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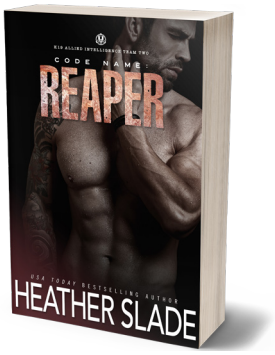

Code Name: Reaper

Book Five in the K19 Allied Intelligence Team Two Series

He keeps his heart locked down like classified intel.
She survives by trusting no one completely.
Now, they're each other's most dangerous—and necessary—secret.

REAPER

I've spent my entire career following protocol and keeping my emotions in check. But everything changed when she crashed into my life—a brilliant agent whose instincts could unravel our enemies or destroy us both. Now, we're racing against time to expose a traitor at the heart of a shadowy intelligence organization so secret that most don't believe it exists. With our nemesis hunting us, a key mentor's life hanging in the balance, and a connection between us that defies every rule I've ever known, I'm about to break every protocol I've ever followed. Because some missions are worth more than orders—and some partnerships are worth everything.

AMARYLLIS

My entire life has been about control—maintaining emotional distance and surviving in a world of shadows and secrets. Then came a by-the-book operative who saw through every defense I'd ever constructed. When I discovered evidence that could bring down a corrupt intelligence leadership, I knew I was walking on a razor's edge. But I never expected to find an ally—or a love—that would challenge everything I thought I knew about myself. With my mentor's life at risk and a conspiracy that reaches deeper than anyone imagined, I'll have to trust not just my instincts, but the man who's become my most unexpected partner. Some secrets are worth dying for. Some truths are worth everything.

1

Reaper

Charity Beaudoin. Code Name Amaryllis. The NSA operative who could make my pulse spike just by walking into a room was missing, and I was about to return to the world I'd abandoned to ask for help finding her.

Three weeks. That's how long we'd worked together in Montenegro. Twenty-one days that had been enough to turn my ordered world upside down. I could still hear her laugh—the one that had escaped during a particularly tedious surveillance shift when I'd made a dry observation about our target's unfortunate choice of attire. It was the first crack in her armor, and I'd started making increasingly absurd comments just to hear it again.

The woman had challenged every method I used, questioned every tactical decision I'd made, and been right more often than not. Watching her pick up on connections I'd missed entirely was when I'd stopped seeing her as an irritating colleague and started seeing her as brilliant.

Even our disagreements had been charged. One night in the Montenegro safe house when we'd been reviewing intelligence files, standing too close while she explained her theory about the network's communication patterns—which I'd found absurd and said so—the air between us had crackled. We'd both stepped back simultaneously, clearing our throats, and focusing intently on our files.

Now, as I glanced out at the Surrey countryside where fog rolled across hills dotted with autumn's amber and gold, I wondered if I was making a huge mistake by coming here?

"You sure about this approach?" Blackjack, my younger brother, asked as if he could read my thoughts.

"No," I said. "But we need to find her."

Amaryllis had been missing for eight days. She'd disappeared during an FSB assault on a Montenegro villa where our team was carrying out an op. In the world of intelligence, that number of days with no communication from an agent in the midst of an active investigation meant she'd either gone rogue, her cover was blown, or worse.

When our team, which was made up of agents and operatives serving on different task forces that were part of the UN Coalition Against Human Trafficking, announced we'd return to England and continue searching for Amaryllis from there, I'd resigned without any explanation beyond personal reasons and with no proper handover of ongoing cases. To me, we were leaving an agent behind, something I was trained never to do.

Now, the magnitude of my decision pressed against my ribs. Soon, I'd reenter the coalition's command center and face the reactions my unexpected return would provoke, then sit through the current briefing, pretending my focus wasn't entirely on the agent I couldn't stop thinking about and not for the reasons I should be.

Far more than duty had driven me to spend the last three days hunting Eastern Europe for her.

She'd created friction in every joint op we worked, instigating arguments that typically resulted in one of us walking away, leaving unresolved tension between us. But the thought of never squabbling with her again made my chest constrict.

Blackjack checked his watch as we approached the main entrance to the Trace Estate and waited for the gates to open.

The leaves of the oak trees that lined the drive created shadows across the house's limestone exterior. Ivy climbed the eastern wall as if each vine and been intricately positioned, and the eighteenth-century mullioned windows reflected our approach in distorted fragments.

Gravel crunched under my boots as Blackjack and I got out of the SUV and approached the Georgian manor house that had been my home base for the last two years. Familiar carved limestone lions flanked an entrance that had probably welcomed visitors since the medieval period, and the brass fittings of the chain along the pathway gleamed despite the overcast sky.

Blackjack reached for the door first and pushed it open with enough force that it swung wide and hit the wall with a solid thud that cut through the noise from inside.

Conversations stopped mid-sentence as we entered, every face turning toward us with expressions ranging from surprise to concern. I took in the space that was large enough for a full-team briefing, but still retained its historic structure while accommodating modern security requirements. Persian carpets covered polished oak floors, and oil paintings of previous owners watched over what had become a nexus for international work. The air carried the mingled scents of coffee, old leather from the antique furniture, and the faint electronic ozone that came from high-tech equipment hidden behind period facades.

I'd been gone less than a month on the Montenegro op, and while everything still looked the same, it felt vastly different.

I could see the surprise on my colleagues' faces, their eyes widening with relief mixed with anger. Commanders, along with their team members from task forces made up of agents from security council countries straightened in their chairs, all turning to stare at my unexpected arrival.

I supposed I appeared different from when they'd last seen me with the dark circles under my eyes that suggested I hadn't slept properly in some time and several days' worth of beard.

"Hello, Reaper. Blackjack."

The voice belonged to Wren Whittaker, who stood near the main display. Her unassuming appearance masked the reputation that made experienced operatives respect her opinions without question. Widely considered one of the best agents who ever lived, she handled critical intel for the coalition, delivering news that could reshape missions and even government policy.

"Excellent timing," she said. "I've just received critical information from the NSA director, concerning Agent Beaudoin—Amaryllis." Wren paused, and her brow furrowed. "She asked me to inform the team that, based on their latest intel, the NSA now presumes her to be dead."

My chest constricted, and my breath caught. The woman whose sharp questions had made routine briefings more engaging, whose absence had driven me to vacate my assignment, couldn't be gone.

Chairs creaked as agents shifted forward, eyes darting between Wren and me.

"What proof do they have?" asked Gunner Godet. I hadn't noticed him when we walked in and I should have. The man was a founding partner of K19 Security Solutions, the firm that had given me the assignment with the coalition. Until now, they'd been my official employer. However, that all might change soon given that now I was here, maybe he'd fire me.

"Overhead surveillance identified what appears to be a shallow grave at the coordinates of her last known location," Wren replied, jarring me back to reality. "They're sending a team for confirmation, but initial analysis suggests the timeline matches her disappearance."

When my phone vibrated in my pocket, I pulled it out and glanced at the message on the screen, stunned at the timing of its arrival.

"Amaryllis is not dead," I said, relief flooding through me.

"How can you be sure?" asked Devin Zak, code name Hornet and my closest friend.

"Because she just contacted me." I read the text out loud. *"Aldrich is coming for me. She knows about the proof. Trust no one from Minerva. Save Mercury first."*

Mercury—Dr. Lyra Carrington, Amaryllis's missing mentor. The woman who'd vanished almost seven months ago, resulting in Amaryllis to request assignment to this very mission.

Those who'd worked with Agent Beaudoin exchanged glances, and the knot in my chest loosened—she was breathing, living, somewhere in the world, sending encrypted warnings to people who might help her.

My phone buzzed again.

Mercury=Dr. Henning. Aldrich compromised. Proof on the way.

"I'm receiving a data transfer now." I accepted the incoming encrypted file, then read through it. "According to this, there's a traitor within Minerva Protocol who has been feeding sensitive intel to SMO—Special Military Operation—Romanov."

"Jekyll suggested the same thing," said Kima Sakari, code name Delfino. Her search for her stepfather, who was also a prominent member of Minerva, had brought us all to this point. "According to him, the corruption goes to the very top."

"Romanov is the network that evolved from Argead after Irish Warrick and his team"—I paused, nodding at the man—"dismantled Nicholas Kerr's corruption syndicate." The former Interpol president and MI5 director and the organization he'd founded had been responsible for decades of agents' and operatives' deaths. "The Russians studied how Argead worked and was taken down, then built a more sophisticated network."

Delfino looked up at me. "We didn't find out Dr. Henning was an alias Lyra Carrington was using until after Amaryllis disappeared. Same with her code name."

"She obviously figured it out on her own," I agreed.

I transferred the files I'd received to Wren, and moments later, they appeared on the main display.

"What are we looking at?" Irish asked.

"Information from Amaryllis," I said, my jaw clenched. "She's been investigating her mentor's disappearance and uncovered this."

Wren opened the first file, and a surveillance photo timestamped three days ago appeared on the screen. It was a shot of Dr. Eleanor Aldrich—code name Prism and founder of Minerva—standing in an abandoned warehouse, passing documents to Nikolai Vasiliev, the head of SMO Romanov.

"This took place prior to the meeting Hornet and I had with her," said Delfino.

The second file Wren opened contained encrypted correspondence between Aldrich and Vasiliev. The text discussed the "elimination of Mercury" as a "necessary precaution."

"*Aldrich* planned to kill Carrington?" Hornet's face went pale as he read the exchange.

"She may already have," Irish added grimly. "These messages talk about staging her death."

"Yesterday, Aldrich assigned us to find Mercury saying Vasiliev was demanding an exchange—her for Ilya Popov. She even showed us proof of life."

"It's a setup," said Irish. "She's sending you to find someone she's probably already captured—or worse."

"While I concur it's a setup, I don't agree that Mercury is being held captive or dead," said Wren, shaking her head. "The most obvious reason Aldrich engaged Hornet and Delfino is that she hasn't, in fact, found her. It's reasonable to take that a step further and suggest that SMO Romanov is also on the hunt most likely with Aldrich's help."

Irish nodded. "I follow your logic."

"Amaryllis pieced all this together," I said, my chest tightening again. "She's also out there alone, knowing the founder of Minerva wants her dead as much as she does Mercury."

Blackjack met my eyes from across the room. "We need to find her before they do."

“Agreed,” I said, knowing it would be anything but easy. The reason I’d returned to the coalition headquarters today was because I had no leads to follow.

“This is big,” said Wren. “Romanov is on our radar too. It sounds to me like Amaryllis has intel to bring them and Aldrich down.”

“How deep do you think this goes?” Delfino asked, pulling up files on her tablet.

Irish’s expression darkened. “If Aldrich has been feeding Romanov intel, then current missions, safe houses, extraction routes—anything they’ve consulted on could be exposed.”

“That’s how they’ve been moving assets across borders,” Delfino said. “Diplomatic channels with Russian immunity protecting their trafficking network.”

Hornet cleared his throat and stood. “First, we need to pool our resources to track Amaryllis’s movements. She’s been dark for over a week; she’s left a trail somewhere, no matter how unintentionally.”

“Agree.” Wren returned to her computer. “Let’s start with what we know and work outward.”

“What’s her last confirmed location?” Delfino asked, pulling up a map of Europe.

“The Montenegro villa,” I responded. “But she could be anywhere by now.”

“Transportation hubs,” Blackjack suggested. “If she’s running from Aldrich’s people, she’d need to move fast and change travel plans on the fly.”

Wren accessed facial recognition databases across major European airports and rail stations. “What aliases would she use?”

“Dr. Nora Brennan,” I said immediately. “Cultural anthropologist from Stockholm. She used it before during our ops.”

“Any others?” Hornet pressed.

I hesitated, then shared what I knew about her backup identities. Each detail felt like a small betrayal of her trust, but finding her breathing mattered more than protecting her methods.

“Got something,” Wren announced after several minutes of searching.

CCTV footage from terminal two at de Gaulle appeared on the screen—the Thalys platform. The next reels were from Antwerp, then Rotterdam.

Unless the person looking at the images spent hours on end memorizing Amaryllis’ mannerisms, they’d never know it was her. I did, though. I knew her every nuance.

The next footage, from fourteen hours ago, showed a woman in a gray coat waiting on the Deutsche Bahn platform. She then boarded the ICE—Intercity Express. The high-speed train offered a direct route to Berlin, and the travel time was six hours.

My pulse spiked. The routing made strategic sense—multiple transfers, different countries, harder to track.

Delfino turned to me. “If we can trace her through surveillance networks—”

“So can they,” I finished.

“We need rapid-response coordination,” Hornet said. “Once teams are formed, we’ll deploy—”

“I’m going to Berlin alone,” I interrupted.

All conversation ceased as attention focused on me.

Hornet’s eyes scrunched. “Reaper, we can—”

“No.” I stood and collected my gear. “She’s operating alone because she has to.”

“We can at least provide backup,” he offered. “Surveillance, extraction support—”

“She’ll only surface for me,” I said, shouldering my pack. “If the Russians have learned from Kerr’s playbook, they’ll be monitoring all official channels. She knows that as well as we do. I was the only person she trusted enough to contact.”

Hornet got up when I stood to leave. “And then what? You find her and…”

I paused, meeting his gaze. “Then I help her locate Carrington before Aldrich and Romanov do. And probably end up arguing with her across half of Europe while she drags me on another impossible hunt,” I added under my breath.

“Sounds like you’re looking forward to it,” Blackjack said with a smirk.

“About as much as I would a root canal,” I responded, already moving toward the exit.

The truth was, working with her had been the most frustrating and exhilarating experience of my career. After days of not knowing if she was safe or dead, I was about to willingly sign up for more of it.

Because Charity Beaudoin—Amaryllis—was counting on me. And I wasn’t going to let distance or regulations stop me from getting to her.