

**Friday, 20<sup>th</sup> May**

**An unknown location**

**Avery**

I was shaking and I was very scared.

There were noises all around us as we sat on cold, bare concrete. The presence of the hood scared me even more. The only good thing was that I could feel Riley's hand as she gripped mine tightly. My face was wet with tears and I had been crying ever since we had been abducted. I had completely lost track of time but it didn't feel all that long since we had arrived wherever it was that we were at.

Then I froze as I heard footsteps and voices – only they weren't real voices; they were electronic and they scared me. Okay, lots of things scared me; I was a wimp! The hood was suddenly whipped off my head and I shut my eyes tight as bright lights hurt my eyes.

"What, are we going to do with you?" A voice growled.

I could not speak; I was *so* scared. Then my eyes began to focus and I could make out movement as somebody stepped into the light. The boots were dark blue with slate grey highlights and they were *very* familiar...

"You worked out my secret identity but you did not stop – you told Riley there. *Who else did you tell?*"

That last bit was full of malice.

"Nobody . . . I promise." I sobbed hard barely able to speak.

"*Who else did you tell?*" Shadow repeated with a growl that *really* scared me and I began to shake violently as another form entered the light.

This time, the boots were dark grey with . . . with purple highlights. I was going to die.

"*Nobody* – please . . . Don't kill us . . . please. I couldn't help it."

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**Riley**

I was as scared as Avery sounded.

It took me a moment to adjust to the bright lights as the hood was yanked off. I knew who was in the dark blue suit – it was our best friend. The other one was Hit Girl and she had a reputation. I just shook with fear and I kept my eyes down as much as I could. Then I saw Shadow's feet come closer and she knelt down before me.

"Please..." I begged.

I felt the rough surface of a glove as fingers took hold of my chin and lifted it upwards. The mask was gone and in its place was the face of my best friend. My chin was in her left hand and Avery's was in her right. Chloe looked at us both and then she smiled – I felt so relieved...

"Avery, Riley – you are my best friends and I would never hurt either of you. Both of you have just entered the world of the vigilante. The door to that world only goes one way. The world has strict

rules which govern our behaviour and strict rules that govern how we must protect ourselves. We wear these masks, not just to protect our own identity, but to protect the identity of those we love.

“In this case; that applies to the both of you. By hiding my identity, I protect you both from others who would harm you to get at me. I know what you both think of my world – it is not the fairy tale that you to believe it is. People die, and yes, I have killed many times. That fact may change how you both see me and it may also change our relationship . . . but this is me.”

Hit Girl moved over to us and she smiled from behind her mask.

“Chloe is very serious about what she does and she is also very serious about protecting her friends who exist in the vigilante world. I am sure that you both know my reputation and how much thought I put into threats against me, my people, or my organisation. I have never killed a child, so don’t give me an excuse to start...”

“Stand up, both of you,” Chloe said and she pulled us both to our feet.

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### ***Hit Girl***

Both of the girls looked very scared and that was the point.

I hated to do it and I was certain that Chloe did too. I had known Chloe for a long time but the two girls had known Chloe longer. It was Avery who lifted the mood at Safehouse D.

“Chloe – I think I pissed myself...” the unfortunate girl admitted.

Riley laughed out loud and so did Chloe, much to Avery’s embarrassed consternation. Then Riley stopped.

“Oh – my – God...” She stammered. “Joshua!”

“Nobody ever said you were stupid, Riley...” Chloe commented, dryly.

The two of us then melted away into the darkness.

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### ***Twenty minutes later***

An SUV pulled into the Safehouse and stopped beside the confused teens.

“Hi, girls!”

“Hi, Dr Bennett,” Avery responded with a little surprise.

“There’s a towel on the seat for you to sit on...” Dr Bennett offered and Avery blushed.

“Where are we going?” Riley asked.

“I’ve spoken with your mothers and you’re spending the weekend with Chloe,” Dr Bennett replied.

Once the SUV was in motion, Riley spoke.

“Dr Bennett...?”

“Yes, Riley – I know all about my wayward daughter...”

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***Half an hour later***

***South Cottage Grove  
Apartment 202***

“Hi, girls!”

“Hi, Josh,” Riley offered shyly.

“Hi – I need a shower; Chloe?” Avery asked.

“Go,” Chloe replied.

I raised an eyebrow.

“I scared her a bit too much...” Chloe elaborated and she looked uncomfortable.

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It turned out that Riley needed some freshening up too, so Chloe went to sort the two girls out while I ‘chilled’ with our other guest and ordered in some pizza. Almost half an hour later, the three girls reappeared in oversized T-shirts. I peeked under Chloe’s and smirked...

“Abby!” Avery blurted out as she noticed the other person on the couch.

“I’ve come to join the weekend’s fun,” Abby replied with a smile. “Hope Chloe didn’t scare you with our little stunt...”

“Huh?” Riley enquired.

“It was Josh and me who shoved you into that van...” Abby admitted.

“You’re a part of *Fusion*?” Riley demanded.

“I’m Hal...”

“Have you, I mean...”

“Yes, Avery, I have killed people...”

“Oh – my – God!” Riley replied with her hand over her mouth.

“I can’t believe that we are both sitting in an apartment and eating pizza with Shadow, Jackal, and Hal!” Avery breathed and then she stopped and took a deep breath. “Chloe, about earlier; we both love you and we think that what you do is so awesome and I know that you only kill when necessary – are we still best friends?”

“You are both in my apartment wearing nothing but one of my T-shirts – what do you think, silly bitch?” Chloe growled rhetorically.

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“Err, Chloe...”

“Yes, Riley...”

“I know that you were injured a couple of summers ago and then Josh suddenly came onto the scene...”

I smiled. The questions were expected but how far should I take the answers? Joshua grimaced at the thought of what was going to come out, but both Avery and Riley looked very excited about what was soon to be revealed.

“Okay, just the one story before bed...”

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***The next morning***  
***Saturday, 21<sup>st</sup> May***

***Indian Knoll Road***

It had been a traumatic week, all in all.

Since my return from Europe, I had spent most of the time curled up on a bed, or on a couch, crying. Dr Bennett had made a thorough examination of my injuries, which had shocked my mother to the core. I had insisted that Mom remain with me for the examination and she had burst into tears at the sight of so many bruises. Dr Bennett controlled her emotions better, but she was still obviously mad at what she saw.

Mindy and Chloe had forced me onto reduced duties which basically meant that I was restricted to Safehouse F until I was fully healed. Neither girl was willing to take any chances with my health – I both hated and loved them for their decision. While in Europe, I had been able to push any thoughts of my attack and injuries to the back of my mind so that I could focus on the mission. Now that we were back in Chicago, I had no mission and nothing much to distract me from my body.

The first weekend back, I had stood in front of a full-length mirror for almost an hour as I had studied every square inch of my naked body. It was really the first opportunity that I had had to check myself over properly. I was stunned by what was still visible, weeks down the line. Dr Bennett had assured me that my body would heal one hundred percent. It was my mind that worried me. Would my mind fully recover from my experiences? I tried to explain what had occurred to Mom, but it was not easy and I found most of it incredibly humiliating to recount.

I had never cried as much as I had in the past week and I found that single fact *totally* depressing.

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***That afternoon***

***South Cottage Grove***  
***Apartment 202***

We rarely got visitors of any sort, in our little apartment, let alone the one who stood outside our front door at that moment.

She had never come to visit us before; we tended not to get on all that well. Therefore, I was quite surprised when I answered the door to find Megan standing there and the eleven-year-old girl was looking rather awkward.

“Hi, Megan – come in.”

“Thanks, Chloe. I’m not disturbing you? I heard that you had visitors.”

Very polite – very unlike Megan, I thought. The younger girl followed me through into the living room.

“No – they’ve nipped out with Josh.”

Megan seemed relieved.

“Nice place you have here, Chloe.”

My mind went into overdrive – something was very wrong.

“Thanks, I think – why are you being so, err, un-Megan?”

“I need to talk, and well, after Mindy and Dave, it’s you that I feel closest to...”

“Me?” I was astounded.

“I know that I wind you up and I make trouble for you, but you’re a big sister to me and I look up to you. When I get older, I hope I can be like you; fearless and unstoppable.”

Megan wanted to be like me? That was one hell of a compliment. I had never known.

“What’s brought this on...?” I asked as I pointed Megan to the couch

“That last mission . . . it scared the hell out of me. Once, I thought that we were all invincible – then I was stabbed three times as a consequence of doing something stupid. Then I was wounded in Gotham. Even then, I still saw us as being able to battle through anything, but over the past month, many of my closest friends have been hurt. Hailee was beaten really badly; I saw her body in Italy and it looked horrible – she had suffered so badly. Stephanie was hurt too. Then Abby was put at risk and almost killed. The final straw was Curtis...”

I knew how she felt; I hated to see my friends hurt and seeing my cousin lying on the ground, not breathing...

“I was so scared of losing him...”

She broke down in tears. I sat down beside her and hugged the girl. I knew how she felt; I had been so scared of losing him too.

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As I walked in the door, I heard talking and I instantly recognised the voice.

I had just been out with Avery and Riley to get some shopping. The two of them were a couple of blocks away picking out some pizza for tea. I dumped the bags onto the kitchen side and then I went into the living room. To say that I was stunned by the sight before me was an understatement. Seeing the two of them hugging was like seeing Palpatine hugging Yoda. However, I could see that something was troubling the both of them, so I dived into the kitchen and returned ten minutes later carrying three steaming cups of hot chocolate with marshmallows.

“Hit Girl’s cure for anything!” I offered as I sat down.

Megan looked distinctly embarrassed. She hated anybody seeing her cry. I could see tears on Chloe’s face too.

“Curtis?”

Both girls nodded.

“It was a tough month,” I admitted.

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“I love you both and I’m sorry I’m such a bitch,” Megan offered.

“Just be yourself, Megan,” I replied. “That’s why we love you.”

“I hate to admit it, but Josh is right. I’ve always been impressed by your outgoing attitude, Megan. You never let anything get the better of you and you have courage that I wish I had at your age. You are way better than me when it comes to acrobatics and yes, I am jealous of your skills at times.”

Megan looked dumbfounded.

“You – jealous of me?”

“I may be the amazing Shadow, but there are some things which you are much better at. I know we’ve had our differences. I know you once shoved me off the roof of a building...”

“I did *not* mean to do that!” Megan exclaimed.

“I know,” I finished.

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### ***D-JAK Prime***

As I watched my daughter assist Chloe with the class, I felt all sorts of emotions.

Megan had refused to speak about what had happened to her in Europe. I was overjoyed that she had returned without any new holes, as was Marcus. However, I had seen Hailee and I knew that bad things had occurred. Whatever had occurred had also brought Chloe and Megan closer together. They had always been a team within *Fusion*, but the two of them had never quite got on. Megan had been a perpetual thorn in Chloe’s side.

It was good to see them both getting along and joking with each other but I so wanted to know what was troubling my little girl. Mindy had been just as tight-lipped, but that was nothing new. Cathy had tried to get information out of her daughter. Chloe had refused to say anything about events in Europe, other than that Megan would come forward when she was ready.

I smiled as my daughter looked over towards me. She seemed happy. I just hoped that she would not do anything stupid and survive till her twelfth birthday which was only a few months away. At least I had had Marcus. We were both in the same boat. But for the moment, I had a new child to think about. The enormous load that I had been lugging around for nine months was all but ready to appear in the next few days.

Megan had arrived a few days late – nothing unusual there. Marcus and I both knew the sex of the baby, but we had decided to keep it a secret from Mindy and Megan, as well as everybody else. We had a name too and we hoped that it would be accepted. I was very uncomfortable and very keen to have my body back with only one person in it. Baby Megan had been a handful – much as she was as a pre-teen.

Ow! That was another kick – I was certain that the little person inside me was listening to the classes and trying out a few of the movements inside my womb.

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*This storyline continues in **Chapter 30: Epilogue of The Fusion Ultimatum...***