “Ah-hah! It would’ve felt superb if it would have been your foster father, huh?”

Mystic reluctantly nodded, clearly not liking this violent side of her. He reached for her again. “Seriously, you okay?”

She waved him off. “Didn’t even feel it. Okay,” she turned to all of us. “Originally, I wanted to do some striking and MMA work first, but I’ve changed my mind. Let’s do a little Greek style conditioning.” Bruiser pointed to me. “You *sure* you want to do this?”

I nodded. “Experiencing the training and the world of a fighter first hand will give me a ‘one up’ on those designers who will be presenting to Harry Noor. And afterward I’ll take statistics on everybody. Using Chapling’s Influence Sway Skins, I’ll trace pulse velocity, strapping adroitness, fortitude, faction, lactic acerbic dissolve, and a few others. I’ll amalgamate that with my Combat Thrash Program and come up with at least three variations to arrangements that will outrival a unit feat.”

Everyone just looked at me.

I sighed. “Never mind. Just trust I know what I’m doing.” Where was Chapling when I needed someone to understand me?

Bruiser pointed to the barn doors. “Let’s take it outside.”

Everyone filed out as I grabbed the video cam, tripod, and my laptop. I followed the group outside and behind the barn.

Bruiser had turned the side yard into an old fashioned training ground. There were a pile of mid-sized boulders off to the left. Between two trees about six feet from each other she’d tied thick rope—two strands up high and two down low. I studied the get up as I set the cam back up, trying to figure out exactly what those ropes would be used for.

Bruiser beckoned Red over with a nod of her head. “Flexibility is a key factor in conditioning your body for a fight. I expect you two,” she pointed to David and Mystic, “to do what I’m about to show you ten times a day.”

Mystic and David nodded their understanding.

Bruiser positioned herself between the trees and held her arms up and out to her sides. Red tied her right wrist to a rope high up on one tree and her left wrist to the other tree, leaving her upper body sprawled and stretched.

He took her left ankle next, lifting it, pulling it, and tying it to the left tree. With the tiptoes of her right foot only, she stood supported.

“Ready?” Red asked her.

She nodded.

Grasping her right ankle, he took it out from under her and stretched it over to the other tree, tying that leg off as well.

Sprawled to the max, her legs stretched and strained sideways to form a perfect split. I cringed as my own legs ached just watching her.

Bruiser smiled. “This, my friends, is awesome for flexibility. And obviously it takes a partner to tie you up. David and Mystic, you two are competing. Like I said, this is most certainly an exercise I want you to do every day. You’ll start off with five minutes and build your time from there. I, personally, love to hang for thirty or more minutes.”

Thirty or more minutes? Ug. That hurt just thinking about it.

“And no worries,” she continued. “The rope won’t take you any further than you’re ready for.”

With that, she nodded to Red. He adjusted the rope around the tree, and her body dropped, hyper extending her stretch by pulling her legs straight up to form a V.

Ow! That couldn’t be good for her body.

Bruiser nodded to Red again, and he loosened her ties one-by-one, letting her body drop back into a standing position.

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Once free, she waved David and Mystic over. “David, you’re first.”

He stepped up between the trees, and she tied off his wrists first, showing Mystic how the ropes worked. She did David’s legs next, first his left, and then his right, leaving him stretched, dangling between the two trees, shaking, cringing, and sweating more and more by the second.

I almost closed my eyes. I couldn’t stand to watch him. He seemed like he was in so much pain. And he wasn’t even doing a split. In fact, he was fairly far away from accomplishing the split portion of the training.

“You’re doing great,” I felt compelled to tell him.

He barely nodded.

“Three minutes,” Bruiser informed him, adjusting the ropes so that he dropped slightly more into the split position.

Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, working through the pain. It was a physical and mental strategy that TL had taught all of us.

Inhale through the nose.

Exhale through the mouth.

Inhale through the nose.

Exhale through the mouth.

Three minutes passed, and Bruiser showed Mystic how to release the ropes, softly dropping David back into a standing position. He stood for a few seconds, shaking his legs and arms, probably trying to get sensation back into them.

Mystic went next, doing phenomenally well. I didn’t know why it surprised me, really. I’d seen him in all sorts of contortion, meditative positions. I guess it always took me off guard because of the size of his ‘football’ like body, very thick and stout.

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He did his five minutes amazingly fast, definitely accomplishing a split, but not the hyperextension.

After he'd been loosened and lowered to the ground, Bruiser turned to the rest of us. "This is a fighter's stretch, and something I'd like you all to experience at least once. But it's certainly not something you need to do every day." She looked at me. "Who's first?"

I took a step back. What was she looking at me for?

"You said," she reminded me, "that you wanted to experience all aspects of training to be a fighter."

I narrowed my eyes. She just *had* to remind me of that, didn't she?

Bruiser raised her brows, a little too sweetly if you asked me. "Well?"

"Fine." I put my laptop down and walked over to the tree-torture area.

Bruiser and Red tied my wrists. Mystic did my left ankle, and I stood supported only by my other foot. I looked down at David who had his fingers wrapped around my right ankle.

"You ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

Gently, David slid my foot from under me, and I dropped into a forced split. *Ow!*

I clenched my jaw and sucked in a breath through my teeth. *Ow!*

"Breathe," TL instructed.

I sucked in another breath.

Oh my God! How had David and Mystic done this?

"Are you ready to be lowered into a split?" Bruiser asked.

"*What?!*" Wasn't I already in a split? "No! Don't touch me."

Bruiser chuckled. "GiGi, really. You're hardly even stretched."

“*What?! You’ve got to be kidding me.*” I felt like I was about to crack in half. “Let me down.”

Brusier glanced at TL, and he shook his head.

Fighting the urge to glare at him, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to focus on my screaming, shaking muscles.

“It’s just a few minutes,” David quietly spoke. “You can do this. Breathe and think of code.”

I listened to his mellow, deep voice and inhaled a breath. On exhale, I conjured code for the Combat-Thrash program:

*<!Phrase % element “Em” (&#x0009;)>*

*<!Entity (%styfon;~%phse;)- -(&#x000C;)(%line:)>*

*<( %line:)-(&#x2000B;)>*

I continued to code, my eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling in a subconscious deep rhythm. I went over every axiom, matching it to its component, and uniting it with all the rudiments. And, strange enough, I solved a fissure in the data that had perplexed me.

“That’s five minutes,” Bruiser announced, bringing me from my concentration. “You didn’t even flinch when I lowered you a few more inches.”

I looked down my body and saw that I was suspended in the air mere inches away from doing a complete split. “Wow.”

Mystic and David went through the motions of letting me free, and much like David, I had to stand for a second and shake out the kinks.

TL went next, doing, of course, fabulously well.

Red stepped up, doing just as great as Bruiser.

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And Jonathan followed, not doing as good as I thought he would have.

We moved onto bench pressing each other next.

“Its all about balance and strength,” Bruiser explained. “In an actual fight, you’re manipulating a person’s body weight. Lifting a person is completely different than lifting weights. Bench pressing each other is a guaranteed way to accelerate your strength training.”

She paired Mystic with Jonathan, TL with Red, and me with David.

“What about you?” I asked.

Bruiser shrugged. “I’m too little. It won’t be a challenge to anybody.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that until she gave instructions, David was lying on his back, and I found myself on top of him.

With our faces definitely within kissing distance, I gave him a little smile. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He smiled back.

We locked our fingers palm to palm, he pushed me straight up, and I found myself above him looking down into his too sexy face.

“Give me a set of twelve,” Bruiser instructed.

In my peripheral, I saw TL and Jonathan in the same position as David, bench pressing their partners up. All of us on top were lowered down by our partners, paused for a second, and then they pushed us back up.

I tried really hard to ignore David’s scrumptious cologne. And bicep bulges. And chest striations. And every other straining, flexed muscle as he pushed me up and lowered me back down. Pushed me up. And lowered me back down.

I just kept smiling. I mean, really, how great was this?

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If I'd been a self-conscious girl, I would've been offended by his red, exerted face. But let's face it, at five foot ten I wasn't exactly the smallest girl ever created.

The set of twelve ended, and we switched positions with me on bottom and him on top. We linked hands palm to palm, Bruiser gave the go ahead, and I pushed with all my might.

Nothing happened.

I pushed again, every muscle shaking, my arms literally vibrating from the effort.

Still nothing happened.

“Stop holding your breath,” David said.

“I.” Quick breath. “Can't” Quick breath. “Lift you.”

“And down,” Bruiser told everyone, and through the sides of my eyes I watched as Mystic lowered Jonathan and Red lowered TL.

One of them grunted, and it pleased me beyond words that someone else was having difficulties, too.

Up and down we went, or I should say they all went, going through the motions of the exercise. I just sort of pushed with all my might, held my breath, and waited for Bruiser to say 'down'.

We finished that and moved onto throwing rocks, or I should say heaving small boulders.

We finished that and ran each other piggy backed across the yard.

We finished that and military pressed wood beams over our heads.

We finished that and did umpteen rounds of squats holding the same small boulders.

We finished that right as the sun was going down and I literally dropped to my shaking knees. I couldn't tell you how happy I was to see everyone else gasping for air, too. Why I ever

thought I needed to be involved with the actual training stretched beyond my comprehension. Frankly, I never wanted to see Bruiser again in my life.

Not really, but you know what I mean.

“And that, my friends,” Bruiser proclaimed, “is a mere smidgen of the way Greek warriors trained before going into battle. Now we need a good high protein, high fiber meal, and then we’ll meet back here for striking and take down.”

News flash. I had no intention of participating in tonight’s ‘striking and take down’. I needed a nap.

“GiGi?” Bruiser prompted. “Didn’t you want to take data or something?”

I got up—*ow*—and hobbled over to my laptop case—*ow*. I got out the Influence Sway Skins, powered up my laptop, and turned to everyone. “If you could please take your shirts off, I want to get a reading on your muscle adroitness and compare it to data Chapling already took on you.” I looked at all of them. “Who’s first?”

David took his shirt off. “I am.”