



*D 1: INSIDE THE  
WALL*

*BTS CHAPTER 20*

**WARNING**

Pete Mansfield, Jr.  
Clements Residence  
Winter Holiday Party

My stomach rumbles as I continue working eating a plateful of leaves. Really, that's all salad is: leaves. I do my best to ignore the stacked ribs dripping with BBQ sauce on Jason and Mason's plates. I keep my eyes on Alysse, one of my main reasons for skipping the red meat tonight.

Jason checks out Alysse while her back is turned and I shift closer to Alysse and lift an eyebrow as my eyes narrow. He starts when he catches me

staring at him and immediately diverts his eyes back to his brisket.

Alysse tucks her hair behind her ear, nervous. Most likely thanks to a low-life back at the entrance, glad handing all the power players invited to his home. I give her arm a gentle squeeze, and she smiles soberly. Her smile fades as she looks over her shoulder.

“Alice got an invitation?” Mishell mocks. My fist tightens as I contemplate just how strict the “never hit a

girl” policy is for  
guys.

Luckily, only  
Mishell's friends think  
she has anything  
worth listening to.

Even better, Alysse  
only stands taller as  
she defends herself.

It's about time.

Puppet-boy Aaron  
walks in the center of  
the group as if he's  
somebody. “Oh, good.  
I'm starving.”

I bite into a carrot as  
my stomach resorts to  
eating itself. *Hungry?*  
*Kid doesn't even*  
*know the meaning of*  
*the word.*

Mishell laughs like a  
lemming, her eyes

only for Aaron. I glance at Alysse, expecting her to be all starry-eyed, too. She looks at me and rolls her eyes instead.

It's about time.

“Hi boys,” call seductive voices. Four well-sculpted, college-age women join our group. Jason and Mason visibly deflate as the group targets Aaron and I first.

“Pete, where have you been?” complains Ali with a pout. She's a party entertainer who's been around and back many times. I know how she

thinks of me as a walking wallet. Her pout with full lips doesn't come close to swaying me.

“Can't you tell. He's been working out,” breathes the hot red-head as she squeezes my bicep, glancing up at me with long-lashed eyes, her smile inviting and warm.

Okay, maybe that's a little swaying. It's nice to have a reward for all the pain I'm going through.

“Hi Mandi,” I reply, my voice deeper than usual and not on purpose.

Alysse doesn't say

anything. She just shifts and turns away. I'm quickly reminded that Mandi wants only one thing. I step away from her and closer to Alysse as music starts in the back.

Mandi swallows her disappointment and soon turns to Jason, who leads the group out to dance to what some would call music.

Alysse looks up at me expectantly as we get left behind. My stomach sinks. *You've got to be kidding.*

*“Let me guess, you want to--”* I stop, unable to bring

myself to say it  
outloud.

Alysse looks up at  
me with her big eyes  
that have just the right  
look—not too much  
and not too little. “It  
could be fun,” she  
says with a teasing  
smile.

I groan, ready to  
turn her down when I  
spot Clement  
watching us. Maybe  
dancing isn't such a  
bad idea.

As we join the group  
outside, I immediately  
spot a guy standing  
next to puppet-boy  
and Tori. He's openly  
staring at Alysse, way  
too interested. I step



forward, blocking his view.

The guy has the audacity to step forward as well, leaning so he can see better. “Who are your friends?” he asks Aaron.

Aaron's just as annoyed at introducing us as I'm annoyed at being introduced, especially when the punk lights up at hearing I'm a Mansfield.

“Mansfield? I heard you were coming. It's great to finally meet you.” The guy steps around Puppet-Boy and offers his hand.

I add some umph as I shake it. “And you are?”

“Rick Pruett, Aaron’s cousin,” the guy responds.

I nod with a forced smile. “Good to meet you.” *Now go away.*

Fortunately, Jason and Mason start showing off, ending the whole conversation. As a slow song begins, Rick steps towards Alysse.

*Not happening, buddy.*

I grab Alysse by the hand, rushing her away. There's nothing for it. I have to use

those dance lessons  
my mom forced me to  
take when I was ten.

I spin Alysse around  
and start two-  
stepping.

Her eyes grow wide  
in shock. She peeks  
up at me, some of her  
hair slipping and  
framing her face. A  
teasing smile forms  
on her lips. “Wait . . .  
Peter Mansfield,  
dancing?”

I glance at deadbeat  
Aaron's cousin who's  
watching us with  
significant  
disappointment. “The  
alternative is worse,”  
I toss back. “Besides,  
you said it can be

fun.”

Her smile widens as she looks past my shoulder. “Depends on the partner, or partners in their case.”

She nods at the Timpson cousins now dancing with four of the party entertainers. I can't help but smile with her as we watch the Timpsons thoroughly enjoy themselves.

“Pete, you've been working out,” she imitates one of the entertainers in a breathy voice. As she squeezes my arm, I flex a bit, and enjoy myself as a blush

forms on her cheeks.

“Wow, Pete. It’s like a rock!”

I think of all the hard weeks Tori tried to kill me by starvation and grueling workouts. “It should be, with as much weight lifting as I’ve done.” Her blush is deep, so innocent and naïve compared to what I’m used to.

She has no clue what the world's like.

Which is good in some ways but bad in others.

“I assume you heard about Chris,” I bring up out of need, not enjoyment.

Her face pales and her smile fades away.

“Yeah. All his family’s stuff is up for auction. Do you think someone put his family in the compound?”

My arms tighten, pulling her in closer.

“More likely an underground prison—the same place your dad will go if the wrong people decide he’s a Sympathizer.”

I glance around and more than one set of eyes is watching us. We're supposed to be having fun. I put on a broad smile as if we're talking about

normal stuff.

Her eyes zoom away from the crowd and start searching mine.

“What are you talking about?”

I feel a flare of anger. *What are her parents playing at?*

“Didn’t your parents tell you? I warned them months ago when your father was added to the Sympathizer watch list. It’s why he was fired and your home was bugged.”

Her eyes and mouth grow wide. “What!” she cries loudly enough for others to hear as I spin her out.

I quickly spin her in, tempted to cover her mouth. “They didn’t tell you that either?” I whisper, hoping she’ll catch the hint.

“No!” she whispers. The look on her face is nothing short of panic. Aaron turns his head to watch us as he and Tori side-step.

I guess I didn't pick the best of places to breach the topic. Before I can change the subject, my phone buzzes a rhythm I hate most. Tori can complain about her mom, but really, her mom is nothing compared to mine.



I reluctantly release  
Alysse as I pull out  
my JS. What is my  
mom up to now?

Clement receiving  
room. 711 **now**.

My blood pressure  
rises. My mom is no  
poser. When she says  
711, she means she  
has information she  
knows I want. Right  
now.

“What’s wrong?”

Alysse looks at me,  
her eyes more shiny  
than usual.

I try to force a smile.  
I don't want to give  
her any more scares  
tonight. A democide  
and a dad who might

get arrested any  
minute is enough for  
anyone to deal with.

“My mom’s here.”

Her eyebrows form  
quizzical curve of  
distaste. “Your mom?  
I thought she wasn’t  
coming.”

My grip on my JS  
tightens. “She wasn’t.  
I’ll be right back.”

I walk up to the  
receiving room,  
pulling out my poker  
face as I spot a  
familiar figure  
examining a portrait  
hanging over the  
fireplace, mumbling  
something about  
cheap imitation. She

plays with her long necklace laced with small, shiny gems.

I sigh and walk over, standing beside her with stiff posture.

“Mother.”

She's dressed to the nines in a sleek, slick fabric which accentuates her slip figure. She turns, facing me. “Is that anyway for a son to address his mother?” she asks, turning her cheek slightly and waiting.

I glance around the room, annoyed, before place a fast peck on her cheek. My hand flicks ever

so slightly as I resist the temptation to wipe my lips. “Why are you here?”

“To enjoy the party,” she laughs, her eyes facing the room in general. The laugh is light and airy. It would be a pleasant sound, if not forced.

I fold my arms and shift my weight.

“Yeah, right. What do you want, Mom?”

She raises an eyebrow, before shifting her hip out and forcing another smile. “I was distressed to discover the sort of company you chose for tonight.

I thought this Simms girl thing was settled.”

I put on my fake smile for any who might be watching.

My tone of voice is a complete contrast. “I date whoever I want.”

Her eyes narrow, making her smile more menacing.

“Really? You would sully the Mansfield name with a girl like that?”

I refold my arms, dropping the smile and glaring openly.

“The only ones who have sullied the Mansfield name are you and dad.”

She only smiles more. “Oh, but Pete. Haven't you read the news?” She swipes her finger across her JS 1050. The buzz on my JS is ominous.

My fists tighten as I read an article hinting that Alysse is a loose girl with big ambitions. Unfortunately, people noticed me pulling over the car before driving up to the Clement gate. They also noticed Alysse stumble out of the car. They hint she was either drunk or high. Add to that the red cheeks and the amount of time we

were pulled over, and they have plenty of theories on what we were doing.

By the end of the article, I have to bite my cheek to keep from uttering the string of oaths threatening to escape. “Who did this?” I ask despite having my own suspicion.

“No one,” she says innocently, giving another laugh before adding in a dark tone “Yet.” She turns and faces me fully, her face very serious.

“Unless you want her the laughing stock of the school, you will

distance yourself  
immediately in some  
obvious way that  
leaves little doubt that  
she's nothing but a  
throwaway for you.”

My jaw clamps tight  
as I force my poker  
face to stay in place. I  
scrounge my brain for  
some way to defeat  
my mom's chess  
move. If the article  
damaged me, it'd be  
an easy call. But  
vulnerable Alysse  
whose father is under  
investigation? Part of  
my wanting to date  
her was to protect her.  
I forgot about my  
manipulative mother  
to whom no low is too



low.

After a long moment, my tone is anything but respectful. “Fine, you win this round.”

“Good.” She giggles. “I’ll be watching.”

I catch up with Alysse just as Aaron and Tori bring her back in the house. “Are you and Pete dating?” Aaron asks, watching her with more scrutiny than I’d like. It wouldn’t surprise me if Aaron already knows her family is under suspicion. “It seems

like you're together a lot," he adds.

I scrape my brain for a way to protect her from my mother's antics without leaving her vulnerable to Aaron's scrutiny.

What would provide her protection without spreading my mom's rumors as true?

A smile spreads on my face as I think of a way. I place my arm around her shoulder, making sure Aaron sees it. I give him a look that says he better not mess with her.

"We're not dating; we've just known

each other for years.

We're practically  
brother and sister."

Even as I say it, I  
purposefully check  
out the nearest  
attractive chick  
walking by. I nearly  
groan out loud as I  
realize it's Mandi.

She flips her red hair  
with a wink that says  
anytime I want to  
switch dates, she's  
ready.

Something in my  
chest clenches as I see  
the hurt on Alysse's  
face.

So much for my  
plans of wow-ing her  
tonight.