

Jesse

All this screaming is hurting my ears.

“Nine, Eight, Seven—”

Ally presses her body against mine, counting down with the crowd.

I open my coat, letting her slip her chilled arms around me. I try to protect her from the worst of the unforgiving wind cutting across our cheeks and tearing at our hair. “I never understood the countdown. Are they trying to build tension?”

Her grin stretches wider and she squeezes me again. “Four, *three*—”

“It’s not like we don’t know what’s happening.” I gesture at the swarm of bodies clustered on the balcony around us. My sides and back are protected by their mass, but leaning against the concrete railing leaves us utterly exposed in the front. If only we were more in the middle of the balcony, then Ally and I could be the queen bees of this hive, the drones vibrating to keep us warm.

“*One*—”

I gasp, pantomiming shock. “Oh look, the New Year. What a surprise! I had no idea what was going to happen when we reached *one!*”

Ally tugs me forward by the lapels of my coat. “Shut up and kiss me.”

The balcony erupts in chaos, everyone singing, cheering, and sucking on each other’s faces. The ruckus is blocked out by Ally’s palms covering my ears as we kiss. Her hair smells like some kind of fruity shampoo, and her lips taste like the wine she drank earlier. I kiss her deeper, my hands wrapping up in her hair. I don’t care who sees us or what they think.

Tonight is all about us. Me and Ally. Gideon, Rachel, and Maisie. We’re celebrating. After weeks and weeks, we finally have a plan for taking down Caldwell. And it’s a *good* plan.

Ally pulls back, laughing. “I can’t breathe.”

“You started it.” I pull her close again, kissing her.

“I *have* to breathe,” she says, chest heaving.

“Right. Sorry. I forgot you have to do that.”

I assault her cheeks and neck instead. She devolves into laughter, hanging heavy and drunk in my arms.

“Stop, *stop*,” she begs, trying to squirm away.

“I can’t. I’ll die.” But I do stop long enough for her to catch her breath, and because I know firsthand that if I torment a drunk girl for too long, my chances of getting vomited on increase tenfold.

Gideon and Rachel stumble forward from the crowd, arms around each other. Their dark eyes reflect the dancing lights coming from everywhere. Billboards. Lighters. The ball itself.

A boom makes us all jump. A second after the *boom* comes a *pop* and a dozen strands of red light rain down on us. Fireworks.

“We should head back,” Gideon says, pushing his black frame glasses up on his nose before tightening his hold on a sagging Rachel. “Or risk being crushed by the crowd.”

“Where’s Maisie?” Rachel’s glazed eyes slide from one face to another without really seeing anyone. She buries her chin in the neck of her jacket.

“Here.” Maisie shouts over the roar. “I’m freezing. So if everyone is done making out, I’d like to go check on Winnie Pug.”

Ally frowns. “We weren’t making out. It’s good luck to kiss on New Year’s Eve.”

“It is,” Gideon adds with a devilish smile. He leans toward Maisie. “Do you want a little kiss for yourself?”

My nostrils flare. "I will cut you."

"I don't need your charity slobber." Maisie flips her hair over one shoulder. "I kissed that guy."

We all turn and see a kid not much older than Maisie, also sporting the double black X marks of the underaged on his hands. He's grinning, goofy but cute. His black hair hangs in his eyes. Black eyeliner encircles his eyes. Very emo and totally Maisie's type.

What does one do when they find out their little sister has been making out with some unkempt boy on a balcony? How the hell should I know? A month ago I didn't even know I had a little sister, but our father is evil so I stole her and here she is, safe—relatively, with me. So what if I don't know what to make of her on most days?

What I do know is I'm not her mother and where she puts her mouth is none of my damn business.

I shrug. "Good for you."

"Call me, Michelle!" The boy yells as the five of us start to push our way off the balcony into the club.

"Michelle?" I hold the door open for everyone.

"I couldn't give him my real name, could I?" Maisie yanks her beanie down over her red ears.

Good point. We've been on the run for a month. No one knows where we are, and we have to keep it that way. Gideon's fancy gadgets, money, and stealth skills won't hide us from my murderous father for too long. We need to be careful until we *want* him to come to us, until we have him right where we need him to be.

I grab Ally's hand and pull her into the club after Maisie. Rachel and Gideon take up the rear. For the few minutes it takes us to squeeze past the crowd toward the street, we're warm. The collective body heat of a hundred revelers is welcome despite the sour smell of beer and sweat. And unless I'm mistaken, that *tang* is vomit. Gross.

I reach forward and grab Maisie's hand so we don't get separated. She twines her cool fingers with their chipping black nail polish in mine and pulls all of us out toward the street. We regroup on the sidewalk as people shoulder past us on all sides. The fierce wind picks up right where it left off, gnawing ruthlessly at my cheeks. I wrap my blood-red scarf tighter around my head in a feeble attempt to protect myself.

Ally slips her arms around my waist, and I tuck her icy hands into my pockets. She is so cuddly when she's drunk. I love it. I should keep her drunk all the time. She's brilliant and can spare the brain cells, but alas, I guess there's her liver to consider.

Maisie leads our little group in the direction of our hotel. Thank god, it's only about five blocks away. I don't know how much of this bitter wind I can take. I see more drunk people than I've ever seen in my life. I've only had two Shirley Temples, which left a sloshy feeling in my stomach that I tried to soak up with super greasy cheese sticks.

A *really* dumb idea.

I probably feel as nauseated as the drunk people shambling around me.

As soon as I see the neon sign of our hotel glowing overhead, I break from the group and rush into the warm lobby. I yank my scarf off my head, pulling the breath-damp fabric off of my face.

"I'm sick of being cold." I groan. "I'm so glad we're heading—"

Gideon shoots me a look that I've memorized at this point. *Don't say anything until we're in the suite.*

"—somewhere warm." I roll my eyes and pile into the elevator with them. Rachel is so drunk she mashes the buttons for floors 14 and 16 before managing to hit the correct button, number 15.

Somehow we make it to the room, a suite at the end of a beige hallway with red carpet. Gideon slides the keycard in and out of the slot and the light flickers green.

Maisie is the first one in. "Winnie Pug? Pug-Pug where are you?"

The pug in question leaps off a white Victorian chaise and runs toward her. He presents his belly for a rub in three seconds flat.

The rest of us squeeze past them into the foyer of the suite. This hotel room alone is nicer than any house I've ever slept in, but that's Gideon for you. Rachel made the suggestion that we sleep in an abandoned house one night on the road from Chicago to New York, and he snorted and arched his eyebrows at her. Then in the most self-righteous tone I'd ever heard, he said, "I have two legs not four. *I do not sleep on the ground.*"

Gideon throws his keycard on the lacquered table by the door. Ally and I kick off our shoes. Rachel pulls off just about every layer of clothing she swaddled herself in except her underwear.

"Well then," Ally says, nodding at Rachel's boobs. "Good night."

Rachel stumbles into her unlit bedroom without a word of acknowledgement.

"Such a good boy," Maisie coos, scratching Winston's ears, then patting his fat belly. "You wanna go out? Let's go out."

I give Winston's ears a good scratch while Maisie finds his leash on a table by the door and slips it over his head. He prances circles around her, too excited to make the harnessing easy.

"Take Gideon's shield thingy." I point at the device on the counter.

"It's freezing out there," Ally reminds her, still hanging on to me. "Go to the little pee patch and come right back."

"Yes, Mother." Maisie's tone is annoyed, but she's smiling. I think she likes the way Ally babies her, even though Ally can't be more than nine years older than Maisie herself. But the kid is taking it well, the whole 'never-supervised' thing. This little two-minute jaunt with Winston is about as much space and freedom as she's had in her months with us.

Gideon disappears into the bedroom after Rachel and softly closes the door behind them. I nudge Ally toward the couch.

"So what'll it be?" I ask her. "Water? Juice? I don't think we actually have Gatorade, but I can walk down to the store."

"Water's fine." Ally falls back against cushions and grins up at me. A light pink blush spreads over her cheeks. She finger-combs her hair. "My hair is so pretty. I love my hair."

I snort. "I love your hair too."

"What else about me is cute?" she asks.

"Everything." I fluff the pillow for her and search the room for a blanket. I yank a red velvety throw off the back of a chair as Gideon slips out of the bedroom and passes me on his way to the mini fridge. He grabs one of the wrapped water glasses from the bar above.

"Grab us one too." I have zero problems assigning tasks to other people. Sometimes I wonder if it was a mistake going into death-replacing. Sure, I was a great death replacement agent, and dying for other people is cool, but I'm really good at bossing people around.

It's like a calling.

Gideon fills two water glasses with some fancy bottled water from the fridge and hands me a glass. I don't dare remind him that Ally vowed not to drink this water yesterday. She ranted about the effect of plastic on the environment for ten whole minutes. I could've reminded her that the planet is about to explode anyway, but that meant Gideon would've won the argument and I'm Team Ally all the way.

I put the glass of water in her hand. What she doesn't know won't hurt her. "Here you go. Drink up."

She waves her water around. "I just feel so *good*, you know?"

I smile. "I can tell."

She runs a hand through her hair. "It's a new year. A new beginning. And we have a great plan for kicking Caldwell's butt."

“We do.”

“And you’re so cute and you *kissed* me.”

With arched eyebrows, Gideon closes the bedroom door behind him. Thankfully, the sound of the television comes on, affording us some privacy.

I sink down onto the sofa beside her. “I’ll do it again if you want me too. I’ll kiss you a *million* times.”

She bites her lip and I’m about to lose it. I lean forward to kiss her but she starts talking again, so I hang there mid-smooch, lips puckered.

“Life is so good right now. No one is stabbing us, burying us alive, beating us up, or kidnapping the dog,” she goes on, her voice echoing inside her water glass. Her face pinches. “That means we are probably about to die.”

I press my lips together and sigh. “Don’t say that. You’ll jinx us.”

It’s difficult getting her to sit up, but I manage it. I want her to drink this water. I tilt the glass toward her lips, encouraging her.

“This is good,” she says and frowns at the water. “Is this tap water?”

“Yep.”

“Because I’m not drinking that \$15 water Gideon bought.”

“It’s tap,” I say again. “You’re just too drunk to taste it.”

Ally shrugs and finishes the glass. Then she hands me her empty glass.

“You want more?”

“No,” she grins. “I want something else.”

“We’ve got chips, but that’s about it. And Rachel can’t close a bag to save her life, so they’re probably stale.”

She shakes her head, grinning.

Then I realize what she’s saying.

“*Oh.*” I smile. “Okay.”

She crawls over the pillow between us and pulls herself into my lap. She straddles me, wrapping her arms around my neck. She kisses me once on the cheek, probably a missed target rather than a sweet gesture, and then manages to get my mouth the second time.

She pulls back. “God, is it you or is it really hot in here?”

“We’re still wearing our coats.”

She laughs and looks down at herself. “Oh. Right.”

I reach up behind her and pull her jacket off. “Better?”

She snuggles up to me. “You’re still hot.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

“Let me help you take your coat off.”

“Okay.” I let her attempt to pull off the jacket, but it’s not really going anywhere and she accidentally pulls my hair twice. So I help her get my jacket off and throw it over the arm of the sofa. One of the throw pillows falls to the floor with a *poof*.

Ally doesn’t stop there. She slips her hands under my shirt, giving me a curious look. “Is this okay?”

I try to find the voice to tell her it’s more than okay. She would have been naked an hour ago in the grubby bathroom of some bar if she wasn’t such a germaphobe.

She is so beautiful. Her eyes are bright, reflecting the lamplight. Her face is flushed from the alcohol, her smile lazy. Her eyes half-closed. My heart pounds in my chest, thudding against my ribs so hard it hurts.

“What’s wrong?” A frown creases her face and I think she can hear my heart throbbing. “Don’t you think I’m pretty?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

I reach up and pull her down into my arms. I kiss her, even more deeply than I did on the balcony. I slip my hand under her shirt and unsnap her bra with one twist of my fingers.

She gasps in my mouth and the sound of it makes my whole body shudder.

“Lay down,” I command.

She laughs, surprised, but her voice goes all deep and breathy. “Yes, *sir*.”

I climb on top of her, positioning myself between her legs. I kiss her neck and she squirms, bucking her hips up against mine.

“Do you love me?” she asks.

“More than anyone.”

“Are you sure?”

I cover her mouth with mine. “Please stop talking.” I pull back. “Unless you want me to stop.”

“No, no.” She grabs the front of my hoodie, twisting it up in her fists and pulls me down on top of her.

I have the button of her jeans between my forefinger and thumb when a voice calls behind me.

“I am very sorry to interrupt, but you need to see this.”

Gideon stands in the living room, his back to the bedroom he shares with Rachel.

“Great timing.” I glare. “Can it wait?”

Gideon frowns. “No.”

“Ugh.” I pull myself off of Ally.

“You too,” Gideon says to Ally. “If you’re feeling all right.”

“I’m fine.” She fusses with her shirt, trying to make it lay right, but that’s hard to do with an unclasped bra bulging through the front. Ally crosses her arms over her chest and Gideon has the decency to let his gaze slide away.

“I’m not *fine*,” I grumble as I pass him.

“The news ends in a few minutes. Then you can go back to doing whatever you like, if you can stomach it.” Gideon’s voice is grave.

I search his face for the source of his tone. He points to the bedroom, where the blue light of the TV dances along the walls.

I creep inside, trying to be quiet, until I realize Rachel is snoring louder than a train. Gideon put her in her PJs, but the glass of water sits untouched on the nightstand beside her.

Gideon lifts the remote from the bedside table and turns up the volume. I don’t need to hear to know I’m not going to like this.

Caldwell, my homicidal father, stands behind a podium, his face a mask of grief. Tears that I’m certain are fake as hell stream down his cheeks. Even in his beautifully tailored suit and nice haircut, he looks like shit. The woman beside him, Maisie’s mother Georgia, doesn’t look any better. Her hair is disheveled and thick black smears from her eyes to her chin.

“We want our daughter back. We want all of this to end.” Caldwell panders to the sympathetic crowd. The camera sweeps the masses, and there isn’t a dry cheek in the house.

“When was this?” I ask Gideon.

“It must’ve run earlier today. I’m surprised they didn’t broadcast it in Times Square,” he says, deep creases forming between his eyes.

“We want the people responsible for this to be brought to justice. We’ll give a reward to anyone who provides information on our Maisie.”

The camera cuts to the reporter, who also has tears in her eyes. “The following suspects are wanted for questioning in this case: Jesse Sullivan—”

My mugshot from last year flashes up on the screen. Not the most flattering picture, I must say.

“Rachel Wright—”

Rachel wearing her mental hospital gown flashes up on the screen next. At least she looks a little worse than I did. If she sees this, she's going to go ballistic. The fact she was on television without makeup and not dressed to the nines will definitely cause an uproar.

"Alice Gallagher—" Ally's driver's license photo fills the top right of the screen, making our square 3/4 complete.

"Captain Gloria Jackson—" An old photo of Gloria from her days in the military is the last to appear. She looks sharp in her uniform, her face and eyes somber.

"A fifth suspect, possibly a radical Islamic terrorist, is believed to be assisting them. They are responsible for the bombings in Chicago that took so many lives."

"What racist bullshit." I half-choke on the words. "Caldwell blew up the city himself!"

"Any information leading to the capture of these criminals or the return of Maisie Caldwell will be generously rewarded."

Gideon turns off the screen. "The first part of the program presented Maisie's disappearance as an attack against the Church. They are arguing that some have radicalized against the unification of the Church and seek retribution by harming the daughter of its leader."

I squeeze my head as if to keep the anger from splitting it in two. There are so many problems with this I don't even know where to begin. I end up shouting, "You're not a terrorist!"

"It doesn't matter." He flashes me a weak smile. "I look like a terrorist, and my devices can't hide us from the public. We are only hidden from technology. Someone will spot us on the streets."

"We aren't abandoning the plan!" No, no, *no*. We are so close to killing him once and for all. Caldwell, the evil son-of-a-bitch who murdered my handler Brinkley, abandoned me, mentally abused Maisie, and is responsible for the genocide of *hundreds of thousands* of people. No. I won't stop until he is cold in my grip.

"Jesse." Ally places one hand on my arm. Her eyes are big and round, and more alert than they've been in the last few hours. "If we're caught and we go to jail, we won't get our chance."

She's right. Dammit.

I look up at Gideon. "But what about our plan?"

"It can still work. With a few minor alterations, it can still work."

I accept his answer with a sense of unease. I wish I could ask Gabriel what he thought, but I've only seen him twice since we left Chicago. Until he became absolutely inaccessible, I hadn't realized how much I'd come to depend on the advice of my angel. I know he's still there. I can *feel* him so to speak, but he can't materialize as long as Rachel, Maisie, and I are together. Inconvenient.

"Just don't tell Maisie," I say at last, looking from Ally's face to Gideon's. "If she knows, she'll do something stupid and heroic."

Gideon clears his throat and cuts his eyes over my shoulder.

I turn and find Maisie standing in the doorway, her expression grim. Winston sits at her feet, his collar and leash still around his neck.

She's heard every word.