

Chapter 1

Jesse

“Come on,” I wail. “Jumping out of a burning building is not the craziest thing we’ve ever done!”

“If you hadn’t panicked, the building wouldn’t be on fire,” Ally snaps back. She tucks the bundled laptop under her arm and starts yanking open desk drawers. Post-it notes of every color fly through the air, followed by pens, a stapler, paperclips and a Kleenex box.

I search the open office space for another door. Nada. Only one way in and out.

“I had to do something.” I thought firebombing the bad guy was my one good idea on this mission to retrieve a laptop for Jeremiah. “If I hadn’t, we’d still be stuck with *him*.”

We both turn our gaze to the locked door twenty feet away. A row of unoccupied desks rests between us and where we entered. The office is spacious, with rows of silver tabletops running the length of the room. Spacious—but not spacious enough with a homicidal maniac just on the other side of the door.

Something large slams into the locked office door, rattling the walls. Ominous black smoke seeps through the cracks and the smell of campfire wafts in. That smell is surely going to cling to my hair until I wash it.

“Just because we’ve been reckless before doesn’t excuse it now.” Ally slams a desk drawer shut and yanks another open. Her disheveled blonde hair hides most of her face, revealing only terrified eyes. She gives up trying to find a weapon in the desk drawer and hurries to the window. Her gaze falls on the street below. “God, Jesse. *No*. We’ll never survive a fall from this height.”

I shrug and pucker my lips. “It’s fine. I’ve fallen from higher. We’ll be fine.”

She blinks at me.

“You’re forgetting about my shield thingy.” I’m talking out of my ass here, but there is no way I’m letting him come in here and hurt her. He can trade punches with me all day if he wants, but not with Ally. I’ll have to find a way to break the window, jump out, and shield her on the way down.

The door shakes for the fourth time and a thick crack appears to the left of the jamb. A thicker plume of black smoke rolls through the crack and floats to the ceiling. The white popcorn tiles disappear beneath the black fog.

I go to the window and look through the glass beside her. The glass is cold under my palms and my breath fogs on the surface despite the growing heat of the room. Down below, tiny cars cut corners around buildings. One could easily be mistaken for a child’s toy.

Shit, it really *is* far down.

I meet Ally's eyes and shrug. "We don't have a lot of options."

Sweat forms at my hairline and in the folds where my coat sits snug against my body. Chicago shines brightly around us, each pinpoint of light from the buildings and streets illuminating the dark sky.

My gaze flits from building to building, from illuminated window to illuminated window, but I don't see salvation. We aren't close enough to another skyscraper to signal for help. No scaffolding or window-washer platform is available to carry us to the safety of solid ground or to the roof above, where we were supposed to meet Jeremiah.

The coms in our ears buzz incoherently for the billionth time. Ally sighs in irritation. As the coms stop crackling she mashes the speak button flat with her thumb. "For the thousandth time, we can't understand you. Something is wrong with our signal. If you can hear us, we are on the 34th floor of the Jensen building and we're trapped. Send help." A look of resolution solidifies on Ally's face. "Jason's going to kill us."

"No." I squeeze her arm. "So what if he's like a hell-bent terminator with unlimited healing ability." I snort, trying to hide my panic. "I've got this."

She cocks her head. "It's great you have firebombs and shields but we have to be careful. We don't know the repercussions of your powers yet."

"And getting ourselves locked in burning buildings with raging madmen is playing it *so* safe."

"You know what I mean." She steps away from the window and shifts the laptop in her arms. She yanks open more office drawers.

I arch an eyebrow. "A paper cut isn't going to hurt him."

"Paper cuts hurt." She forces a smile. "But we need something to slow him down. And you're not helping."

I throw my hands up and pick an aisle of desks. After uselessly searching two drawers, I lift one of the office chairs and immediately know this flimsy, ergonomic piece of crap won't be able to break a window. I throw it anyway. It bounces off the glass and comes back at me with a vengeance, clipping my knee.

"Fuckity fuck! Ow. *Ow*."

Ally looks up from the drawer and scowls at me. "Injuring yourself before he even breaks into the room is not what I had in mind."

I give her a hard stare, rubbing my throbbing knee and stumbling to another desk.

I have half a mind to remind her that it wasn't *my* idea to come to Chicago. I was happy in Nashville. Sure, my boyfriend Lane—ex-boyfriend—wasn't talking to me, but everything else was okay. The first time Jason, the insta-healing terminator tried to rip my head off, Ally had a fit. Jeremiah capitalized on it, of course.

Come to Chicago where it's safer. We have more people and more power there. And Caldwell is up to something in the city. We could really use the extra hands.

I just wanted to stay in bed and mourn Brinkley, the man who'd given his life trying to kill Caldwell. Everyone else keeps acting like I'm supposed to be working here.

The crack in the door widens and I see an angry eye fix on me. Jason screams as if the very sight of me enrages him.

Gabriel appears at a desk two rows up from the one I'm searching. He flickers in and out, unable to hold his form with another partis—a weirdo with powers like me—nearby. He's crystal clear when I'm alone, but when there's two or more partis, I'm lucky if Gabriel can materialize at all. This is real inconvenient given that I need him most when the others show up looking for a fight.

“Here.” Gabriel points at a giant rock sitting on top of one of the desks. “Use this.”

No, not a rock, I realize. I place my hands on the massive stone. It's an amethyst the size of a grapefruit. Beside it sits a little note: *Don't touch me. Please. You'll change my energy.*

I look up, but Gabriel's gone.

I lift the rock off the desktop. It sinks into my palms like dead weight, the purple spikes poking my flesh. “Sorry, but I need your energy to club this fucker.”

I meet eyes with Jason again as he inches his fingers through the crack and starts swiping at the locking mechanism we latched behind us.

“Get over here,” I shout to Ally.

Ally makes it halfway across the room before the door explodes. Splinters the size of my leg fly at my face. I duck behind the desk, clutching the gigantic stone to my chest.

I peek over the tabletop and see Jason standing in the flames. His body smolders. His blistered arm melts from burnt to scabby to pink. He spots me behind the desk and we lock eyes. His face twists into a murderous grin.

“Stop hiding,” he calls out. “Let's do this.”

In my peripheral vision, Ally darts to another desk, staying low.

Jason takes a step toward me. “Just think, this power could be yours if you'd challenge me already.”

“Fighting is such a commitment.” I stand slowly, but keep the desk between us. I'm hoping it buys me time if he does anything crazy like lunge for my throat. “You have to get close. You have to touch people. Sometimes, like you, they *smell*. No, thank you.”

Jason's face goes perfectly smooth. Was it something I said?

A flash of black wings catches my eye. Gabriel's still here, even if he can't materialize. The scent of rain overtakes me as Gabriel dials up my power. My muscles contract and my body warms. My skin starts to itch around the collar of my shirt and across my belly. I feel like I have to pee.

I try not to squirm. “You know who else is in the city? Caldwell. Why don’t you kill him instead?”

Jason’s face twists up in fury again. “After I’m finished with you.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” I would put my hands on my hip if not for the giant amethyst. “Don’t you think I’m a badass?”

“You’re smaller.”

My temper flares. “You’re trying to kill me because I’m *short*?”

Ally coughs on the smoke filling the room and I jerk my head toward the sound. Jason doesn’t hesitate.

“Jesse!” Gabriel’s voice booms in my head.

My soul rips open, power exploding from my center in all directions. It’s like someone is yanking my intestines out of my belly button. I’m so overwhelmed but I can’t stop the power from flooding out of me or even slow it down.

Fire and smoke whoosh away from me as if blown by a great wind. The air around me shimmers like pavement on a hot day. Blue flames roll over the surface of my body, suspended about three inches above my skin before erupting outward toward Jason, the office around us and anything else in its path. The only object that is safe is the amethyst cradled in my hands.

The walls and ceiling shudder under the force of my firebomb, raining dust and plaster down on our heads. One minute the windows shatter, and glass spills out into the night air. The next minute cold winter air is sucked into the room.

I open my eyes and find Jason sprawled on the floor, unconscious. My power blast knocked him out, burned his skin, but didn’t kill him. Damn.

I come around the desk, or what is left of it, and peer closer. His flesh is already healing.

I try to use my breath to slow my heart rate. I need to calm down, but my head is throbbing.

“Ally?”

No answer.

“Ally!”

“Here.” She pulls herself to standing in the middle of a cluster of desks that had obviously been pushed together in the blast.

She shakes glass out of her hair and checks the laptop in her arms for damage.

“Kill him,” Gabriel says in my ear. The weight of the amethyst doubles in my hands. “*Kill* him.”

The idea of killing Jason and taking his healing powers appeals to me. Instead of having to die in order to heal myself, I could simply stay alive, and after a few breaths, be as good as new again. Wasn’t that a hell of a prospect? Less pain. Less wasted time. Less danger for myself and the people around me.

I lift the amethyst, my eyes fixed on his skull.

“Jesse.”

I lift the rock a little higher as a strange calm washes over me. No, more than calm. Peace tinged with excitement. Oh god, I *want* to kill him. I don't think I've ever wanted to kill anyone.

“*Jesse.*”

Ally's face appears in front of mine. Eye to eye, she blocks my view of Jason. “Baby.” She's whispering. “We need to get out of here.”

Her voice. Something about Ally's voice seeps into my mind and untangles my thoughts. The cold hand inside me, the one delighting at the idea of peeling Jason open and stealing his ability to heal, grows warm. Its hold on me slackens as her brown eyes come into focus. I can't murder someone in front of Ally. What the hell am I thinking?

My muscles relax and I let the amethyst slip from my fingers to the floor.

“Come on.” Ally squeezes my shoulders. “Maybe we can crawl down the hall a little bit and find the stairs.”

“No we can't go that way—” I don't finish my thought. The smallest movement steals my attention and I turn just as Jason snatches up the amethyst and throws it at Ally.

“No!” I scream as the rock sails through the air. “Gabriel!”

My shield goes up around Ally. The shimmery purple light envelops her from head to toe. The rock ricochets off the force field, shoots through the broken window and out into the night. Jason screams and runs at me, head down as if he might tackle me like some football player.

“Fuck this.” I sidestep Jason and grab hold of Ally. Her shield falters just long enough for me to wrap her in my arms and yank her forward. Before she can process what is about to happen, I shove her out the big window and don't let go.

Her shriek is muffled by the wind whipping around us, tearing at our hair and clothes.

I suppose this is a perfectly natural reaction to your friend shoving you out of a high-rise building.

“It's okay.” I squeeze her against my chest. “The shield will hold.”

“*Right?*” I ask Gabriel.

“What about you? What about you?” Ally screams.

“You will not survive the fall.” He plummets with us, his wings folding back to embrace the drop. “You must shield yourself.”

“Ally lives, not me. We have a deal.”

“You must shield yourself also.”

“I don't know how. You have to help me.”

“Envision it.” Gabriel's wings open, lifting him up into the air. “See it grow larger.”

The field shines about an inch or so above Ally's skin, it touches parts of me, but it sure as hell doesn't cover anything important.

“Hurry,” Gabriel says. “See it around you.”

I close my eyes and see us falling in my head. The building rushes past us. The freezing air tears at our clothes and hair relentlessly. Lights shine from windows in a blur as we pass. I picture my shield bigger. I picture it around me and Ally, covering us both from head to toe.

“Good. Do not stop now,” Gabriel says.

I peek my eyes open to see purple has crept over my arms and shoulder, the shield half devouring my body—until pain erupts through my legs, my back, and the whole world goes black.