

## Chapter 1

### Jesse

When they describe female special agents in the movies, or in books, it's always like this: a sleek, cat-like body that slithers in tight clothing, gorgeous exotic face and a sultry voice that can lure any target into submission.

While I am a female agent, double agent even, I'm not sultry, exotic, cat-like, sleek or even remotely alluring. I'm an idiot wearing a clown suit. And I don't mean clown suit figuratively.

I am wearing a clown suit at a birthday party.

I have the red nose, the floppy shoes and this horn around my neck that honks obnoxiously every time a grubby kid with sticky fingers runs up and gives it a squeeze.

The double part is more complicated. Neither my official job nor my unofficial off-the-books job requires I wear a clown suit. Yet, here I am dressed as a clown because my current client Regina Lovett begged me to.

She apparently believes a clown is less terrifying to her daughter, the person she's hired me to protect, than just being a regular old death replacement agent. Death replacement agent is my "respectable" job—though that depends upon whom you ask. The double agent part of me is here to gather intel. This is the only reason I'm willing to jump through Regina's obnoxious hoops in order to keep her business. Usually I hold all the cards in a death replacement because without me, they die.

I'm not even sure Julia, turning four, will agree with her mother anyway. She's done a good job of keeping her distance from me, the red-nosed wonder, backing away slowly every time I offer her a balloon.

My floppy shoes squish against the ground saturated with six days of September rain. I rock on my heels and watch Julia twirl in her party dress, a good twenty feet away. It's a pretty lavender color, complete with lacy ankle socks and Mary-Janes. A tiny gray peacoat protects her from the elements. She looks like any other privileged upper-class kid, standing in a big, beautiful yard, her thick brown locks pulled up into curling pigtails that graze the top of each shoulder and the lacy white collar of her dress. A white fence establishes the boundaries around the property and along the edge of the fence stands a few large saggy trees that have seen better, dryer days.

The pool has recently been drained, a military-green tarp stretching from one end to the other. I can't help but look at it and wonder if Julia will fall through and crack her head open on that poured cement or something. Or maybe the birthday candles will ignite and catch her hair on fire.

Occupational hazard, I'm afraid. I spend lots of time pondering death.

A little boy, maybe a year older than the birthday girl, tugs one of her curly pigtails. She stops twirling, squeals, and takes off chasing him through the yard. It is a shame the kid will die today being as cute as she is and on her birthday even.

Unless I can change it, of course, and that's what Regina Lovett is paying me to do—without her husband Gerard Lovett's knowledge, I might add. Given my real reason for being here, I am perfectly fine with this arrangement. Gerard doesn't need to know about me. But what his wife said to him to keep him away from Julia's birthday, I have no idea. When I suggested she pick another day for the birthday party, since she knew this would be Julia's death day, she said: but I've already sent the invitations. I can't just cancel now.

The woman has strange priorities, but it's really her husband I have to watch out for.

Gerard Lovett, the religious freak that he is, would have never allowed me—especially me—to be his daughter's death replacement agent. The Unified Church has a particular view on people like

me. It doesn't matter that I have the ability to sense death coming, the ability to see its sneaky blue fire and put the *kibosh* on all that. Taking help from a death replacement agent would be a sign that they didn't have faith in God. All high-ranking church officials like Gerard Lovett have to demonstrate the solidity of their faith at all times. I often wonder if they'd refuse blood transfusions too, having faith God would just add a few pints when he got a chance.

Or maybe it's because I don't go anywhere when I die that I can't be trusted.

I turn at the sound of a sliding glass door and see Regina appear cake in hand. My personal assistant Ally is with her. She holds open the door for Regina, and then slides it closed behind them both.

"Time for cake!" Regina exclaims. The smile she'd given me when entering my office with Julia's death report two months ago had been forced, practiced, the smile of a woman married to an important man.

Her smile is softer now and Julia abandons the boy she's been chasing for it. She runs toward her mother with renewed laughter.

I look away, focusing on something mundane—Regina's clothes. They're some kind of modern business casual, classy and feminine. Her mousey hair is side swept and elegant, curling at the ends naturally. She's attractive, not gorgeous like Ally, but she knows how to do herself up, glossing up her plainness enough without screaming I AM TRYING, OKAY?

I notice all of this instead of looking at her and Julia together. For me, it hurts to look at mothers loving their daughters. My mother is dead and we weren't speaking for years before that.

Ally leaves Regina's trail, escaping the children gathering like rats around the Pied Piper, and comes to stand beside me. She pulls her red A-line coat tighter against the chilly air icing our cheeks and gathers her straight blond hair, the color of honey butter. I'd have helped her free it from the collar, but before I could she'd already done it, and with a single toss her locks had spilled down her back. Her nose stud looks silver in the dull overcast sky, instead of sparkling like the tiny diamond that it is. Her brown eyes are equally muted from their usual vibrant amber to an unremarkable brown. Dull light aside, she seems radiant against all this lush, landscaped green, moist with rain. The light flush in her otherwise pale cheeks suits her.

"Are you cold?" she asks, nodding at my colorful polka-dot jumper.

The answer is yes. Cold air has collected in my thighs and stomach, where the fabric of my polka-dotted jumper feels thinnest.

"I'm wearing layers," I insist. Ally can be quite the mother hen, and I know myself well enough to admit I can't be alert and babied at the same time.

"Are we good?" she asks.

Do I sense Julia's death coming? Not yet. "For now."

We watch Regina arrange the cake table, and launch the birthday song. It isn't until I start singing that Ally nudges me.

"Quit that," she says.

"What?" I play coy.

"I hear what you're saying," she accuses. "You're replacing birthday with *deathday*."

"It is her death day."

"You are so morbid," she murmurs, but she's smiling. *Happy Death Day, Little Julia*.

"What does morbid mean?" a kid asks. This kid is pudgy, as tall as he is round and apparently uninterested in singing to the birthday girl. Also, his face is an unnatural green color from eating something made mostly of food coloring.

"Weird," Ally says. I am not sure if she is defining morbid or if she is as surprised by the ninja appearance of this kid as I am.

"Clowns are weird," the kid says, sucking on his sticky fingers.

“You’re weird,” I say. Ally nudges me with an elbow, but it’s unneeded. This kid is too young to recognize an insult or he is just impervious beneath all that fat.

“I want a balloon,” he demands.

I offer the big black trash bag to him, filled with animal balloons of every shape and color. When I took this job, I knew better than to improvise a skill I didn’t have. So *voilà!*—a big bag of balloon animals.

“I want to see you make one,” the kid groans.

“I want to see you leave,” I say and stick the bag in his face.

Ally intervenes. “She can’t make them because she has a bad wrist.”

“Really?” the kid asks. He warms to her the way everyone warms to Ally.

I tell the kid, my cover story. “Yeah, carpal tunnel from all that juggling, camel riding, and whatever the hell clowns do.”

“You said a bad word.”

“I’m going to call you a bad word if you don’t go away.”

Ally is doing a decent job of keeping a straight face. She is also doing a great job of being pretty and convinces the little fatty to take a yellow “lion” and go get some cake. The words before it’s all gone seem to work.

“You promised not to make the children cry,” Ally says. She’s not kidding.

“Sorry,” I grumble. “I’m in a piss poor mood today.”

“It’s the first kid since Nessa.”

And that’s why Ally is my best friend. She knows what bothers me before I do. I let out a big exhale and the breathing hole in my red nose whistles, dramatizing my despair.

Nessa.

I’ve thought a lot about Nessa this past year, especially in the past month leading up to Julia’s replacement. It was this time last year that I’d failed to save her. Granted, I hadn’t been her death replacement agent, so technically my perfect record is still intact. But she’d also been just a little girl and I’d promised her mother I would save her from some bad people. When you have this ability to save people, and a perfect track record of doing so—when you screw up—

Yeah, I’m a sore loser.

“Nessa Hildebrand. Our first casualty of war,” I whisper. An ache fills my chest and I look away from the kids.

“Are we calling it war now?” Ally asks. She let her own breath out slow, weary.

“Two sides. Good versus evil. Only one can win. That’s war, isn’t it?”

“Evil hasn’t made a move in over a year,” Ally whispers. “Openly anyway.”

“Oh they’ve made moves, I’m sure,” I say. “Just not that we can see.”

“That’s a good sign though, right?”

Oh Ally, my ever optimistic companion. Just because someone hasn’t stabbed her in a year, she thinks we’re safe. I know better. I can feel them sliding through the dark around us, large and scaly, looking for the right moment to spit acid venom in our faces.

“Sure. That’s a great sign,” I say. I don’t believe what I’m saying and she knows I don’t believe it. But sometimes you say things to be kind to the people you love. It wouldn’t comfort her to hear: *We’re all going to die, Ally. They came for us once and they’ll come again. Harder and harder until they win, and God help us, I can’t imagine anything worse than what we’ve already been through*—no.

Some things you don’t say to the people you love.

Besides the word war suggests a fighting chance. War means a prolonged battle where either side could come out on top. This isn’t war. This is a death sentence.

Ally gives my hand a quick squeeze, bringing me back to the present moment, to a moment when I am just a clown at a little girl’s birthday party.

“Go on,” she says. “Get what you came for.”

I cast a last look at Regina, Julia, and the others, then hand Ally the balloon bag.

“If they ask, I went to pee.”

She gives a cute salute and I slip away. I take my huge floppy shoes off by the back door and creep inside, careful to slide the door closed behind me.

The kitchen welcomes me. A large island with a granite countertop sits off to the left, and behind that, mahogany cabinets and a stainless steel fridge. The place looks like an ad in *Better Homes*, with only a few stray coats from guests and the occasional toy forgotten in a corner. Otherwise, it is pristine.

I turn on the bathroom light and shut the door, hoping to give the *ocupado* impression should someone wonder where I am. Cover story secure, I creep up the stairs and down the hallway. My ears strain for any people noises—voices, footsteps, maniacal whistling, for anyone who might wonder why a girl wearing a rainbow wig is sneaking around up here.

But I hear nothing and see no one.

I place my hand on the door handle of Mr. Lovett’s office and find it locked. Then I do what I’ve been taught to do. I pull two pins from my thick rainbow wig and slip them into the lock. I push against the bearing—turn, and pop.

It sounds easy, sure, but I’ve practiced a million times on a variety of locks purchased from hardware stores. A box of locks in the corner of a living room is a great conversation starter, by the way, and a lovely way to spend a Friday night alone.

Gerard Lovett’s office is large. The desk lay in the middle of the room, directly opposite the door. The desk itself is immaculate, nothing like mine, which has piles of paperwork, junk mail, and bills needing attention. Behind his neat desk is a regal black chair, with a high back and wheels. The desk and chair itself are perched on top of a red and gold rug matching the red and gold drapes on either side of the fireplace behind the desk. One side of the room has a massive book case. The spines look unbroken, unread, and I’m not surprised to think of Mr. Lovett as a man who likes the appearance of being erudite rather than the actual reading. The remaining side of the room has a wooden chess set on a table between two more regal chairs, this time made of red leather.

Before entering the room I look around. I’m glad I do. Because up above me, sitting on a ledge above the chess set, is a camera. It isn’t trained on the whole room, just the desk and the wall behind it, so if I’m lucky, I’m still invisible.

I admit I’m pretty freaked about the camera. I’m staring at its little black eye, trying to determine my next move when—POP.

I jump. My heart explodes in my chest, taking off like a rabbit fleeing a fox and I am about to run like hellfire back down the stairs and out the door. Then I hear a child crying. I swear, steady myself against the door frame, breath caught in my throat like a cotton ball and cross to the window to see what made the sound.

A balloon had popped and a child, devastated, is crying against Ally’s leg while she searches the bag for one in a similar shape and color. She finds one and the girl brings her weeping to a raggedy, shuddering stop. Her face brightens. The smile still tight, turns into a half-hearted, lopsided grin and the sobs become a kind of gleeful hiccup.

“Jesus,” I mutter. I swear I can feel my ovaries die.

When I turn back to the room I realize something is wrong. Not just that I’d run into the room without thinking and was surely caught on camera, but the room is suspiciously quiet. The hum and click of electronics I’d noted upon first entering the room is gone. The clocks have stopped ticking. Latent electricity in lamp wires, phone outlets, an answering machine and internet modem have all stopped. The camera too, of course. Everything still, everything quiet—the way a house is quiet after a power outage.

“Shit.”

This time last year, when my life started to get out of control, and homicidal maniacs tried to kill me and whatnot, I started to develop this new—I can’t believe I’m going to say this—power. Unfortunately, there just isn’t another word for it. It’s not part of my weird death-replacement thing, but something that can’t be explained scientifically by my NRD—my Necronitic Regenerative Disorder, a neurological disorder that allows me to die but not stay dead.

No, this is something else entirely.

It would seem I have some strange connection to electricity. It’s not like I can control it. When it started last year, it was just a shocky thing—a static sort of electricity managing to blow light bulbs at the flip of a switch, or shock people quite a bit stronger than the usual I-shuffled-my-feet-and-now-zap.

It’s evolved.

Lately, I can do this surge thing. When I’m startled, or scared, I send a shock out and BAM, electronics fail. So far I’ve only managed to blow up my own shit—bye, bye the possibility of morning toast or midnight margaritas, which is fine except now I’m blowing up other people’s shit.

This is a serious problem.

I can’t fall apart over fried electronics. I have to do what I came up here to do. I relax against the side of Mr. Lovett’s desk and steady my breath. Once I feel somewhat together, I pull out a small Phillips-head screwdriver from my rainbow wig. I hold my hand above Mr. Lovett’s computer listening for any kind of electric static crackling around my skin. When I feel none, I start to dismantle his computer.

Three of the six tiny screws are out of the computer, the ones that would release the hard drive from its little plastic nest, when all hell breaks loose.

A wave hits me. I rock back on my heels, topple, and hit the wall. My shoulder brushes something and I hear a crash. I quit moving, knowing because I can’t see, I’ll only knock more shit over if I continue flailing blindly.

“No, no, no,” I whine as if that will make Julia’s death turn on its heels and leave. Because that is what I feel—Death come calling.

I work faster.

First I reach out for the desk, find its edge and pull myself back to the computer. In my hurried panic, I start dropping the little screws on the office rug.

I have the last screw loose, but not completely out, when my vision changes.

The world dissolves from its usual solid self into a shifting world of color. The only equivalent I can think of is heat sensory, like the way they show it on TV or in the movies where someone puts on special goggles and then the world turns into an orange-yellow-red blob. This isn’t exactly right, what I see in the moments before a death. I see more color and nuances, but it’s close enough to get the idea.

The problem with it happening now is two-fold. Problem one—I can’t see the last freaking screw anymore. I can’t clearly define anything, now that the world has reduced itself to something less substantial than an acid trip.

Problem two, Julia Lovett is about to die and I’m not close enough to save her. I can feel her out there, moving around in the yard, feel the pull surrounding her, centering and drawing close. If she dies and I am not near her, she can’t be saved. Proximity is required for a death replacement.

The only thing I can do now is force myself to focus.

Even after my best effort, the colors are still there, making it hard to see. I have to rely on my fingers, the feel of grooves against the tips just to figure out what I’m doing, really hoping that it is the hard drive I’m removing.

I'm not a computer expert. I only know how to do this because Brinkley, my ex-handler, showed me on an old garage sale computer making me practice until I practically wept for a break.

Finally, it falls free of its case. Clutching the stolen hard drive in one hand, I rush back toward the stairs. I can't afford to be casual. I can't afford to take my time or even stop to turn off the bathroom light or open the door. In fact, I'm forced to crawl down the stairs the way a baby would, butt first so I don't fall. I make slow progress, but I can't save Julia's life if I break my own neck before even getting to her.

Somehow I manage to make it back to the sliding kitchen door and see Ally on the other side. Sure, she is a blur of color like everything else, but I know Ally. I know what she looks like even in this form. Maybe it's because I've saved her life once, or because she's been on a *bazillion* replacements with me, or even because she's my best friend. I don't know or care as I pry open the glass and croak her name.

Nothing.

Louder: "Ally."

She turns around and it must be the way I look because she comes running.

"Are you—?"

"Here," I say. I shove what I hope is the hard drive at her and step fully into the backyard.

"Jesse, your shoes," she says.

"No time." I'm already walking to the edge of the brick patio stretching like a giant doormat away from the kitchen entrance. I'm searching the yard for Julia.

I find her colorful blur twirling again and I know it is her, because something isn't quite right with her "thermal" reading. A menacing black blur mars her color. She's out by the fence and I can't see anything around her that's of danger, but I know better than to let that assumption stop me. Something can fall from the sky at any second. Some insane driver could crash through that white fence. Hell, little Julia could be having a heart attack from all that twirling.

I run through the soggy grass, my socks soaking up the cold rainwater. My toes curl. I run and Ally follows, but not too close, yelling, "Everyone back up, please!" She knows to do crowd control and create as much distance between me and the others as possible.

I have no idea if it works. I can't afford to focus on anything but Julia.

I run across the yard, arms out to grab her. Julia must see me coming and stops twirling for long enough to scream and run in the other direction. It isn't until I hear her screaming "Mommy the clown! Mommy!" that I realize I am the one terrifying her, a clown with a manically determined expression, rushing her at full speed.

"Come here!" I yell, unable to pretend like this was anything but urgent. "We don't have time for this."

And of course I'm right.

I hear Ally yelling. Something unclear, directed at Regina. People always want to rush in and save their loved ones from dying, but it only gets in the way and causes more casualties. After all, I can only replace one person at a time.

Death is different for everyone and I see it differently for everyone.

Sometimes I see death as a tiny black hole created inside a person, an empty swirling vortex sucking all the warm, living colors out of a person, leaving nothing behind that can survive.

Sometimes a hot-cold chill settles into the muscles in my back and coils around my navel before yanking me down into oblivion.

Then there are deaths like Julia Lovett's.

A death where I just have to throw myself out there and hope it works out. No vision guidance. No conscious effort on my part. Just faith that being who I am, what I am, the exchange will happen.

Julia has almost reached the fence when I grab ahold of her. I hold her against my scratchy polka-dotted jumper while she screams and flails. I try to say soothing things: "I'm not going to hurt you. Gee-*zus*. Calm down!" My best efforts fall short as I look up and see my worst nightmare.

A tall, stupidly beautiful man, dressed in a three-piece suit, strides across Julia's yard toward us. With determined, dedicated steps, he unfurls his black wings on either side of him as he closes the distance between us. I haven't seen that shaggy dark hair or those animalistic green eyes in a year. Now here he is, walking straight toward me in all his angelic splendor.

"Shit," I say.

Julia quits squirming in my arms and turns her wide eyes up to mine. Her mouth is open in horror as if my profanity is the worst thing that's ever happened to her.

Before I can apologize or even comprehend what's happening, what Gabriel's reappearance might mean, something hard and heavy slams us from behind.

The entire world goes dark.