

**annie
miller**



A.L.I.A.S.



Book 1

International

Chasing Chaos

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CHASING CHAOS
ALIAS INTERNATIONAL

Book 1



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About this book:

A widower with trust issues and a hacker without boundaries. A match made in heaven... Not!

Former MI5 analyst, Ryan Butler, had followed the rules his entire life. He served his country, loved his family, and kept his mouth shut when he stumbled upon a biochemical weapon hidden at his father's house. Everything in his life changed when his wife was murdered and the only suspect was the father he'd lost trust in.

Then in walks in Chaos.

Daisy Chambers has one rule that she lives by... have no regrets. So when her hacking identity, Chaos, had been leaked, she had no other option but to go legit and work for ALIAS in their England location. It won't be too bad, she told herself. She could play by the rules... until she meets her new boss.

Together Ryan and Chaos team up to find who is responsible for his wife's death and who is trying to steal the vials of toxins he'd secured.

Only they discover more than they were prepared for.

All Ryan knows is that no one has affected him as much as Chaos has. He'd do anything, including chasing after her, to have her in his future.

Only, chaos beget chaos, or so it would seem, as Chaos runs from the truth and who she wants to be.

Dedication

To Pythagoras and those who agree with this philosophy.

“There is a good principle which created order, light, and man; and an evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman.”

To you believers, I have one word for you - **whatever!**

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Prologue

Three months earlier

“Well, that went swell.” Seven chuckled and punched his brother’s arm. “I honestly didn’t think you were going to revive him.”

Ryan didn’t either, but he had his daughter to think about. She’d already lost her mother. The last thing he’d ever do was leave his four-year-old unprotected. That didn’t mean he’d let his father have any sort of relationship with Sophie ever again.

“What now?” Ryan asked instead. The two brothers were standing outside of the hospital after they’d dropped their father off once he’d regained consciousness. “Do you think he’s going to retaliate?” The former MI5 analyst worried that his father would target their families once again after they’d interrogated him. It wasn’t until Ryan’s wife had been killed that he discovered his father could’ve stopped the assassination.

“Honestly, I never would’ve thought our father would be involved with a black ops mercenary group in the first place.”

“Mercenaries!” Ryan scoffed. “These people are the ones who pull the string for assassinations and cold-blooded

murders.”

“They are the ones we should be rooting out. Raptor follows orders, not gives them. We need the decision-makers.”

“I want to take all of them down, Jude, but Raptor is at the top of the list. That’s nonnegotiable. If Ghost or Ivy have a problem with that, then they can look for someone else to run their London satellite office.”

“So you’re going to take the job?” Jude, whose call name was Seven, had been working with ALIAS out of Austin, Texas, for a little over a year. Seven believed having his brother work under the same leadership would be good for Ryan. He was an analyst at MI5, but his bloodlust for vengeance was in his veins now, and it must be controlled by someone who could see the bigger picture. Justin Dalton, or Ghost, was that person. Like Raptor, Seven had been a tool MI6 used to extinguish their enemies. Ghost was a planner. He ensured those at ALIAS went after ones who believe they were above the law. They targeted the worst that humanity had to offer. Seven, for one, was glad he’d searched out the operation also ran by his counterpart, former CIA operator Ivy Brooks, well, Dalton now.

“It will let me work from home. Sophie is still struggling with Amy’s death. She needs stability. I can’t leave her with a nanny.”

“You don’t have to convince me. I agree. Speaking of home, what are we going to tell Mum?”

“Do you really think Father is going to expose himself, Jude?”

“Brother, our father isn’t who we thought. I have no idea how much—if anything—he’s ever told Mum. Do you think she suspects?”

Ryan thought about it before he eventually shook his head. “No. Mum’s too wrapped up with her charities and tea parties. I don’t think she knows what’s going on with our father. If she did...”

“She’d leave him,” Seven added.

“I believe so. She has an image to live up to. If she thought Father was jeopardizing her social standing, she’d separate herself as far as possible from him.”

“Agree. What about Sophie? If you keep her from Father, are you going to do the same with Mum?”

“No. Look, Mum can be a little unobservant to what’s happening in her home, but she’s a good woman. She can be a little cold, but wouldn’t she have to be in order to live with Father?”

“I didn’t realize how aloof she was until I’d seen Aria and Tori together. They hug, laugh, and play. Aria would literally kill anyone who put our child in jeopardy.”

“So you’re letting Tori get to know our Father?”

“I can’t believe you even have to ask that ridiculous question.”

“Why? You did.”

Seven nodded. “You’re right. That was a stupid question. I suppose I’m still in shock. It’s one thing to suspect Father, but something else to have confirmation of his involvement.”

“Are you really, Jude? I mean, you worked with him at MI6. My career choice caused a rift in our relationship. I knew he didn’t think well of me, but I never regretted my decision to join MI5.”

“No operative would take on a job without a good analyst by his side. I actually think your job was harder than mine at times. I was told who to kill. I didn’t question the intel because

someone smarter than me found the reason for the assassination.”

“Thank you.”

“You think you’ll miss it?”

Again, Ryan thought about the question before answering.

“I think I’ll miss the resources more than anything else.”

“Oh, that isn’t something you’ll have to worry about.

Ghost has a way of finding everything we need. If he can’t, then Ivy or Byte can.”

“I liked her.”

“Byte?”

“Yeah, she’s what I would’ve wished for if we’d had a little sister.”

Chuckling, Seven agreed. Sobering up, he broached the subject they’d avoided thus far. “N8T.”

“You’re wondering if anyone else has it,” Ryan asked.

“Why wouldn’t they? I don’t believe for one minute that Father was the only one with the vials and formula. He would’ve shared it with someone, especially with someone he believed he could trust or someone he had leverage over.”

“You have somebody in mind, don’t you?” Ryan asked. He did, but the very thought of it made him nauseous. “Mother?”

“It has never crossed my mind. No, I honestly don’t see her getting involved with this. It’s not her style.”

“Then who?” Ryan pushed.

“Amy.”

“No!” Ryan replied and shoved his brother against the parked car. “She wasn’t a traitor.”

“I’m not saying she was. I’m saying that Father could’ve used you or Sophie as leverage. He could’ve tightened the screws. He might even have used Aria’s death as one of his threats. It would make sense why he killed her, or let her die, according to him.”

No. Ryan would’ve known. He’d known she was an operative with MI6, even if she hadn’t ever confided in him. But to have access or knowledge of the terrorist group working against her own directives didn’t make sense. She might have had secrets, but not that one. She wasn’t a traitor.

When Ryan didn’t respond, Seven tried to soften his next words. “Ryan, I’m just tossing out ideas. Bishop, or rather Amy—sorry, some habits are hard to get rid of. What I’m

saying is that Amy was in a vulnerable situation, and our father would've capitalized on that.”

Ryan knew he was right. Their father was nothing if not an opportunist. But Amy? No, Ryan refused to tarnish her sacrifice to Great Britain. They might have had secrets in their marriage, but she'd never betray their country. At least that was what he had to believe. How else could he give Sophie good memories of her mum? How could he tell his daughter, that he mum might have betrayed everyone and everything they believed in... God, country, and family. It wouldn't reconcile with the kind, loving, and doting mother she'd come to love.

Ryan, however, didn't tell this to his brother. Instead, he turned and hugged the only parent he had left. Seven's back was to the hospital and he hadn't known his mother was walking toward them.

“Mum,” Ryan said and kissed both cheeks. “How are you holding up?”

“I don't understand what happened. Clifford says he was attacked coming from the auto park, but they tortured him. Did you see his fingers? Who would do that?” his mother asked.

Neither Ryan nor Seven would ever admit to using a diamond-tipped drill bit to encourage their father to talk. Nor were they disgusted with their actions. As Ryan had said in the warehouse shortly after injecting his father with the poison, he might not be a murderer, but he wasn't weak either. One way or another, Ryan was going to find out who was behind the orders to kill his wife. But that would have to wait. His first objective was to find Raptor and end him or her. Only then could he ensure his daughter's safety. It was also the only way to secure his own happiness. He owed it to Amy. He owed it to Sophie, and he owed it to himself.

Part

One

Chapter 1

“Now put your fingers inside both ends of the bunny ears. Good. Just like that. Now I need for you the pull them as tight as you can.”

“I did it!” Four-year-old Sophie exclaimed.

“Yes, you did. You tied your own tennis shoes,” Daisy cheered.

“We call them trainers,” the masculine voice corrected.

Looking up, Sophie smiled at her father.

“Daddy, Daisy taught me to tie my shoes!”

“I see that. I’m very proud of you.”

“Thank you, Daddy. Is Daisy turning into Chaos now? Is that why you’re here?”

“What if I said I was here to see how beautiful you are?” Ryan asked.

“You already know that. Daisy is pretty too.”

“Ahh, thank you, kiddo. I told you, I am always going to be Daisy to you.”

“Like the flower.”

“Yes, like the flower.”

“But when Daddy talks to you, he calls you Chaos sometimes.”

“That’s because it’s my work name, but I’m not working today.”

“About that,” Ryan corrected. “We have a call with Ivy in fifteen minutes.”

“You have to work now,” Sophie pouted.

“Just for a bit.”

“Can I see you change to Chaos? Do you wear a cape like Captain Underpants?”

Chuckling, Ryan’s attention moved from his daughter to the woman who’s been living in his guesthouse for a little over three months. He wondered if she’d seen his stolen glances. Did she know each time they casually touched, his body reacted?

“Well?” Ryan questioned.

Sticking her tongue out to Ryan, she mentally tried to remember what Captain Underpants wore and besides the obvious, she was drawing a blank.

“Sadly, I don’t have a cape. I’d wear one if I had one. As for the other thing he wears, I do, but they are always on the inside of my clothes. Can you imagine me walking around with my undies showing?”

Yes. Yes, he could, and Ryan hated himself for it. It had been six months since his wife had died. Regardless, he had no doubt that he would have quite the vivid fantasies in his dreams for quite some time.

Clearing his throat, he reminded Sophie of her playdate later and that she needed to take a nap so she would have plenty of energy.

“I will, Daddy. I don’t need to go to sleep,” Sophie pleaded.

“What? You are so lucky,” Daisy said. “I wish I could take a nap, then I’d be the strongest superhero ever. Naps are like little zaps of energy that keep you going for hours. If I didn’t have to work, I would take a nap.”

“So you can catch the bad guys?”

Daisy looked up and watched as Ryan’s expression mirrored hers.

“Why do you think we catch bad guys?” Ryan asked.

“Cause Grandmum told me so. She said you wanted to find the person who killed Mummy. She said that person was real bad.”

“When did she tell you this?” Ryan quizzed.

“I don’t know. Like four thousand hours ago.”

Giggling, Daisy tickled the little girl. “Four thousand hours ago! That was like forever. I can’t believe you even remember it.”

“Stop,” Sophie squealed. “I do remember.”

Sophie’s tone immediately lost her joy and excitement. Ryan and Daisy understood why when Sophie recalled the conversation. “She was sad and hugged me and said she hoped Daddy would find the person who killed Mum. Why did she get killed? You said she died in her car. Did someone kill her in her car? Are you going to catch the bad man?”

So many questions. Even if he did want to talk to his daughter about her mother’s death, they didn’t have answers. The bomb that went off and killed her had led them to an international assassin known only as Raptor. Why she was killed was still unknown. Was she a random MI6 target, or had it been meant for his brother, Jude, her MI6 partner? It did

happen at his safe house, with him being a witness to the explosion. And was their father as innocent as he claimed to be?

Instead of posing more questions, he answered the only one he was comfortable with.

“Mummy was very brave, and if anyone wanted to hurt her, you can trust that Daisy and I will find him.”

“Or her,” Daisy added, and Ryan nodded his agreement.

“Okay, Daddy.”

Ryan tightened his hold and ran his hand over the back of Sophie’s head, along the same chestnut hair she’d inherited from her mother.

Pulling away, she looked into her father’s eyes and angled her head to the left, trying to work out a puzzle.

“Daddy. Do you have a superhero name like Daisy?”

Ryan looked from his daughter to the woman who’d reawakened his heart little by little. Where a brief accidental touch had him sucking in his breath. Didn’t her superhero name do to him exactly as it inferred... bring him chaos, mentally and physically?

Daisy had initially introduced herself by her real name, but the tyke had questions after Ghost called her Chaos. A long discussion ensued where Daisy explained what their nicknames were and how they used them when at work.

“I don’t. Want to give me one?”

Putting her index finger against her chin, she tapped it with serious intent. “How about Panda?”

“What? Do I look like a panda?”

Giggling, she shook her head. “No, but they are so cute. How about applesauce?”

Daisy laughed. “I can just see Ghost calling you Applesauce.”

“I think I’ll pass on that one too, Cricket.”

“Think real hard, because the next one you say will be your daddy’s.”

“Hey,” Ryan countered Daisy. The way Sophie’s suggestions were going, he’d end up with rhubarb or squash as his moniker.

“I remember Uncle JJ calling you something. Let me think... What did he say?”

“Goodness, there’s no telling what that could be,” Ryan groaned.

Working hard to remember, Sophie’s eyes shot up in satisfaction.

“Oh, no,” Daisy warned.

“Einstein! He called you Einstein.”

“When did he say that?” Ryan quizzed.

“Um, maybe three hundred thousand days ago.”

“Well, that’s a long time,” Ryan chuckled.

“He said you were so smart, Einstein.” Sophie’s smile matched that of Daisy’s. Einstein was the perfect moniker for Ryan. He was brilliant, but also a little eccentric, almost a relic—a man dropped out of the skies from an era long forgotten.

“Well, there you go, Einstein,” Daisy said. “When you’re working, you are superhero Einstein Underpants.”

Sophie leaped from his arms onto the bed, giggling.

“What are you giggling about?” Ryan asked as he began to tickle her, ignoring her pleas.

“Daisy! Help!”

“No way, José. You started this.”

“Daisy! Please! I’ll love you forever!”

“Well, in that case,” Daisy replied and began tickling Ryan.

“You think you can take on someone your own size,” she taunted.

Ryan flipped Daisy over so she was lying on the bed next to his daughter. The challenge in Daisy’s eyes was all it took for his merciless assault.

“Stop. I give. Uncle! Uncle!”

“Is Uncle JJ coming to rescue her?”

Someone needed to rescue him. The pure joy and light shining from her brilliant orbs was going to be his undoing. He saw the moment her excitement turned from innocent to sensual. He felt his body responding, and wondered if she could feel just how much he wanted her. Instead of torturing them both, he eased off Daisy and moved further away from the bed.

Ryan finally answered, doing anything he could to calm his rapidly beating heart, and his body’s reaction to touching her. “No, I think that’s a job for Einstein.”

“No, Daddy. It’s Einstein Underpants, remember?”

“Well, I think I’ll keep my knickers under my trousers if you don’t mind.”

Oh, Daisy minded. Minded way too much. Rising from the edge of the bed, Daisy gave Sophie a quick peck on the forehead and said she’d meet Ryan downstairs. “Sorry, I meant Einstein.”

Lord, what had she gotten herself into? It would be too easy for her to fall for those two. She hadn’t missed his subtle glances. How could she miss them when she too was watching him, gauging his interest.

She’d accepted the job offer in an attempt to protect her life. She hadn’t figured she’d have to protect her heart too.

Chapter 2

“Hey, it’s just Ghost and me on this side of the pond. Is the whole team there or is it just you and Chaos?” Ivy asked Ryan.

“No, it’s just the two of us. Heath is midflight. He’s taken a group of friends over to Scotland. And Luca, well, he’s probably sleeping off a bender.”

“No doubt, and who knows how many women are with him,” Ivy agreed.

When Ghost and Ivy decided to open a European ALIAS branch, they’d pieced together a ragtag team, led by former MI5 analyst, Ryan Butler. When Chaos’ identity had been exposed, Ivy shipped her to London, hoping no one would go looking for the hacker. One single event or mistaken identity had changed her life forever.

Heath Franklin was an old Navy buddy of Ghost. They’d both been drone pilots during their tours. Heath had continued his career in the air, working initially for a corporate passenger company, and later for himself in the wilderness of Alaska. He too had reconnected with Ghost when Seven needed help getting into Panama. Then there was Luca. Luca Rubio was the wild card Ivy had cautioned and warned Ghost and Ryan

not to hire him. However, the men believed they'd be able to handle the disgraced rogue CIA operative. The man had been disciplined and reprimanded more than most teenagers. Luca didn't understand what the word *no* meant, and it didn't matter how many times his hands were slapped, he kept reaching for that cookie or three.

“Alright, then let's get started. Have you decided on office space yet?” Ghost asked.

“The four of us have discussed it greatly. In the end, we're all pretty happy with the layout we currently have. With the office being here on my estate, I'm close to Sophie. I'm still not comfortable letting her stray too far from me,” Ryan said.

“In the main house or the cottage?” Ivy asked. She'd yet to visit the estate, but from what Ghost and Seven had told her, it was a fairly large compound.

“Right now, Daisy is living in the cottage.”

Ivy wondered when Ryan called Chaos by her birth name. It seemed more often over the past three months they'd been working together.

“I've told everyone that I can find somewhere to go. It's a pretty long commute from London, but there's some small

cottages that are near this village.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Ryan responded. “If worse comes to worst, we’ll build her a place on the estate. We have plenty of acreage.”

“That’s just ridiculous. If Ivy and Ghost want the business ran out of the cottage, I’ll find somewhere to live,” Daisy defiantly said.

“Or you could stay on the east wing of Ryan’s home and you wouldn’t ever see each other,” Ghost suggested.

The line remained quiet, neither Ryan or Chaos’ eyes meeting.

“I don’t think that would be wise,” Chaos eventually said. “It might be confusing to Sophie. She’s had enough changes in her life. I don’t want to give her the wrong idea.”

Sure, that’s why you don’t want to be there... because of Sophie, Daisy’s conscience pricked.

“That makes sense. You guys work it out. For now, we’ll leave it at your home. I understand there’s a large area that can accommodate an office,” Ivy stated.

“We converted the billiard room into a conference room. There’s also a small sitting area that we’ve converted into

office spaces for myself and Daisy. Heath and Luca aren't here every day and don't warrant their own workspace... at least not as of yet. They typically work in the conference room, as do we. When it becomes necessary for additional workspace, I have plenty of rooms downstairs to accommodate the team."

"Just how big is your home?" Ivy rhetorically asked.

"Huge," Chaos replied. "I wouldn't call it a house, at least not when compared to homes in the US."

"Good to know. Now, for the main reason we called. Byte uncovered a message board that referenced Raptor. I believe she sent you the link, Chaos," Ivy stated, calling Daisy by her moniker. She wasn't sure how she felt about an intimacy developing between the two, as long as they didn't allow it to interfere with their business. Until then, Ivy, nor Ghost had any reason to intervene.

"Oh, sorry. She might have. I was teaching Sophie to tie her shoes and haven't looked at my messages. Hold on, let me check now."

Chaos wanted to slam her head on the desk. Why had she just told her bosses that she'd been playing with a toddler instead of keeping up with her work?

“Oh, okay. I’ve got the link.”

“Good, you two look at it together. We didn’t see any leads, but you might see something that we missed. And speaking of Byte,” Ivy began to say.

“Is she okay?” Chaos jumped in.

“Oh, she’s great. Hunter, her boyfriend, has been nominated for an Audies’ Award. From what I understand, it’s a pretty big deal in his industry. She likened it to the Academy Awards, but for the audio industry. They are going to be out of pocket for about five days while in New York, provided Hunter can keep her phone away from her. She’s already fretting about having to go incognito. We want her to enjoy her time away and not worry about work. This means, Chaos, that you’ll have to take the lead and run with this intel and determine if it’s actionable.”

“I can do that,” Chaos told Ivy. “Now that I have the link, I’ll tunnel through that rabbit hole. I’m so excited for Byte. Gwen says she’s very happy.”

“She’s driving us crazy,” Ghost said. “We go from a girl that is snarky, moody, and sometimes ridiculously improper, to this woman in love. It’s still unsettling.”

“Who is still snarky, moody, and improper, but it’s a good unsettling,” Ivy reminded her husband. “There’s nothing better than falling in love, especially if you share common interests. For Byte, however, she’d never allow someone in her domain, so the fact that Hunter is normal—her words, not mine—gives Byte the ability to open up more and let her walls lower, little by little.”

“I’m so happy for her. Carter said she’s even being nice to him,” Chaos added.

When Daisy first met Byte, they’d been trying to protect Gwen, her twin, from her husband, Carter. Daisy and Gwen both believed he’d been the one behind the multiple attempts on her life. When Carter weaseled his way into ALIAS, he received the full onslaught of Byte’s wicked tongue. However, the death attempts were from Carter’s former CIA partner. Unfortunately, Vanessa suffered from schizophrenic episodes and ultimately took her own life. Since then the married couple had reconnected and resumed their life together, both at work and at home. Daisy couldn’t have been any happier for her sister after learning the truth.

“She is also nice to Faulkner. I’m telling you, we have a tamer, gentler Byte,” Ivy confirmed.

“That’s all great,” Ryan interrupted, “but is there anything else you wanted to talk to us about? Sophie has a playdate with her friend in a bit.” Ryan still struggled with the lovey-dovey side of life. He’d loved his wife, and her death had been a devastating blow, but she’d chosen to keep a large portion of her life private. The secrecy might’ve cost her her life, and because of that, he would never entrust his heart to someone in the spy business again.

But Chaos wasn’t a spy, his subconscious reminded him.

No, but they did work together. He’d had that argument several times over the past few months with himself, but in the end, he saw no other option than to friend zone her. As a boy, he’d always hated that status, but at thirty-five, he needed to remember he had a child to raise, a killer to hunt down, and a group of assassins to manage. There was no time for a relationship, no matter how easy it could be with Daisy. That was why he tried—but mostly failed—to think of her by her moniker and not her given name. Daisy was a real threat, at least to him.

“Nope, we’re good. Let us know if you need anything. Otherwise, we’ll wait to hear from you on your progress in tracking down Raptor,” Ghost replied.

After the four said their goodbyes, Daisy and Ryan remained seated. When the silence became uncomfortable, she rose out of the chair and began walking toward the door. Before exiting, she turned and smiled.

“I’ll get started on following Raptor’s movement. You have fun at Sophie’s playdate.”

“Oh. Yeah. Right. Of course,” Ryan stumbled in his response.

“Sophie said Lacy’s mum is looking forward to your visit.”

“That makes one of us,” Ryan muttered in frustration. One thing he hadn’t been prepared for was all the divorcées vying for his attention, especially when they used his daughter as a way of getting closer to him.

Ignoring her smile and need for an explanation, he asked if she was going to have time to get in some riding. He’d quickly learned the open air and freedom on the back of a steed was her outlet. It was like she dropped her alias and let Daisy out to play.

“I want to. Getting out in the open range has a way of clearing my mind. I can’t thank you enough for letting me ride

your horses.”

“My stables are your stables.”

“Have a nice date then, Einstein,” Chaos said and exited the room quickly, not giving Ryan time to recant her assumptions. He was not going on a date.

Way to go, Einstein.

Chapter 3

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Linda, Lacy’s thirty-four-year-old mother, asked.

“No, thank you. I don’t drink when I have to drive.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot about your poor wife,” Linda mock gasped. Extracting her insincere comforting hand off his lap, he shifted slightly away from her touch. “I heard she died in a car accident. I can’t even imagine.”

“Thank you. It’s been tough, but Sophie and I are doing well, considering.”

“I heard you have a live-in nanny. That can’t be easy. I know I like having my own space, especially if I’m entertaining.”

“Daisy isn’t my nanny. She’s a coworker.”

“Oh, I must have misunderstood. I thought Sophie said she lived with you.”

“In my guesthouse.”

Why was he defending his situation with this stranger?

Perhaps it was to remind himself where Daisy belonged in his life.

“Oh, isn’t that lovely.”

Daisy had educated him on verbal cues. She said that when someone said something was lovely, it was meant to be catty. She compared it to when someone said ‘bless your heart’ in the South. Both seemed benign, but were anything but sincere.

He had to agree with her observation after hearing Linda say it.

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an analyst.”

“Oh, smart and handsome.”

“Thank you,” Ryan replied and looked down at his watch. “Well, I need to get Sophie out of the pool. We have dinner in an hour.”

“Isn’t that nice,” she replied and called out to the girls.

“Daddy,” Sophie yelled as she lunged at him, soaking the front of his shirt.

“Cricket, you best get changed. We have dinner plans.”

“We do? With who?”

Yeah, Einstein... with who?

“It’s a surprise.”

“Is it Daisy? Please say it’s Daisy. She said she’d teach me to braid her hair. I want my hair to be long like hers. Daddy, don’t you think she has the most beautiful hair in the whole wide world?”

Grinning, he nodded his agreement. “It is very pretty.”

“No, Daddy. Not pretty... it’s beautiful. Miss Linda, you have to see it. Her hair goes down past her you-know-what,” Sophie whispered the last few words, clearly underscoring exactly where Daisy’s hair reached.

“That’s nice.” Any pleasantries weren’t reflected in her words or tone, but Ryan was nothing if not relieved.

“Hurry up. We need to leave.”

“Okey-Dokey, Daddy.”

“Okey-Dokey?” Linda nearly gasped.

“That’s one of the benefits of having an American living on the property. She’s quickly influenced my daughter’s vocabulary.”

“It’s appalling how the Americans have butchered the English language. I refuse to let Lacy watch American TV programs. Their slang and downright butchery are unforgivable.”

“Then I’m afraid Sophie might not be the best choice of associates for your daughter. I applaud Sophie for being diverse in other dialects and customs. I believe it makes for a more rounded individual, someone who can adapt to any personalities and idiosyncrasies.”

“That’s an interesting way to bring up a child. I guess it’s a woman’s job to teach her daughters how to be respected in society.”

“I’m not sure it’s a woman’s job, but I want to raise Sophie with the tools necessary to earn the respect of others and not simply expect it because of her sex or financial status. But perhaps that’s the father’s role. As you said, it’s lovely having a daughter. Isn’t it?”

Before Linda could respond, Sophie bounced into the room, providing Ryan the excuse he needed to end the horrible visit.

“Thank you again for inviting Sophie over. We’ll see about planning one at our place next time.”

“Oh, yes, please, Daddy. Then Miss Linda can see how beautiful Daisy is.”

“Sure, doll. Now tell Miss Linda thank you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sophie.”

Ushering his daughter out of the house, he couldn’t wait to get home.

On their way home, Sophie told him something he wasn’t surprised to hear.

“Lacy said her mum likes you. That she wants to be my mummy too.”

“No one could ever take your mum’s place, especially not Miss Linda.”

“Good, because she’s not nice. Lacy said she called Daisy a heathen. What is that?”

“It has several meanings, but I think she’s referring to someone without culture.”

“Like how Grandmum uses a knife with everything she eats. She won’t pick up a slice of toast. She makes me cut it with a knife. She said it’s polite and shows culture.”

“Something like that.”

“So Miss Linda doesn’t like Daisy because she doesn’t use a knife?”

“Among other reasons.”

He always worried when Sophie let a subject drop. It was as if her brain was gearing up with the ammunition and speed for an upcoming battle. He didn't get to question her since his father's car was in his drive.

“Why is Grandfather here? I didn't think he could come see us anymore.”

“I don't know, Cricket. Why don't you go out to the stables? Daisy may still be out there.”

“And the kittens need some loving. Moonbeam hasn't been nice since she had them.”

“She's protective of them, just like I am of you. Even cats are parents.”

“Okay. Bye,” Sophie yelled back as she raced toward the stables.

Ryan looked at the empty vehicle, wondering who would let his father into his house. The only staff he kept was a chief, and Gus didn't live on-site. The last thing he need was for his father to find their ALIAS offices. Despite installing a lock on the door, it wouldn't be too difficult for his father to pick the lock, provided Daisy had engaged the deadbolt.

“Why are you here?” Ryan asked when he found his father sitting in the parlor.

“It’s your mother. She’s unwell and wants to see you and Sophie.”

“And you couldn’t have called?”

“You wouldn’t have answered.”

His father was probably correct. Instead of saying so, he asked how he got into the house.

“Your nanny let me in. She said she had work to do and went into the billiard room. What could a nanny have to do in that room?”

“What Daisy does is of no concern to you, and once again, she’s not my nanny. She’s a coworker.”

“I thought you resigned from MI5. It was in very poor form if you ask me. After they offered you a six-month sabbatical, you up and quit. What are you doing now? And why is it necessary to have a secretary to boot?”

He and Daisy had discussed how best to explain her role to others. They both agreed being a nanny wasn’t the right

choice. He didn't want Sophie even more confused than she already was. Instead, they opted to tell a portion of the truth. However, he wanted Clifford to know the threat they posed.

“I oversee an international group with various skill sets, Daisy being one of those individuals.”

“So, mercenaries,” his father surmised.

“If you want to call them that.”

“You work with your brother at that American company, I assume.”

“Indirectly, yes.”

“Are you still blaming me for Amy's death?”

“Aren't you to blame? You told me and Jude that you knew she was being eliminated and did nothing to stop it. In my book, that's liability. Now, tell Mum we'll come by later this evening. Let me show you out.”

Ryan began to leave the room when his father ordered him to stop. Turning, he saw, not the father who'd raised him, but the MI6 assassin he'd become.

“Are you going to let me explain?”

“Unless you have more to tell me, then your excuses are unwanted.”

“I told you and Jude the truth. I am a nobody in the organization.”

“Which organization?”

“I can’t—no, won’t—tell you about the group.”

“Then, Father, I think it’s best if you go.”

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into. Think of Sophie.”

“Don’t you ever threaten my daughter,” Ryan menacingly demanded. He’d walked close enough to his father to feel his lungs being expelled. “You have no idea who you are messing with.”

“Neither do you. These are powerful people you’re looking into.”

“So are my people. You have to choose a side. Either you’re with us or you are an enemy in this war.”

“There doesn’t need to be a war. Just walk away,” his father demanded.

“Do you hear yourself? You want me to turn a blind eye to the fact that my wife was murdered, that my brother was on the hit list that you knew about and even provided to the assassin. You may very well know who Raptor is, but you refuse to identify him. If you don’t believe there’s a war, then you’ve not seen the battle lines that are already set.”

“You’re over your head, Ryan. Just back off, or else.”

“Or else you’ll kill me? Or else you’ll use my daughter against me? Or else what, Father?”

“Just back off.” With his parting warning, Ryan watched his boisterous father slam the front door, at the same time he saw Daisy slip into the parlor.

“Did you hear all of that?”

“I did. I never left your father unattended. I wanted to make sure he didn’t snoop.”

“And did he?”

“He tried, but he never left the family room, oops, parlor. He might have planted a bug or three.”

Ryan placed his finger to his lips to end any more discussions, only Daisy lifted a device no bigger than a remote control and said it was a jamming device.

“I think we should discuss whether to leave them and misdirect your father or remove them completely.”

“Good point. For now, let’s go into the office and see if we can find Rubio and Heath.”

“Great, and I’ll get the playback ready. It’s a good thing we set up recording devices in this room.”

Ryan had opened his home willingly, but he hated the lack of privacy it required. However, with unwelcome guests, like his father, he understood the logic behind the surveillance.

Ironically, it also served as a barrier—a reminder—that Daisy was off-limits. The last thing he needed was to have an interlude with her and it to be caught on camera.

No, the last thing he needed was to have an interlude at all.

Then stop lusting after her.

Chapter 4

“I thought my family was dysfunctional,” Luca stated.

“It would explain a lot,” Heath remarked over the secured video call he’d joined the team on.

Luca was indeed the wild card Ryan had been forewarned about. Ivy had suggested and even pressured for him to turn the agent away, but there was something that made Ryan look beyond his gruff exterior. The first time they’d met, Ryan knew, without any reservations, that ALIAS International needed someone like Luca Rubio. He was hardened by his experience, and yet there seemed to be a vulnerability that Ryan recognized, similar to his brother. Just like Jude, there was pain boiling up from within Luca. Ryan wondered when it would boil over, and whether Luca would be able to regroup afterward.

“I think we all have a little dysfunction in our families,” Chaos stated. “My sister was in hiding for five years and presumed dead, and during those five years, my parents never pressured or questioned me about her. It was as if they walked around in denial. And you can’t say they weren’t reminded of Gwen. We’re identical twins.”

“I have to agree, we definitely are a group of defective misfits,” Heath summarized. No one had a full understanding of his past, other than he was a drone pilot with the Navy, became a commercial pilot after leaving the military, and until recently flew tourists in Alaska. However, when Seven needed help getting to the Panama Canal, it was Heath who not only flew him over, but also assisted in taking down the drug cartel.

Chaos turned her brilliant blue eyes to Ryan. Every time she did, Ryan could feel his breath catch. It was something he was determined to overcome... eventually.

“But today, it’s your family that we need to tackle,” Chaos reminded Ryan.

“Right. Okay.” Ryan tried to redirect his thoughts. “Can you show us what happened after my father entered the house?”

Chaos nodded and pressed play on the mp4 file. Clifford ignored Daisy and walked immediately into the drawing room.

“Is your dad blind?” Luca asked.

“No. Why?”

“Seriously? Every red-blooded American would do a double take when Chaos was in the room.”

“They’re British,” Heath reminded.

“I’m not sure if I should be offended or complimented,” Chaos remarked, then reverted her attention back to the video.

Ryan understood Luca’s statement. His father hadn’t given her another look, and no, it wasn’t a British thing. If it was, then why did he search for her in every room he entered?

“But thankfully. I’m not easily swayed by words,” Chaos continued and redirected their attention to the footage captured. “Now, watch what he does.”

The foursome watched as Clifford walked over to the furniture and opened every drawer, even pulling some out and looking under the bottom. When he couldn’t find anything useful, he pulled out a small leather case and placed listening devices under the drawers. He then walked over to the bookcase and removed something else from the pouch.

“It’s a camera,” Chaos confirmed.

“I guess he does have an agenda,” Heath stated.

“He tried to leave the room, most likely looking to enter the study, but Ryan and Sophie arrived before I could intervene.”

“And no other bugs?” Ryan asked.

“No. Like I said, I kept my eyes on him the whole time. I’m sure his intention was to gather more intel, but he was limited to the family room.”

“You should probably do a sweep of the whole place, just in case,” Luca suggested.

“I’ll work on that when you guys leave. Which is when?”

“So eager to get rid of us, Chaos. I’m hurt,” Heath said, placing his hand over his heart.

“Whatever. I’m sure you have a date or three lined up for tonight.” Chaos and Ryan had talked about the two men and their dating habits. Heath liked them all—tall, short, thin, curvy—he seemed to have no preference. His country boy swagger and tough wilderness look didn’t stop him from attracting women. Just as a British accent was catnip for Americans, the opposite was just as true for Brits. While some cringed at how the Americans spoke, it hadn’t stopped their fascination with the various enunciations from other regions.

Luca, on the other hand, kept his conquests on the down-low. Regardless, Ryan and Chaos both believed Luca wasn’t a relationship kind of guy. He seemed to prefer being a lone wolf. But Chaos knew how dangerous the big bad wolf could actually be to some unsuspecting girl.

Now while Heath was absolutely the kind who could be in a relationship, it was obvious by the amount of women in and out of his bed that he chose not to. Or at least that was their assumptions. For all they knew, Heath was all talk and went to bed at midnight each night alone.

“Not tonight. I have something I need to do for a friend.”

“Do you need any help?” Heath asked Luca.

Luca smirked, patted his gun holster, and said he had it all covered.

Just great, Ryan thought. He hoped Luca wasn't going to start an international situation. Ivy wouldn't ever let him hear the end of it.

With a final goodbye, Luca left and Heath signed off, leaving Chaos and Ryan alone in the office.

“Do you have plans tonight?” Ryan asked.

“I have my spa night with Gwen.”

“Oh, that's right. Today is Friday.”

Gwen and Daisy spent every Friday night, unless on a job, having a glass of wine, applying mud to their faces, and catching up on gossip. It was something they had sporadically done when she was in hiding, but the threat of her identity

being discovered had kept their calls short and infrequent. Now, however, the two rarely missed a Friday night. They'd even convinced Carter to join. On rare... very rare occasions, they'd been able to bully him into applying a mask as well. Those screenshots were sitting in a folder on her laptop, just in case she needed some leverage against her brother-in-law.

“You could join us. Carter does sometimes.”

“As exciting as it sounds to listen to you and your sister gossip, wear that god-awful green gunk on your skin, and finish off a bottle of wine, Sophie and I have to go see my mum. Apparently, she's unwell and wants us there. I'm just hoping she's not contagious.”

“Or that it's a setup by your father.”

“Good point.”

“If you want, I can stay here and do my spa night in the office. It will give me a chance to check for any additional bugs or cameras. The added benefit is that I'd be on-site in the event your father returns.”

“I hate to ask that of you.”

“First, you didn't ask, and second, look at this place. It's no hardship to hang out here.”

“If you’re sure.”

“Absolutely sure. How long will you be gone?”

“Probably no more than an hour.”

“Great. I’m going to run to the cottage, gather my spa kit, and will be back in fifteen. I need to shower before I come back.”

“You can soak in the tub if you’d prefer.”

Daisy had coveted the freestanding soaker tub in Ryan’s en suite bath since the first time she’d seen it. When he told her he never used it, she scolded him. “How can you not? It’s beckoning for hot water, aromatic salts, and bubbles.”

Ryan chuckled and continued with their tour of the residence. And while the house was spacious and beautiful, it was the stables and tub that had won her over.

“Don’t tempt me. I might just skip my call and prune in the bath.”

“Prune away,” Ryan said, trying desperately not to visualize her lying against the cold porcelain, her hair held by a clip, and that beautiful face covered in green goop.

Tried and failed.

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Chapter 5

“How are you doing, Mum?” Ryan asked after he kissed his mother’s cheek. When Sophie had been born, he and Amy vowed to be affectionate with their daughter. Regardless of how they were raised, they were determined to break the British stereotype of aloofness. They wanted to hear laughs and giggles. They wouldn’t deprive their daughter, and hopefully, children, of their youth. No boarding or military schools, regardless of what the grandparents pressured them to do. No, he and Amy were both in agreement. They wouldn’t raise their children the way they’d been raised.

“There’s nothing to worry about. It’s a migraine. Nothing a little quietness won’t ease.”

Dig one.

“If we’d known, we wouldn’t have come today. Father said you were ill and wanted to see us.”

“I didn’t realize you’d bring Sophie, especially if you thought I was ill. Is the nanny not working out? I still can’t believe you hired an American.”

Dig two.

“I don’t have a nanny. As I told you and Father many times, Daisy is a coworker with the new company I’m working with.”

“And she lives with you?”

“In the cottage.”

“You’d think she could be competent enough to find her own housing. Those Americans are typically independent. You just happen to find one who wants something for nothing. I bet she’s not even paying you rent.”

Dig three.

“Daisy is not taking advantage of me. Her staying at the cottage was my idea. She’s not familiar with the area, and since we work out of my home, it just made sense to keep her close by. Besides, Sophie loves having her around.”

“Sounds like a gold digger to me. You need to be careful, Ryan. You’re a good-looking widower, who has a nice home and equally nice bank balance. How do you know she’s not hoping to take Amy’s place?”

And dig four. This one he’d been expecting.

“Mother, Daisy is financially in a better place than I am, so I know she’s not after my money. And no one will ever take

Amy's place. She was Sophie's mother. If by any chance I do remarry, it won't be for Sophie's sake. I'm selfish enough to marry for love. Of course, Sophie is my number one priority, but I won't remarry to gain a mother for her. Besides, she has Aria for that assistance."

"Don't get me started on your brother. That woman kept his daughter from him. That's unforgivable. I don't understand Jude."

"She also kept Tori away from herself. Both of their careers could've endangered her. Aria did what she thought was best for Tori, not herself or Jude."

"Both of my sons are involved with foreigners."

"Again... not involved. We are coworkers."

"I bet that will change. American women have no boundaries. They're a bunch of floozies."

"Stereotyping much?"

"Just calling it as I see it, Ryan."

"Then you might want to think about what stereotype there is for British women... uptight, prim, and snobbish."

Pff was her retort.

Ryan was tiring of the conversation, so he redirected it to her social calendar. His mother was someone who had to be seen regularly so as not to be forgotten. Not that anyone in their social circle would ever attempt to. Despite his father's secret indiscretions, his mother had an image to uphold, and that included a successful husband.

When they'd arrived, Sophie went immediately into the gardens. When she was a tot, her grandmother had planted pink roses in her garden for her first—or who she thought was the first—grandchild. Each time they went to visit his parents, Sophie went and checked on her roses. Ryan appreciated the distance so he could take the temperature of the room before his daughter entered the house. Today was no different. He wouldn't want his impressionable four-year-old to question Daisy's intentions. In the time they'd worked together, Sophie had become close to Daisy. And as much as he hated to admit it, so had he. Not that he'd act on it. Daisy was a pivotal part of ALIAS' success, and he refused to do anything that would tilt the scale.

“Grandmum!” Sophie squealed once she'd entered the drawing room.

“Did you see the flowers?”

As much as his mother could irritate him, he couldn't say she was distant or cold to his daughter. Unlike his father who'd never warmed up to being a granddad, his mum was the opposite. While she wasn't what he deemed as a typical grandmother. She loved her granddaughter, and Ryan knew her intentions were sincere when it came to Sophie, but grandmotherly she wasn't.

“Did they have baby flowers? There's a bunch more.”

Watching his mum cringe at Sophie's elementary speech had Ryan internally chuckling. Sophie rarely spoke with the poise his mother wanted.

“A bunch more?” His mother wasn't questioning the amount of flowers; instead, it was her choice of words.

“Yeppers.”

Ryan could no longer hold back a grin when his mother glared at him.

“What is yeppers?” she asked.

“Daisy says it is the same as yep, which is the same as yes.”

“Of course she did,” she grumbled. Turning her attention from Sophie to Ryan, she simply stated the obvious.

“American.”

“Sophie, you need to speak proper English and not the way this Daisy creature speaks.”

“Why? She speaks English too. Don’t she, Daddy?”

“Doesn’t,” he corrected.

Huffing, Sophie restated her question. “Doesn’t Daisy speak English?”

“Yes, Cricket, she does. It sounds different because of where she once lived.”

“Like Tori,” Sophie reasoned. Her cousin, Victoria, was raised in Ireland until she was six, so her lilt was different than the British or American enunciations.

“Just like Tori.”

“Awesomesauce.”

His mother huffed; of course it was a British huff.

Ryan stayed another twenty minutes as he listened to his daughter talk about the new kitten and her daily horse rides with Daisy. As he bent to kiss his mother’s cheek, she asked quietly if he’d seen his father.

“Yes, this morning. He’s the one who said you were ill. Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“When was the last time you’ve seen him?” Ryan felt a twinge of unease building. His mother wasn’t someone who shared their family business, but there seemed to be something weighing on her.

“A day or so.”

“Mum. Why has it been a couple of days since you’ve seen your husband?”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

Only Ryan knew he would. Whatever his father was involved in was also affecting his home life.

“When you see him again... well, never mind.”

“It’s not likely we’ll see each other anytime soon. Our last visit didn’t go so well. Actually, none of our visits have fared well since Amy’s death. I don’t see that happening in the foreseeable future.”

Ryan could see the color drain from his mother’s already pale face. She’d lived with a spy long enough to know when something was wrong, so her uncertainty shouldn’t have

bothered him, but Ryan felt there was more going on than even he or Jude knew.

“Soph and I will check on you in a day or two. If you need me, Mum, please ring me.”

“I will. Now go take care of my granddaughter.”

Before they parted ways, his mother squeezed his hand and whispered, “Be careful. I don’t know what your father’s involved in, but it’s not good.”

Interesting, he thought. His mother had never shown any interest in his father’s career. Sure, she knew he was the director of MI6, but they kept it low-key. For his mother to warn him, told Ryan a lot.

“I am. You be careful too.” Ryan knew how dangerous the threat was. He didn’t have to look any further than the woman missing in their lives. As a MI6 operative, his wife was entrenched, if not by default, in whatever his father was. The difference was his father knew about Amy’s kill order and hadn’t intervened from her being murdered. Now he was a widower and his daughter was motherless, and it could’ve been prevented with just a warning from his father.

Against all the training he'd received as a lad, Ryan pulled his mum into an embrace and kissed the top of her head. While he and Jude hadn't grown up in an affectionate and loving household, they still knew their mother loved them and showed it the best she knew how. With blue running through her blood, Esther Butler was the poise and aloof mother the telly depicted for blue bloods. To his surprise, she hugged him in return and patted his chest after they detached.

“Bring that girl of yours next time.”

“Mum. We're friends.”

“And friends turn into lovers. I want to meet the woman who has my granddaughter speaking demonstratively.”

“Will do,” Ryan said chuckling, then waved his mum goodbye.

Well, that went well.

Chapter 6

Ryan shared his mother's reaction to Sophie's new vocabulary with Daisy the following morning. She snorted when he told her that Sophie said awesomesauce to his mother. The office was quiet for the most part. Luca was working on his special project, which could possibly result in a nuclear war. There was a reason his call name was Doom. Not only did he leave a path of destruction, but anyone in his scope was also doomed.

Heath was leaving Scotland and taking his friends to Greece. When he first accepted Ghost's offer, it was on the contingency that he could take on some special requests. Over the course of his chartering business, he'd developed some kinship with a few of his clients. Byte had secured them a Pilatus PC-24 private jet. Heath wasn't sure how the hacker attained the nearly nine-million-dollar jet, but heeded Ghost's recommendation to not ask. For Heath, having flown only military drones, choppers, large commercial 737s, and small commuter planes, the luxury liner was every pilot's dream.

So once again the office was quiet with only Ryan and Daisy there.

“Is your mother well?”

“She is. I’m not sure why my father said she was ill. She had a migraine, nothing worthy of bringing a four-year-old to. If anything, I’m sure our visit did more harm than good for her headache.”

“Your father’s up to no good. Last night I decided to take advantage of your offer and bathed upstairs. I had an alarm go off on my phone. Instead of walking into an unknown situation, I logged into our surveillance system. Your father was attempting to enter the house.”

“Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“Because his attempt failed. I remotely turned on the exterior lights, which had your father jumping into the bushes. It was quite the visual. Hold on, let me pull it up.”

A few keystrokes later, Ryan watched exactly what Chaos had described. His father was using a lock pick, which was what had alerted her to the intrusion. One of the first things she had done upon her arrival was install new locks, both on the doors and windows. These mechanisms had silent alerts, which went directly to their cellular phones.

“Why didn’t I get the alert?”

“Good question. I think that’s something you’ll need to investigate. I’m wondering if your father has a signal jammer at his house.”

“I’m sure he does. I’ve never thought about it, but I can’t remember ever receiving a call when at his home. Interesting.”

“I’ll check your phone first, but I’m guessing your father’s security system was most likely the problem.”

“Did Heath or Luca call?”

“Heath did, and Luca texted. I told both I had it under control.”

“What was so important that he sent me to my mother’s side?”

“I’m sure there’s a lot of things. Raptor is only one. What did you and Seven do with N8T and the antidote?”

“How did you know about that?” He’d held off from telling the team about the drug and how it had come into their possession. He had trust issues. He knew they stemmed from his father, but Amy had also played a role. Apparently, not telling Daisy hadn’t stopped her from knowing about the toxins. How much she knew, he wasn’t sure.

N8T was a poison he found in his father's study when he was in his teens. Years later, Ryan understood the danger surrounding the drug and confided in his brother. After Aria and Tori were safe, Ryan and Jude confronted their father about the serum and when he didn't offer any explanation, Ryan plunged the needle with the toxin into his father's neck. Eventually they used the antidote and saved Clifford's life. It was a decision Ryan had questioned on more than one occasion.

“Never mind. It doesn't matter how you know. Jude and I destroyed the drug.”

“I doubt that. I can't see you destroying the actual poison, especially not the antidote. The reality that someone might have duplicated the formula would keep the antidote necessary. So try again.”

This was something he and Jude had vowed to keep secret. To his knowledge, Jude hadn't shared the drug and its origin with anyone. Were they protecting their father? Perhaps, but not for his sake. If the drug got out, his family, including Tori and Aria, would be in danger. They'd decided to place it in a safety deposit box in Rome. The more distance they could put

between it and their family, the better. Only now it would seem the secret was out of the proverbial bag.

“Rome. In a safety deposit box.”

“Who has access?”

“Jude and myself.”

“When was the last time you checked on it?”

“Never. We didn’t want to draw unnecessary attention to its location.”

“Any paper trail?”

“We used an alias and a shell company.”

“But no one electronically wiped out all your information? You didn’t use a hacker.”

“No. I’m guessing that was a mistake. Before meeting you and GigaByte, I wouldn’t have trusted anyone else with its location. Do we need to call Jude?”

“Yes, and I think we should have Heath go to Rome. He’s already in Greece. It’s only a two-hour jump from there.”

“You’re thinking the location has been compromised. How did you even know about the serum?”

“You did pretty good at covering your tracks... for an amateur. However, it wasn’t hard to dig into your background to find the alias used. From there, it was a matter of following the breadcrumbs. First, the only business conducted by this corporation was in Italy, and it was the one and only time the corporation came up in my search. If you’re going to create a smokescreen, you best make sure the smoke is so thick you can’t see yourself.”

“Do you think others know?”

“I believe your father does.”

“He does. Jude and I tried to kill him with it.”

“Tried? I mean, it’s obvious that you failed, but why?”

“It was a threat. In the end, we used the antidote and revived him. It was only the second time the antidote had been human tested.”

“That you know of. Let’s hope it stays that way.”

“So do you think Raptor found it?”

“Yes. If I had to guess, she found it and told your father the location. Actually, I’m sure others know. I can’t imagine her only letting one person know that the drug was still in play.”

“Why do you refer to Raptor as a woman?”

“A feeling. All our conversations have led me to believe so.”

“Interesting. There aren’t a lot of female assassins.”

“Gwen, Ivy, and Aria immediately come to my mind.”

“Good point. Alright. Let’s reach out to Heath. I think we should tell Luca, in the event Heath needs protection.”

“I agree. If Raptor has found the deposit box, both men are in her scope.”

“If only we could have her in ours.”

As soon as he said the words out loud, he wondered why she wasn’t. They had something Raptor wanted. Maybe it was time to draw the assassin out from the shadows.

“I have an idea...”

Chapter 7

Heath wondered if he'd ever visit The Emerald City for pleasure. Each time he'd flown to Italy, he'd had to make a quick return. This particular trip would warrant an overnight stay since the bank was closed when he arrived.

Ryan had confirmed with the institution that only one of the three signatories would be arriving in person and he and Jude would be available via remote video. It had taken Chaos less than an hour to add Heath's credentials to the bank's records and update Seven on their situation.

He laughed as he listened to Chao's frustration with the bank's security firewalls.

"Just think of all the time you just saved. I'm sure you'll leave it more secured than when you started. I'd guess you'd also given yourself a backdoor for future hacks."

Unlike Ryan, Heath couldn't see her frustration, but it was coming forth loud and clear in her tone.

"You can bet your life I did."

"Just to confirm, Ryan, my objective is to ensure the vials are still secured. Not to remove them."

Ryan replied, “Yes, there should be eight vials in all—four N8T, and four antidotes. Included in the box is a manila envelope that contains the formula.”

“Mind telling us what N8T is?” Heath asked.

“When you and Luca return, I’ll update the team.”

“But I’m not going to die if I drop one of the vials.”

“Not to my knowledge...”

“I can’t tell you how comforting that is,” Heath said with a snarl.

“Don’t forget, you’ll have the antidote right there, just in case,” Chaos chimed in.

“I’m not sure Ghost pays me enough,” Heath mumbled.

“I would think the jet would make it all worth it.”

No lie there. He wasn’t sure how Byte secured the jet, but it was a fantasy to fly the plane.

“True. It really is a sweet ride.”

“Is it true it has a bedroom?”

“Not that I’ll ever be able to use it,” Heath argued.

“Poor baby,” Chaos replied. “You get to spend the night in Italy. It sucks to be you.”

When Heath loudly huffed, she broke out in giggles.

“I’ll call you guys once I’ve made contact with the bank. Later.”

After Heath disconnected the call, Ryan shook his head and sarcastically agreed how sucky Heath’s assignment was. Not!

“If everything goes right, Raptor will be aware of Heath’s presence and will assume he has the vials. Carrying the fake ones with him will also lend credibility to us having the vials unsecured.”

“How will she know that he has fake ones?” Chaos questioned.

“It’s a gamble. She won’t know with certainty that the vials are stored in the bank’s vault until we access them. Letting her know this will be on you,” Ryan told Chaos.

“Not a problem. I have a plan on how best to do that, while not alerting her to my new position... as the mole.”

“Once she knows we are in possession, she’ll follow the vials, which is where Luca will come in. And then we’ll set the trap,” he explained.

“Which is?” Chaos asked.

“Luca is going to try and sell them on the black market. Once Raptor’s aware of the auction, she’ll be quick to make a bid or steal them. Have you ever spoken to her?”

“No. We only communicate over secured networks and voice-altering devices. I believe she’s a woman for a couple of reasons. It’s a long theory so bear with me. In *Jurassic Park*, the Velociraptors were vicious and cunning killers. They were predators, which you’d assume our assassin to be. However, the animal that they were actually referencing was the Deinonychus. These are the aggressors, unlike the Velociraptor. Don’t get me wrong, they aren’t mild and meek animals. They are scavengers. While they would hunt, they generally fed on what was abandoned by another animal.”

“Interesting fun fact. But aside from knowing the inaccuracies of the animals portrayed in the movie, I still don’t understand why you think she’s female?”

“One could reason that only a female would use a double alias. However, it goes further. In my opinion, Raptor, the assassin, not the bird, lies in wait and picks up the pieces—scavenging in effect—what other have abandoned.”

“Again, why female?”

“Ugh, because she’s too smart to be a man. There! Did that answer your question? Raptor pretends to be something that’s already pretending to be someone else. She’s a double agent with a double alias, and perhaps even a double mission. She’s interesting. Raptor’s a puzzle. Therefore, she’s a woman.”

“And all of this is provided she, or he, knows the raptors in Jurassic Park were really *Deinonychus*,” Ryan reasoned.

“Which *she* would know.”

“I guess time will tell if *she* is who you think *she* is.”

“Oh, make no doubts about it, Mr. Butler. Our assassin is a woman, and she’s deadly to anyone who questions her ability or skill. I believe she’s been misunderstood and devalued for some time by her handlers. Being ignored and underestimated has only strengthened her resolve to best everyone else.”

“So she’s reached the proverbial glass ceiling in her field.”

“Exactly.”

Ryan watched as Daisy became more animated as she outlined her objective. He found joy and peace in her presence. It was a dangerous feeling. It had been months since he’d felt carefree, not that he was without problems, but he could finally sit back and chuckle at something without

wondering if he was being judged. Being a widower brought on a new type of pressure. He couldn't engage in a conversation with a single woman without worrying she was reading more into the conversation than he'd meant. He also found it challenging around married women. Their husbands immediately saw him as a threat, which he wasn't, but their insecurities, or perhaps the state of their marriage, left room for doubt and distance to creep in. And then there were his own feelings. He missed Amy, how could he not, but having Daisy there reminded him of their early days. They talked about everything, or what he thought was everything. Unlike Amy, though, Ryan didn't believe Daisy was hiding a secret life. She lived her secret life as a hacker. She was open about her job with Raptor, and never overcommitted and underdelivered. Besides, she was attractive and he'd have to be blind not to notice her. But he wasn't ready. He wasn't sure he'd ever be ready to start something new. He had Sophie to think about. Bringing a girlfriend into their lives could prove to be detrimental.

“Just say it. I'm right! Daisy is always right...” she taunted him.

“Okay, Sophie. You sure do sound like a four-year-old.”

In response, Daisy stuck out her tongue and laughed when Sophie entered the room.

“Did you call me, Daddy?”

“No, love. I was just talking to Daisy.”

“But you called her Sophie. Did you forget her name?”

Daisy swept Sophie into her arms and tickled her. “Your daddy loves you so much that he calls every woman Sophie. It will get pretty confusing around here if he doesn’t stop.”

“Yes, Daddy. You can’t call everyone Sophie. That’s my name. Besides, Daisy has a good name. I like it. I wish I was named after a flower.” She began to pout.

“Why? Did you know that daisies are weeds? I was named after a weed. I’m just lucky that people think of them as flowers, which they kind of aren’t.”

“We should call her ragweed,” Ryan suggested, to which Sophie laughed.

“No, thank you, Einstein. I’ll stick with Daisy or Chaos. Now to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“I wanted to go riding. Will you go too?”

“Absolutely! Give me five minutes with your dad, then we can go to the stables.”

“Yay! I’m going to change into my riding suit. When are you getting one?”

“Not happening anytime soon. I’m good in jeans and a sweater.”

“Jumper,” Ryan corrected. He had to admit, though, that she did look good in those low-waisted boyfriend jeans and brilliant blue sweater that mirrored her eyes.

Good wasn’t even close to how she looked. Fantastic. She looked fantastic. Which only forced him to remember that she was off-limits.

Only it didn’t stop him from wondering how she looked out of those jeans and jumper.

He mentally slapped himself, wondering if there would be a time he’d have to literally injure himself for thinking about her.

Chapter 8

The tip Raptor had received had paid off. N8T was finally out in the open. After MI6 had lost it, there had been a worldwide search for the toxin. Then to discover that an antidote had been created, only amped up the value and interest in the black market.

Raptor watched as the American walked out of the bank with a briefcase in hand, no doubt housing the vials. Now, how to get them from the transporter was the next obstacle. The man wasn't the target. He was too pedestrian to be involved in the dark web.

Chaos had someone on the inside who discovered what no one else knew. No one knew for certain that the drug was still in play or if it had been destroyed. Chaos had proved her value once again.

Raptor eased out from her hiding place, replaced the rifle, and made the dissent from the roof. It was time to follow the vials and give Chaos her next order.

Chapter 9

“Were you followed?” Ryan asked over the secured line. Because of Raptor’s unknown identity, the team decided against Heath bringing the vials back to London.

“I never saw anyone, but I felt eyes all the way to Switzerland.”

“Where are you now?” Luca asked.

“Hiding out in the French Riviera. I didn’t want to stay too close to Switzerland.”

“What an inconvenience that must have been.” Chaos snorted.

“Saint Tropez is beautiful this time of the year,” Heath agreed. “Want to join me?”

While no one took Heath’s invitation serious, it hadn’t stopped Ryan from gritting his teeth just thinking about Daisy with Heath, or anyone else for that matter.

“Sorry, love, I have real work to do.”

“When are you returning?” Luca asked.

“I’m not sure it’s smart to bring Raptor back to you. I’ll hole up here for a few days and if I feel it’s safe, I’ll fly over to

Alaska. It's easy to get lost in the wilderness. Best guess, I'll be back in a week."

"Sounds about right," Ryan stated. "I don't want the assassin following you to my home. If we need you back earlier, we'll reach out. Until then, lose your tail."

"Or yourself with a French doll," Luca suggested.

"Perhaps I'll do both. It sounds like fun, losing my tail to a Frenchie."

"Gross!" Chaos replied. "Au revoir," she said right before disconnecting the video chat.

"What a life," Luca stated. "So with Heath out of pocket, can you tell me what N8T is and why Raptor is after it?"

"Back when Jude and I were lads, we broke into our father's study, more out of curiosity than expecting to find something."

"You found the vials in his office?" Chaos asked, not having heard this story before.

"No. His office was clean. Jude wasn't satisfied, so he broke into the butler's office. We were kids. We didn't know what to look for. Jude believed our father was up to no good, so one night when our parents were out, he began his search

again. Jude was sixteen and I was intrigued, so I followed him. We found documents, spreadsheets, and guns. We knew then that if there was some big secret, his father would've hidden it in the butler's office."

"At sixteen," Chaos said in amazement.

"We were curious boys with only intrigue and espionage on the brain. Jude was sure our father had some type of surveillance protecting the room. When Jude was at uni, I continued our search. Eventually, I found a false drawer. It not only had the vials and the formula, but it also had a list of potential buyers. I wasn't sure what it all meant, but I knew I needed to keep it a secret. I didn't even tell Jude... not for years. I didn't want him to lose out on going to university. Father would've disowned him immediately."

"And your father hadn't figured it out?" Luca asked.

"He never saw me as a threat. So right before I was leaving for university, I packed everything up and moved out that weekend."

"Unbelievable," Chaos remarked.

"To this day, my father believes it was Jude who discovered his role in the secret black ops, especially after he

injected our father with the serum.”

“I’ve heard that story,” Chaos stated.

“Well, I haven’t,” Luca objected. “I feel like it’s an important part in all of this.”

“The Awakening, which we’ve now learned is the name for this secret organization, had put my wife, Jude, and others on a kill list.”

“Why your wife?” Luca asked.

“Because my wife was MI6, and also my brother’s partner.”

“That must have made for lively family dinners.”

“You have no idea, especially since neither told me about her involvement. Anyway, my wife was murdered while visiting Jude. We learned that my father was part of this organization and was aware of the target aimed at Amy. He chose to not save my wife when he had the chance.”

“That’s rough, man.”

“Jude and I confronted him,” Ryan began but was interrupted by Chaos.

“Tortured.”

“Okay, Jude tortured my father until we knew what his involvement was. He used the N8T as one of his threats to make my father talk. And it worked.”

“Until you basically killed him,” Chaos added.

“I brought him back,” Ryan countered.

“But you didn’t know the antidote would work,” she reminded him.

The room remained quiet, until Luca roared with laughter. He was wiping tears from his face when he finally managed to speak.

“What a FU...BAR!”

“That’s one way of describing it. So my father knows we are in possession of the vials. How Raptor is involved is still unknown. Our best guess is that she was hired by The Awakening.”

“I believe that might be how it started out. Raptor is only looking out for her own best interests. If she got her hands on the vials, I doubt she’d let the organization know. She would hold all the power,” Chaos informed the men. “She’s not going to take orders from anyone anymore. At least that’s my theory.”

“I agree,” Ryan said.

“Me too,” Luca added. “So what does that mean for Heath? Will he need backup?”

“Time will tell. Even though she’s an assassin, I’m just not sure that’s her style,” Chaos stated. “She’s more likely to figure out how to get her hands on them without Heath ever knowing.”

“That’s unlikely, since they are in Rome,” Ryan stated.

“Unless his guard is down,” Chaos replied.

“That is, unless he finds that Frenchie and lowers his guard,” Luca stated.

“God help us,” Ryan said while rubbing his temples. “God help us all.”

“Hey, at least they are still safely tucked away,” Chaos reminded them.

“Thank goodness. I have a feeling that Heath might just bend to a beautiful woman.”

Ryan hoped Luca was wrong.

Heath could feel eyes on him. He wasn't sure where they were coming from, but the small café felt too confining. As he stood to drop some Euros onto the table, he heard his name.

“Is it really you?” London Chambers asked.

“London, wow, I never expected to see you here.”

“Same. Do you have a layover?”

“Oh, I left the airlines and started my own charter company in Alaska.”

“Alaska? Well, that's quite a commute to here.”

“Have a seat,” Heath offered. If it was London's eyes he'd felt watching him, then the café no longer felt unsettling. She'd been his lover on many flights they traveled together. It was cliché, but pilots and flight attendants hooking up was the norm rather than the exception. They hadn't had a commitment, but Heath had to admit she was the only woman from the job he'd entertained, regardless of the open invitations from passengers and coworkers alike.

“I didn't know the Riviera was now being serviced by the airlines.”

“Oh, it's not. I left a couple of years ago. I'm now the head steward on a luxury yacht. I have the Mediterranean route.”

“And you like it?”

“Love it. What’s not to love? I have a better class of passengers and hefty tips. I’m only responsible for a limited number of guests because of the size of the yacht. It’s a pretty sweet gig. Seven or eight passengers compared to a couple hundred. And did I mention the tips?”

She looked good, better than good. Her sun-kissed skin only made her raven-colored hair shine brighter. She’d always been on the slim side, which was a necessity in her line of work, but now she seemed to have filled out. He’d immediately wanted nothing more than to pull her against him and feel for himself the curves she now had. Instead, he cleared his throat.

“You look good. Healthy.”

“Fat. Is that what you’re trying to say?” There wasn’t any venom in her words, only laughter.

“God, no! You’re perfect, better than perfect. So before I stick my foot in my mouth, tell me what I’ve missed in five years. Are you married?”

“And be gone six months at a time? No, I don’t think I’d ever find a man comfortable or as trusting as that. We both

know what can happen over long stints.”

“Neither of us were in a relationship with someone else.”

“No. Nor were we in a relationship with each other.”

“I’m not sure that’s true, London. I never cheated on you.”

“I never asked you to be with only me. We weren’t serious. How could we be when we didn’t see each other outside of the trips we shared? We had no agreement, nor did I expect one.”

Heath could feel his pulse begin to beat a little faster. Was she saying that she had similar arrangements with other pilots or crewmen? Why should it matter? Like she said, they were hookups, not dates. Two consensual adults having fun. So why did it piss him off thinking about her being with someone else while she was with him?

As if she could read his mind, she started to stand. “Look, Heath, it was great to see you, but I’m not looking to start up where we left off. Obviously, you’ve gone on with your life. It’s been five years. I’ve not heard from you, nor have I tried to contact you. Let’s just part ways as two friends who happened to bump into each other in one of the most beautiful cities in the world.”

“And what if that’s not what I want?”

London gazed into the eyes she'd secretly fallen in love with and had to remember why it wouldn't work. She had to remember the pain she'd felt when he left without contacting her. She had to remember those long bouts of depression she'd undergone when she'd lost their baby. No, she couldn't let him play with her feelings again. She was stronger than before. She knew what he really wanted, even if he was saying the opposite. Heath wasn't a forever kind of a man. He was impulsive, never worrying about the tomorrows. She wasn't that person any longer. She had a job to do, and she wouldn't let someone in her past, regardless of her feelings, stop her from finishing what she was tasked to do. Never again would she let someone demand more than she was willing to give, at least not after this job was finished.

"It's the way it has to be, Heath." Leaning in, she kissed her former lover's cheek and made her hasty retreat. She could and would finally close that door in her past. Now, she only had to do what she was told, and then run. If she gave in to her feelings, she'd confess all her sins to the man that she both hated and loved. She had one last job, and then the threats would end. Or so she tried to convince herself.

Chapter 10

“I think it’s safe for me to come back. It’s getting cold up here and I don’t want to get snowed in,” Heath told the team the following week. He still couldn’t get London’s words out of his mind. Had he simply walked away, never looking back, and still expect her to pick up where they’d left off? Apparently. What a pompous jerk. If it had been his sister retelling the story, he’d be looking to hang the man by his minuscule balls.

“We agree. We’ve been tracking the dark web and haven’t seen or heard from Raptor since you left the fake vials in the Swiss bank,” Chaos stated.

“You are sure you didn’t come across her in France?” Ryan asked.

“One hundred percent. I saw an old friend, but she was on a short layover,” Heath answered.

“Ah, so you did find you a Frenchie,” Luca cheered.

“She’s American, and nothing happened.” Not that Heath hadn’t wanted it to, but he’d come to realize that he’d burned any bridges with London Chambers years earlier.

“Could she be Raptor?” Ryan asked. “You said you just happened to encounter her.”

“She’s working on a private yacht. She’s not our assassin.”

“Give me her details and I’ll do a search, just in case,” Chaos ordered.

As much as Heath knew she was clean and he didn’t like turning her life into a report everyone perused, he understood the reason for their suspicions.

“London Chambers. She’s from a small town in Georgia. Trenton, Georgia.”

“Let me guess. She was conceived in London,” Ryan said, not holding back the humor he found in his assumption.

“No. It was her mother’s maiden name. She’s not Raptor,” Heath restated.

“We’ll see. I don’t believe in coincidences,” Ryan stated.

“Me neither,” Luca supported.

“Well, I know her and she’s not our target.” Heath knew this in his heart even if he had no proof to support it otherwise.

“Let’s table this for later,” Chaos suggested. “We don’t know where Raptor went after Switzerland.”

“No trace?” Luca asked.

“No. If I had to guess, she’s lying low until she has a buyer. If she thinks the vials are in Switzerland, she will only make the attempt to get them once it becomes necessary. She’s too smart to keep them in her possession,” Chaos answered.

“So what’s next?” Luca wanted to know. He was a man of action and sitting around waiting for a move made him restless.

“We wait,” Ryan said.

“I need something to do. Anything.”

“It’s all in Chaos’ wheelhouse now. Once she has something actionable, she’ll give us directions,” Ryan replied.

“Then I’m out of here. I need to wrap up what I’d been working on before,” Luca responded.

“Want to share with the class what that is?”

“Not yet. I promise, Ryan, once I can, I will. Right now, the less you know the better, for you and your family.”

“Am I going to regret bringing you on board?”

Chuckling, Luca stood, slapped Ryan on the back, and walked toward the door. “You wouldn’t be the first.”

Ryan and Chaos watched as their wild card left the house.

“Well, that’s not comforting,” Ryan murmured.

“It could’ve been worse.”

“How so?”

“He could’ve said yes, that you would regret hiring him.”

“I think he just did, Chaos. I think he did.”

Chapter 11

Daisy pulled her long chestnut-brown hair into a low ponytail. As much as she'd love to let the wind whip her locks free while riding the horse, it wasn't practical. Besides, she'd only had a couple of hours to steal away from her computer. Even though it wasn't necessary for her to look professional, she really wanted the team to respect her as a professional, and not just the skills she had to offer. Working with ALIAS was the first job she'd had since high school where she sat face-to-face with a coworker. Being a hacker was a solitary job. She wore pajamas on most days. Her face was clear of makeup and her hair was generally in a braid or ponytail. But it was worth it, or so she told herself. She chose to ignore that little niggle in the back of her mind that she was dressing only to impress a very handsome and cultured English gent.

Everything she did recently came back to Ryan. Or so it seemed. She'd talked with her sister one evening about her crush. Gwen was no help in easing her conscience.

“He's a grown man. Just tell him what you want and see what happens.”

“That’s easier said than done. What if he turns me down? It hasn’t been that long since his wife died. And then there’s Sophie. I don’t want to confuse her.”

“Do you get any feeling that he is attracted to you?”
Voodoo asked.

Daisy remained quiet for a beat and then acknowledged the truth.

“I think so. He hasn’t done anything to say so, but there’s this edge about him. He’s nothing like the kind of man I’m attracted to.”

“Which is?”

“Dangerous,” Daisy admitted. “I like men who know what they want and take it. I like them a little damaged, so I’m not the only one who is. Basically, everything Ryan’s not.”

“How so?”

“He’s a family man. He’s Richy McRich. He’s nice.”

“And you don’t like nice men,” Gwen surmised.

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“Then tell me what you *do* like about Ryan.”

Again, Daisy was quiet on the line, not really knowing what to tell her sister.

“You there?”

“Fine! I like how smart he is. He’s analytical and methodical in his reasoning. He doesn’t fly off the handle when intel comes in. He lets it resonate before giving instructions.”

“What else?”

“He’s a good father. His smile is genuine when Sophie enters the room. He encourages her to be who she wants to be, not someone she’s expected to be.”

“And his wealth. Does that bother you?”

“No. I mean it should. He practically owns a mansion. Financially, I’m his equal, if not superior. The difference in his status is clearly seen, whereas mine is hidden quite well.”

“Um,” Voodoo responded.

“Um, what?”

“I’m just trying to put all the pieces together. I’m no expert but, sis, it sounds like you recanted all the reasons you don’t like him.”

“What?”

“You said he was a family man. I see how that could be a deal breaker for you, but you also see his gentle and loving side when Sophie enters a room. That’s a good thing. Finding someone genuine is a rare treasure. Then you said he lives his life not hiding his status. But you said the money doesn’t bother you... it’s the outward appearance that does. If you weren’t living in his home, would you know immediately that he came from money?”

“No.”

“So it’s not the physical appearance of his wealth, just how he’s perceived. That sounds a little shallow.”

“You just don’t get it,” Daisy huffed.

“Perhaps not. Daisy, I just want you happy. When I see you Friday nights, you smile, you laugh, and you’re relaxed.”

“That’s because I get to talk to you and unwind with a glass of wine and a good face mask.”

“If that’s the lie you want to keep telling yourself, then that’s your choice. Look, you’ve only been there three months. Give it time. Who says you have to rush into anything? Just feel him out and trust your gut. It’s never failed you before.”

“Right. I can do that.” But could she? Could she ignore the hunger in his eyes? Could she keep her own desire in check? Did she have any choice? She wasn’t sure, but Gwen had continued talking despite her internal debate.

“Good, now tell me what’s happening with Raptor.”

As much as she’d missed her sister those five years she was in hiding, her absence was felt even stronger. Those years, she was needed to keep her sister safe. Now that the danger has been removed, Gwen didn’t need her. She had a husband and job she loved. It was just thousands of miles away. She should be happy for her sister. No, she was happy for Gwen.

You’re a nut job.

That’s why she had taken a break to ride. She needed to clear her head from the overactive assault and frustration it was causing. She missed the freedom she experienced on the back of such a powerful and majestic animal. She needed as much open space as she could get after moving onto Ryan’s property. There were too many conflicting thoughts clambering for her attention.

Thirty minutes into her ride, she felt a chill in the air. The temperature hadn’t lowered... it was an internal alert that had always proceeded trouble. She slowed her run and continued

on a canter, trying to figure out what had changed. Then she heard it. A buzz. It was low but Daisy heard it. Looking up into the sky, she searched for the drone. Had Heath returned early? He was their drone expert. He could be testing out a new toy.

But she didn't think so. Someone was monitoring Ryan's estate. Someone was snooping. Was someone trying to ascertain Ryan's interest in finding Raptor? Even if she couldn't prove it, it made sense. Clifford knew Ryan had, or at least did have, access to N8T. Clifford knew he was working with ALIAS. It wasn't a leap that Clifford, or someone associated with The Awakening, would be watching Ryan.

There! A glimpse. She saw something metallic, casting a shadow on the trees in front of her. Daisy knew she'd been captured on the footage. She was out in the open. A small forest was to her north, but she rarely went that direction. The path required a trot since there were trees and roots that could injure the horse. She stayed in the open area so she could run freely. Realizing she needed to shield herself, she gently led the horse in the copse of trees and listened to the soft sound of the drone as it passed to her east.

Pulling out her phone, she sent a text to Ryan. She had to capture its movement since the cameras didn't extend past the stables and estate.

There's a drone following me. I'm in the trees. Confirm this isn't Heath.

Seconds later, Ryan texted what she'd feared. Heath was still in the States.

Coming to you.

No! Stay with Sophie. I'm okay. It's just a surveillance job. No obvious threat.

She hoped that was true. She knew all too well that drones could be equipped with weapons. However, if their intruder had wanted her dead, she'd have been killed while out in the open.

At least that was her belief until she was showered with a thin residue from above. It had been quick and strategic.

She couldn't outrun the powder, not with its residue already covering her and the horse's flesh. But she wasn't going to remain a sitting duck. Squeezing her legs tight against the horse's belly, she applied enough pressure for the beast to bolt out of the protective trees and charge back to the estate.

She couldn't remember when they'd stopped their escape. She didn't recall when she fell from the horse or saw the horse fall to its side.

The only thing she did know was danger had been the first word that came to her mind.

Danger was an understatement, she thought, before drifting off into unconsciousness.

Chapter 12

The minute Gus had arrived to fix their dinner, Ryan left Sophie in his care and flew out into the estate on his four-wheeler. If Daisy was hurt, he wanted to get her back quickly, hence the reason for driving a different kind of horsepower.

He saw the horse first. Ryan could see the intaking and expelling of the beast's lungs. He didn't have time to stop to care for it. Thirty feet away, he saw Daisy's lying form. She was breathing, but people and horses don't drop to the ground for no reason. She hadn't lost control of the horse. Something had caused their dissent. His concern was for the woman he'd grown to care about. Those were feelings he'd worry about later.

Gathering an unconscious woman wasn't as easy as the telly made it appear. She was limp, unable to assist. She couldn't put her arm around his neck. He knew all the reasons why he shouldn't lift her. He didn't want to cause her any additional injuries or pain, since he couldn't assess the extent of them. She'd fallen at least five feet off a moving fifteen-hand horse. Landing on the ground could've caused her spinal

injuries. It was painfully obvious that her left arm was broken, most likely with it landing first onto the unforgiving ground.

However, none of those reasons would keep him from carrying Daisy back home. As gently as possible, he turned her onto her back, crossed her legs, placed her right hand around his neck, and slowly rose from the ground. Once she was in his arms, he secured her left arm against his chest.

Then came the next challenge. He needed to drive the off-road vehicle, without laying her down and possibly causing additional injuries. Once he nestled himself, with her in his arms, behind the wheel, he once again ensured that her right arm was around his neck and left her legs dangling off the left side of the vehicle. He raised the steering wheel, since the option to adjust the bench seat wasn't possible.

Ryan ran his knuckles along Daisy's relaxed cheek. He couldn't deny it any longer... Daisy was more than someone he liked. His feelings ran much deeper than he'd anticipated. "Please, Daisy, don't you dare leave me. I can't have another person I care about die. Not again!"

As quickly and cautiously as possible, he drove toward the house.

Hank, the stableman, met him at the barn and was instructed to call the veterinarian and see to the horse.

“Tell him to suit up. Make sure you don’t let the animal’s fur touch you. I don’t know what they’ve been exposed to.”

“What about you?”

Ryan looked down at what little wasn’t protected by his shirtsleeves, and ignored his own warning to the man.

“Just be careful,” he repeated and drove the ATV to his car.

Transferring Daisy was easier from her already sitting position. As much as he wanted to take her inside, he reminded himself that he wasn’t sure what she’d been exposed to and couldn’t endanger his daughter. Instead, he seat-belted her in, pulled his cell phone out, and remotely started his sedan. His next call was to the hospital. They needed to be prepared for a possible biologic. After providing them with as much detail as he had, he placed his next call to Luca.

“Ready for me already?” Luca asked as he answered the phone.

“Luca!” Ryan yelled into the phone.

The operative's tone immediately switched into a dangerous tenor. "What's wrong?"

"It's Daisy. I'm taking her to the hospital. I believe she's been poisoned."

"From what?"

"I don't know. She called while riding and said there was a drone following her. When I arrived, both she and the horse were on the ground. She's breathing. That's all I know."

"On my way, boss. What do you need from me? Do you have Sophie with you?"

"No. Gus is watching her, but I haven't given him an update. Can you let him know that Daisy fell from her horse and I'm taking her to the hospital? I don't know much more than I just told you. I need you to go and see what you can find. She was near the small forest on the east side of the estate. Look for any residue on the ground or the trees. Be careful."

"Got it. I've got a PPE in my trunk. I'll be protected."

Sometime later, he'd have to question why Luca carried hazmat protective equipment in his car, but at the time, he was just thankful he did.

“What about Heath? When did he leave Alaska?”

“I don’t know. I’ll update Ghost once I have something to tell him.”

“I’ve got this handled. You just take care of Chaos.”

That was Ryan’s only concern. He knew Sophie was safe. Gus was former Italian Navy. Although in his sixties, the former Armed Forces sailor would protect his daughter with his life, of that he was certain of.

The hospital had responded quickly. Even though he didn’t have answers, he knew they were taking the threat seriously. It was nearly an hour before the doctor’s words replayed in his head. It wasn’t until he entered the ICU unit and saw Daisy secured behind plate glass walls that the doctor’s words sunk in.

“Rat poison?”

“A modified version of rat poison. On its own, rat poison can be toxic if you touch, inhale, or ingest it. However, it generally takes up to two weeks before symptoms occur. This one was modified, making it lethal upon contact. You saved her life by getting her to the hospital as quickly as you did.”

“But she’s going to live. Right?”

“We’re doing everything we can. We don’t know what it was modified with. It’s not the normal toxins we’re familiar with. Once our toxicologist has time to evaluate the compound, we’ll be able to treat it effectively.”

“When is he going to be here?”

“He and his team are flying in from London. The chopper should arrive any minute. In the meantime, I suggest you let us monitor you for secondary transfer.”

Ryan agreed, but knew he had to call Voodoo. She was a toxicologist and could work with the one in London. She also had a right to know that her sister had been targeted.

“What about her other injuries?” Ryan asked.

“We were able to set her arm without surgery or pins. That’s going to be more of an inconvenience than anything else. We didn’t find any spinal injuries. She’s going to be hurting when she wakes up, but there’s nothing we could find that would cause immobility for her.”

All Ryan heard was *when she wakes up*... not if. Nodding, he was left in the containment area and went through some additional testing, and at times embarrassing observation by a team of specialists. In the end, his contact had been minimal,

mostly his hands and fingers. The doctor placed him on broad spectrum antibiotics, much like the ones dripping from Daisy's IV.

Instead of worrying about himself, he stood, butt naked—minus the minuscule hospital gown—adjacent to Daisy's sealed-off room. He'd been kept out of her room. Not only had he been exposed to the toxin, but he also wasn't family.

His conversation with Voodoo had gone about as well as expected. She, Carter, and Ivy were en route and would soon be demanding answers to the same questions Ryan had.

Was Chaos the target? Did it have anything to do with N8T? If the poison had been altered by the drug, how had Raptor come to have it, and how could he get its antidote in enough time to not permanently damage Daisy? And if by some chance it wasn't meant for Chaos, then who was the target? And even worse, what if there was another threat, one they'd not flushed out yet... perhaps someone from Daisy's past? Someone who'd finally discovered Chaos' true identity? She might've confused her enemies when her sister was wrongly identified, but they could've discovered the truth. If that was true, then he needed the danger as far away from Sophie as he could.

He also needed the antidote. He was afraid time might already be running out.

Chapter 13

“Is there any way this is a ploy to get you to use the antidote?” Ivy asked as the five of them sat around the conference table. Ryan had been released from the hospital. The toxicologist felt his exposure had been nominal, so after the broad spectrum antibiotics were finished, he checked himself out so he could meet with the team.

“I’ve thought about that, but Raptor believes the toxins and antidotes are in Switzerland. Why target Daisy? There’s no way she could know that Daisy is Chaos,” Ryan answered as he ran his hand through his hair. He’d given that scenario a lot of consideration. He didn’t believe she was targeted by Raptor. Call it a hunch, or something else, but Ryan believed Daisy was targeted by someone in her past.—a client that had tracked her down. This theory didn’t ease any of his fears. Instead, he had one more threat out there to shield her from.

Once he’d left Daisy’s care to her sister, he, Carter, and Ivy met Luca and Heath at his house. They needed answers.

“So it was an attack to kill my sister-in-law, not the hacker.” It wasn’t a question. It was all everyone could agree on.

“Maybe, but if we worked on the assumption that this is about N8T, then why would Raptor want to kill off her only resource, especially one that seems useful?” Heath asked.

“She’s a loose end,” Luca answered. “She knows, or thinks Chaos knows, where the toxins are located. The only person Raptor has had contact with is Chaos. She’s cutting her ties.”

“Raptor always has an agenda.” If Luca was correct, Raptor was too close to them... too close to his daughter. He needed to know his daughter was safe, so he called his mother and asked if she’d take Sophie for a day or two. While he couldn’t disclose the reason, he simply told her that they were all sick and he didn’t want his four-year-old exposed to the germs.

“Ryan, you know I’d take Sophie any time I can get her, but what if she’s contagious? I don’t bounce back from the flu as easily as I used to.”

“I understand. She’s not been exposed; it’s more that I don’t want her to be, but I’ll see if Linda can watch her.” As much as he didn’t like the woman, Daisy loved Lacy. He knew better to mention the threat of illness the next time.

“Not that god-awful woman. Bring Sophie here. If she gets sick, I’ll take her immediately to the doctor and see if we can

catch it before it gets contagious.”

“Are you sure, Mum?”

Thankfully, his mother was and fifteen minutes later he’d promised to check in on them both and kissed them both goodbye.

He rejoined the meeting upon his return just in time to hear some good news.

“Seven is on his way. He’d been on an assignment with Faulkner when you called,” Ivy told Ryan.

There was something about having a team rally around him that he’d not experienced before. He hadn’t realized how alone he’d felt until he’d agreed to join ALIAS.

“Where’s your father?” Luca asked.

Ryan wished he knew the answer. When he’d dropped Sophie off, he’d inquired about his father. As far as his mother knew, he was at work. The sadness he’d seen in her eyes made him hate his father even more.

“It’s not unreasonable to think Clifford was behind this, and not Raptor.” Ivy didn’t have to remind him of his father’s involvement in his wife’s death.

“I think that’s a good point. We know nearly nothing about Raptor. Going after her would be pointless, but Clifford is another thing,” Carter said.

“I agree. Let’s find him,” Ivy instructed. “Carter, get Byte on the line. We’ll need her assistance in tracking him down.”

As they waited for Byte to answer, Gus refilled everyone’s cup with freshly brewed coffee and Ryan’s with Earl Grey tea. The strong hand that squeezed his shoulder reminded him that Gus understood exactly what he was dealing with.

“What’s up?” Byte asked after the call connected. “Is Chaos okay?”

“We’re not sure yet. To know what she was poisoned with, we need to find Clifford Butler.”

“Again! How many women in your life is your father going to kill?” she asked Ryan.

“Byte!” Ivy scolded.

“No, she’s right. This feels personal, and I don’t know why,” Ryan frustratedly answered.

“We’re going to get you answers,” Heath promised.

To which questions, he wondered.

“Let me see if I can trace his cell first,” Byte said while she typed away on her keyboard. “Okay, he’s in London, at the SIS building.” Knowing that he was at MI6 headquarters should’ve relieved him, but it didn’t. Everyone knew that drones had long-distance capabilities, so him being in a highly populated area didn’t mean he hadn’t been the one operating or directing the drone.

“Do we know what kind of drone was used?” Heath asked.

“We don’t have video coverage that far from the house,” Ryan replied.

“But we do have aerial satellite views in surrounding areas, especially if it was sent from London,” Byte stated.

“Give me a sec. Any idea what time span I should be looking at?”

Ryan pulled out his mobile and restated what time Daisy had texted him about the drone and when he received the message.

“I’m looking at an hour before and after. Even if your father, or Raptor, knew your coordinates, they’d still have to do some surveillance.”

“Which brings me to a point that is bothering me,” Ivy said. “How would either Raptor or your father know that Daisy is Chaos, and would she know that she’d be riding at that time of the day? Could you have spies on your grounds?”

Ryan hadn’t considered that point. “Aside from Gus, I have a stableman who lives with his wife and daughter on the grounds. We fixed up a hunter’s cottage for their accommodations. They’ve been with me for years. I can’t see Hank being a spy.”

“Who else?” Carter asked.

“No one,” Ryan said.

“In the last three months, try to think about who has been here,” Ivy instructed.

“I’ve had a gardener come this summer, but he never entered the house.”

“Would he have access to the stables?” Ivy inquired.

“I guess, but I can’t imagine why.”

“Who else?” Carter asked once more.

“After Amy died, we had a lot of friends and associates who came to pay their respects. I’ll have to write a list for you.”

“Do that, and I’ll dig into their backgrounds,” Byte said.

“Anyone else?” Ivy challenged.

“My parents, of course, and Amy’s family, but not in a month or so. I think they are upset that I have Daisy here.”

After Ryan gave Byte their names, he kept trying to recall any visitors since Daisy’s arrival.

“Any of Sophie’s friends?” Heath asked.

“You think a four-year-old is involved?” Ryan challenged.

“Of course not, but that doesn’t mean their parents or nanny couldn’t have accessed your home.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry, I’m just frustrated,” Ryan sheepishly replied before providing Byte a list of visitors or workers over the past three months.

“Back to the drone,” Byte interrupted. “I found one. Let me text you a screenshot.”

Seconds later, Heath let out a groan.

“What?”

“This particular drone has been rumored to have been purchased by the Ukrainians. It has the ability to spray toxic chemicals. Of course, these are only speculations and

accusations by the Russian Defense Ministry. I've not seen any actual documental proof of these purchases. The Ukraines won't confirm the purchases, and the Russians' proof would most likely be fabricated. For all we know, they could also be masking their own purchase of the drones.”

“I'll see what I can find. If they are easy for governments to attain, then our search will be easier, but with more suspects...” Byte stated.

“The longer it will take. Keep digging. We are looking for an assassin, a father, and a rogue government agency,” Ivy recapped.

“Well, at least we have narrowed down the suspect list,” Luca mocked. “It's just the whole freaking world.”

“Challenge accepted,” Byte replied before ending the call.

Part

Two

Chapter 14

Daisy opened her eyes and saw her sister resting her head against the wall. She knew she was in the hospital. She also knew she'd been close to dying even though her mind was fuzzy on the why.

"How long?" she croaked out.

Gwen jumped and stood by her sister's bed. "This is day four. Do you remember what happened?"

"No." Looking down at her cast, she said the obvious, "Fell off the horse."

"Yes, that's part of it. Do you remember anything else?" Gwen prompted.

Daisy racked her memory. There was something buzzing around in there, then she remembered the buzzing.

"A drone. I remember hearing a drone."

"Good. What do you remember about it?"

Looking at her twin, she scoffed and replied, "It was flying."

"Well, at least you haven't lost your sarcasm. Besides it being in the air, do you recall what happened?"

“No.”

“It dropped down some toxins.”

“N8T?”

“We don’t know. Heath had flown back to Rome to get the antidote just in case.”

“It was a trap,” Daisy warned.

“Probably, but they took all the necessary precautions. Luca and Carter were with him.”

“They shouldn’t have gone.”

“It’s a good thing they did. I only gave you five CCs since we don’t know for sure that it was N8T. Let’s just hope that you don’t have a reaction to the antidote if it’s not the toxin.”

Daisy’s fear eased a bit when she heard Heath wasn’t alone. It wasn’t because he wasn’t capable, but Raptor was an assassin. She wouldn’t play by the rules. However, the men were dangerous and deadly together. Carter was former CIA and had years of field experience. Luca was former something. His files were so locked up, she still hadn’t gathered all his intel. All she knew was that at one point he was with the CIA, but then his records end. There were no mission details, no visuals, or transcripts. He fell off the planet. She wasn’t even

sure if Luca Rubio was his real name, not that it mattered.

Knowing he was protecting Heath was all the assurance she needed. Luca wouldn't play fair, especially if it meant helping his teammate, including her.

“Where's Ryan?”

“Home with Ivy and Sophie. They are safe. Sophie stayed with her grandmother for a bit, but drove her crazy begging to go home. Eventually Ryan consented. But it doesn't help that Sophie asks about you every hour, on the hour. Ryan's about to crawl out of his skin worrying about you. Whether you want to admit it or not, you are intertwined with this family.”

“He's not ready. We haven't known him long enough. It's too soon.”

“A short while might be enough.”

“But he should still be mourning.”

“Should or could? They are very different. Grief has no timeline. Don't assume you know how he feels.”

“I'm not ready. I should move out.”

Gwen laughed. “If his reaction to being told he couldn't be in your room is any indication, I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't move you into the main house.”

Daisy shook her head in disagreement. “Not happening.”

“We’ll see. Now I best call him and let him know you’re awake. I’ll also send the nurse in. I’m sure the doctor has plenty of questions for you.”

Shortly after her sister left the room, Daisy went into cardiac arrest. Eventually, they were able to revive her, but she’d remained unconscious for the next four days, even after Gwen continued to inject small doses of the antidote.

Not surprisingly, the doctor told Voodoo they couldn’t find any trace substance that could’ve altered the brodifacoum, the prime ingredient in rat poison.

“We know it wasn’t ricin, which was what we’d expected to find. We tested for botulinum and thallium, but again no trace. We’re at a loss,” the toxicologist stated. “What are your thoughts, Dr. Hughes?”

It was still strange to hear her sister referred to as a doctor, but her education demanded such respect.

“My first guess would’ve been the same. However, as you know, there are toxins that can go undiagnosed. Thankfully, it doesn’t appear to be a nerve agent. But there are plenty of other toxins that can be just as dangerous.”

“At this point, we have to believe that the fluids and drugs we administered have flushed the poison out of your system. All your tests seem to appear normal, minus you being a little iron deficient,” the doctor told Daisy.

“So can I go home?”

“I wouldn’t suggest it,” he answered.

Personally, Voodoo wanted her out of there. She was vulnerable. In her best medical professional demeanor, she challenged the physician.

“I believe my sister will be safe to return to my home. She won’t go unmonitored, and it will free up your area. You will need to quarantine the unit, which puts pressure on your staff. I will take medical responsibility and sign releases to state such... if Daisy agrees.”

“Yes! I will do whatever you say if I can get out of here,” Daisy pleaded.

“It goes against my better judgment, but other than observe you, we really aren’t sure how to proceed. You will be good in Dr. Hughes’ capable hands. I’ll get the documents started, along with the hospital’s release forms. I hope you discover what was used. It’s frightening knowing there’s

something potentially fatal in a dry aerosol form that can be combined with generally any toxic agent.”

Only it wasn't unknown, not anymore. The toxin had been used on three people within their circle—Aria, Clifford, and now Daisy. If not for the antidote, their lives would have been cut way too short.

An hour later, Daisy sat beside her sister in the car and was updated on the team's progress.

“Aside from getting the antidote in time, we have yet to make any progress on how your foe got their hands on N8T. Everyone thought Ryan and Seven had the only vials. That's obviously not true... at least not for the actual poison. The antidote is another story.”

“Maybe that was the play all along. They wanted the antidote. It makes sense. But you haven't said it was Raptor who drugged me.”

“We aren't sure she was. There are too many unknowns. You have a pretty scary client list.”

“But she would hold all the power. Raptor's true power would come from having something the buyer would need if

not for any other reason, then for their own protection,” Daisy reasoned.

“That’s our thoughts too, whoever it was.”

“I’m sick of this cat and mouse game. I need to find Raptor and end this once and for all.”

“You can’t only limit it to Raptor. There’s always Clifford, if it’s not one of your other clients. Remember, that’s why you were relocated in the first place.”

“You’re right. How in the world are we going to find out who the real threat is?”

That question was possibly answered when they pulled into the circle drive in front of Ryan’s estate. At least one of them. Standing in front of the door was Clifford Bishop himself. Only he wasn’t alone. Clutched in his hand was a suitcase.

“What in the world is he doing here?” Voodoo practically yelled.

“Looks like we’re going to have a houseguest.”

Now it was time for her to play some cat and mouse games of her own.

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Chapter 15

“What the bloody...”

“Son, I need your help.”

“Get off my property,” Ryan practically yelled. He would’ve punched him if not for catching sight of the car sitting in his drive.

Ryan watched as Voodoo helped her sister out of the car. Pushing past his father, Ryan ran down the steps and pulled Daisy into a hug.

“Thank God you’re okay. The hospital wouldn’t let me in.”

“I know,” she replied. Her voice was muffled against the chest holding her tightly. “Gwen explained everything on the way home.”

Home. He loved hearing her call his place her home.

“How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but otherwise okay. What’s he doing here?”

Ryan had all but forgotten about his father standing at the door. He never would’ve exposed his feelings toward Daisy had he remembered. Although, he wasn’t sure he would’ve

been able to stop himself. The relief of seeing her alive, walking, and talking, drove home the feelings he'd been trying to fight. He'd nearly lost her.

“I don't know and I don't care. Come on. Sophie's dying to see you. All she knows is that you were hurt when you fell off the horse.”

“Good.” She inhaled his aroma before pulling away. “Let's go see what Clifford is doing here.”

The three walked up the steps where Clifford stoutly stood.

“Ladies,” he said to Gwen and Daisy.

“Clifford,” Daisy ordered.

“You look unwell,” he said while looking at Daisy.

“Nothing you need to worry about,” Gwen snapped.

“Oh, yes, you two haven't met. This is Ch... Daisy's sister, Gwen. She and her husband are visiting from Texas.”

“Quite the houseful.”

“What do you want, Father?”

“It's a private family matter. Can we step inside?”

Just as Ryan was about to tell him exactly what he thought about his father and ‘family business,’ Daisy intertwined her

fingers with his and pulled him inside, suggesting that everyone should come in from out of the heat.

After the door closed, Ryan looked at Daisy, trying to understand why she welcomed his father into the house. Rather than waiting for an answer, he directed his father into his sitting room.

“Are you going to offer me a drink?” Clifford asked after taking a seat.

“What do you want?” Ryan said instead.

“Can we have some privacy?”

“No,” Ryan started to say but was interrupted by Daisy saying she wanted to find Sophie. Once she and Gwen left the room, his father chuckled.

“I see you didn’t waste any time. Good for you. A man wasn’t made to sleep alone at night.”

Ryan could feel his temper rising, but before he could contradict his father’s assumption, Clifford kept speaking.

“I need a place to stay. Your mother has it in her bloody mind that I’ve been stepping out on her.”

“Have you?”

“No! Your mother means everything to me.”

Ryan let his laughter reach the ceiling. “My mother’s money and influence means everything to you. You aren’t equipped to care about anything or anyone else. You must be desperate if you think I’d let you stay here. You killed my wife.”

“I already told you. I couldn’t stop the assassination,” Clifford challenged.

“No, what you said was you couldn’t stop the assassination without damaging the position you had obtained within The Awakening.”

“How did you learn the name of the organization?”

“You’ve always underestimated me. Do you really think I wouldn’t find out who was behind murdering my wife? Did you think I wouldn’t track down those within the organization? You’re a fool. You always have been when it came to me. Now get your bags and get out of my fu...!”

Ryan stopped the rest of sentence when the door flew open and Sophie came running inside.

“Daddy, did you see that Daisy is better? I mean she has a cast, but she said I could draw on it. She’s gone to get the

markers right now!”

“Darling, I need you to go see Daisy. I’m just telling your Granddad goodbye.”

Finally noticing that someone else was in the room, Sophie backed up until she was against her father’s legs. “Hello, Granddad.”

“Ah, Sophie. You look beautiful today. How about you come and give your Granddad a hug?”

Sophie looked up and saw the angry look her father was giving her grandfather and instead of doing as he’d instructed, she fled the room. She had already been told by her father to stay away from her grandfather. Her grandmum had also said he was trouble. She didn’t want to get in trouble, so she ran out of the room.

“You’ve taken my granddaughter away from me,” Clifford started.

“And you’ve taken her mother away from us. Now get out! You have many associates you can turn to. For that matter, Father, I’m sure you have enough blackmail on people that you can find a place to live. Now leave.”

Once again the door opened, only this time it was Seven who entered the room. Instead of greeting his father, he told him that Daisy needed him.

Walking away from his father wasn't difficult now that his brother, who hated his father just as much, was there to handle the problem sitting on his sofa.

Once Ryan closed the door, he went into the conference room and found Daisy hunched over her computer. Instead of asking questions, she looked up and smiled.

What was she smiling about? From his point of view, nothing was worth being happy about. They had an unknown killer, who used an unknown drug, to target his woman.

His woman. How did those words both comfort and scare him at the same time?

“This is perfect.”

“Do tell, because I can't see anything perfect about the situation.”

“Don't you see? If your father is here, we can keep track of him. We will know his ins and outs. We will be able to have visual and audio surveillance, which we couldn't have otherwise. You need to let him stay.”

“I don’t want him in my house... nor near Sophie.”

“I agree. That’s why he’s going to stay at the guesthouse. Luca and Heath are already setting up cameras and mics. Gwen is gathering my belongings. I’ll stay here. It’s not like you don’t have the room.”

Ryan lowered himself into the chair adjacent to her. Daisy’s reasoning felt logical. She was right; it would give them insight into his father’s activities, but it would also leave them exposed. They would literally have a traitor and murderer under his roof... well, the guesthouse’s roof.

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t believe me even if I was okay with it.”

“That’s why Seven is in there. He’s going to grill your father. He wants answers just as much as you do. In the end, he’s going to be the bad guy. Once he has him by the collar, ready to toss him out, you will intercept. Talk with your mother. That will be the reason you agree to let him stay.”

“What if she doesn’t want him to be here?”

“You won’t know until you call her,” Daisy challenged.

Ryan nodded and placed a call, hoping beyond hope that his mother didn’t want his father looked after.

“Mum, you’ll never guess who showed up on my doorstep.”

Ryan let out a loud breath before ending the five-minute conversation he’d had with his mother. Daisy knew what Esther’s answer was. She’d expected it. As angry as she was with her husband, he was still her husband of nearly forty years.

“Fine. Let me know when the guesthouse is ready. I want him out of here as quickly as possible.”

Grinning, Daisy relayed the message to Luca and was told they needed five more minutes.

In just five minutes, Ryan would have to share space and watch the man he hated more than the elusive Raptor, invade his happiness.

Clifford tried to suppress his smile after his son agreed to let him stay. He needed to know what his sons had discovered. This was even more critical after Ryan revealed his knowledge of The Awakening. He’d learned of his son’s employee’s hospital stay. He’d been tasked to discover if she’d been exposed to N8T. Had his sons kept the toxins after they’d injected him with the drug? Despite their interrogation, Clifford didn’t believe they had wanted to kill him. If they

had, Jude wouldn't have pulled back nor would Ryan have given him the antidote. So why did they show their hand?

He didn't know, but he would. He had to. If he didn't, The Awakening would have no problem tasking Raptor to take care of him.

Chapter 16

“What’s he doing now?” Luca asked while looking over Chaos’ shoulder. “Never mind! Can’t he make it to the restroom?”

The first week they’d followed Clifford—who seemed to rest more than necessary—was unsuccessful. He’d made only one call, and that was to ask his wife for the tea he generally drank to ease his upset stomach. After two weeks of observation, Chaos’ only report about Clifford was the volitive nonstop vomiting.

“I think he needs to see a doctor,” she answered instead.

“It’s probably just for the cameras. Surly he’s found them by now,” Ryan remarked.

“No way. We hid them well. Even if he had, we’d know about it because of where they were placed. Trust me, he may suspect we are watching him, but he doesn’t have any confirmation,” Heath answered.

“Either way, he needs to see a doctor. Too bad Gwen isn’t here anymore,” Daisy said.

The ALIAS team left shortly after Clifford arrived. Ivy reminded them that they were only a phone call away. Byte had fixated on finding the drone. This freed up Daisy's time to watch the daily life of Clifford Butler. Aside from the constant vomiting, the man slept an inordinate amount of hours. Daisy had no doubt, the man was ill.

She'd finally talked Ryan into calling his mother to see if she was ill as well.

"No, I feel fine. Why is your father sick? Did he drink the tea I gave you last week?"

"I gave it to him, but I have no idea if he actually drank it." That wasn't the truth, but he didn't want to expose the surveillance team.

Ryan could hear the worry in her voice, and that was the only reason he'd finally agreed to take his father to the doctor that afternoon. However, Clifford's condition worsened. Ryan altered his route and returned to the hospital he'd left two weeks earlier. Only this time he wasn't concerned about the outcome. Daisy might blur the lines with her occupation, but she wasn't a murderer... unlike his father.

The doctor who'd monitored Daisy weeks earlier pulled Ryan into his office.

“You people seem to like playing with poisons. We’ll have to run tests to determine what the toxin is, but your father has been poisoned, of that I am certain. I’ll touch base with our toxicologist again, but you might want to quarantine your home. Something isn’t right. Again, we’ll draw your blood to ensure that you aren’t infected. Then I will have to notify the authorities of a potential outbreak.”

That was the last thing they needed, so instead, Ryan gave a partial truth to the physician.

“My father is the Director of MI6. I’m sure you understand why we can’t have anyone, other than the agency, look into this. They’re the best qualified to handle it, should it be a biological terrorist threat.”

“Yes, I understand. Please tell the agency that we are working on identifying the toxin and will provide them with updates.”

“Provide me with the updates. I’m analyzing all the data and will relay what is happening to the appropriate people.”

“Understood. Now, let me get back to your father, and again, I suggest you find out if the toxin is also inside your home.”

“Will do. Please call me with anything you find... or what you don't find.”

Ryan shook the doctor's hand and gave the blood sample they'd requested. On the drive back to his home, he placed a call to his brother and gave him an update. He shouldn't have been surprised by the lack of concern or empathy for his father. Regardless, Clifford was still his father, and he had to face the dueling emotions he was harboring... hate and worry. He, however, didn't have an ounce of guilt plaguing his conscience.

“I'm starting to believe that this is Raptor, and she's tying up loose ends,” Seven said, interrupting Ryan's internal dialogue.

“I know, me too. If that's the case, Heath might be the next on the list. Truth be told, all of ALIAS could be under threat. There's so much we don't know about Raptor.”

“I'll sound the warning over here. Can you have Heath bring us a vial of the antidote just in case?”

“Yes. I'll have Luca go with him. The last thing I need is Heath passing out and crashing the plane.”

“And Luca can pilot the plane?”

“If anyone can, I’m thinking it’s him. From what little we know about him, he’s a master of everything, but I’ll confirm. We might consider moving the vials out of Italy... at least for the time being.”

“I’ll talk with Ivy and Ghost and see what they have to say. It might be wise to make more of the antidote. It’s obvious we aren’t the only ones with the poison. I’ll mention it to Voodoo. Be safe, brother. Do you want to send Sophie over with the guys?”

“I might. Let me talk it over with Daisy.”

“Already consulting the woman, I see.”

“Nothing is going on.”

“Yet. I saw how you two are together. It’s just a matter of time. I’m happy for you, Ryan. Really. If anyone deserves to be happy, it’s you.”

“It’s too soon.”

“Says who?”

“Society. I should be mourning, not lusting after someone new.”

“Hang society. No one has a right to judge you. You and Amy were happy,”

“For the most part.”

“Right. On the outside, no one questioned your marriage. Perhaps that wasn’t true on the inside, but who cares. If Daisy is the person you want to be with and she’s good to my niece, then flip off anyone who interferes.”

“And what about appearances?”

“Since when have we ever cared what people think of us. That’s Mother... not you and me. Are you worried what Daisy will say?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then I suggest you talk with her. You may find that she doesn’t have the same reservations.”

Ryan thought long and hard about Jude’s words. He was right about one thing; he had to talk to Daisy. All his feelings might be a moot point if she wasn’t interested in having a go at them.

First, he had to get Heath and Luca over to Italy, then have them stop and pick up his daughter. Seven was right; he couldn’t put his daughter at risk. He wasn’t going to give her the chance to use his daughter as leverage.

Their plans were in motion. After collecting the vials, Heath met them at the airport and escorted Sophie to the States. This left Daisy and Ryan in the house alone for the first time. Now was the time to broach the subject, but he hadn't a clue how. He'd married Amy right out of university. He hadn't asked a girl out in more than a decade. Did he just blurt it out or maybe feel the room, see if she gave him any hints as to how she felt about him?

“Daisy,” he started, cleared his voice, and continued. “Daisy, I wanted to talk to you about us.” They'd been watching TV in comfortable silence until he broke it. He had to. He longed to touch her, even if it meant only running his fingers through her hair. He'd tried to ignore his attraction to Daisy. It would be a gamble mixing business with pleasure. He'd seen how those relationships worked... disastrously. But that didn't stop him from telling Daisy how he was feeling.

“Us? Is there an us?” she asked.

“I'd like there to be... I mean if you would want to date me.”

“I don't date.”

“Oh, I see.” He’d fouled that up, he thought. Not much of an Einstein after all.

“No, you don’t, but let me explain.” Daisy stood from where she was sitting and moved closer to him on the sofa. “You see, I’ve never been able to be myself, all of me, to anyone. I’ve lived a quiet, alone, solitary life. If I wanted male companionship, I’d find it, but generally I was fine alone. I don’t do love. I mean, I believe in it in a superficial way, but it’s not for me. You, however, are a forever kind of guy. You were once married, and you have a child. I’m sure you’re looking to remarry at some point, but I don’t have that desire. Plus, you’re still mourning Amy’s death.”

“Right. I guess you’d know how I’m feeling better than I do. Don’t worry, Daisy, I get it.”

Daisy cocked her head, trying to understand if his tone meant what it seemed to. He was mad. Maybe he wasn’t mourning the way she’d expected. She needed answers.

“But do you?” Daisy asked as she moved over more, this time lowering herself onto his lap. “I like you... A lot. Can you handle a no-strings relationship with me? Can you leave your heart out of having a sexual relationship?”

Daisy watched as his Adam's apple slowly swallowed away his response. She'd given this a lot of thought. She wouldn't lead him on. She couldn't get Sophie's emotions tangled up with what would never be. She had to make sure she was upfront with what she could and wouldn't give.

"Just sex?" he finally asked.

"A lot of sex," she purred.

Ryan ran his hands along her waist, lifting up the bottom of her t-shirt. He gently ran his fingers over the belly ring that had taunted him on too many occasions. He loved it when her breath hitched at his touch. "And Daisy, you promise to not fall in love with me."

"If you make the same promise."

Ryan had two options. One, tell the truth... He was already falling in love with her. He knew it would end their friendship and the closeness he needed every day, or he could tell a lie and keep her close. The kiss he couldn't stop from pulling her in to sealed his fate. He couldn't walk away without having a piece of her, even if he knew he'd be hurt in the end. He would deal with that later, much later if he had his way.

Daisy's tongue met his stroke for stroke, until she pulled back, trying to remove her shirt. The cast meant she needed his help, which he was more than willing to provide. Sitting there, now baring herself without reservation, she whispered in his ear.

“Are you sure?”

“You're so beautiful,” Ryan said as he kissed and nipped her collarbone. He couldn't answer her question, not without telling her the truth. He'd never been so unsure in his entire life. But the moan he captured in his mouth had him rising up with her legs wrapped around his waist. As he began to walk toward the stairs, she told him to let her down.

“I can carry you.”

“I know you can, but I'd rather you preserve your energy for something better. This isn't how I want you to throw out your back.”

Chuckling, Ryan slowly—inch by every painful inch—let her feet hit the ground. He reached for her hand instead and led her up the stairs and into his bedroom.

He wasn't sure if they'd have just one night or the more she promised, but he was determine to spend every minute he

had tasting, kissing, and loving her body. And if he did his job right, maybe eventually she'd give him her heart—regardless of the restrictions she'd placed on their relationship. She wouldn't ever be able to stop his feelings. He just needed to keep them in check and not let her know how much he wanted her in his life permanently.

You may run from your feelings, but I will never stop chasing you, Chaos. I need you, as much as you need me. I just have to prove it to you.

Chapter 17

Ryan looked over at the woman currently in his arms. He'd nearly lost his mind when weeks earlier she'd been lying in that hospital bed. She'd been in real danger, and just like his wife, he'd felt powerless to help her. Now he was in danger. He'd taken the gamble and he would have to make her see that one night together would never be enough. He'd seen Daisy's passion and then her unabashed need. How could one person evoke two different feelings? Had he made love to Daisy and shagged Chaos? Did it matter? Of that he wasn't sure. Even though he knew about his wife's secret life, he never questioned if she was his wife or the spy. Her touch was never followed by doubts. She was Amy, no one else, when they made love. Daisy, however, invoked tenderness and reverence, whereas Chaos demanded what she wanted without regret or embarrassment. One thing he knew for certain, he'd never be bored with her in his life.

For as long as she's in it.

He feared the uncertainty. He tasted and touched something he hadn't realized he'd missed.

His musing was interrupted by the cell phone ringing.

Nothing ruined sexy thoughts faster than his mother calling with a woman sleeping in his arms.

“Hello, Mum.”

“Ryan, did I wake you?”

He looked over to the wall clock and wanted to chuckle. It was five in the morning, which according to his mum was an acceptable time for calls to her children.

“No, I’m awake.” Ryan slid his arm out from under Daisy and smiled when she pulled his pillow against her chest.

Stepping into his lounge pants, he exited the room, trying to shift his thoughts and listen to his mother.

“Good. I wanted to see how your father is doing. What did the doctor say?”

How much should he tell her?

“I ended up taking him to the hospital.”

“It was that serious?”

“We believe so. The doctor believes he’s got more than a stomach bug.”

“What? Is it his gout? When he eats poorly, it triggers his attacks.”

Interesting, he hadn't known his father had preexisting issues. He'd make sure the doctor knew about his inflammations.

"I'm not exactly sure what it is. Is there anything else that the doctor should know, other than his gout?"

"He's not a young man. He has high blood pressure, but it would seem everyone does nowadays."

"It's his job."

"I know that. It's him you need to tell. He needs to retire."

He wondered if his father would survive living with his mother twenty-four seven. Maybe that was exactly what his father needed to do... if not for the stress it would cause his mother.

He might not understand his mother's need for social acceptance, but he couldn't fault her for doing the best she could considering her own upbringing.

"You could go see him at the hospital, Mum. I know you two are having problems, but he's still your husband."

"I could say the same thing to you, Ryan. He is still your father despite what offense he's done to you."

If only he could tell her exactly what he'd done, but it wasn't his mother's sin to bear.

“Good to know,” he replied instead.

“I'll call the hospital to make arrangements for him to come home. You have your hands full raising Sophie. He can sleep in the west wing. Can I visit with Sophie before Clifford comes home?”

“Oh, I neglected to tell you. She's with Jude. She missed Tori immensely. It's better for her to go now before she starts school this fall.”

“I hadn't realized you'd traveled to the States.”

“I didn't. Jude picked her up.” It wasn't a lie. He had picked her up from the airport. He trusted his mother, but he didn't trust his father to not have their phone line recorded.

“Brilliant. I'm sure she will have fun. I was thinking of going to visit Tori. Perhaps this would be a good time for a holiday.”

Hadn't she just said she would care for his father? As if catching her faux pas, she restated her statement.

“Of course, after your father's health recovers.”

“Of course. Just so you know, he was in ICU yesterday morning, but the doctor assured me he’s stable. They were observing him, trying to determine what caused his illness. There’s still the chance they won’t release him just yet.”

“Alright, Ryan. I’ll see to your father. Would you gather his belongings for me? I will come and retrieve them after I’ve gone to the hospital.”

“I can bring them to you, Mum. Like you said, you’re going to have your hands full.”

“If you would.”

“I can be there this afternoon.”

“Leave them in the hall if I’m not home.”

“Mum, I can take them to his room. Which one are you thinking?”

“I don’t care. You chose one.” As she was about to end the call, she remembered why she’d call.

“Ryan, I wanted to know if you would attend the Children’s Hospital Gala this Friday.”

“You know I hate those. I’ll just make a donation.”

“Ryan Alfred Butler.” He hated it when she said his full name. Jude used to pick at him, calling him Alfred the butler—not that Jude was Bruce Wayne. “We’ve talked about this before, Ryan. It’s not just the donation from the Butlers that is expected. We have to be seen.”

“Mum.”

“No, I’m not taking no for an answer. You don’t have Sophie to care for. You won’t have your father to bother you. I need you there. You can even bring that woman you’re sleeping with.”

“Mother!”

“Don’t Mother me. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know you are sleeping with her. She’s beautiful enough, despite being American. She’ll need a gown. See if she can find something at the boutique I go to.”

One thing he had to agree with, his mother wouldn’t take no for an answer, especially if she’d nixed several of his excuses.

“I’ll ask her, but no promises. Send me the details. I’ll try to make it.”

“I’ll see you there,” his mother replied, ignoring his caveat, before ending their call.

He was still mulling over his conversation with his mother, when warm, slender arms wrapped around his body. Instantly, he placed his hands over hers.

“I woke up alone.” It wasn’t said in aggravation or accusation. If anything, he thought it was disappointment he heard.

“Sorry about that. My mum called. She’s going to take my father home when he gets released.”

“That’s surprising, but mortality has a way of forgiving sins.”

Chuckling, Ryan doubted his mum had forgiven his father. “Trust me, it’s only for appearances.” Clearing his throat, he told her why his mother had called. “Speaking of appearances, it appears my presence has been requested for a gala this weekend. Will you come with me?”

He knew it was the wrong question even before she extracted her arms from around his waist.

“Ryan,” she started, then stopped as if trying to consider what best to say. “That would be a date... And, again, I don’t

date.”

“It wouldn’t be a date. I was thinking about The Awakening. These people are high-ranking government officials, which I’d think would mean they are high society. I’m not saying that we’ll have a target to go after, but if there’s one place we might have a suspect pool, it would be at one of my mother’s galas.”

“Oh,” Daisy replied, feeling uncomfortable about jumping to conclusions.

However, she hadn’t been wrong with her assumption. It was only after she rebuked his invitation that he’d come up with a logical reason for the invite. Was this going to be how their relationship would evolve? Would she always question what his motives were, and would he always try to trick her into believing something beyond the obvious?

“Hey,” Ryan softened his voice and reached for her hands, pulling her once again closer to him. Resting his chin on the crown of her head, he tried to think what best to say, something that wasn’t a lie. “This is all new, for both of us. Don’t fault yourself for assuming I am pushing you for more. Most of the time, I probably will be. I like spending time with you, so it stands to reason that I’ll look for every opportunity

to have you by my side. But you've laid out the ground rules, and I understand. You won't go out on a date with me."

"Only as friends. Right?" Daisy circled the tattoo on his right pec. The open heart with an infinity symbol in its design had five loving words scrawled—*until I see you again*. Inside the heart, a heartbeat started at the left and flatlined adjacent to his own heart.



It was both beautiful and heartbreaking. When Ryan hadn't immediately answered, she asked a different question. "Why is the memorial tattoo on your right side and not near your heart?"

Ryan remained quiet, worrying if his answer would have her pull away; however, she deserved an honest answer.

"Because when I held her, her heart was against my right side."

"That's beautiful," she whispered, still tracing the heart's outline. She shifted her fingers to follow the heartbeat, first moving up and down until it stopped and only a flat, silent line broke through the heart. "It's really sad what happened to her."

“It was avoidable, on so many levels.”

“Are you mad at her for keeping secrets?”

Ryan didn't want to talk about his dead wife. Not with her. He wanted to keep them mentally apart, but she didn't want his heart. She was curious, not threatened by the love he had for Amy.

“I'm not sure.”

Daisy didn't press him because she felt the honesty in his words. He wasn't sure how to deal with his wife's omissions. So it surprised her when he spoke. “I'm mad at what she did to Sophie. Amy left my daughter without a mother or an explanation. Sophie might not show it, but her mother's death has affected her.”

“Of course it has. How could it not?”

Not wanting to continue the discussion, Ryan reached down and lifted her up into a fireman's hold and began his way back into his bedroom.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“I'm thinking it's time we take a shower. We worked up quite a sweat last night, and you smell like sex.”

“I smell! What about you, buddy?”

“Darling, if I had my way, I’d smell like sex all day, every day.”

“Fool.”

A fool for you, Ryan thought. He was the only fool in their non-relationship relationship.

Chapter 18

Daisy accepted the glass of champagne and smiled at the gentleman Ryan had introduced her to. They'd been at the gala for an hour before she'd been introduced to his mother. She was everything Daisy had expected. Thin, elegant, the epitome of a British Dame. Ryan had explained the honorary title his mother had received years earlier.

"It's the equivalent to a knighthood. It's a courtesy title, just like Sir."

"Sir, as in Sir Elton John or Sir Paul McCartney."

"Yes, exactly. A lot of entertainers have been knighted Dames or Sirs, but there are key influencers and old money that also share that rank."

"Do I curtsy?"

"Please don't. Mum already thinks too highly of herself. Shake her hand or simply nod your head in acknowledgement. Do what feels natural."

"There's nothing natural about tonight. I'm used to working in sweats, and eating a frozen pizza on my bed."

"You look like a natural to me."

When Daisy had walked down the stairs, he had to hold himself back from rushing up to her and spilling his heart. Instead, he kissed her cheek and complimented her gown. But it was more than the backless emerald gown that exposed the skin he'd enjoyed earlier that morning, or how she had his brain going haywire when she smiled. Her hair was twisted into an intricate knot, her makeup expertly applied, and heels that brought her lips close to his. It was simple... He felt pure jealousy when every man's eye followed the curve of her spine. In spite of her reminding him that they weren't on a date, he let everyone in attendance think otherwise, including his mother.

"My granddaughter speaks of you frequently," Dame Esther Butler stoically stated.

"She's a doll," Daisy responded and ignored the vibes she was feeling from the matriarch. She hadn't had much experience talking to her lover's parents, especially his mother. Amp that up to Mrs. Butler's perusal and finding her lacking, she had to remind herself that she wasn't dating her son... just sleeping with him every night. As much as she had reservations about their arrangement, so did his mother.

"How long will you be staying with my son?"

“Mum,” Ryan warned.

“I’m just curious. Your father told me she moved in your home when he moved into the guesthouse. I’m assuming she will move back to her own domicile.”

Neither Ryan nor Daisy responded. She hadn’t considered the ramifications of Clifford moving out. Would Ryan expect her to return to the cottage? Would they continue to see each other... outside of their routine work life? What about when Sophie returned? Would they continue their affair or would her arrival be the end of what probably never should’ve started? Did she want to continue whatever they had or let it die naturally with her living hundreds of feet away?

Waving her hand in the air, as if swatting away a pesky gnat, Esther continued. “I’m sure you will work it out. I’d hate for my granddaughter to be confused by having a woman sleep in her mother’s bed.”

“Mother,” Ryan scolded loudly. “That’s enough. Now, if you’ll excuse us, there’s some people I’d like to introduce Daisy too.”

As Ryan was pulling Daisy away, he apologized for his mother’s words.

“She’s not wrong. I don’t want to confuse Sophie. Staying in the house would do that.”

“You aren’t moving.”

“But...”

“Period, Daisy. You are not going to slink back into the background. For as long as you’ll have me, you are living in my house, sleeping in my bed, and dining at my table. Do you understand?”

She wasn’t able to answer when a throat cleared behind Ryan’s back. Ryan didn’t turn around to greet the intruder, but Daisy had looked up. He noticed her eyes move past his head. Ryan only knew a few men over six two. Miles Harmon. Without turning, Ryan acknowledged Miles.

“Not much has changed. You know it’s me without even looking behind you.”

Turning only after he reached for Daisy’s hand, intertwining their fingers, Ryan let an insincere smile grace Miles. Daisy instantly became curious. Why was Ryan’s smile unnatural and hard? She’d never seen this on him, not even when dealing with his father.

“Not much of a talent when you never changed your cologne since university.”

“Why change it when it works so well with the ladies? Speaking of ladies, please introduce me to yours.”

Daisy squeezed his fingers, reminding him that she was there with him and for him.

“Daisy, this is my former college roommate, Miles Harmon.”

“Nice to meet you,” Daisy replied while extending her free hand. Miles pulled her fingers to his lips and ghosted over them, softly blowing his breath over her knuckles. Before he could attempt a kiss, Daisy roughly extracted her hand and wrapped it around Ryan’s forearm.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it to your wife’s funeral. I was out of the country at the time. I assumed I’d be able to give you my condolences tonight, but it doesn’t look like you need them.”

“Wait just a second, mister,” Daisy angrily growled.

“Oh, Ducky, it’s nothing personal. Trust me, I’m sure I’d want someone to ease my pain had my wife died so violently a few months earlier. Provided of course that I had a wife.”

“Miles,” Ryan warned.

“How’s little Sophia?”

“Sophie,” Ryan and Daisy corrected simultaneously.

“Right, close enough. How’s she handling Amy’s death?”

“She’s four. How do you think she’s handling it?”

“Who’s watching her?”

“She’s in the US visiting family,” Daisy said, not realizing the question had been directed to Ryan. But his reply reminded her of her place.

“That’s none of his business,” Ryan scolded.

“Now it makes sense. Cat is away... so the mice will play, sort of thing. No baby around to care for, so you have another babe doing so much more than consoling you.”

Without any warning, Ryan dropped Daisy’s hand, reached out, and punched Miles so hard, the cartilage in his nose loudly broke.

“What the...” Miles sputtered.

“Ryan!” he heard his mother screech.

Ignoring the voice rapidly approaching, Ryan pulled Miles down by his tuxedo collar and menacingly warned him. “I

know who you are. Watch your back, Miles. Your friends at The Awakening won't like you bringing attention to their black ops."

Not waiting for his guesstimate to be verified, Ryan reached for Daisy's hand and pulled her onto the dance floor.

"Do you think we should leave?" Daisy asked as Ryan pulled her flush against his body.

"No. I'm not ashamed of what I did. He deserved it."

"I agree. Thank you."

"For what? Defending your honor?"

"No... well, yes, but for mainly for not hiding. You had every right to."

"I'd like nothing better than to take you home, run my lips along your exposed skin, and then run a bath for us to enjoy after I unabashedly make love to you."

"Oh," Daisy whispered. "Then maybe I shouldn't thank you for staying."

"No need. My plans haven't changed, only delayed for a bit."

“Good to know. Speaking of which, how did you know Miles was with The Awakening?”

“I didn’t. I took a gamble. If he was so entrenched with my father, it would stand to reason he’d bring Miles into the fold. Either way, he would know who I was talking about or he’d assumed he’d misunderstood what I had said.”

“His face gave him away. He knows who they are, or he works with them?”

“Most likely he works for them. He studied criminal law at university. He hadn’t been accepted to MI6 and had to settle on the offer from Five. My father later recruited him. Father had finally gotten his *yes-man*, and Miles got the job he believed he was owed.”

“Did he work with Seven?”

“Not likely. Neither of them mentioned each other. Jude stayed as far as he could from Father. They were always butting heads.”

“Do you think anyone else with The Awakening is here?”

“Yes, but we’ve done what we came here to do.”

“Which is?”

“Let The Awakening know they are on our radar. Now the games will begin.”

“So can we leave?” she whispered into his ear, letting her tongue slightly brush against his lobe. The intake of Ryan’s breath was the answer she had hoped for.

Leading her off the dance floor, he gathered her handbag from the table and moved to the exit. Only his mother’s demand for him to stop slowed his steps.

“Ryan! Stop right there!”

Ryan stopped and turned to face his very unhappy mother.

“Where do you think you are going?”

“Home, Mother.”

“You have to stay. The Butlers need to be seen, especially after your barbaric move earlier.”

“I don’t have to stay, and I am not apologetic for my reaction to Miles’ words.”

“What did you expect, Ryan? I know I said you should invite your friend, but really, did you have to flaunt your mistress in front of my friends? I thought you were different than your father. Clearly, I was wrong.”

Daisy tried to keep her emotions blank. She wasn't sure to giggle at someone being called a mistress or blow a gasket at Esther's insults. In the end, she didn't have time to respond. Ryan closed the distance between him and his mother and held nothing back.

“What I do or don't with Daisy is no one's business. We are adults—unattached adults at that. And Mother, don't you ever compare me to your husband. If you do, you will lose more than you wish for.”

“You are threatening to take Sophie away from me, just like you did your father.”

“Yes.” Ryan turned his back on his mother, grasped Daisy's hands once more, and exited the ballroom. He hadn't seen the murderous glare his mother had directed to his date... but Daisy had, and she couldn't stop the shudder that ran through her body. For the first time, Daisy began to wonder if Clifford wasn't the only parent they should worry about, because if looks could kill, she would've been assassinated right there in front of the coat closet. That wasn't an option in the game *Clue*.

Miss Daisy, killed with a poisonous tongue in the coat closet by a murderous Dame.

Daisy came to the gala, but it was Chaos who left. She had some digging to do and hoped for Ryan, Sophie, and Jude's sake, she had misunderstood the threat she'd seen from the matriarch.

Chapter 19

“Why is Mum calling me? I’d like to be prepared before I accept her call,” Seven asked his brother. It had been three days since the gala confrontation. He hadn’t heard from his mother until early that morning. As he didn’t care to start his morning with his mother’s scolding, he’d ignored the call, as well as the other six he’d rejected.

“She and I had a blowup a few days ago.”

“I am speaking to my squeaky-clean brother, right?”

“Shut up. She went too far when speaking to Daisy. I refuse to let her demoralize another woman in my life.”

“Explain, brother.”

“It’s nothing. She and Amy didn’t get along.”

“How did I not know that? Amy never mentioned it.”

“That’s because she didn’t care. Daisy might not either, but I wasn’t going to let her get away with it again. I tried to get Amy to tell me when Mum was hateful, but after the first couple of times, she swore they had buried the hatchet. I never believed her, but I didn’t have any proof, other than a feeling.”

“I guess I wasn’t around them enough to notice. So what happened with Chaos?”

Ryan retold the events from the gala, both with his words with Miles and then his threat to his mother.

“Sounds like a gala I might have actually enjoyed attending. Is Chaos alright?”

“She’s different since that night. I can feel her pulling away. I never would’ve thought she’d let another person’s words bother her so much.”

“Ask her what’s bothering her.”

“I did. She said everything was fine. She said Mum’s words didn’t bother her. But they did, at least if her reactions are any clue.”

“Give her some time, mate.”

“How’s Sophie? Missing us yet?”

“Nope. Aria has taken time off to spend as much time as she can with both girls before they have to go to school. They are always on some adventure. This weekend, they’re going to Six Flags in Arlington. Tori is a thrill seeker, which shouldn’t surprise me, but she’s more and more starting to act like the nine-year-old she should.”

“I’m so happy to hear that. I’m missing Sophie more and more, especially the further Daisy seems to be drifting away. Maybe having her here would keep Daisy from backing off.”

“That’s not good, brother. You don’t want the woman you are into, only being with you because of your child. Talk with Chaos. Make her tell you the truth. That is if you want to keep her in your life.”

“I do, but she’s already said she’s not interested in anything long term or permanent.”

“Of course she did. You have a lot going on over there. I’d imagine she’s not someone you can push, if she’s anything like her sister.”

“I believe you are correct. So are you going to call Mum?”
Ryan knew it was a cowardly move, asking his brother to return her calls, but he wasn’t ready to make peace with her just yet.

“Talk about subversion. Yes, I’ll call her. I will try to ease the way for you to talk with her. She’s the only grandparent in our children’s lives. You know how she can be. It’s just how she is.”

“I understand. I’ll talk with her later. I’m just not ready to hear her apologies yet.”

“Right, well, I’ll ring if I need to relay any messages. What’s an international charge when your brother is throwing a temper tantrum and won’t call his mum back.”

“Give my girl a hug and kiss.”

“When I finally get to see her, I will.”

After the brothers hung up, he knew he needed to clear the air with the two most important women in his life, at least the ones over the age of four. He’d start with the one lying naked in his bed.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he stopped when he saw the suitcase on the bed.

“Daisy?”

Walking out of the bathroom with her makeup bag in her hand, she smiled and kissed his cheek. “Have you been working?”

“No.” He shook his head, trying to make sense of the mixed messages he was getting. She didn’t seem mad, but she was packing up her stuff. “What are you doing?”

“I told you a few weeks ago. I’m meeting my sister at our parents’ house. We haven’t seen them in some time, and she wants me to go with her. Their relationship is still a little tenuous.”

“No. You didn’t tell me. How long will you be gone?” Ryan asked, running his hand through his hair. Was she making up a reason for leaving? No, that wouldn’t make any sense. But he was sure she’d never told him about the visit... not that she needed his permission. Even though she was paid by ALIAS as an employee, she was free to work from anywhere, especially since her work was generally done online. Only, something felt off. So he asked once again if she was upset by his mother’s antics.

“I already told you I wasn’t. She’s a mother. Of course, she’s looking out for you and Sophie. We’re okay. I just need to see my own parents.”

“What about Raptor? Are you going to give up looking for her?” Ryan accused.

“Of course not. I can work anywhere, and the last time I heard, the internet is available in Seattle.”

“Right. Okay. Um, what time is your flight?”

Looking at her cell phone for the time, she had three hours, but needed to be there two hours early, as per the international flight requirement.

“Can I drive you?”

“There’s no need. I can leave my car at the airport.”

“This is ridiculous. For whatever reason, Daisy, I feel like you are running away. You are on a flight that both of us know wasn’t planned in advance. You don’t want me to take you to the airport, and instead, you want to leave your vehicle in the long-term parking, which will cost an exorbitant amount of money, and you’ve shown no interest in locating Raptor so we can recall our team and Sophie back home.”

“That’s not fair,” Daisy stated, tossing her makeup bag in the suitcase before zipping it closed. “My sister needs me. You can’t tell me you wouldn’t do anything to help your brother. I was trying to save you time by not taking me to the airport, but feel free to waste two hours in bumper-to-bumper London traffic. As for my job... I’ve got feelers out. I’m extremely close to identifying Raptor. Once I have, you can call everyone back, but I won’t make a rush decision. It’s too important of a person to identify incorrectly.”

“You’re right,” Ryan admitted and walked over and reached for Daisy’s hand. As he sat down on the spot her luggage once rested, he felt conflicted. Why was she running? He couldn’t let her leave without making it right between them. Drawing her in closer—enclosing her in between his legs—he pulled her onto his lap. Once she was settled, he kissed the side of her neck at the base of her throat. “I’m sorry,” he said, as he worked his lips up to her chin. “I was insensitive and paranoid.” He sighed in relief when she relaxed into his arms and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “You’ve felt withdrawn since the gala.”

“I’ve been here the whole time.”

“I mean more than with your body. Your mind seems to have stepped away. Is it Raptor? Do you really think you’re close?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“How will you know?”

“I’ll have to set a trap.”

Ryan pulled back and met Daisy’s confused eyes. “What kind of trap?”

“Nothing that will hurt me.” At least not physically, she countered.

“Can you wait until you come back home?”

Home. For years, she didn't think she needed a home. She went wherever her whim took her. She didn't own property. Ownership left a trail and she couldn't leave herself vulnerable. Now, she realized, perhaps a little too late, that it wasn't a structure that she was running away from. It was a different kind of ownership. She ran so her heart couldn't be owned. She couldn't be vulnerable. She needed her sister. Thankfully, Gwen had heard her turmoil and offered to come to her. Instead of going to visit their parents, they were going to Italy. She had to know if her assumption was correct. And if she was right, she would run away once again, because she could never intentionally, or unintentionally, hurt Ryan and Sophie. She would put her own feelings aside for their happiness. Knowing that her happiness wasn't destined to be with Ryan, she let her emotions flow. She couldn't have stopped it even if she'd tried. She hadn't realized she was crying until Ryan captured a tear with his thumb.

“Why are you so sad?”

“I’m fine. Stupid hormones! Just wait till Sophie gets her period.” She couldn’t tell him the truth. She was going to miss them, both of them.

Groaning, Ryan begged her to stop reminding him that his small little starfish would eventually become a barracuda.

“We have to go if you’re going to drive me to Heathrow.” She needed distance. She couldn’t let her emotions tell the real reason why she was leaving.

Before he released his hold on her, he gently tilted her head so he could capture her lips. He couldn’t let her leave without her feeling exactly what was in his heart. She might not want his love, but she got it anyway. He couldn’t help but fear that would be their last kiss. When they separated, she reached out and captured his tears just as he had hers.

“It’s not goodbye, Daisy. You have to promise me that. You have to come back.”

“It’s not goodbye.” She would only commit to that. She couldn’t promise to return to him, his home, or even ALIAS. There was a reason she was always alone. It hurt to open yourself up to genuine feelings. Too much chaos in its path.

Not understanding what she'd neglected to promise, Ryan stood, grabbed the handle to her suitcase, and offered his other hand to Daisy.

They held hands as they made their way to the airport. Ryan tried to fill the emptiness by recounting his conversation with Seven.

“Sounds like Sophie is having fun. I've always loved amusement parks.”

“Next time we go to Texas, we'll have to take Sophie ourselves. Maybe we should go to Disney. Have you ever been there?”

“No. When we were younger, my parents said we were too young to appreciate the trip. By the time we were older, we had interests other than being princesses and marrying Prince Charmings.”

“Um, I think you would've been a beautiful princess. And I'm just saying, I'm pretty much a prince, just by being British.”

“Wow! That's a stretch.”

Their conversation stopped when Ryan's car stereo alerted him of his brother calling.

“Excuse me,” he told Daisy before accepting the call.

“What happened? Did she threaten to take me out of the will?” Ryan joked.

“Ryan.” Seven’s voice was serious... deadly, operative serious.

“What’s wrong?”

“Are you alone?”

“No, Daisy’s here. We’re in the car.”

“Good. Maybe you can pull over.”

“What is going on, Jude?”

“Just pull off the road, Ryan.”

Taking the next exit, Ryan pulled the vehicle over at a petrol station.

“We’re off the road,” Daisy stated. “What’s going on?”

A moment of silence had Ryan calling his brother’s name, wondering if they’d dropped the call.

“Right. Well, Mum was calling you because Father went from bad to worse. He died early this morning, around five a.m.”

“Oh my God,” Daisy said, holding her hand over her mouth in shock.

“Ryan?” Seven asked.

“I’m here. Is Mum alright?”

“What do you think, Ryan? Despite their problems, they were still married forty years. Then the son who lives the closest rejects all her calls, well, let’s just say I tried to calm her down as much as I could. She needs you, Ryan. You need to table your issues with Mum. Me, Aria, and the girls are catching a flight in an hour. Obviously, we’ll need to stay with you, but I need you over there. It’s going to be late tonight before we arrive.”

Daisy had pulled out her phone, typed into her taxi app, and secured a ride in five minutes. She could wait inside the station should Ryan leave before the taxi arrived.

After he’d disconnected his call, he looked over at Daisy in disbelief.

“I think Jude and I killed our father.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because we injected him with N8T several months ago.”

“Yes, but Aria is still alive, and she got the virus before he did.”

“Only she got the antidote quickly. I held off from giving Jude the order to revive him. The virus was untreated longer than it was for Aria.”

“I think that’s a pretty untested theory. I’m still alive and Gwen gave me the antidote.”

“We still don’t know you had N8T. We gave you the antidote in hopes that we could stop the poison from spreading.”

“Ryan, you don’t need to harbor any guilt. You just need to be by your mother’s side.”

The taxi pulled alongside the car, and Ryan did a double take when Daisy unbuckled her seat belt.

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes. I’m sorry your father died, I really am. But you need to be with your family. The last thing you need is having me around and upsetting your mother. Seven will be here. Besides, I can’t cancel on my sister. She’s already en route.”

“But Daisy.”

“I’ve got to go, Ryan. I’ll call you later and check in.”

Without looking back, or more likely ignoring Ryan’s call for her to stop, Daisy tossed her luggage into the back seat and followed suit.

The last thing Ryan heard was her telling the driver to head toward Gatwick.

Gatwick, not Heathrow.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I can promise you one thing, Daisy Campbell. I will find you and make you mine, once and for all,” Ryan said as he watched the taxi’s blinker indicate their entrance onto the roadway and away from him.

Chapter 20

“Well, little sis, tell me why we’re here,” Gwen asked her twin.

“I’m only a few minutes younger than you,” Daisy snapped.

“Woah, Daisy, it was a joke. The same one I always say. What’s going on?”

Daisy looked over the veranda and wished she could enjoy the majestic vistas of Florence. She’d arrived two days earlier than her sister and spent her time in Rome trying to confirm her suspicions. She shouldn’t have been surprised that her lead went cold. It was all about the timing. Instead of staying in the city, she took a quick flight to Florence and waited for Gwen to arrive.

“I think I found Raptor,” she unenthusiastically said.

“Why so down, Eeyore?” Daisy smiled at the analogy. She did sound like the sad, downtrodden mule from Winnie-the-Pooh.

“She is going to hurt a lot of people when she’s identified.”

“Stop with the puzzles. Who is she?”

“I haven’t got enough to place blame. Not yet.”

“Daisy, if you believe you’ve found her and that you can identify her, that’s all I need to know. I don’t care about proof. Your belief is enough to me. Now who is the traitor and assassin that has been targeting our people?”

“Esther. Esther Butler.”

“Seven’s mother!”

“And Ryan’s, and the girls’ grandmother,” Daisy confirmed.

“Well, I didn’t see that one coming. We knew the old man was a problem, but the mother? Wow. Have you told them?”

“Absolutely not! And neither are you.”

“Back up, sis, I was just asking. I wondered if this gloominess was because you bit the bullet and told them your suspicions.”

“No, because like you said, they are only suspicions. How could I throw that out into the universe and not have proof? What if I am wrong?”

“Are you?”

“No. I may not have proof, but I’m not wrong. Dame Esther Butler, mother of Ryan and Jude, grandmother to Tori and Sophie, is the assassin, Raptor, who works with The Awakening, a blacker than black ops mercenary group. I just have to prove it.”

“And maybe take a breath and speak with less run-on sentences. Is that why we’re in Italy?”

“Yes. Before Clifford died, I had hoped to lure her here. Now I have to wait until Clifford’s services are over. God, that sounds so cold.”

“You’re far from being coldhearted. You are worried about how this information will affect those who love her. What was the plan? Were you going to use N8T as the bait?”

“Not the actual vials, but I have something even better... the formulas for both the virus and antidote. With those, she doesn’t need the vials ALIAS is protecting.”

“Surely, you aren’t giving her the real ones.”

“Of course not, but it will be close enough to pass a provisional inspection.”

“What’s the plan now that she’s out of pocket?”

“It’s the same. I sent her the message yesterday. Even though I know she can’t come and retrieve it, she’s unaware that I know about Clifford’s death. I just have to wait and see how long it takes her to come to me.”

“You’re going to meet her face-to-face?”

“Yes. I have to. I have to know for sure.”

“Take pictures, set up surveillance, have one of the guys meet her. You’re not an operative. Plus, you’re dating her son.”

“We’re not dating.”

“Is that the only thing you caught out of that sentence?”

“I’m just correcting you.”

“Or lying to yourself. Why don’t you take this little sabbatical to really listen to your heart. I know firsthand how our minds can twist the truth. I missed five years of my life with Carter because I let my brain take me to an irrational assumption. Even you weren’t fully convinced that Carter was trying to kill me. All I’m saying, Daisy, is if there’s anything there—any feelings at all—don’t let fear stop you from pursuing happiness.”

“I don’t want to have an instant family. It’s too much. I am responsible for only myself, and I’m happy.”

“That’s BS, and you know it. Is Sophie too much for you? Is she a horrible child, a brat?”

“No! No way. She’s sweet and thoughtful. She keeps me laughing and smiling. I taught her how to tie her shoes a few weeks ago.”

“You sound like you’re proud of her.”

“Of course I am. She’s brilliant.”

“So, not a brat. Then is it Ryan? Is he temperamental? Does he blow off the handle at the slightest little thing?”

“No. He’s quite the opposite. He’s easygoing, pretty even-keeled. Well, unless someone insults me.”

“Do tell.”

After retelling the night at the gala, Gwen continued her interrogation. “And since the gala... how’s it been?”

“Horrible. It’s the night I really began to investigate his mother. I just had this feeling. I can’t explain it. It wasn’t like she said something that made me think of Raptor. It was more that I saw a side of her that I hadn’t expected. I spent that night

reviewing the profile we'd set up for Raptor, and Esther ticked off each one of them."

"Give me the profile."

"First, I suspected Raptor was a woman. I also believed she was highly educated and highly influential. She would be able to fly under the radar because of her social status. She would be the last person anyone suspected. She'd come off as nonthreatening, but would use her cover to gather intel. Because of her status, she'd be exposed to a lot of secrets, and she'd exploit that."

"That sums up most wealthy people. What else?"

"Raptor wouldn't be emotionally engaged with others, including her family. From everything I've heard from Seven and Ryan, their mother has always been aloof, disconnected, and not very maternal. I know that isn't rare, especially in the ultrarich world with nannies and servants, but it checks another box."

"Okay. I see how her rank, position, and fortune might lead you to suspect her. But why? Why would someone respected by everyone do something so heinous?"

“Revenge. This has nothing to do with her husband or even the government. I went through her history and it told a story I hadn’t expected. I’m sure neither of the guys know it either.”

Rubbing her hands together, Gwen told her to go on.

“It all comes back to her daughter.”

“Wait, Ryan and Seven have a sister. Do they know this?”

“Doubtful, but she’s not alive anymore. She was killed when she was two years old.”

“Murdered?”

“Yes. Esther was married before she met Clifford. She and her husband lived in Lyon, France. I believe she was happy, and had her life not changed, she wouldn’t have ever become Raptor. But when it changed, so did she.”

“What happened?” Gwen leaned in and asked, fully invested in the story.

“There are pieces I don’t know for sure but I can make some assumptions. Clark, her first husband, worked for Interpol.”

“So being spies run in the family.”

“Clark wasn’t a spy. He was a lower-level analyst. He didn’t have access to sensitive information. Everything he received was redacted. He was not a threat to anyone.”

“So why was he killed?”

“This is where I’m having to make some assumptions. My guess is that he somehow came into contact with intel that he shouldn’t have seen. I don’t know, maybe he received an unredacted file in error, and it got him killed. Honestly, I’m not sure the why is important anymore. I believe it was a cover-up job. Clark discovered, or they thought he had discovered, something that could expose them, so he had to die. My guess is that whoever carried out the assassination was planning on taking out the entire family; however, somehow Esther survived.”

“That’s horrible. Is it wrong to feel sorry for her, even though she’s an assassin?”

“If she’d simply went on with her life, then yes, I would sympathize for her loss, but that wasn’t what she did. She became a gun for hire. I can only imagine that it first started with tracking down her family’s killers.”

“I would hope so. Maybe she kept doing it because she hadn’t found all those who were involved,” Gwen suggested.

“Possibly. It would explain why she works with The Awakening. They have intel that she could use to track down those who killed her husband and daughter.”

The two women sat quietly, trying to digest what it all meant and how her sons would handle finding out the truth.

“I think she had something to do with Clifford’s death,” Gwen said out of the blue.

“What? Why?”

“If your assumption is correct, then perhaps Clifford was somehow culpable for her family’s death. If she learned of this, she’d take him out.”

“Why now? It’s been forty years. Plus, he seemed oblivious to his wife’s alter ego.”

“I don’t know. Call it a hunch. When Clifford was admitted into the hospital, the toxicologist reached out to me because of what he’d discovered. When we looked at your blood results, it showed an immediate reaction to the toxin. However, with Clifford, it appears that he’s been exposed to a toxin for years, most likely in small doses. Hear me out. What if she used Clifford as test subject one? She might have been

unsure how the toxin would react, so she gave him a little each day or week and monitored his reactions.”

“She did mention that he drank a particular tea each day. She even brought some of it over for him to drink while staying with Ryan.”

“Interesting. If he was ingesting it, it might not have been caught when he took his physicals. If it was in his tea bag, it would be diluted by the water, cream, and even the tea leaves themselves.”

“Do you see why I need to catch her? There are too many what-ifs. I can’t accuse her of being Raptor without having the blanks filled in.”

“I’m afraid you won’t get those answers until you have outed her. Are you prepared for that? Are you prepared for what the aftermath might be for you and Ryan?”

“No. That’s why I’m not going to take the chance. Once I have proof that Esther is Raptor, then I’ll send it to Ryan.”

“Send... not give?”

“No. He won’t want to see me. I’ll be responsible for uprooting his entire life. I would always be a reminder of what

he'd lost. I can't do that to him or Sophie. I'll send him everything he needs to move forward with his life."

"Without you." It wasn't a question, because they both knew an answer wasn't needed. Voodoo shook her head, knowing that Chaos was the one making that decision, because it was obvious Daisy was madly in love with the Butler brother. It was also obvious that she would run from him as fast as she could.

You best chase after her, Ryan, or else you'll lose her.

Chapter 21

“I think we need to loop Ghost and Ivy into this,” Gwen said the following morning over breakfast.

“I don’t have proof yet.”

“Listen to me first, and then you can start debating the reason why I’m wrong. You want to interrogate Esther and get the answers to your questions. You are not a skilled interrogator. Carter and Ivy are.”

“So is Luca.”

“Okay, let’s say that the three of them work together to capture Esther. They won’t let Seven or Ryan know about their black ops. While the boys are still grieving, they won’t question why Luca is away.”

“They wouldn’t even have to be grieving for them not to question where Luca was. He’s always on some assignment or another... ones we’re not included on. There’s something unsettling living under his skin. But that’s a problem for another day. Go on.”

“Carter, Ivy, and Luca all take turns at getting what they need to present to Ryan and Seven. They will be the

disseminator of information, not you. They will be the ones who decide what Esther's fate is... not you."

"And if I'm wrong about her?"

"Then you owe her a large Mother's Day bouquet, but I don't think that's going to happen, not based on what you've told me. I trust your gut."

"And if I'm right... Ryan will still know that it was me who gathered the intel. He will know that I am the one who sent Luca, Ivy, and Carter to his mother. He will know that I exposed his only living parent as a murderer and traitor."

"Well, according to you last night, it doesn't matter what he thinks, since you didn't want an insta-family. So why does it matter to you now if he blames you?"

"I care about him."

Liar! You more than care for him!

"Well, then you'll have to make him understand why you didn't include him. If anyone can, it's you."

Daisy kept her gaze overlooking the rolling vista, trying to find a logical reason why it hurt knowing he'd blame her. She hadn't meant she didn't want Sophie in her life. She just

wasn't ready to be a mother, and the longer she dated Ryan, the more confusing it would be for Sophie. For all of them.

That's what she told Gwen when she asked once more what was bothering her.

"I think you've lost your freaking mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I think you want to be a part of that family, more than you'd let yourself believe. You're half in love with Ryan already, and Sophie, well, I'd say you're fully in love with the tot."

"I'm not in love with Ryan."

"I said half in love. And that's a dangerous place to be."

"How so?"

"If you are fully in love, you're a committed, faithful, and loving couple. To be half in love means you could make a mistake and realize it too late. You could leave before you had a chance to fully know the depth of your feelings. Instead, you'll return to being a wanderer, a lone wolf, a party of one. At some point, you will lower your guard and let your heart be touched, but not with the one you should've been with. You have the chance to find real happiness, Daisy. But you're too

scared to let go of the maybes or what-ifs and let yourself feel loved.”

“Sounds like you read someone’s blog or something.”

“Funny girl. I can come up with my own thoughts, thank you very much. I’m just reminding you of what you told me not so long ago. Happiness is just a few steps away.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“Are you kidding? I spent five years running away from my husband. I believed he was trying to kill me. Now I can look back and see where I lost faith in myself. I didn’t believe I was worth having happiness. I believed Carter was too good for me and I was the nerd he gave attention to. Only we were the real deal, and we still let things get in our way. If we’d only talked all those years ago, we wouldn’t have wasted so much of our marriage playing hide and seek.”

“I’m glad you two are happy.”

“Immensely happy. I owe that to you.”

“Because I fell off a bridge for you.”

“God, don’t even laugh about that. Vanessa was deranged. I can’t believe she tried to kill all three of us.”

“And then herself. Speaking of which, how’s Byte doing? I heard she had a bad reaction to Nessa’s suicide.”

“She’s better. She needed time to come to terms with her own trauma. PTSD has a way of exposing our underbellies to the world. You’ll have to see her and Hunter together. If there were ever two mismatched people in the world, it’s them. But they love each other... it’s so cute to see.”

“I’m happy for her.”

“And we want to be happy for you, but I’m not going to mention it again, or at least not while we are on holiday.”

“How long can you stay?”

“Well, I promised to actually go see the parents next week. Carter is supposed to come with me, but if we’re needed here, then we’ll reschedule with Mom.”

“That’s where Ryan believes I’m at.”

“In Seattle? Why?”

“I needed an excuse to leave, so going to see our parents with you was an easy excuse.”

The notification on Daisy’s laptop stopped their conversation.

“It’s her.”

“Esther?”

“Maybe... but it’s Raptor.”

“What does she say?”

“Here, read it for yourself,” Daisy said as she turned the laptop screen so her sister could read the email.

‘Chaos, I wondered if I’d hear from you again. I know the intel about the vials being kept in Rome was a trap. They are in Switzerland. I’m not sure what your intentions were? Was it a trap? Were you trying to catch me? Or were you a victim in all of this too? Did the people who stole the toxins trick you and misdirect your search, or are you back on the market to the highest bidder? I’ve been in this business too long to ignore warning signs. You and I have a symbiotic relationship. I need you, as much as you need me. I’m sure you’ve made quite a few enemies over the years. You’ve gotten access to secrets that people would kill for. Only with me as your business partner, you have an asset you can use. I am the one who will take care of any unwanted attention. But that protection comes at a price.

The problem is I'm not sure I can trust you. I want to believe you didn't know there was a trap set by the holders of the virus and antidote. Now you say you have the formulas. How can I authenticate that? Am I to have blind faith in you? To your credit, everything you've done for me up to this point has been flawless. It has built a level of trust, but I sense we're going backward. So tell me, Chaos, how can I verify that the formulas you are offering me are correct? Any suggestions?'

“Interesting,” Gwen said, rereading the note once more.
“She wants to trust you, but has somehow figured out ALIAS was involved in the stakeout.”

“I'm not sure she really believes it was a setup. Think about it. When I gave her the location of the vials, I never said they were being moved. I just gave her a location. For her to know that the vials were moved, she had followed my intel. Only they hadn't moved the vials. It was a sleight of hand trick. That's why I'm pretty sure she doesn't know the truth, and even if she does, why would she associate that with me? I believe she's testing the waters. She wants to believe in me, but her radar is up.”

“What are you going to do?” Gwen asked.

“I guess I’ll get in touch with Luca, while you reach out to Ivy. After we’ve talked with everyone, I’ll respond to her message.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter 22

“Mum, what can I get you?” Ryan asked his mother, who hadn’t spoken since the services.

Ryan’s heart took a hit when her glassy eyes matched his. He’d done this. He and Jude had killed their father. Was it justified? Yes, at least in his opinion, but had they considered the ramifications of what their revenge would mean to his mother? No! All Ryan could see was the need to punish his father for his role in Amy’s death. And now, he had to live with that decision for the rest of his life.

Ryan sat beside his mother, lifted her hand from her lap, and held it in his. He wanted to confess everything, but what good would come from that? To ease his conscience, he’d isolated the only parent he still had in his life.

Reading the scene accurately, Jude sat on the other side of his mother and repeated Ryan’s attempt at comforting her. Her hand was small and delicate in his large one. He’d never considered his mother as weak, but her grief was palpable.

“Mum,” Jude softly said.

“I need time, boys. Perhaps a holiday would help. I can’t stay here. Your father,” she began and then stopped, trying to gain her composure. “Your father’s presence is everywhere. I need to get out of this house.”

“Mum, we’ll take you wherever you want,” Ryan offered.

With a small smile, she shook her head in objection.

“You have a family to care for. Sophie will be starting preschool in a couple of weeks.”

“We can bring her with us, Mum. You shouldn’t be alone,” Ryan countered.

“Why not? I’m going to be alone for the rest of my life. You and Jude can’t coddle me and still live your own lives. No, I want to go alone.”

“Mum, that’s not wise,” Jude added. “It’s not safe for you to travel alone. You’re a very wealthy woman, prime target for a grifter, or worse. Please let one of us go with you, even if for a few days. Give us the peace of mind knowing you are settled.”

“We’ll see. I’ll think about it. But it would just be for a couple of days. You two need to take care of your own families.”

“You are our family,” Ryan reminded her. “You are not alone. We’re here for you, in whatever capacity you need us.”

“Where do you want to go?” Jude asked.

“I don’t know yet. I have a couple of friends who have estates I’m sure I could stay at. I need to see who can accommodate me for a month or two.”

“That long?” Ryan replied. He wanted to keep her close enough to help her, but he knew all too well how much it hurt to remain idle after the loss of a loved one. If not for Sophie, he too would’ve ran away for a bit.

Changing the subject, Esther asked instead, “Where’s your friend? I owe her an enormous apology.”

“She’s visiting her parents in Seattle. I’m sure she’d be here otherwise, but it was already planned. Her sister joined her.”

“That sounds lovely. Please express to her how horrible I feel for the things and assumptions I made about her. I hate that I interfered and caused a rift between you and me.”

“I was acting immature. I should’ve answered your calls, or at the very least, returned them. I’m an utter prick.”

“Language, Ryan,” his mother scolded. If only she knew just how crude his language could be, or had been until Sophie was born.

“Yes, ma’am. You relax. Jude and I will see to the guests. Would you like for the girls to come and sit with you?”

“Not yet. I’m not ready to see them. Please don’t fault me for that.”

“Mum, of course, I... we don’t think poorly about you. They are a handful on an easy day, but having to be on their best behavior can be a little chaotic for them. Don’t worry, Aria is keeping them in line.”

“That’s sweet of her. Someday we’ll get to know each other a little better. Now that Clifford isn’t causing the family trouble and divisions, perhaps we can act like a real family. How horrible did that sound? Your father could be kind at times, but over the years, those times became less and less.”

“We know,” Ryan stated. Their separation had affected their mother more than he and his brother realized. They would change that, but first, he’d help his mother with her travel plans.

“Go and see to our guests. I would hate for them to think less of us.”

“Hang them,” Jude spat.

“Jude,” his mum began to scold.

“Sorry,” he said before he could be schooled on his language. “We’ll take care of it.”

Both men stood, kissed their mother’s cheek, and left to pretend to a group of people they didn’t know or care to know, that they would miss the patriarch of the family.

“Come on. Let’s put on an Oscar’s Award winning performance,” Jude told his younger brother.

Esther didn’t think her sons would ever leave. She needed to see if Chaos had responded to her question. She’d been thinking about the verification process, and the only thing she could think of was to bring a scientist with her. She didn’t want the formula shared, but she needed a professional examination. What to do with the scientist afterward was another question she’d have to consider. Could he be useful in

recreating N8T and its antidote or did she need to eliminate a potential threat?

Escaping to her bedroom, she locked the door, gathered her burner phone, and placed a call to someone she should be able to trust, despite not doing so.

“It’s Raptor. Who do we have that can authenticate N8T?”

“You have it?” the man asked.

“No. I have a way of getting the ingredients for both the virus and the antidote. However, I don’t trust my source.”

“Do you ever trust your sources?”

“Point taken. Do you have someone or not?”

“Of course I do. You can trust him.”

Esther scoffed. She couldn’t trust anyone, but she could get leverage. She knew all too well how effective blackmail could be. Hadn’t it been the reason for being Clifford’s doting wife? If she’d been able to turn the tables on him earlier, she would have, without any regret or remorse. However, she’d wasted forty years, all because he knew who she was. He knew what she did all those years ago. He knew she had blood on her hands, well before she became an assassin. The fact that he trusted her was testament to how ignorant the man was. He

might not have outed her to her sons after their interrogation, but it was only a matter of time. She had no other option but to take matters into her own hands.

Hang The Awakening, she thought, smiling at the irony of her scolding Jude for his crude speech.

“When and where do you need him?”

“I’ll get back to you. Tell me who you’re sending. I don’t want to be blindsided.”

“That’s not the reason, Raptor. You want to gather enough intel to ensure that he keeps his head down and mouth closed.”

Neither confirming nor denying his accusation, she replied, “Send me his name and I’ll let you know where he’s to go.”

“He’s trustworthy.”

Now she did scoff loud enough for the man to hear. “I trust no one.”

“Not even me?”

“Especially not you. Name first, then location.” Esther disconnected the call after issuing her order.

She had things to put in order before she left the country, because she knew for certain that Chaos was a loose end that needed to be snipped, but not before she got everything she needed from her.

Chaos, you have no idea who you have crossed.

Chapter 23

“Can I just say my original observation was correct,” Luca said. “They’re one dysfunctional family.”

Luca had arrived within an hour after they’d spoken on the phone. He hadn’t been forthcoming of what he was doing in Italy, but it was just one more mystery to add to his resume.

“My heart breaks for Ryan and Jude when they find out,” Daisy stated.

“I think Ivy’s suggestion for Aria to bring the girls back with her was a good one, but I doubt she’ll want to leave Seven’s side. This really is a cluster fudgscicle. Thank goodness Ivy and Carter will arrive this evening.”

“Fudgscicle?” Daisy asked her sister.

“Long story.”

“Anyway, Ivy knows I can’t wait too long to respond to Raptor. What do you think I should say?” Daisy asked the group.

“Don’t look at me,” Luca said, raising his hands in defeat. “I’m not the most politically correct person. What I’d tell her wouldn’t be welcoming.”

“Which is why you are here to execute the plan, not draft it,” Voodoo stated. This would be her first real contact with the former operative. They’d both been involved in Kensley’s rescue, but their assignment didn’t interact with each other. In fact, based solely on Ivy’s opinion of the man, she hadn’t reached out to get to know him. The last thing she needed was another rogue assassin in her life. Her husband was hard enough to hold back from shooting first, asking questions later. For that matter, without Ghost being the voice of reason, Ivy would shoot first, and never ask questions. She lived her life without regret. If someone needed to be exterminated, then Ivy did her job and never failed.

Ignoring the two, Daisy opened up her messaging app. She began typing, then stopped, reread her response, and then continued with her typing.

“How does this sound?”

Raptor, the vials have been moved by the ALIAS team, as we’d expected. I will meet you in Switzerland. You can bring someone to verify the accuracy of the formulas, but no others. We’ve worked together long enough to form some semblance of respect, even trust, to as much as our line of work allows. I am taking a greater risk, since you don’t know my identity,

whereas I know everything about you... and I mean everything, Dame. If I discover your failure to comply to the rules, I will fade into the background with everything I need to incriminate you. Imagine what I can do with the level of intel I have. You'd lose everything you hold dear... your status and reputation. To threaten your family would be useless. They were necessary if you were to keep your cover intact. Don't underestimate me. You will lose. Once I have confirmation of your arrival in Saas-Fee, I will provide you with a meeting location. Let's hope you can ski."

Daisy raised her eyes from her screen and waited for her team's input.

"Well, I think you are just as dangerous as the rest of us," Luca said as he lifted his espresso to his smirking lips.

"What he said," Voodoo added. "I knew you could be devious, but to threaten the assassin was bold. Letting her know you aren't ignorant to her identity was genius. Why Saas-Fee and not Geneva or Zürich?"

"Even though it's small, with around two thousand residents, it's a resort village in the Alps, and close to the Italian border. There are several good vantage points to choose from. Unlike so many ski slopes being closed this time of the

year, this village is still open in August. You'll have tourists who'd love to get one last ski in. We'll blend in with the tourists. She won't know how many operatives are with me, not that she'd expect me to have backup, not with my arrogance."

"I don't ski," Luca bluntly stated.

"You don't have to. I'll be there. We went to the Cascade Mountains each year. Daisy and I can handle getting down the mountain."

"So, are you guys okay with me sending the message as it is?"

"I am," Voodoo replied.

"Sure, why not," Luca added.

"Well, with your vote of confidence, how could I ever doubt my response," Daisy told Luca, chuckling and shaking her head at the spy.

"Oh, trust me, cariño, you never lack for confidence. Just send the message. I want to get out of here as soon as we can. I hate being in Italy."

"Wait. Isn't this where you were born?"

“Bite your tongue,” Luca stood, tossing his napkin on the bistro table. “I’m from Toledo.”

“Ohio?” Voodoo asked in confusion.

“Dios mío. Do I look like someone from the Midwest?” He muttered something indistinguishable in Spanish as he started to leave the table. The only thing Voodoo or Daisy understood were his departing words. “Toledo, Spain. It’s south of Madrid. Dios ayúdame.”

“Sorry,” Voodoo said to Luca’s retreating back. “Good grief, it was an honest mistake. How was I to know there was a Toledo in Spain?”

“I honestly thought he was Italian. I mean Rubio could also be Italian.”

“Who would’ve guessed he would take it so personally,” Voodoo agreed.

“Just adds to my growing list of assumptions when it comes to Luca Rubio. He has so many layers, I’m not sure we’ll ever know the person on the inside.”

“He might not know that person either. Be careful how deep you dig. It’s been my experience that the shields someone puts up are for more their own protection than to keep others

out. Especially those from the field. The things they have seen and done are unimaginable. Honestly, I sometimes wonder how they can live in the world without self-destructing and taking out masses of criminals with them.”

“Ivy?”

“If Ghost wasn’t there, I’m not sure where Ivy would’ve landed. That’s what it’s going to take for Luca. He’s going to need a strong woman to settle his nervous energy.”

“Strong would be an understatement,” Daisy added.

When her laptop chimed with a notification, Voodoo moved her chair closer and looked on as Daisy opened her message app.

‘I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you know who I am. I only hire the best, and that would be you. If you truly know who I am, you also know that I’m in a delicate situation and leaving immediately isn’t an option. I need two days at the most before I can leave the country. I will be bringing a chemist with me, once I find one I can trust. I could ask for recommendations, but I’m not sure that would be in my best interest. Until we meet in person. - Raptor.’

“Well, I guess we have a plan. I’ll text Ivy and give her an update while you make flight arrangements for tomorrow,”
Voodoo told her sister, as they both stood and left the balcony to take care of their assignments.

In less than forty-eight hours, Chaos would finally know if she was going to break Ryan’s heart with her discovery. For the first time in a long time, she prayed she’d made a mistake, but she knew deep down that she hadn’t.

Esther Butler had confirmed in her message that she was her nemesis, Raptor. Ultimately, she stood in the way of Daisy’s happiness. Either way, she knew things would never go back to what they were between her and Ryan. And she would eventually come to terms with that... she hoped.

Chapter 24

Ryan numbly walked from the right to the left side of the room several times until Seven tossed a pillow at his head.

“Hey.”

“Stop pacing. You’re giving me a headache watching you.”

Sighing, Ryan settled into the wingback chair adjacent to his brother.

“I can’t help it. I feel so guilty. Should we tell Mum?”

“That we might have killed our father? My vote is for a hard no. In fact, I don’t believe you should say that in front of anyone else. What if Sophie heard you?”

“This is why I never could’ve been in the field. The guilt from killing someone is like a millstone around my neck. I can’t seem to settle down.”

“First, you have survivor’s guilt. How were we to know that there would be long-term effects from N8T? He seemed okay, not that we saw a lot of him since that day. Second, we don’t know for sure N8T killed him. Could it have added stress to his already existing conditions? Possibly, but again,

we wouldn't have known that. Third, if we did play a role in his early demise, it was well worth it. He killed your wife and nearly killed Aria. And lastly, we might have taken out the person we were looking for all this time. What if he was Raptor?"

"Daisy thinks she's a woman."

"Daisy could be wrong. I noticed you call her Daisy more often than not. Is there something going on there?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start. Let's just say that for the first time I feel sorry for Linda."

"Isn't she the mother of Sophie's friend? What does that man-eater have to do with this?"

"Nothing really. It's just I now understand what it feels like to want more than the other person does."

"You're in love with Daisy." Not a question.

"No... Yes... Devil, if I know. I just know that not having her here hurts more than it probably should."

Seven waited until the silence had his brother looking up.

"Now that I have your attention. How do you know she doesn't want more? Did she tell you so?"

"Yes."

“Wait, are you saying that she came out and told you she wasn’t interested after you poured your heart out?”

“No, she told me upfront that there could never be a future with her. She could only give me now and I had to take it or leave it. Obviously, I took it. But I think she’s done with me.”

“You came to that conclusion how, Einstein?”

Ryan smirked at the moniker. Jude and Sophie were the only ones who ever called him by it. “Look around, she’s not here, is she?”

“So because she continued with her plans, plans that included her sister, after our father, whom we all hated, died? Did you think she would drop everything to help you mourn? Is that why you think it’s over?”

“You’re being a little melodramatic.”

“Pot meet kettle.”

“It was more of the feeling in the bedroom before she left and then the car ride. It was more those moments than anything she said.”

“Little brother, you need to learn one thing about women. They won’t shy away from telling you exactly how they feel about something. If Daisy felt uneasy being subjected to all the

BS we just went through, then she's not the only one. Aria even said she was ready to fly back home tomorrow, but we are staying, at least for a bit longer. Nevertheless, Aria told me how unhappy she was being here, even if she understood why we were needed. If Daisy is the woman I believe her to be, she won't intentionally lead you on. She understands the damage she could do to you and Sophie. Speaking of which, what does Sophie think about the change in your relationship?"

"She doesn't know. It all happened while she was visiting you."

"Brother, that's been three weeks. I really do think you are jumping the gun."

Then why did he have a stone weighing heavily in his body?

"Are you irritating your brother?" Aria asked as she joined them in the sitting area.

"No. He's fine. It's just been a surreal few days. Are the girls okay?"

"They are. Tori didn't have a relationship with Clifford, so his death doesn't affect her. Sophie seems okay, but even if she wasn't close to Clifford, his death has to bring on memories

and triggers from her mother's not too long ago. She's also sensitive to how your mother is responding. Sophie can see grief, even if she doesn't understand it yet."

"I will book a session with her therapist for next week. Did she say anything I should be worried about?"

"No, not really. She mostly wanted to know where Daisy was and if she was coming back."

That was exactly what he was afraid of. If Daisy walked away without a second glance, his daughter would be heartbroken, probably more so than he would be. Their instant bond filled a need he couldn't ever be able to provide his daughter. Now he understood her reservations about them being together. He wanted more than she was willing or able to give.

"Get out of your head, little brother."

"Right. This isn't about me. Where do you think Mum will go?"

"Apparently, she has friends I didn't know about," Seven replied.

Aria added, "She told me she was looking at Switzerland or Italy. She was waiting to hear back from her friends."

“That far away?” Ryan asked. He knew she wanted to get away, but he assumed she’d go somewhere closer, perhaps Paris.

“I think a little time and distance will help her. Think of everything she’s faced the last few months, and then for him to be cheating on her,” Seven said.

“He wasn’t cheating,” Ryan replied. “He couldn’t tell her about his side job with The Awakening. His silence only lent itself to doubts.”

“This is what he told you?” Aria asked.

“Yes, and I believe it was the truth. I can’t see why he’d lie to me at this stage of the game.”

“True,” Seven said. “Well, regardless of what he was doing, it brought unwarranted stress to Mum. Honestly, I’m surprised that was the first time she thought he was cheating on her. I suspect he had a time or two. He wasn’t one for loyalty or having and keeping healthy relationships.”

“Well, I’ve had enough for today. I’ll see everyone in the morning.” Ryan stood, hugged Aria, and made his way upstairs to see Sophie. As expected, she was wide awake, despite her cousin snoring by her side.

“Daddy, where’s Daisy?”

Placing his index finger over his lips, he motioned for her to follow him out of her bedroom.

“Want to sleep with me tonight, Cricket?”

“Yes, please!”

Ryan reached down and picked up his daughter. He’d missed her, even if being with Daisy had taken away his loneliness. Just the weight of her in his arms settled him... calmed him.

After Sophie burrowed down under the comforter, he answered her original question.

“Daisy went to America to visit her mum and dad. She’s going to hate knowing she missed you.”

“Can we call her?”

Doing some quick math, he nodded. “It’s lunchtime where she’s at. I’m sure she’d love to hear from you.” Or so he hoped.

After the third ring, their call connected.

“Ryan. How are you doing? How’s your mother?” Daisy asked as soon as the line connected.

“It’s me, Daisy... Sophie.”

“Sophie, oh my goodness, I’ve missed you so much. Did you have fun at your cousin’s house?”

“So much fun. We went to ride big rides and I was so scared.”

“I would be too. How’s your daddy doing today?”

“Tori said he was sad. He’s just daddy to me. When are you coming home?”

“Not for a bit. What else did you do at Tori’s?”

Ryan understood that change in topic. He was the king of avoidance, especially with some of the topics Sophie brought up.

It was a full ten minutes later before Sophie handed him the phone.

Taking it with him, he left the room, telling Sophie to close her eyes and rest.

“Daisy,” Ryan breathlessly said.

Daisy closed her eyes at his voice. She immediately felt fear, guilt, and longing, but she had to stay focused. She had a job to do first. Perhaps afterward they could talk about their

situation. Provided she could understand what her feelings were and what she was willing to give him and Sophie. Because they were a combo. She couldn't fall in love with Sophie and not be willing to give Ryan everything that she was. Just another reason why distance was required.

“How are you doing, Ryan?”

“The truth?”

“Always.”

“I feel guilty. What if Jude and I were responsible for my father's death? I'm not a murderer, or I wasn't.”

“Knowing what you know now, would you do anything differently?”

He didn't know, which was what he told her.

“I think that's what you have to figure out. If the answer is no, then there's no reason to feel guilty. If you would've changed what happened all those months ago, then I suggest you speak with someone who's in a better position to understand your conflicting feelings. Gwen told me Ivy had a very similar situation. Her stepfather was probably one of the most evil people I've ever heard about. She eventually killed him, but not before she suffered severely at his hands,

including discovering he was responsible for killing her mother. Sound similar?”

“Too close for comfort. I think I will reach out to her. Besides, I need to update her and Ghost on what’s been going on over here.”

“She knows. Gwen told her. She offered to come to England if you need her.”

“That won’t be necessary. Besides, we aren’t any closer to exposing Raptor. Jude believes there’s a chance my father was the assassin.”

“I wish that was the truth, but I’ve heard from her since his death.”

“What did she say?”

“Same as before... she wants the toxin.”

“Any threats?”

“Just some veiled ones, but you don’t need to worry about her. I’ll take care of her from here.”

“How is your family?”

Daisy could feel her eyes gathering tears. She hated lying to him. If anyone deserved the truth, it was him, and not just

because of who the assassin was, but because of their relationship. How was she any different than Amy? She kept secrets from him. Wasn't she doing the same? She could reason that she was protecting him and Sophie, but wasn't that what Amy had done?

Blinking away the moisture building, she gave him as much truth as she could.

“Parents are the same. They love having both of their girls visiting at the same time. Gwen is good. She's the happiest I think I've seen her in years. She and Carter will be coming to London possibly in a week or so. Maybe sooner because of the situation.”

“That would be nice. Speaking of coming to London, when are you coming home?”

Home. Daisy had to admit that she did feel like she finally had a home, but like so much of her life, she knew it wouldn't last. Nothing but heartbreak was on the horizon.

Yours, or Ryan and Sophie's?

“Soon.”

Soon she'd have the answer to her question. Soon she'd find out if her own heart would break when or if she walked

away. Soon she'd figure out how to chase away her demons.

Chapter 25

“I see her, and your assumption was correct. Esther Butler is exiting the lodge, skis in tow. Any way this might just be some random coincident?” Luca asked.

“I don’t believe in those,” Voodoo replied through the mic securely placed in her ear.

“Me either, but it was worth asking.” Luca hadn’t ever doubted Chaos’ intel, but he wanted to be the voice of reason. He had no connection with the Butler family, besides business. He knew the risks to everyone involved when the lines of friendship and work blurred. After years of trying to move from one failed relationship to another, deception, suspicions, and betrayal always seemed to follow him.

“It’s time to make the call,” Daisy said as she pulled out the burner she’d set up for this one job.

“Best hurry. She’s heading to the lifts,” Luca encouraged. “Do you want me to make the call so she doesn’t recognize your voice?”

Daisy and Voodoo had discussed this option during their lift ride. In the end, they believed Esther wouldn’t trust Luca.

He also wouldn't be able to pass any tests she might throw out. Besides, Daisy and Esther had spoken only once at the gala. It was unlikely she'd pick up on Daisy being Chaos.

"No, I've got it. Just keep a lookout for me." Once again she was thankful the cast had finally been removed. She welcomed the ache from the harsh weather. At least her heart wasn't the only thing hurting.

"Roger."

"Here goes nothing," Daisy told her sister, deeply expelling a breath and calling up the woman who potentially stood in her way of happiness.

"Where are you?" Esther asked.

"Take the black slopes. I'm at the bottom."

"My chemist isn't an expert skier. I'd suggest the blue or red slopes instead."

"I guess you should've chosen a qualified chemist. Come with or without him, makes no difference to me. If you aren't interested in buying the formula, I can find someone else. You have ten minutes before I leave," Daisy said before disconnecting the call.

“Oh, you ticked off mama bear.” Luca chuckled. “She tossed her phone a good twenty feet. Some lackey picked it up and is now bringing it to her.”

“Do you see the chemist?”

“No, she’s alone. Wait, hold on. She’s calling someone right now. Whoever it is is not telling her good news. She’s going to dislocate her shoulder with as much hand gesturing as she’s doing. Oops, there goes the phone again.” After Luca stopped laughing, he continued to relay the scene. “Alright, she has her phone once again. Looks like she texting someone, or perhaps sending an email.”

Daisy checked her phone to see if she’d received either, but nothing popped up.

“Well, it’s not me. So it’s either her employer or possibly the chemist.”

“She’s walked back into the lodge. She still has seven minutes, so why is she giving up?” Luca asked.

“She’s not,” Ivy said as she watched Esther from inside the lodge. “She’s being directed to the equipment department. Do you see her, Carter?”

“She just entered. Hold on so I can get closer.”

Their plan had been put into place earlier that morning. Voodoo and Daisy would be at their meeting downhill. Luca was armed with a long-range tranquilizer gun just in case. He was on a limb right before the first curve on the slope. Ivy was located inside the ski-in and sky-out lodge. From her vantage point, she could see the elevators and front desk. Sipping hot cocoa and taking in the scenery drew no one's attention. Carter, the other nonskier in the group, remained near the equipment shop. He also had a clear line of sight to the lift chairs. With everyone in place, they felt the resort was fully covered.

“Okay, she's asked for a snowmobile. They gave her clear instructions that it was only allowed on the blue slopes. She signed the documents and is being fitted. Wait, there's a man walking up to her. She nodded toward the equipment. He looks to be arguing with her. He doesn't want to be on the mobile. Wait. Let me get closer. Wish I had a sound amplifier. Ivy, we need to find a way of getting one pocket size,” he muttered.

“On it,” Ivy lied.

“Okay. The man, name unknown, has refused to get on the mobile. Raptor has threatened his family, but he still refused.

He said he didn't work for her and was never told he'd have to ski. He obviously has a healthy fear of dying... Smart man."

"What's she doing?" Voodoo asked her husband.

"She just threw the helmet back to the equipment guy. Yep, she grabbed her skis and is once again walking over to the lifts."

"So she doesn't have any way to authenticate the formula," Daisy said.

"She's desperate," Ivy stated. "I'm going to jump on a lift behind her. Give me a minute for an update."

Voodoo smiled at Daisy. Things were working out to their advantage.

"Alright, guys, she's on the lift. I'm going to change positions," Luca advised. He was resuming Ivy's post. He couldn't be any happier than to get away from the snow. What Spaniard would want to be exposed to the ungodly temperature? His idea of being exposed was on a beach, in the buff, with a couple of ladies spreading oil along his sun-kissed body. That was his idea of a fun and relaxing holiday.

"And I'm following our chemist," Carter said. "Once I have him in custody, I'll let you know, Luca."

Luca would be responsible for driving their guests to the remote cottage they'd rented. This wasn't an easy task since the village itself was car-free. Only milk-float-type electric buggies were used inside the village with a max speed of twenty miles per hour. Since their cottage was outside of the village, he had stashed their vehicle for easy access from the buggy. Thankfully, he was only looking at transporting a nonthreatening target. He'd never win at a high speed chase. The chemist didn't seem to present any challenges for Carter to secure alone.

The cottage they'd selected was the perfect location for interrogation. No neighbors close by, plus the added benefit of having an underground storm cellar. He'd already purchased and organized their tools. The only thing he was unhappy about was Daisy and Ivy's decision that no one would die. He'd argued that if the situations were the other way around, Raptor wouldn't think twice about executing them. He didn't see any conflict with Raptor's demise, despite her being related to his boss. But he'd promised Ryan to listen to Ivy when she gave directives. That was the only condition when he was brought on to the team. *"She has the final say. I may be your direct report, but this is hers and Ghost's organization. They have the final say on all missions. Do you think you can*

work with that?” His immediate response would have typically been no; he wasn’t good with that, but he respected Ivy. Despite the chewing out he’d received when he tried to woo Kensley, who happened to also be the hostage they were sent to rescue, he’d never had any issues with Ivy. Oops.

A crackling noise nearly drowned out Ivy’s message. However, enough words were clear to know that she was in the second lift behind Esther.

“You ready for this, sis?”

“Yes and no. I’ve never been in this position. I’m always behind a keyboard, not meeting an HVT face-to-face.”

“And your first one is your boyfriend’s mother. Can’t say I’ve ever been in this kind of situation either. I’ve got your back... the team has your back. We just need to keep her away from the après area. There are too many potential hostages she’d have access to.”

“That’s why we had to direct her down the right piste. We lucked out there. 2 Galen is not only the remotest black slope, but it’s currently closed for the summer.”

“Luck is on our side. See, we’ve got this.”

“I hope you’re right, Voodoo,” Daisy said, stressing her sister’s moniker.

Their conversation was interrupted when Carter said he’d retrieved the scientist and was taking him to Luca.

“I’ll get the other transporter and meet you outside the village,” Carter stated to his wife.

“It’s game time,” Voodoo replied, then smiled when she noticed her sister fidgeting with her boots. “Relax.”

“I’m trying. I just hate knowing how this is going to end.”

“It will end with you saving a countless number of lives. At the end of the day, Ryan will agree, even if he never understands the reason behind his parent’s treason.”

Daisy hoped he would if for no other reason than he needed closure.

Chapter 26

Esther knew her decision to leave her security behind was a risk, but as she told her employer, she was the assassin. Having a few guns for hire wasn't going to do anything more than bring unwanted attention to herself. Her skills and wits had been what had kept her alive during the past forty years.

Forty years! The life she'd never wanted but had learned to excel at, had smothered out the one she'd been happy and content with. At least her tormentor would no longer be a threat to her. Clifford would never be able to blackmail her again. He'd never be able to expose her identity to the world. If only the toxin had worked faster. With the formula, she'd be able to alter it so it would react faster, even when delivered in small doses, as she had Clifford's. It took nearly ten years for it to build up enough to show the effects. If not for the large dosage delivered by her sons, she wondered if he would've continued to live for another ten years. For the first time, she was thankful to have bore him children. Their existence eventually killed their father.

She wanted, at least to some degree, to feel something maternal for her children. But how could she? They weren't

conceived out of love. She only loved one man, and one child, and Clifford had robbed her of that love. Whether he was the one yielding the gun or some other operative, it was him who'd threatened her. It was him who'd let her believe that killing the men who'd taken her family away would result in a lifetime in prison. And yet, hadn't being married to him been the same type of prison? Had his threats of exposing her as Raptor meant he'd been following orders from the queen herself? Did it even matter anymore?

In the end, she was a traitor, both to her country and to Clark and Katie's memories. But with the N8T formula, she'd finally be able to exact the pivotal move in her plan. She would take out all the members of The Awakening. None of them would live to steal another person's life and happiness again.

What she wasn't prepared to consider was Jude and Ryan's feelings. Wouldn't they be proud to learn their sixty-year-old mother took down the world's most deadly organization? Would Ryan appreciate her need to right the wrong she'd committed? Amy was a means to an end. If it meant getting her closer to the organization's leaders, she would have sacrificed her own children. Her only true concern had been

for her granddaughter, but like Katie, she would eventually become collateral damage if *The Awakening* had anything to say about it.

When the lift became even with the trail she was to take, she cleared her head and remembered she had a job to do, and no one, not even Chaos, would stand in her way.

The trail ended too quickly to actually enjoy it. Perhaps she'd return in the winter and enjoy everything the Alps had to offer. Money wouldn't be a problem, not that it ever was. She might have inherited the bulk of her fortune, but she'd ensured it would increase in value. She would never be reliant on someone else for her lifestyle. Not anymore, and especially not to a man.

She could see a woman resting at the end of the piste marker. It was hard to get a visual on her, but she didn't seem to be a physical threat. Rarely anyone was, male or female.

"Chaos?" Esther asked after lifting her goggles up and resting them on her beanie.

"Raptor," Chaos stated without removing her goggles or hat. "Follow me."

Chaos turned without waiting to see if Esther followed her as directed. She had her own set of eyes on her. Voodoo had spent the last six months honing her firing skills. According to Carter, her sister had become quite the markswoman. With Voodoo also armed with a tranquilizer gun, Chaos knew they had the upper hand. Plus, Ivy was a few minutes behind and would cover her six.

“Where are you taking me?”

“You didn’t bring a chemist, so I brought one myself. She is waiting for us in a transport vehicle.”

“How do I know she’s going to be honest?”

“You don’t. But if I want to live, I know better than to try to outrun an assassin. I’m a middleman, just as you are. It’s your call. Either way, I’m going to meet my contact.”

“Has he seen the formula already?”

“She, and no.”

“Another woman running the show. I approve.”

“Not that I need or want your approval, but I learned a long time ago that men only look at women’s parts. I want someone who can see our smarts.”

Esther knew she'd found a kindred spirit. Too bad she'd have to kill her. Under different circumstances, she could see the two working well long-term. But Chaos knew too much, as she'd already alluded to. She'd found a way to identify her. Chaos had an agenda, and she knew she'd have to end Chaos before she could enjoy her retirement.

“Leave your skis on the bench. The milk cart should be here in five minutes. You nearly missed your ten-minute deadline.”

“Unlike you, I made the mistake of hiring a man.”

A couple of minutes later, Voodoo pulled up in the open off-road vehicle.

Esther and Chaos took a seat in the back of the buggy. Esther finally asked about the chemist.

“That would be me. I'm Voodoo.”

“Interesting moniker. How do you know Chaos?”

“We've known each other forever, but you can trust my assessment. My reputation is beyond reproach.”

“Good to know. How long will it take you to authenticate the formula?”

“Not long. I only need to look for the active key ingredients. If those are there, the rest is fluff.”

Esther considered her words and agreed with her assumption.

When they reached the SUV outside of town, she stood and walked over to it. She wasn't aware of the people behind her. If she had, she would've been prepared for the black sack thrown over her head. Her instant reaction to fight back was stopped when her hands were yanked behind her and the zip ties cinched into place.

“What is happening?” Esther yelled through the head covering.

“I suggest you stay quite before I quiet you permanently,” Carter growled into Esther's ear. “I just need one reason to snap your neck.”

Esther wasn't a fool. She knew she was in a vulnerable situation, even if it wasn't a position she generally found herself in. Of course, most of her kills weren't done in close proximity. A well-placed IED, the suppression on a rifle, or as in the case of her husband, the liquid that saturated his daily tea grounds, were her weapons of choice. This, however, wasn't how she'd expected the meeting to go. Instead of

ending Chaos' life, the hacker had made sure to make the first move.

Kudos to you. Lesson learned... Girl's smarts, not girl's parts, would be the end of her legacy, Esther thought.

Chapter 27

“I know you,” Esther realized when the bag was ripped off by Ivy.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. It’s not every day that I get to meet such an effective assassin up close and personal. Our jobs don’t typically lend themselves to a chat.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Esther stated.

“I wouldn’t be either. Love has a way of making an assassin a little less deadly. Fortunately, my associate over here doesn’t believe in love. Do you, Luca?”

Luca walked out from the shadows and spat on the ground before he answered her. “Love is for the weak.”

“See, Luca isn’t afraid to get his hands dirty. Don’t get me wrong; if push comes to shove, I’ll shoot you without reservation. You’ve hurt some people very close to me.”

“My sons work for you. Do they know you’ve kidnapped their mother?”

Luca roared in laughter. “That’s ironic, isn’t it. You are no more a mother than Clifford was a father to those men.”

“They will not let you kill me. They didn’t kill Clifford, and they knew what he’d done.”

“Are you sure about that? Clifford might have turned a blind eye, but it was you who tried to kill Seven’s woman. Oh, and let’s not forget that you did kill your daughter-in-law. Do you really think the men will try to stop us from executing you? If I called them right now and told them I had Raptor in custody, do you think they’d be lenient with their demands? Would Raptor being their mother soften their orders? I guess we won’t know until we place the call.”

Looking over her shoulder, she called out for Chaos.

Esther startled when she saw Daisy step out from the shadows, wearing the same ski suit as the woman she’d encountered at the base of the slope.

“You’re Chaos... Does Ryan know?”

“Of course he does. I don’t keep secrets.”

Esther saw the doubt and regret in Chaos’ last statement and dove in for the kill.

“Really. You haven’t hidden the fact that you’ve taken me hostage? Imagine how he’d feel knowing that his poor mother, who had escaped England to mourn alone, was now being

accused of being the assassin he'd been hunting. Do you think he'd believe you with just your words?"

"No, your sons are very smart. That's why it won't be with just my word as proof. You are going to tell us everything we want to know or else."

"Or else what? You'd tell my children how evil their mother is? Don't bother. I don't care what they think. They weren't supposed to be born. Clifford forced himself on me more than a few hundred times over the past forty years. It only took twice for him to cement me to him... or so he thought."

Ivy stepped in and continued with her interrogation. "Tell us why you were with Clifford then if it wasn't a love match."

"No."

"Why not? I would think you'd love nothing better than to gloat about how you took down a key member of The Awakening."

Esther guffawed. "He wasn't a key member. He wanted to be, but they had reservations, so he was kept at mid-level. He took directives, just like the rest of us."

“Interesting,” Ivy stated. “So did you kill him because of Clark?”

“Don’t you ever say his name,” Esther ordered with pure venom and hatred.

“But he and Katie are why you turned from being a happy little housewife to the elusive assassin working for one of the most horrendous organizations on Earth. How did that happen? I’ve heard of female assassins hanging up their gun for a glue gun, but not the other way around. Killing isn’t something you just wake up and decide to make as your new career.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Esther angrily replied.

“But I think it would matter to your sons,” Chaos said. “You might care for them on some level, but they love you. They will need to understand why you are who you are.”

“I have nothing more to say.”

“Was it you who covered me with N8T with a drone?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t even know you were Chaos until ten minute ago.”

Who did want Daisy dead? If not Raptor, it had to be someone from her past. Ivy would circle back to that problem

after they'd interrogated the woman sitting before them. She could only focus on one killer at a time.

When Esther didn't offer any suggestions on who the attacker was, Chaos resumed asking her questions. "Did you know your sons discovered N8T when they were teenagers? I mean, they didn't understand the risk they were bringing on themselves when they took the vials, but it was Ryan, not Clifford who stole your stash."

Again, Chaos was met with silence.

"Did you have more vials stored off-site? I can't imagine the only ones you had were in the butler's office."

That brought Esther's eyes up to meet hers. Had she not been the one who had left them there? Were they Clifford's, as the boys had assumed? When had she gotten the toxins?

None of her questions were answered.

"Do you have anything to say before we turn you over to Luca?" Ivy asked.

Grinning, Esther chuckled before bellowing into full laughter. When she'd finally regained control over her emotions, she said two words. "You're next."

She didn't elaborate on who she was talking about. Was it Ivy? Perhaps she was referring to Chaos. Most likely there were others within the organization who knew about her. Or was Esther speaking about ALIAS in a general sense?

They just hoped Luca would be able to find out what threat loomed ahead and for whom.

With a slight nod, Luca watched as the ladies exited the cellar. They had a few questions for the chemist Carter was guarding.

Ignoring who this woman was to his teammates, Luca began doing what he'd been groomed to do. He'd like to say that he hated this part of his training, but it would've been a lie. If he couldn't expel his own demons, he'd do whatever it took to get the evil out of his targets. Knowledge was power, and he for one thrived on power. Esther Bishop wouldn't die at his hands, but she would wish for death by the time he was done.

Chapter 28

Sitting on the private plane in Sion, Switzerland, Ivy reached over and grasped Daisy's hand. The light squeeze was enough for her to understand that she wasn't alone. However, she hadn't changed her mind. Ivy, Voodoo, and Carter would sit down with the Butlers and give them the bad news. They weren't willing to reveal their mother's location at that point. Luca needed to extract as much intel as he could, without her children interfering.

"Are you absolutely sure?" Ivy asked. "Running is never the answer."

"Isn't it? Didn't you run from your father? Or what about Gwen? She ran from her husband. Regardless of the reason, running was the answer."

"The wrong answer," Voodoo stated. "If I'd talked with Carter, we could've found out together who was targeting us. If I hadn't run, we wouldn't have lost five years. We wouldn't have had other lovers. We wouldn't have been living every day without a part of ourselves. If I had one do-over in my life, it would have been the call I made to you. The call when I

chose to let Gwen die and I became someone new. That was the wrong decision, and I lost a lot because of it.”

“Your sister is right,” Carter added. “We’ve all made the decision that we thought was right at the time. The difference is, we didn’t have anyone who showed us a second option. You do. You don’t have to live through the pain and struggles we all did. You have our mistakes to learn from.”

It made sense. She’d always believed it was best to watch and learn rather than stumble and fall, but this was different. Even if she returned to London and told Ryan everything, she could not guarantee him a forever. And then there was Sophie. What if she didn’t have the staying power? Sophie deserved someone fully committed to her. She needed someone who could do more than teach her to tie her shoes. Chaos wasn’t that person, at least not yet. Problem was, she wasn’t sure how to become that person.

“I appreciate everything you are saying, and I agree, at least theoretically. I’m just not ready to take that next step. I need time.”

“Alright,” Voodoo finally said. “We’ll respect your wishes. Just let us know you’re okay from time to time.”

“The pilot will wait for your destination and knows to keep the flight plan confidential. David might be friends and neighbors with Seven, but he understands he works for Ghost and me. You can trust him.”

Daisy hadn't known the pilot and Seven were friends, but it was comforting to know Ivy had her back.

“Thank you. I promise to check in once I get settled. As for ALIAS, I guess you'll need to find a new hacker for the team.” Why did that hurt so much? She wasn't going to dwell on it... She couldn't if she wanted to keep her composure.

“I think we'll hold off on that. Besides, you never know. You might be able to work wherever you land.”

Daisy wasn't as positive as Ivy, but she wasn't going to challenge her.

“What about Luca? Do you think Ryan and Seven will be able to come to terms with their workmate torturing their mother?”

“*If* they can come to terms that their mother is Raptor, then yes, they will understand and possibly even be thankful that he took charge and didn't include them. *If* they can't accept the truth, then honestly, they don't need to stay with ALIAS. We

never act without proof. We aren't haphazard with our missions. *If* Ryan and Seven can't trust our intel and question our technique, then they need to move on. And I have no problem telling them so," Ivy clearly stated.

No, Daisy didn't think Ivy would. She just prayed they both could come to terms with their mother's betrayal. They would have the ALIAS team to help them combat any upcoming threats or regrets they might face.

An hour later, she hugged Ivy, then Carter, and braced herself for saying goodbye to her sister.

"I'm just a phone call away," Voodoo said, trying to hold back her own tears.

"I know."

"So is Ryan."

"I know."

"I hope you figure out what you want before it's too late, Daisy. Don't make the same mistakes I made. Talk with him. You owe him that much."

Nodding, Daisy tried, in vain, to stop her tears from falling, but when she pulled out of her sister's embrace, she knew she hadn't been the only one failing.

“I love you,” Voodoo said, then grabbed her purse and walked down the stairway to meet her husband.

Daisy watched as her sister fell into her husband’s awaiting arms. She hated being the reason her sister was hurting. It was just one more person she’d let down.

It was becoming a pretty long list.

Walking into the cockpit, she gave David her destination.

She was returning to Florence, and the villa she’d neglected to tell anyone she had purchased.

Just one of the many changes she was going to make. She needed to discover who she was when she wasn’t behind her keyboard. She needed to find out what she wanted before she caused any more chaos in Ryan and Sophie’s life.

Chaos begets chaos.

Chapter 29

“I want to see her,” Seven coldly stated after he’d listened closely to the tales Ivy and Voodoo were sharing with him and Ryan. Ironically, and unfortunately, he believed them. Had he suspected his mother? Not really. It wasn’t a belief he truly considered despite asking his brother if she might be involved or at the very least aware of their father’s betrayal. What kind of spook was he?

“Not yet. Not until we know we have everything we need from her,” Ivy replied.

“You’re torturing her?” Ryan asked. He wasn’t a spy, so he had a hard time understanding the value in gathering intel any way possible, but he was the minority in the room.

“She is being interrogated,” Carter cautiously replied.
“How difficult that is, depends on your mother.”

“Stop calling her that,” Seven ordered. “She is Raptor... not our mother.”

With a sardonic laugh, Ryan said, “In one week, we’ve lost both parents. Who would’ve guessed Mum poisoned our

father? Even if Mother doesn't die, she's essentially committed suicide to us. We're orphans."

"I'd rather be an orphan than to have Clifford or Esther in my life. At least she did what we couldn't," Seven muttered.

Ryan didn't disagree with his brother. But it didn't make him feel any better knowing the truth behind his father's death, even if it would have cleared his conscience. They hadn't ever considered testing his father's tea. Why would they?

"Where's Daisy? If she was the one who tracked down Raptor, why isn't she here? She didn't stay for the interrogation, I hope."

"No, she left when we did," Voodoo slowly said. "Only she kept traveling after we departed the plane."

"Why? Where was she going?" Ryan demanded.

"As to where she was going, I haven't a clue. She didn't tell any of us what her plans were."

"David can tell us," Seven reassured his brother.

"No, he can't," Ivy sternly replied.

"Why?" Seven challenged.

“Because he works for ALIAS, not you, Seven. He was given clear instructions to not reveal the flight plan. If Chaos is going to return, it will be because she chooses to, not because she was pressured to. You are not to go chasing after Chaos. Give her the time and space she’s requested,” Ivy ordered.

Voodoo called Ryan over, who had zoned out and stopped listening to Ivy and Jude’s snitch.

“Come on, let’s take a walk.”

The room became quiet until the two exited and began walking toward the stables.

However, once they were out of sight, Seven resumed his stance and demanded to know where his mother and Chaos were.

“Jude,” Aria softly said. “Sit down and let’s talk, as professionals. I can’t even imagine what you’re feeling right now, but barking and making demands isn’t going to get you the answers you want.”

He took the seat next to her and ran his hands up and down his face, finally running his fingers through his hair in frustration. “I just didn’t see it. How could I’ve missed it? She

was a killer my entire life. For thirty-eight years. And I didn't have one clue!"

"She has lived with her cover for longer than that. I'm sure if she'd began when you were a little older, there would've been some clues you could recall, but you were a child while she was still perfecting her skill. By the time you were old enough to question your upbringing, your father became the best proxy for your anger. I'm not saying he was innocent, but it had to have been more than just luck that you kept your focus on your father and no one else," Aria replied.

"Then there's Chaos. I can't even imagine how Ryan is handling this. He took a double hit. He loves her, you know."

"I do. But, Jude, you have to let them work things out. We both know how outside pressures can influence your decisions. I had that with the FBI and you with MI6. A wedge was driven between us, and we lost ten years. That doesn't have to be their story. But it's their story to write... not ours to edit."

"What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"No clue." Aria lost her smile when she noticed Jude's tears. "Ah, baby, we're going to get through this. We... do you hear me? You are not in this alone. We're a team."

Seven drew her closer and let his grief out. He hadn't noticed they were alone. He didn't know where the others had gone, and at that moment he didn't care. He'd lost everything he'd known about his family. There wasn't anything his mother could say that would remove the hate he felt in his heart. He didn't care if she'd lost the life she'd wanted. She'd stolen the life he and Ryan had deserved. She'd stolen his last good memory he had of his mother. Esther Butler was nothing more than a traitor, liar, and murderer, and he'd do everything in his power to make sure his daughter never had to feel the shame he was feeling. Aria and Tori would never wonder if his love was genuine. That he could promise... forever.

“Did Daisy ever tell you about the neighbor's horse?”

Gwen asked Ryan when they reached the stables.

“No.”

“For twins, we were just as different as any other two siblings. I was the nerd, always having my nose in a book. Daisy, well, she was the adventurous one. She never met a stranger that she couldn't engage in a conversation with. We'd moved to a rural part of Oregon. Our neighbors were a mile

each way, which meant she had a lot of ground to cover if she wanted to meet them. Despite our mother telling us to keep to ourselves, Daisy would strike out each morning and walk the mile to our east. The neighbor was a widower, probably in his fifties, but at twelve, everyone seemed old. Mr. Moore was a craggy old man. He wore a straw hat every day. The first few times she snuck over, he'd tried to scare her off, but Daisy rarely got scared. So each day, she'd return."

"How does a horse fit into this?"

"I'm getting there," Voodoo replied as she ran her palm over the stallion's nose. "Mr. Moore had a barn, but he'd sold everything after his kids moved away and his wife died. I think they reminded him of a time he'd never get back. I mean, the kids came for visits, but it was only once or twice a year. He was alone for the most part. Anyway, one day Daisy had seen a poster at the feed store looking for a buyer for a rescue mare. We had chickens and turkeys and weren't equipped to house a horse, especially not one that came with problems. So Daisy went to Mr. Moore. Of course, his first response was no. He didn't care how much she pleaded, his answer was a resounding no."

"But she wore him down," Ryan assumed.

“No. He wasn’t the kind of man who’d just have a change of heart. No, that crazy sister of mine sold her share of the jewelry we’d inherited from my grandmother. She had to first steal it out of the hope chest Mama kept for us. Then after she’d gotten it all, she went to the pawn shop and got cash. Only it wasn’t enough. So the fool came and stole my jewelry and sold it. I didn’t know this for a long while, but when I did finally figure it out, I was pissed. I’m sure my memory of the jewelry has romanticized since then, but I want to believe they were heirlooms from centuries past, passed down generation after generation, gaining value with each one. In all honesty, they were probably trinkets, but she’d gathered enough money to go see the vet who had the mare.”

“He just sold it to her, at twelve? How was she going to care for it?”

“Jeez, hold your horses, pun intended.”

Rubbing the knot out of his shoulder, he nodded for her to continue.

“The vet told her he couldn’t sell it to her. That not only was she too young to care for the beast, but we didn’t have accommodations to house it. So she lied and told him that she was there at Mr. Moore’s request. That he had all the land and

shelter the animal would need and that he needed something to keep him sane. Daisy told the vet that she was afraid he'd die of loneliness if he didn't get the horse. She really laid it on thick. The vet finally said that he'd agree to sell it if he could first come and inspect the barns and speak with Mr. Moore. You would've thought that would've banished her hope, but it was a challenge she had to meet. She sneaked over after dark for a week, tidying up the barn, laying out fresh hay that she'd stolen from the other neighbor. In fact, I'd guess she got most of the goods—bridle, saddle, and brushes—from our neighbor to the west. She was fearless, but just as equally determined.”

“And Mr. Moore. What did he do?”

“That man knew exactly what she was doing. For each item she stole, he replaced it with the neighbor. I guess in some way everyone knew about it, except for Daisy. Every night she worked herself to death, and Mr. Moore would leave a jug of water on the back porch. I'm not sure she realized at the time that he was aware of her antics, or she just thought it was good luck that she had something to drink and wash with before going home. So, the day the vet was due to come, she sat at the end of the street, three miles from our house, and stopped the doctor when he pulled onto the farm road. She

jumped in and instructed the doc to drive onto the property from the north, rather than the south. From what I remember, she said they were having sewage problems and it was too vile to get to the barn the other way. So the doc did as she directed. The barn was immaculate. He couldn't have found something wrong even if he'd wanted to. But the issue of meeting Mr. Moore was still there."

"She get an imposter?"

"That would've been smart, but no. Daisy began walking the doctor through a wasteland. To this day, she's never told me how she brought the sewage onto his land, but God as my witness, crap was everywhere, and she wouldn't have done something to intentionally damage Mr. Moore's property. From a distance, they could see Mr. Moore, who was cursing like a sailor. The vet stopped and told Daisy that he had seen enough and didn't want to bother Mr. Moore. He accepted the meager funds she'd offered, and he told her he'd bring the horse the following day. He reassured her that he'd arrive the way he had earlier. And she got her horse."

"But didn't Mr. Moore have something to say about that?"

"You know for having such a cunning mind, she missed the obvious. Of course, Mr. Moore knew there was a horse

there. He was old, not blind. He couldn't miss the large black mare even if he'd wanted to. It was probably sixteen hands high. But he played ignorant. He'd watch from a distance as Daisy came every day, sometimes twice a day, and take the horse out for walks, and later for runs. He never stepped in and helped her with feeding or brushing even when it was cold and snowing. He turned a blind eye and made Daisy responsible for her own decisions.”

“What’s the moral of this story, Voodoo? Because from what I can gather, it’s that Daisy manipulated the situation until she got what she wanted... regardless of what she had to do or who she had to steal from.”

“Idiot! No, the moral is that my sister is smart. She is a problem solver. If she runs into a roadblock, she thinks and plans ahead. She’s not impulsive, despite what her latest actions might suggest. I honestly don’t know where she’s at. It’s probably for the best because I think I’d tell you, but like Mr. Moore, you need to step back and let her work out her own problems. You can’t lift the fifty-pound bags of feed. You have to let her figure out how to get from point A to point B. Daisy is selfless, which means she’s willing to do anything to help someone else. She’s having to learn how to take what she

wants. She loves you. She didn't tell me this... I just know... perhaps it's a twin thing, but I promise you, Daisy loves you. But you come with challenges that she needs to figure out."

"Sophie."

"Not just her. You're a newly widowed man. That's a challenge. She needs to make sure she's not a replacement. She wants to be wanted for herself. She wants to be included in your life, not because you need a new mother for Sophie."

"I don't."

"But she has to figure that out. Let her problem solve for a bit. Give her the ability to make a plan, and know that when she comes home, she's doing it because the loss isn't worth it. Do you think you can do that?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do. But like my sister, you're going to have to decide if walking away is the decision you can live with or if you can wait and let her come to you with what she can offer."

"I want to chase after her. That's what I told myself I'd do if she ran, but I'll wait."

“Good. Now, are we going to ride or what? It’s been too long.”

“Saddles are over there,” Ryan said.

It should’ve been hard talking with the carbon copy of the woman he loved, but like she’d said, they were as different as night and day. And as much as he wanted to chase after Daisy, he knew Voodoo had been correct. She deserved to make her own decision.

Chapter 30

Six weeks later

Daisy paid the taxi driver and waited at the end of the drive, unsure if her decision to not call first was a good one. She wanted to surprise him, but maybe he wouldn't want her there. It had been nearly two months since she'd last seen him. She hadn't spoken to him directly, but Heath and Luca had kept her informed of what was happening.

She wasn't surprised when Luca told her that Esther was going to be charged under Britain's Treason Act. Due to the nature of her crimes and her influential friends and wealth, Luca believed she'd received a life sentence since the death penalty wasn't an option in Great Britain.

Heath kept her up to date on ALIAS' agenda to find and dismantle The Awakening. Ghost and Ivy hadn't replaced her and had used her for a couple of non-Awakening jobs. She assumed they had pulled Byte into those matters. She had, however, been involved in running the background for their newest hire. While Ivy was at Ryan's, she'd met Gus and they exchanged war stories. When she discovered that his son was also former SF, they made arrangements to meet him. From

everything Daisy could find during her research, Nathaniel Messina was exactly what he claimed to be. The Sicilian served in the Marina Militare, or the Italian Republic's Military Navy. He was part of the elite special forces unit of divers and raiders known as Teseo Tesei. Ghost was excited to have another naval operative on the team, and Nate having training similar to a SEAL would be another bonus for the international team.

No one offered, nor did she ask about Ryan and Sophie's welfare. Anything she learned, she wanted to come from him only. Which was why she hadn't called. She needed to see him, see his reactions, his responses, and read the room. That couldn't be done over the phone, not even through video conferencing.

Stop stalling, she schooled herself.

Instead of walking to the house, she redirected her steps to the stables. She needed to ease herself into the possible confrontation. She could find herself homeless. He could've sent her things back to the States with Gwen for all she knew.

The smell of hay, leather, and a slight hint of manure seemed to settle her nerves. It was a scent she associated with freedom and happiness. She knew it started with Mr. Moore

letting her house Chocolate in his stables. She'd sent him funds to care for her horse for years, until one day the check was returned. All the years he'd pretended to not want the beast was what had kept him going, according to his daughter. "He needed her as much as she needed him. Thank you for bringing them together."

Only she hadn't been altruistic. She'd been selfish. She'd wanted that horse and didn't care who she inconvenienced. She'd hoped she'd grown up from that twelve-year-old.

That was why she had needed time and distance. She wanted to make sure that she wasn't falling for Ryan, and by extension, Sophie, out of gratitude. Yes, that sounded wrong, but she was grateful. Ryan had given her stability—a home when she needed one. She'd literally been dropped on his doorstep when her identity had been indirectly revealed. She'd pushed herself into his house and then his bed.

A part of her wanted him to come after her, but that would've been wrong. He'd made his feelings known; even if he hadn't told her he loved her, she knew he did. He needed to let her take the first step. He needed to—and he had—given her enough time to discover what she wanted and who she wanted it with.

So why are you in the stables and not at the house?

“Because I’m scared,” she answered herself.

“Of what?” the voice she’d missed asked.

“Ryan,” she replied, still with her back to him. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“Turn around, Daisy.”

When she did, she kept her eyes focused on his chest. She was terrified to meet his and see them angry, or worse, vacant.

Lifting her head up with a finger under her chin, she closed her eyes.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“I told you, I’m scared.”

“Of me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I hurt you and what if you haven’t forgiven me.”

“Open your eyes,” he ordered.

She obeyed and saw humor instead of reproach.

“You silly, girl, you didn’t hurt me. Scared me, worried me... yes, but I wasn’t hurt. Do you know why?”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“Because I know you. You’re not cruel. You have a kind spirit. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

“I left and didn’t call you for over a month.”

“Nearly two, but who’s counting.”

“You’re not mad?”

“I can’t say that. I was furious when the team came back without you. I stayed that way for a couple of days. If not for Sophie, I might have remained mad, but she’s quite your little cheerleader.”

“Really,” Daisy asked, not holding back the humor in her voice.

Mimicking his daughter’s high voice, he said, “Daisy is a flower, but also a weed. Weeds always come back no matter how many times you try to kill them.”

“So insightful for a four-year-old.”

“Tell me something I don’t already know. When she’d say her prayers, she’d always include you. But it was never for

you to come back. It was for you to remember you loved us.”

“Oh my God,” Daisy said, then burst into tears. “I’m so sorry. I was so scared. It all happened so suddenly. One day I was here, and the next I was falling for you and Sophie.”

“I hope your feelings for me are different than what you feel for Sophie.”

She smacked his chest, then clung tightly when he pulled her into his chest.

“I love you both, but yes, differently.”

“Good, because I love you both too, but very differently. You make me feel alive. We’re partners in everything. I’ve never had that. We’re vulnerable with each other.”

“But your mother,” Daisy began to say.

“Is not relevant. She made her choices, years ago, and sadly my childhood will never evoke any good memories. It can’t, not with what we now know.”

“So what now?” Daisy had yet to pull away from Ryan’s hold. Once again, she was worried what he’d say. He might not be mad, but he might choose to punish her for leaving him vulnerable for so long.

“Well, Daisy. I think we need to talk about what’s changed while you were gone.”

“Okay.” She knew it wouldn’t be as easy as Gwen had said it would be.

“You can’t live in the guesthouse any longer.”

Ouch. “Alright. I understand.”

“With the team growing, I felt it was best to move the office out of my home. The logical place was the guesthouse.”

“Oh... okay.”

“Which means, you’re homeless, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Well, unless, of course, you’d like to move in with me and Sophie. Now before you answer, I have to lay out my offer so there’s no confusion.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, Sophie is getting bigger and she needs her space.”

“As every four-year-old does.”

“Exactly. I’m glad you understand why it would be necessary for you to stay with me.”

“Yes, of course, the other eight bedrooms in the mansion you call home wouldn’t be appropriate for me.”

“Right. Because eventually, we might want to fill those rooms with little chaoses.”

“Wait! Eight! You want eight more babies?”

“Well, you are a twin, so it could be as simple as four pregnancies.”

“Simple.” She couldn’t resist pinching his side. She missed their playfulness. Aside from the eight children, she knew they were on the same page.

“I love you, Daisy, weeds and all.”

She wanted to kiss that smirk right off... so she did.

“I love you too, Ryan... dad jokes and all.”

“Why don’t we go tell Sophie the weed has finally returned?”

“I’m thinking I will regret telling Sophie what a daisy was.”

“Nope. One thing neither of us will ever regret is being honest with our daughter. If I’ve learned nothing else from this experience, it’s that you have to hang on to whatever

happiness and love you have. Life can be cruel, but people can be crueler. Our children will never have to wonder if they are wanted or loved. And do you know why?”

She hadn't missed his reference to Sophie being their daughter, but she wasn't ready to admit how warm it made her feel inside. So instead, she answered his question. “Why, Einstein?”

“Because unlike Seven and me, our children will be born out of love and mutual respect for each other.”

Ryan pulled back and reached for her hand. Before they made their way out of the stables, Ryan lowered his head and kissed the woman he would've chased around the world. Thankfully, he could cancel his flight to Italy scheduled for the following week. Byte hadn't had the same reservation as the others. It hadn't take much convincing for her to give Ryan Daisy's address. According to her, it was time he found his balls and went after his woman.

Balls in check. Clearing his thoughts, he barely caught Daisy's response.

“I agree. But we still have to talk about these eight children.”

“We will. We’ll have a lifetime to argue about the number. Now that I’m thinking about it, we could double a couple of them up. The sky’s the limit.”

“Keep dreaming.”

And he would for the rest of their lives. He finally understood what the American historian, Henry Adams, meant when he said that *chaos was the law of nature; and order was the dream of men*. In his life, he’d have Chaos and order, and the envy of every other man.

Chapter 31

Everyone gathered around the large table. It was the first time everyone from ALIAS and their families were in the same room. But it was more than a company holiday party; it was a family gathering.

Ryan's home was able to comfortably host the seventeen visitors. Daisy had convinced Heath, Luca, and Nate to stay over so they weren't driving intoxicated. Being one bedroom short, Luca opted to sleep in the guesthouse. He could only handle so much jolly, gushy stuff—nearly his exact words. No one questioned his need for privacy. If the last six months had taught them all something, it was to respect everyone's limits. Ryan and Luca never discussed the things he'd done to get as much intel as he had from Esther. The only thing Ryan ever said was how much he appreciated Luca taking one for the team. No matter how skilled a person was, it still weighed on their conscience, with each strike, cut, burn, or break they inflicted on another human. Knowing this person was deserving of it didn't ease the nightmares their cries, pleas, and curses tormented them with.

But for that weekend, there was no talk of work, The Awakening, the sex trafficking world, or their personal demons. For that one weekend, they would laugh, love, and drink until they heard bells.

Which was not what they were hearing at that moment. That sound was Seven tapping the side of his glass with his knife.

“Friends, as you know, I’ve asked this beautiful woman beside me to be my wife. I know I don’t deserve her, but I can’t help myself, which is why I need everyone’s assistance with this. You see, Aria wants a small, intimate wedding. In fact, those that she wants to have in attendance are all sitting right here. Being the frugal man that I am...” He paused until the hecklers quieted. “As I was saying, I don’t see why we can’t marry while we’re here. I’m a British citizen. My brother could stand up with me, and Ghost could get certified to wed us.”

“I’m already certified,” Byte interjected. “For England.”

“What? Why?” Aria asked.

“Because I’m not stupid. Everyone knew Seven would spring this on you. That’s why we have your wedding gifts with us.”

Aria looked around the table and watched as everyone nodded or smiled.

“Brilliant. So there’s nothing stopping us... minus the part about Byte marrying us. Sorry, ducky, but that’s not happening.”

“Figured. Ghost is already registered.”

“I am?”

“Sure. I took care of it, just in case Seven shot me down.”

“Good thinking,” Seven said.

“So what do you say, my sweet dear Aria? Will you marry me tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow!”

“Or the day after. I really don’t care, as long as we start the new year and leave my motherland as husband and wife.”

“Yes, I will.” Aria giggled when the well-wishing commenced, but stopped the giggle when her man’s large hand pulled her in for a sweet and possibly too long for proper etiquettes, kiss.

Another round of cheers erupted.

Clearing his voice, Ryan tapped his wineglass with his butter knife, and Daisy gasped. They'd talked about marriage, and he'd promised to give her time to acclimate into being a family, but it seemed like four months was his timeline for not rushing.

“This past year was without a doubt the worst of my life, but despite all the pain, something beautiful came out of it. The woman by my side has given me a reason to smile, to forgive, to love, and to be loved. She once told our daughter that she was like a weed, determined to break through any obstacle. Daisy is more than a survivor.”

Turning his attention to Daisy, he continued. “You are my savior. During the darkest hours in my life, you were there, holding my hand and lending your support through it. To quote my namesake, Einstein, when you trip over love, it's easy to get up. But when you fall in love, it's impossible to stand again. I can't stand another day without you as my wife. Will you marry me, Daisy?”

“Yes, of course I will, Einstein. I will always stand by your side.”

After another round of well-wishing quieted, a third knife tapped, bringing everyone's attention to Hunter.

“Elle,” he began.

“Oh, no, you don’t. Sit down.”

In good humor, Hunter bent over and kissed his blue-lipped fairy. “Trust me, Elle, when I propose, you won’t tell me to sit down. You’ll be begging to take my name. Just imagine, Mrs. GigaByte Higgins.”

“Whatever.”

“You know what my father says about that, don’t you?”
Ivy asked Byte.

“No, what does Steve Ellison, the king of his own castle, have to say about using ‘whatever.’”

“He says, and I quote... *When a woman says whatever and that she is fine, then you can bet she doesn’t mean it. It’s some secret code for, I hope you get shot, thrown off a bridge, and eaten by a shark.* Dad said ‘whatever’ is female code for game on, and the man best be prepared to lose not only the battle but the war.”

The group erupted in laughter and did what Ivy had meant to achieve, which was redirect the attention from Byte. As happy as she was with Hunter, Byte still struggled with understanding social cues.

“Before I go and crash for the night, here’s a toast to the men and women who are willing to jump off that bridge together and be eaten by a pool of hungry sharks,” Luca said and tossed back the remaining sips of wine in his glass and left the room.

Byte wasn’t the only one who struggled with social etiquette.

On a cold, wintery evening, Ryan and Daisy said their vows, right after Jude and Aria were married. In a twist of fate, Byte did, in fact, perform the marriage ceremony at Daisy’s request. The two ceremonies couldn’t have been any different. Ghost had stuck with the more traditional vows, including the promises to love, honor, and cherish. Byte, however, created her own version of how marriage vows should be told, in her expert opinion, as she informed the guests.

“Ryan and Daisy, I could ask you to promise to be faithful in sickness and in health. I could say, till death do you part. But I won’t. Those vows are for optimistic couples, the ones full of hope. And I do not stand here, on your wedding day,

optimistic or full of hope. I am not optimistic; I am not hopeful.”

“Byte,” Ivy warned.

“Wasn’t that in Grey’s Anatomy?” Voodoo asked.

“Hush,” Byte ordered. “As I was saying, I am *sure* that your days will be long and that you will love and respect each other forever. I am *sure* that every day will be a day you’ll never forget, just like today.”

“They’ll definitely never forget this.” Heath chuckled, stopping when he got the stink eye.

“Again. I’m *sure* you will make each other a better person, and no matter where life leads you two, I’m *sure* you’ll get there together, hand in hand. So today, I tell you both that you don’t *have* to honor and cherish each other... you *get* to.”

Ivy leaned into her husband, who wrapped his arm around her and kissed her forehead. “She did good, didn’t she?” Ivy asked, speaking of Byte.

“She did. Our little family is growing.”

“Who would’ve imagined we’d become a group of sappy assassins?”

Softly chuckling, he agreed and cheered when Byte pronounced Daisy and Ryan as husband and wife.

Epilogue

Once again Heath found himself in the French Riviera, only this time it was for a little relaxation. He'd flown Ryan and Daisy to Florence for their honeymoon, and Seven and Aria to Ireland. Tori and Sophie were being cared for by Voodoo and Carter at Ryan's estate.

He still couldn't stop laughing when he thought about Byte's reaction to the gift Hunter had picked out for the couples.

"I wanted to give you guys something personal, but I haven't known either of you long enough to know what that was, so please accept this in its place," Hunter had told the couples.

Daisy was the first to open the box and couldn't wait to show her husband the engraved gift. Aria's gift mirrored Daisy's, and she told him and Byte how thankful she was for it.

"Don't include me in this messed-up gift. I had absolutely nothing to do with it," Byte deliberately said while avoiding eye contact.

"What is it?" Ivy asked.

“It’s...” But before Aria could answer, Byte spoke up. “It’s an engraved butt plug!”

“What!” Ivy stammered.

“What are you talking about?” Seven asked as he looked closely at the gift.

“Byte, that’s not what we have. Ryan? What’s in your box?”

Ryan held up his gift in confusion.

“See, Hunter got them matching butt plugs. I can’t believe him,” Byte said in disbelief.

“Byte,” Daisy softly said. “These are wine stoppers. They are engraved wine plugs. Not butt plugs.”

The room erupted in laughter. Byte had to look up on her phone and prove to herself that they were, in fact, used after a cork was removed from the bottle.

“Thank God! I couldn’t imagine you two having the same fetish, and worse, that my boyfriend knew about it. I mean, I know he narrates some pretty scorching books, but whew, is that a relief.”

Heath didn’t know Byte very well, but after spending the past week with her and the rest of the ALIAS team, he knew

he'd hit the jackpot when he'd accepted Ghost's offer.

He'd just placed some money on the table, when once again he saw London. Only this time, she seemed to be in a heated discussion with a man... a man who was imprinting his fingers into her arm.

Skirting around them so he could approach from the back, he put the man in a choke hold, causing him to drop his hold from London.

"Heath. Oh, thank God, you are here," she said as she stood slightly behind him, distancing herself as much as she could from her assailant, while staying in his proximity.

"Who is this?"

"A passenger who doesn't understand the word no."

"I can teach you the word, mister, in several languages. Let's start with English... No. Perhaps German is what you need to hear... nein. French... non. Perhaps Spanish... No. Maybe in Russian... HET. Do I need to keep translating what the woman said?"

"No."

"Ahh, you see, London, he's a quick learner. Aren't you, Mr...."

“Sheikh Habib,” the olive-skinned man growled. “Unhand me.”

“As long as you refrain from molesting another woman with your unwanted advances. Can you do that, Habib?”

“Sheikh Habib,” the man once again growled.

“Sure thing, Shrek. Now get along and don’t let me see you again.”

Heath released the man, who rubbed his hand across his throat, never losing eye contact. While the man’s emitted pure evil and hatred, Heath’s demeanor was carefree and unaffected by their interaction.

After the man left the area, Heath pulled London into his arms. She was shaking to the point he feared she’d fall over.

“Come on, London. Deep breath. That’s it. Again, deep breath. Any better?”

“Yes, thank you. I can’t believe I ran into you again. Do you come here often?”

Heath chuckled and pulled back a little so he could meet her eyes. With his shining with mirth, he said, “I think we’re well past that pickup line, babe.”

“Shut up.” She giggled. “You know what I mean.”

“No. This is my first time back since we’d last seen each other. I dropped off a couple of honeymooners and thought I’d take a few days to myself. What about you? When do you have to return to the ship?”

“Fortunately, they are servicing the yacht, not a ship, and I’m free for the next two days.”

“Well, fortunately, so am I.”

“Then I guess the next questions is, your place or mine?”

“I love how you think, Miss Chambers. I like having the home field advantage, so let’s go to mine,” Heath said and walked beside her, never dropping her hand.

He’d seen the Arab as they turned the corner, and based on the number of men surrounding him, Heath knew their paths would cross in time.

“I want to know everything about the American. She called him Heath. Find out where he’s staying, who he works for, and how he knows London. He will pay for taking my London away. She is to be my princess, and she will learn to yield to my demands.”

Seventy-Two hours later:

“You’re going to have to repeat that, Ryan.” Heath hadn’t expected to hear from the newlyweds, so when his boss rang, he accepted the call.

“I said we received a message from a man who claims to know you. He said you’d want to listen to the message. Can you hear me?”

Heath was mid-flight, and despite the beautiful weather, they were having signal issues.

“Go ahead. Play it.”

“Mr. Franklin. This is Sheikh Muhammad Habib. I wanted to invite you and a plus one to my wedding. I believe you know my betrothed quite intimately, but don’t worry, I’ve forgiven her for her transgressions. It felt only right to invite you, since you were the one who made our union possible. If you hadn’t interfered and humiliated me, I might have moved on from my fascination with London. However, you made that impossible with your American John Wayne attitude. The nuptials are in seven days at my palace in UAE. I hope to see

you there. I have a few words I'd like to say before I have my intended's virtue cleansed and rejuvenated. Good day."

"Son of a..."

"Wait," Ryan jumped in. "Calm down. Circle back and pick us up. We need to get on top of this. You will not be going to UAE unprepared, nor alone. How do you know this guy?"

"I had a run-in with him on the streets in the Riviera. He was manhandling a woman I know. I intervened. I thought that was the last of it."

"I'm digging into his background, but Heath, there are some trails that lead him back to Raptor, meaning he might be part of The Awakening," Chaos stated.

"I have to get London back. She can't stay there. And what the heck is a rejuvenation for her virtue?"

"It's nothing fun, that's for sure," Chaos said.

"I agree, we need to save this woman," Ryan added, "but we also need to see what ties this sheikh has with The Awakening."

"See you in two hours," Heath said and ripped the headset from his head and tossed it on the floor.

He'd spent two wonderful days with a woman he wanted to see again. They'd reconnected in a way they never had before. But he was a cautious man and made no promises to her. Now he was wondering if that was a mistake. Would this sheikh take what she wasn't willing to give? Yes, he believed he would.

“Hold on, London. I'm not leaving you behind, not this time, even if that means I have to chase after you into a world I don't understand and an enemy we've yet to identify.”

Just hold on for me a little while, babe.

The End.

Dear Readers,

As a writer, I'm a mix of a pantser, someone who writes without an outline, and a planner. I love my characters so much that when I find a way of keeping them alive, I leap without planning how it's going to work out.

In writing, [Uncovering Seven](#), I knew Ryan's story needed to be told. He was a good family guy who needed some happiness in his life. In came Chaos. I'd never expected Voodoo to have a twin when I first introduced her in ECP Team Alpha, [Poison Ivy](#). I'd kept Voodoo a mystery throughout both the [ECP series](#), and the beginning of [ALIAS](#). However, when her story was told in [Uncovering Voodoo](#), we saw her vulnerable side, something we'd yet to see. With that, we learned about her upbringing and family... and in walks Daisy. And when I needed a hacker other than Byte, in walked Chaos. It just happened they were one and the same (again not planned).

Two other characters from previous books also joined the ALIAS International team. You were first introduced to Heath in [Uncovering Seven](#). He was Ghost's friend who assisted Seven in destroying the sex trade organizer who'd taken his

family. The second character, Luca, was first introduced in the [ECP Bravo](#) series, [Hunting for Kensley](#). Quickly, we learned that Luca was different and a little mysterious and a lot reckless. His and Heath's story will be out a little later in 2023.

I hope you've enjoyed the first book in the four book series, ALIAS International. If you haven't read the books where these characters are first introduced, I highly recommend you do so.

Are you curious about what happened when the Butler boys interrogated their father? Keep reading below for an excerpt from Uncovering Seven. Enjoy!

As always, I want to thank my supporters, friends, family, and of course my editor, Kimberly. No way could I do what I do without each and every one of you.

Annie

Annie is a prime example of what a city girl does when she moves to the country: write award-winning suspenseful and contemporary romantic novels. From her first book, *Destiny*, to her popular ECP and ALIAS series, she has let her imagination take over and fill countless pages with heartfelt characters. The Texas born author likes to travel, chase her grandkids around the house, and occasionally have a glass of red wine. Follow her on her journey at www.anniemiller.net

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[Uncovering Seven](#)

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[Uncovering GigaByte](#)

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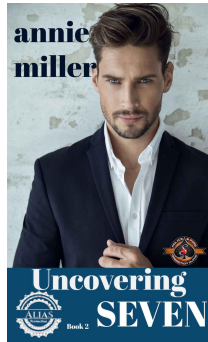
FUTURE SERIES:

Stoney Ridge Hometown Heros

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ECP Series - Team Charlie

Enjoy an excerpt from Jude's story in [Uncovering Seven](#), book 2 in the ALIAS series.



Excerpt from

Chapter 33 - Clifford's Interrogation

Seven watched as his father struggled against his binding. He and Ryan decided the night before to bring their father back to the warehouse where Amy was murdered. It looked even worse after the explosion. No one would be looking for the two men to bring in a hostage.

They'd also discussed the merit of Ryan not being seen. He would record the interrogation and even prompt Seven with his questions through his ear com.

Removing the black knit cap shielding his appearance, Seven ruefully grinned down at his father.

“What do you think you're doing? I could charge you with treason for kidnapping the director of MI6.”

“Bullocks, Father. You wouldn't arrest me... I know too much.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about, Jude.”

“I think for the purpose of today's meeting, you should call me Seven. It's nice to meet you, Cyclone.”

“I’m impressed,” his father mocked. “A spy who discovered my call name. No wonder you’re working in the United States.”

“Say all you want, it won’t make a difference. You see, I’m who you and the agency created.”

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“You know, I wasn’t sure all those years ago if I’d have the stomach to kill someone, but after my first mission and I witnessed firsthand the debased trash that was my target, I slept fine that night knowing I’d saved at least one more person.”

“Just like you... trying to validate your actions. You’re a disgrace to the agency and your family.” Clifford spat at his son, which Seven dodged.

“That’s all you’ve got, old chap? You have more spittle on your chin than you do on the floor.”

“What do you want?”

“Answers.”

“You could’ve just asked me. This is a little too cloak-and-dagger, even for you.”

“I’m not sure you’d give me what I need. This way, I have access to tools that will encourage you to speak.” Seven walked over and removed the towel covering an array of tools, vials, and syringes.

“Poppycock. You’ve wanted to do this for years. You’re just justifying your actions to yourself.”

“Could be, but we’ll never know. Now, Cyclone, tell me about Raptor.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“See, that was the wrong answer. I know you’re familiar with the mercenary.”

“Considering I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m finding this conversation pointless.”

“Very well, Father.” Seven picked up one of the instruments he knew would speed up the interview.

“A drill? Really that’s what you’re going to use.”

“It’s just to deaden the area for the next tool. Trust me, you’ll be glad I took your comfort into consideration.”

He placed the diamond-tipped bit against his father’s thumb. Looking up, he asked once again if he was willing to answer his questions truthfully.

“I can’t answer what I don’t know.”

“So be it,” Seven said as he pressed down on the gun without touching the trigger. His full weight was compressed against the drill, essentially digging into his father’s bone and flesh.

“What about now? You ready to speak?” Seven asked as he watched his father’s eyes reflect the pain he’d just inflicted. However, he had to give his father credit for not screaming or begging for relief. Instead, he’d remained silent, never lowering his eyes from Seven’s face.

“Playing hardball, I see. Okay, I’d warned you,” Seven replied seconds before engaging the trigger. The growl and natural reflexes were all that his father expressed.

Blood pooled from the open wound, splattering some on Seven’s white dress shirt. He’d rolled the sleeves up to his elbows but hadn’t protected the body of his shirt.

“You know, I used a nail gun on my last mission. I found it to be handy for inflicting pain. Sadly, I forgot to charge it... but it’s okay, I have other options. Let’s move past Raptor. We both know you’re familiar with his handiwork. In fact, I’ve discovered he was responsible to blowing Amy’s car

up. He'd most likely been responsible for the attempt on Aria's life."

"When did that happen?" his father asked in sincerity. Seven believed his father knew nothing about the attempted assassination, which made no sense.

"A few days ago. Fortunately, we had access to N8T's antidote."

"N8T. How do you know about that? It's on a need-to-know basis and you're not part of that small group."

"I've known about it for years. At least fifteen years. What I've not been able to figure out is why it's in your home and not in our enemy's hands by now?"

"The antidote hasn't been tested on humans."

"It has now. Aria fully recovered in a matter of minutes and her bloodstream detected nothing abnormal."

"Why are you telling me this, if you think I'm an assassin?"

Seven laughed. "I don't think you're an assassin. That would require you getting your pretty little hands dirty. No, I believe you hire said assassins to eliminate those on your kill list."

“What?”

Seven knew, as did Clifford, that the ruse was over, especially when he filled a syringe with N8T.

“Son, I didn’t know about Aria. I had nothing to do with that. You have to believe me.”

“You know, Father, I hoped you weren’t involved, and then I watch the CCTV. You left her room minutes before she coded.”

“I didn’t do it!”

“But you don’t disagree that you were there?”

“No. Your mother and I went to see her. She is the mother of our grandchild. We weren’t there more than five minutes, and then we left.”

“I saw you outside on your phone. Was it Raptor you were speaking with?”

“No! You have to listen to me. Your mother needed to use the loo, so I went outside to listen to my voicemail messages. I didn’t order any hits. Not that day nor any other day.”

“You’re wanting me to believe that minutes after you left Aria’s room, someone... someone you didn’t send,

attempted to kill Aria?”

“That’s exactly what I want you to believe because it’s the truth.”

Seven pushed the needle into the base of Clifford’s throat.

“I wonder how much time will have to elapse before the antidote is no longer effective.”

“Don’t do this, Jude. I’m telling you the truth.”

“You’re telling me half-truths at best.”

“Take the needle out and I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Um, how ‘bout I leave it in, and I’ll remove my finger from against the plunger. Now speak.”

“I don’t know who Raptor is... I promise. I receive updates from an unidentified person. I’ve been trying to figure out who’s overseeing this mission, but I’m not any closer.”

“And the hit list? The one with me, Bishop, and Aria on it. What do you know about that?”

“It’s real. I’ve tried to stop the assassinations, without giving away my position.”

“So, you’re a double agent?”

“Yes. I tried to get to Amy before she was killed. I hadn’t known which safe house you were at. I’d chose the wrong one and as a result Amy died. I never would’ve killed my daughter-in-law. I know you want me to be the villain, but I’m not.”

“Can you prove any of this?”

“I’ve got emails.”

“We have those already.”

“We?”

“We. Go on. What proof do you have?”

“I don’t, at least not something to prove I’m working against the government.”

“Where’s this organization located?”

“I don’t know. I’ve tried to find them for years now. I think they are all remote and not in one singular location.”

“What’s your role in this organization? You say you aren’t ordering the hits and you try to prevent the assassinations, but you’ve not said what you do for them.”

“I’m a fixer. A cleaner. An enforcer. It doesn’t matter what the title is. The fact is it’s taken me years to win their confidence. I’ve done that by risking everything I have, including my family. I’ve pushed you and Ryan away. I didn’t want you involved in this.”

His role was what Ryan had guessed. Thus far, their assumptions had been spot-on, but there were still holes.

“Are you going to kill me?”

“I should.”

“Probably,” his father admitted. “I’m not proud of what I’ve done. I went to this group with the intentions of stopping them. It’s been years and I’m no closer to that happening. I had to build trust first, then I had to prove I would do what they assigned me to do.”

“And Bishop’s death did that for you?”

“Sadly, yes.”

Before either of them realized it, Ryan came into the open area.

“Ryan, what are you doing here?” his father demanded.

“Ryan!” Seven warned.

“Shut up, Jude. You of all people understand why I’m here. This traitor let my wife die. He lies so well that you’re having second thoughts. Well, I don’t.” Ryan pushed the plunger before Seven could stop him. N8T instantly flowed into Clifford’s bloodstream. They both watched in silence as their father stopped breathing.

“I’m not sorry,” Ryan emotionlessly stated.

“I know,” Seven replied, and he did understand Ryan’s feelings. Hadn’t he felt the same way when he’d discovered Aria’s attack, or when he thought of Tori being a target?

“What now?”

“We use the antidote. I’m not a killer, but I also wanted him to see that I’m not weak or a pushover as he’s always led me to believe. Bring him back,” Ryan stated.

“Alright, Ryan. Just know I’m proud of you.”

“For killing our father?”

“No, for letting him live. I’m not sure I could. You’re a better man than I am. ALIAS will be lucky to have you head their new venture.”

“I think you’re right. I’m not done following this rabbit hole, with or without ALIAS’ help.”

“You’ll make a great spy, dork,” Seven joked as he pushed up Ryan’s black-rimmed glasses.

“Prick.”

Ryan stood back while Seven administered the drug and watched in humor as his father soiled himself. Mind made up, he knew he’d accept Ghost and Ivy’s offer to oversee ALIAS International.

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