

**THE LAST NIGHT  
OF ALTON WEBBER  
ROBIN PARRISH**





# 1

## NOW

“How long are we to wait, Brandt?”

Ian Brandt had a burning desire to turn and shove the palm of his hand up into the other man’s nose. He’d killed at least nine men this way, violently forcing the bone and cartilage from their noses up into their brains. These days, he wasn’t as fast or as deadly as he’d once been. Yet even at seventy-eight, he was certain he could snuff out the life of anyone in this room with minimal effort. Then again, the others were just as advanced in years as he was, so everyone was on level playing ground—and one of them was dying.

He’d never do it, of course. These six men, these six brothers who formed a solemn circle around the seventh, had taken a vow never to harm or betray one another. That promise had been made long ago as part of the clandestine charter that bound them together.

Now, though, Brandt despised every member of this circle, and none more than the man who lay dying in its center, Alton Webber.

Here, in the dead of night, in this place that very few people knew existed, it would be so easy to snuff out each one of them. This was Alton's home, his bedroom, the place to which the others had been summoned more than forty-eight hours ago.

"We wait for as long as it takes," Brandt finally replied, not moving his eyes from Alton, who lay unconscious in a hospital bed.

Herman Ott, an eternally agitated squirrel of a man who persistently smelled of whiskey, gestured at Alton. "Look at him," he squeaked. "He's barely holding on. He's going to croak any second! Unless this blasted storm outside blows the whole place down first."

Brandt was forced to concede Herman's point about the wind and rain attacking the exterior of Alton's ancient home. The ferocious storm, with howling, powerful gusts and lightning that flashed like fireworks just outside Alton's enormous bedroom windows, had Brandt wondering whether the earth itself was reacting to Alton's death. It was as if the whole world were eager to usher him out of this life. Or maybe the very gates of hell had been flung wide to welcome the old villain to his eternal home.

Perhaps. But still, the rest of Herman's words made Brandt bristle. "Have a care, Herman. You would do well not to speak of Alton Webber as you would a piece of meat. Do not forget his station among the Seven. You don't have to like it, but you *will* respect this circle. As we all do."

Herman retreated a few inches from Brandt, as if suddenly recalling that this man had once been among the most dangerous alive.

"I still don't see why I can't just leave," muttered Virgil Kirwin, another member of their circle. "I've made it very clear I have no desire to be any part of this."

"You *are* a part of it, whether you like it or not," Brandt barked. He was growing irritable from the others' bellyaching; nearly all of them had found plenty to gripe about over the last two days. Brandt had complaints himself, but at least he had the good grace to keep

his issues to himself. The truth was, none of them wanted to be here, but they were duty bound to abide by Alton's wishes.

It hadn't always been this way. Long ago, these men had been Brandt's most loyal and trusted friends, and he theirs. None more so than Alton Webber, the glue that had held them all together. When he first met Alton, Ian Brandt was a teenager full of spite and ire for a world that had dealt him nothing but cruelty. Alton had expressed a similar—if more philosophical—disenchanted view of the world, its general unfairness, and the pain it inflicted.

It was young Alton who recruited and brought each member into the Seven, just as it was Alton who fanned the collective flames of their shared hate for the world. The group then chose their path together, based on feelings they believed entirely justified. But these days, Brandt blamed Alton for pretty much everything.

"As for your concerns," Brandt said, turning back to Herman, "Alton is not going to die. Not yet. If what he told us is true, he can't."

A mighty flash of lightning illuminated the room at the same time the deep, hollow gong of the manor's doorbell sounded. At Brandt's right, Herman jumped.

The five men standing with Brandt turned in his direction at the sound, and even Alton cracked open his eyes just above his oxygen mask long enough to glance at his old friend. There were no servants here this night, and Alton had no family. The Seven were alone.

