



Claiming
WHAT'S
HIS

A NEW YEAR NOVELLA

ISSA MARIE

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Dedicated to Annette for single-handedly launching an
accidental story in my head.

Also, to my best friend Katt, may we always have our wild
nights out on new years. Love you bish!

To every girl who just wants to be railed... oops, I mean
kissed, on New Year's. #NewyearNewme

New year- a new chapter, new verse, or just the
same old story? Ultimately, we write it. The
choice is ours...

Alex Morrit

Playlist



Call Out My Name - The Weeknd

River - Bishop Briggs

Still Don't Know My Name - Labrinth

Earned It - The Weeknd

Drunk In Love - Beyonce

Buttons - The Pussycat Dolls

Ruin My Life - Zara Lawson

Escapism - Raye

Needed Me - Rihanna

I Think I'm In Love - Kat Dahlia

El Amante - Nicky Jam

Gasolina - Daddy Yankee

Mueve La Cintura - Pitbull

Muñecas - TINI, La Joaqui, Steve Aoki

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Prologue



Krista

Age 12

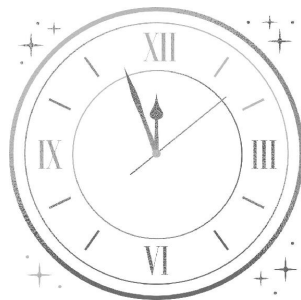
I'm cold, the closet is dark, and I'm scared; I'm hungry, too.

I'm so tired but I don't want to fall asleep. I need to stay awake. I have to. I hear his boots coming up the stairs and my heart races. I push back into the corner, wishing I had clothes on to hide me. Bringing my knees to my chest, I wrap my arms around them.

Maybe he is too drunk to remember he left me in here.

My hope is gone as the door flies open, his camera around his neck. I wish they put Britt and me in the same closet but she's downstairs. I know because I hear her yelling. She knows he likes to come here first. She tricked him on Christmas, so he started with her. She's always saving me. I can't wait until we grow up.

He yanks me by the arm, and I scream before everything goes black.



Ryder

Age 13

We watch the staff taking the Christmas décor down. New Year's is in two days, and we always have a huge party. The thing is...I'm sick of these parties. I want to go with my dad to his special party. My brother Derek went once. He snuck into Dad's car after we were sent to bed. He said naked girls hung from the ceiling and that it was like the circus but better. I can't wait to see it.

We have a party here with all our families and friends and then around ten, our dad leaves. He's an elder to the Sons of Knight so he has obligations. My brother and I will be Knights someday. I can't freaking wait to grow up.

Chapter 1



Krista

Current Day

Age 19

I look so fucking good in this slinky silver dress. I glance over my shoulder at my best friend and she smiles, nodding in agreement, as she puts on her fire hydrant red lipstick. I turn back to the mirror, in awe of my body.

I have worked so fucking hard this summer to make it onto the dance team at TSU. I've always been a thicker girl, from my head to my toes. I love my body, but staring at the mirror, seeing how every curve is accentuated and defined, I feel proud of myself. I twist and turn in the mirror, watching how the dress clings to every dip and mound. My long brunette hair cascades down my back, the tips touching my waist in loose curls.

I pick up the hot pink lipstick Britt got me for Christmas from my vanity and apply it to my lips. I smack them together and rub, but quickly realize that it's still missing something. Pondering, I stare at my reflection while perfecting my hair and outfit. "It needs gloss."

I look over at Britt, waiting for her opinion.

"Yeah," she agrees, popping a piece of gum in her mouth. "You definitely need gloss, especially because your dress is so shimmery."

“Okay, gloss then,” I agree and start looking through all of the ones I have in my makeup drawers.

When I’m done with all my primping, I grab my heels and sit on the bed bench to put them on. “Don’t forget to lotion up those puppies,” Britt reminds me.

“You bitch! They aren’t bad,” I reply.

“Says you,” she laughs, and I roll my eyes.

“It’s New Year’s, bitch, and we need to look perfect.”

I slather the lotion on and then carefully put my foot into the silver stilettos I chose. I fix the thin strap over my toes and begin to place the strings that wrap around my legs strategically. Holding my leg up, I admire the way they look before I continue with the other foot.

Britt’s Ariana Grande perfume fills the air. “Which one is that?” I question.

“*God is a Woman*, duh.” She places it on the counter in the restroom as she admires herself.

Unlike me, my best friend is tall as fuck. Well, to me anyway. She is at least 5’7 to my 5’1, hence the sky-high heels I’m always wearing. She’s slim but curvy with long toned legs and has long red hair, and she is the most beautiful girl I have ever known. She is mean to everyone and definitely not a people person, while I’m very outgoing and too accepting, which means she’s always protective of me.

We are both dancers. My favorite thing about our friendship is that we are both confident in our bodies and we drown each

other in love. We grew up in foster care together and we swore to always be there for each other. So the hell that was our childhood consisted of planning our lives as roommates in college, double weddings, and houses next door to each other.

Phase one, college roommates. We were separated once when I was sixteen. She was seventeen and aged out, but she kept in touch. As soon as she got a job and had all her shit together, I ran away and went to live with her. We have been together ever since, vowing to never allow anything to separate us again.

I had a boyfriend at the time she was away, and when she found out he hit me, let's just say that was the first and only time because Britt took care of it. I'm not sure how, but he never contacted me again. She is less like my best friend and more like my sister.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

“Yes, let me just get some perfume on and we can go.”

We are headed to one of the biggest New Year's parties that's so well known, people travel to Texas just to attend. Luckily, we happen to live in the city that hosts it so we don't have to travel far. We know that the Knights- a fraternity on our campus- hold it at their mansion. They're a feared and well-known group, to say the least.

Excited to get the night started, we slide into the little black car that Britt ordered for us so we don't drink and drive. Safety first, after all.

Chapter 2



Krista

It takes us fifteen minutes to get there when it should have taken five, but traffic is crazy since so many people are trying to make it there on time because they close the doors at 9 pm. Once that happens, no one gets in or out until after midnight. My heart skips a beat, releasing butterflies into my tummy and I'm suddenly nervous.

Britt is going to be meeting Derek- the guy she's been dating, who happens to be one of the leaders of the Knights. The man is like 6'3 and gorgeous as hell but he doesn't hold a candle to his little brother. I have had a thing for him since I first saw him, but he doesn't seem to have any interest in me.

"We're here," Britt says, pulling me out of my thoughts. Just in time, too, because I could think about Ryder forever.

The door opens and a gloved hand reaches in for Britt's. She takes it with a smirk on her face, which means the hand must belong to Derek. I scoot over to get out on the same side when another gloved hand reaches for mine. The second I glance up, my breath catches, my legs instantly turn to Jello, and my heart skips a beat.

Ryder.

He is breathtaking with his dark curly hair, tan skin, and chiseled jaw. A God on earth if I've ever seen one. He is perfection. Taller than his brother, he's six foot five and built like a linebacker, which makes sense because he is one. He smiles, giving me a little peek of his pearly white teeth.

Feeling a boost of bravery, I decide to make direct eye contact. The moment I do, I instantly regret it. Time stops and everything around me is happening in slow motion. Those sea green eyes have little specks of gold, and it seems as if they are staring straight into my soul, devouring me with just that look alone. I clench my thighs together, remembering all the times I have imagined those eyes peering up at me from between my legs while pleasuring myself.

He smirks, and I swear he's checking out my tits. It's cool out and I couldn't wear a bra with this outfit, so my nipples are puckered. There's no way he's checking me out, right? I must be imagining things, so I place my hand in his and he grips it so tight that it's almost painful. I trip on thin air, falling into his chest because why not embarrass myself in front of the only guy I'm interested in, right? For fuck's sake, why do I feel like I'm currently in a '90's teen rom-com?

“Are you okay, Little Doll?”

Little Doll? Did he just give me a nickname? We've never even talked more than a few times when Britt and Derek hang out. Why is he calling me that?

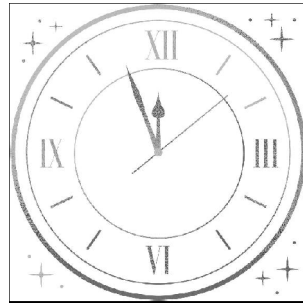
I feel a warm hand on my hip, gripping a little. I look up, meeting those mossy green eyes once more. “I'm sorry.”

He leans in to whisper in my ear, “Don't be sorry, Little Doll. I like your breasts pushed up against me.” I gulp at his admission and all he does is chuckle a little. “Let's go.”

I straighten up and realize his hand is lower, near my ass now. My face heats and I know I'm flushed. I risk a glance at

him and he is just looking straight forward as we walk with my arm linked in his. This doesn't feel real.

Chapter 3



Ryder

Krista looks fucking delicious. She doesn't know it yet, but tonight I am claiming her. She will be mine. I have wanted her for months now, ever since I noticed her dancing. My brother sent me to drop off a package to Britt and when I went into the building to find her, I saw Krista through a window of the dance room. The glass is a one-way mirror. I was captivated by her body, the way she moved, it was like magic. Like she was born to dance. She seduced me without even trying to, hypnotized me with those hickory eyes.

I look down at her as we walk into my mansion. Those hypnotic eyes stare at me all innocently. She is fucking stunning. I can picture her dancing like it was yesterday, the thigh high fishnet tights, the ripped booty shorts, the white t-shirt cropped and torn showcasing her smooth skin. My cock stirs in my pants, just like it did then, too. I remember stroking it as I watched her dancing to "Call Out My Name" by The Weeknd, which couldn't be more fitting.

I've watched her silently and quietly since then, stealing little peeks at her when I can. We aren't in the same circles, so other than hanging out with my brother and his girl, we don't cross paths. Naturally, anyway.

I move her in front of me while still holding her hand from the back. I can't help but stare at her plump ass and the way this dress sits just below the curve of her cheeks. Such a tempting little thing. I wonder if she is wearing panties because I know she doesn't have a bra on.

She seems confused at our sudden close proximity. What she doesn't know is that I sneak into her room and touch her. Fuck! I want to stick my dick inside her pussy so bad that it physically hurts sometimes. I know she is a virgin, but I don't know if she's ever fucked around with anyone. I'm sure she has, and I won't hold that against her. Sex positivity and all that, but I'm so fucking happy that my dick will be the first and only one to ever be inside her.

She looks over her shoulder at me. *Those fucking eyes.* They call to me and all I want is to drown in them.

She smirks, batting her lashes, and then turns back around as she pulls my hand closer to her while we walk through the threshold of the foyer. I grab her hip again and I feel her hold her breath. I can't help but laugh quietly. She's so fucking sexy. The little things she does makes her irresistible to me. I don't know how I held off this long. I know she likes me, I can tell in the way her body responds when she knows I'm around. She gets quiet and timid, whereas she is usually confident and powerful. I'm going to show my Little Doll that she can be even more confident and powerful with me at her side.

My Queen. Because tonight, she will be mine.

Chapter 4



Krista

The mansion is dark, the décor a combination of matte and glossy black with hints of silver. I'm feeling giddy because Ryder hasn't left my side, better yet, let go of my hand since we got here. He keeps staring at me and I can feel his gaze on me when I'm not looking. At first, it felt like I was imagining his touches, but I quickly realize that he is taking small opportunities to feel me up. I don't mind it. Hell, I want him to. I want to feel his rough hands on me, to feel his fingers inside of me.

We walk up to the bar. Before I can order, he orders me a blue Hawaiian. My favorite. How the hell does he know that?

"That's my favorite," I lean in to tell him. The music is loud and the beat is thumping to the point that I have to be pretty close for him to hear me.

"I know," he loudly replies as his hand rests on the small of my back. Chills pepper my skin as he touches my back right where it dips low on my dress. I arch my back a bit as I lean my elbows on the bar, waiting for my drink.

I imagine fanning my feathers out to get his attention like a peacock. It works because I notice when I peek at him, that his head is slightly tilted while he checks out my ass. I giggle and face forward, immediately noticing how fixed the bartender's eyes are on my cleavage. I straighten up but before I can even adjust myself completely, Ryder has the bartender by the shirt with his fists tightened around the collar to the point that his knuckles are white from the tension.

"Don't you ever fucking look at her! Understand?"

The guy raises his hands in surrender and Ryder lets him go. “If I ever see your eyes on her again, I will pluck them out and force feed them to you.” He adjusts his suit and places his hand back on my waist. “Respect her,” he demands as my drink finally appears in front of me. I can feel my jaw on the floor. What in the fuck just happened?

Chapter 5



Krista

I look over at Britt. Her eyes are wide, whereas Derek doesn't seem to share the same sentiment. I'm guessing this is normal behavior for Ryder, so I guess if his brother isn't worried, then we shouldn't be either.

I watch Britt whisper something in his ear but there is no way to hear what she said with how loud it is in here. I sip my drink and turn to face the crowded room, watching as everyone talks and dances and lives their best life.

The song that starts to play has me moving my body to the beat. It flows through every cell in me, but when I feel Ryder's hand slip underneath my dress, nothing has ever compared to how he makes me feel. How instant it makes my pussy moisten. His rough hands feel exactly as I imagined they would as they scrape my soft skin.

“Fuck, Little Doll. Your skin is as soft as I imagined.”

I gasp, afraid to look at him because I don't want to give away what he's doing. I can't believe he is doing this here. I don't know how to react to his touch with everyone around me. Why is he doing it?. I didn't even think he had noticed me, but clearly the chemistry between us is saying something different. It's magnetic. From the moment I stepped out of that car with him... No. From the moment I touched the hand he extended, gloved or not, something changed.

His hand moves lower, under the curve of my ass, and he sits on the bar stool so he can get closer without it being obvious that he is touching me. He pushes his fingers deeper in between my thighs. “So, you *are* wearing panties?” I feel his

smirk through the words but I don't respond because if I whisper, he won't hear me. There's no way that I want to turn and face him. I feel my cheeks heat and I know my face is red as a beet, blushing down to my collar bone.

"Are you okay?" Britt asks, noticing the redness, and all I can do is bob my head. His hand freezes and I see him raise his glass to his lips. Britt would kill him if she knew what he was doing to me.

She moves towards me, and I hold a hand up. "I'm just hot," I shout over the music. "This drink was strong."

She nods and shouts back, "They were."

I take another sip of my drink, almost spitting it out as his fingers dip into my pussy. "So wet for me, Little Doll. Do I turn you on?" I nod, afraid to speak because I can barely think because I am so fucking turned on.

His fingers slowly plunge in and out of me and my walls clench around them. I am so wet that it helps the feeling of him stretching me, which is something I've never felt before. I have only used my own fingers in there and I didn't like it, so I usually just use a clit stimulator. This feels so much better than anything I have ever felt and I can feel my wetness coating my inner thighs, dripping from me as he slowly moves those long, thick fingers inside of me.

"You're pussy is so fucking tight."

"Hey," Britt yells and my heart drops, thinking that she caught us. "Derek is going to walk me to the restroom. Want to

come?”

I start to speak but then Ryder intervenes. “I got her. She’s safe in my hands.”

I spit out the sip I just took of my drink. Britt looks at me with disgust and hands me a napkin. “Okay, I trust you,” she shouts and then says, “Don’t take your fucking eyes off her.” She turns to walk away with Derek following behind.

He leans into me and says in response to Britt, “Don’t worry, I won’t,” and continues to finger fuck me in this crowd full of unsuspecting people.

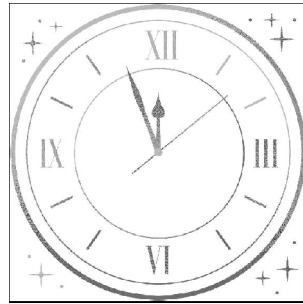
I lean back against his chest, pressure building inside me and radiating on my skin like glitter. It’s absolutely euphoric.

“Come for me, Little Doll,” he demands and I grind on his hand, circling my hips like I’m dancing to the beat of my favorite song. Riding this feeling, the bass flows up from the floorboards into my toes and into my body. I feel so high on this. On *him*.

I feel his hot lips on my neck and he sucks gently as if it was his mouth on my clit. His tongue grazes up and down my collar bone and I come undone. Moaning and writhing against him, he nips and bites at my neck. He grabs me by the throat with his free hand and pulls my chin to the side. “I want to see your face as you come on my fingers, Little Doll,” he confesses and kisses my cheek before pulling my mouth to his, swallowing my spirit whole.

My chest rises and falls rapidly as I wonder what the fuck just happened and why I want more. I feel so conflicted between the pleasure experienced and feeling used.

Chapter 6



Ryder

She looked so beautiful as she came on my fingers just now. Her fate was already sealed with me but now there is no escaping it. She let me finger fuck her virgin pussy with everyone around us. So that tells me she wants me just as badly as I want her.

I fix her g-string and dress and she turns to face me. I lean down and kiss her gently. “What was that Ryder? Why did you do that?”

“Simple. Because I wanted to.” I bring my cup to my lips and down the rest of the alcohol in it. “Want another drink?” I ask her and she shakes her head no. I pull her as close to me as I can, palming her ass.

“You can’t.”

“I can’t, what?” I see a speck of fear in her eyes. Good, I will not play, not about her.

“You can’t just do that. You can’t use me and then throw me away like some toy you are bored of. I deserve better. I’m sure girls let you do that all the time, but that isn’t normal for me, Ryder. I don’t just do stuff like that.”

I stare at her intensely for a moment and confess, “You are not a toy I will ever throw away, but you are my Little Doll and you are mine. Trust me when I say this, Krista. I have wanted you for a long time and tonight, I am claiming you.”

She gulps, clearly shocked by my words. “What does that even mean?”

I signal for another drink and when it arrives, I down it in one go. “It means you belong to me. You’re not some throwaway. I want you for good. Forever.” I release her and she stares at me with wide eyes. “Let’s dance.” I hold my hand out to her and she accepts without hesitation.

We make our way to the middle of the dance floor, and she turns around, her ass facing me. I place my hands on either side of her waist, pulling her close. The combination of the disco ball spinning, the music blaring, and the strobe lights makes everything feel heightened.

She sways from left to right as Pitbull’s “Mueve La Cintura” fades in and the crowd goes crazy. Cups are raised and the energy surges through us all in waves. Krista’s hands are in the air as she winds her body up and down, circling her hips as she grinds her ass into me. I push my groin into her, grinding back into her from behind. Her hair sways as she moves her body.

Watching her dance is so fucking captivating. It’s my favorite thing.

Britt and Derek find us in the crowd and she looks at where my hands rest on Krista. She raises one eyebrow and I smirk. Britt knows what’s up. She knows I wouldn’t be wasting my time and what tonight is. She went through this her freshman year when Derek claimed her. She’s a little bit too much fire, but he seems to love it. He already claimed her but what she doesn’t know is that tonight he is proposing.

The song transitions to “Drunk In Love” by Beyoncé, and Britt and Derek join us on the dancefloor.

Chapter 7



Krista

I can feel a bead of sweat down my back as I slow down and lean back into Ryder. A shot girl passes by, and he stops her, grabbing one off her tray for all of us. We pause to swallow them and put them back on her tray before she scurries off and we continue dancing. I grab Britt's hand and I bend over, my hands on my knees as I slowly swirl my hips in a figure-8, all over Ryder's dick. I'm a lightweight so I'm buzzing already. I want more.

Britt's other hand is in the air as she twists her hips in a figure 8-motion. Derek isn't dancing like his brother. He has his hands on her waist, admiring her like art.

I love that Ryder is dancing. Definitely unexpected and I couldn't refuse his offer. The song changes again and "Gasolina" by Daddy Yankee thrums from the sound system. I pull away from everyone and total main character energy radiates from me. This is my fucking song. I must be in a movie now because this feels like a scene straight from one.

The song builds and then the beat drops. I sway and twirl and dip my hips to the rhythm. My hands are raised in the air, one hand moving down in a caressing manner. I look over at Ryder. This is *my* domain.

His eyes are filled with lust, his pupils blown as he watches me. Dance is like sex, there is emotion and sexual tension, the build up and the release. I move my hands down my body, over my breasts and down my abdomen as I lower to my heels and bounce my ass.

Ryder bites his lip and I lick mine. Knowing that I'm teasing him, I love it. I have control here, he had it earlier now it's my turn. I see him adjust himself. Power surges through me, i feel powerful, like a queen, and he is my knight. His eyes never leave me and it's as if we are the only two people in this room.

I roll my body back up and twirl like a tornado as I turn away from him. Then he grabs my hand and starts to dance with me. Not the bump and grinding but actual dancing. He moves his body and steps around me, spinning me under his arm and then the song shifts again. "El Amante" by Nicky Jam plays and the crowd clears a little since this is a slower one.

"I didn't know you could dance," I shout

He passes me behind him and my hand slides across his back as he spins. Grabbing my other hand, he turns me and then pulls my body close. "There are a lot of things you don't know, Muñeca."

We sway to the music for a while longer. "Want another drink?" he asks.

"Yes, please. Two of them if you don't mind."

He pats his brother on the shoulder and signals him to go to the bar with him. He nods in agreement, kisses Britt, and they leave us on the dance floor.

The vibe shifts when "Bottoms Up" by Trey Songz comes on, and the crowd roars. I turn and Britt pushes my head down as I swirl my hips into her. You would think we were tired by

now, but no. We could dance all night, even if we're the only two out here.

I come up and face her. She grabs my hands and turns away to drop it low and snap back up. We make eye contact as she turns back towards me and we laugh, just vibing to the music as we wait for the guys.

Out of nowhere, strong arms wrap around me, and I look back as I start to move into his hips. Only I freeze. It isn't Ryder, but an incredibly handsome guy, so I just dance, thinking nothing of it. I'm single, after all. Why not play with a little fire? This guy looks like he can hold his own.

I face forward at Britt and suddenly I think I'm seeing double. I look back at my dance partner and I'm guessing this is his twin brother. They look identical and are dressed similar too. Only Britt isn't having it. She is gesturing to the bar and waving her hands like she doesn't want to dance. She looks over at me and I can see her mouth.

"She's single, dance with her." Britt tells him pointing at me.

He looks at me, makes eye contact with his brother, and then I'm in a hot twin sandwich. Britt watches us dancing by herself as the song shifts once more.

"This DJ is fucking good," I yell.

One twin is behind me, and his hands are on either side of my hips, under my dress, and I don't even care. I am so wrapped up in the music that nothing else matters. It's New Year's and I'm feeling so fucking good. The other twin is in

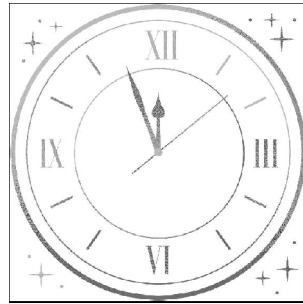
front of me, his knee in between my legs, and the other on the outside of my thigh. I place my hands around his neck to steady himself as we all move in sync. It's the craziest thing I've ever experienced.

I can feel the one behind me. His dick is hard and pressing into my ass. There isn't much between us. My dress is short and I'm only wearing a g-string. Anxiety rises, my chest tightening. I feel dizzy. A pang of guilt tugs at my heart. I'm single but Ryder also made his intentions crystal clear. His fingers dig into my flesh and then he's ripped away.

Ryder.

The twin in front backs up. I think it's more so out of respect. His chin is raised, and as he holds his hands up, Ryder has his brother by the throat. "What the fuck are you two dickheads doing?"

Chapter 8



Ryder

Thing One and Thing Two, also known as Apollo and Ares, are twin brothers and also Knights. They are mischievous little fuck boys.

The twin I'm holding by the throat smiles maniacally as if he's enjoying it. "You like this, do you?" I ask sarcastically.

"As a matter of fact, I do." He briefly pauses and then continues, "I may ask your girl to try it later. I mean, that's why you're mad right? Is she yours?"

"Ares," his brother warns.

"I'm just kidding, man. Lighten up. We didn't know she belonged to you, we were just dancing. Your brother's girl said she was single and we had no reason to believe otherwise."

My gaze moves to Britt and she shrugs, rolling her eyes.

"I'm not his," Krista admits. "I'm single and can dance with whoever I choose." She folds her arms across her chest, pushing her tits up. I don't miss their eyes on her chest.

"Don't test me, Little Doll." I shove Ares away and move to her before grabbing her by the throat and pulling her into me for a kiss. She doesn't fight me which makes me think she likes this little game. Making me jealous. She pulls back and looks up at me through her lashes, those whiskey-colored eyes melting me in the process. So innocent.

I turn to the twins and level them with my stare. "She's mine. I'm claiming her tonight." Their eyes bulge because they know what that means. A woman is completely off limits to any other Knight and we protect our women at all costs, not

just individually but as brothers. They straighten, their playful nature they carried now gone.

“Our bad, big dog. We would never disrespect your claimed.”

I nod. “You’re dismissed.” They really are lucky I can’t kill them, even if they didn’t know. There is this possessive nature that overtakes me when it comes to her. I want to hide her in a dungeon away from the world where only I can admire her. That wouldn’t be fair, though. Not just to her but her art. Art is meant to be admired, to be loved and cherished. It is special and unique. Krista is a one-of-a-kind piece, curated just for me. My Little Doll.

“Get the fuck out of here and go find your own claimed.” Thankfully, they do, although Ares takes one last long look at her. His eyes dart from her head to her tits, and all the way down to her feet. Then his eyes meet mine and he smirks. I never break eye contact. I’m the fucking Alpha where he is just a pup. I turn to face her and she’s just staring at me in awe.

“What the hell was that?” Krista asks.

I begin to explain but she turns to walk away. I follow, of course. “Krista, wait.”

She continues to walk. “I need space. I need air. I need to sit. Or pee.”

“Well, which one is it? “

“I don’t know!” she shouts. “I just need to be away from you.”

A hand wraps around my arm and it's Britt. "Do not follow her, Ryder. Let her go." Her eyes are a fierce dark green and I know she is setting a boundary. A boundary I will respect because she is my brother's girl.

"I just want to make sure she's safe. You know as well as I do the kind of people that fill this building."

She glares at me. "That's my job. I will go check on her! *You* need to check yourself. What the fuck is your angle with her? You have never expressed interest in her to me before."

I don't really know what to say.

I'm sure telling her that I've been secretly, watching her, and sneaking into her room at night like a stalker to just stare at her sleep will go over well, so I opt for something a little less... direct. "I choose her, Britt. It's that simple. I've been interested for a while but I was just waiting."

"Well, that's where you fucked up. You should have dated her or better yet, at least have a goddamn conversation beforehand." She throws her hands up in annoyance.

"I know," I admit, because she's right.

"Look, she is like a little sister to me and if you fucking hurt her, I will kill you. Not because of who your brother is, but because of who the fuck I am. Do we understand each other?"

I'm the one surrendering now. "I know. I understand," I say.

"No, Ryder, you don't know. Your brother doesn't know, hell she doesn't even know. But I've killed for her before and I won't hesitate to kill for her again." With that, she walks away,

and I stand here like a pathetic little bitch who just got checked by his brother's girl.

Chapter 9



Krista

I find a balcony to escape to and even though it's cold out, that doesn't seem to phase me. It must be the alcohol. The pre-gaming must be catching up to me with how much my head is swirling. *What the fuck is happening?*

I hear footsteps behind me and turn to find my Britt. Thank God.

She walks up to me and rests her elbows on the balcony. "So..." is all she says.

"So?" I ask in response.

"Ryder, huh?" She smiles weakly.

"I guess so. He keeps saying he is going to claim me and that I'm going to be his. Is he fucking serious?" All she does is nod and I know there is something she wants to say but doesn't know if she should. "What?!" I exclaim. "Do you know something I don't?"

She faces me now, tears in her eyes. "Look Krista, I don't know if this life is for you. You are so innocent and..."

"No. No, Britt. You don't get to pull the 'I'm innocent' card. You know what I've been through. We grew up in the same foster home. We suffered the same abuse, and you don't get to do that."

"Do what?" Confusion flutters across her expression.

"Leave me out," I admit. "I am strong, Britt. Stronger than you think. I know that you got rid of my ex. I don't know how, but I know you did. I know that Derek is the leader of all this."

Shock replaces her confusion.

“I know that this is a secret society,” I add.

She bobs her head and then says, “Okay, you want in? There is no out once that happens so this is your last chance. Once the truth is out of the bottle, you can’t put the lid back on. If I tell you, then what Ryder is saying becomes fact. Truth. Got it?”

“Got it.” I take a strong stance and turn to face her when she tells me everything.

“Ryder is claiming you tonight. That means you are meant to be his girlfriend, fiancée, wife, and mother of his kids someday. It means exactly what it means. You have been chosen by him.”

My heart flutters and I’m not sure how I feel. All I’ve ever wanted was Ryder. To find out he wants me like this? Forever? It feels like a fever dream. It just doesn’t seem real. Like it’s just some game that’s being played, a prank. But I know Britt and she wouldn’t do this to me. She wouldn’t play like this.

“Why me? He has never even expressed the slightest bit of interest in me. Why now?” She throws her head back and laughs, but I just stare at her like she’s crazy. Soon, we’re both laughing our asses off.

The laughter fades and we just look at each other.

“I don’t know why, but I do know he is serious. Know that these guys are faithful and loyal and you will be taken care of

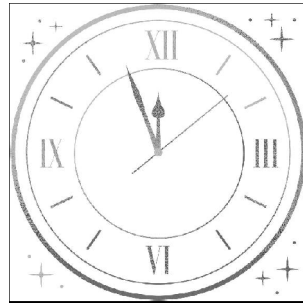
for the rest of your life.” She moves to hug me and I let her. “I’m sorry,” she whispers.

“For what?”

Her hug tightens. “For getting you into this mess.” She pulls back and looks at me. “I love you more than anything and if you don’t want this, we can run. We can leave everything. I will make it happen. Trust me. If you want this...” She pauses. “Then we stay and we do it together, like we do everything else. Forever.” She lays her palm out to me and the jagged scar is white and thick.

I face my palm up next to hers with the same mark splayed across my palm. “Forever,” I say. She smiles and leans in to kiss my forehead. With that, I make my choice and head back in to the man who is going to claim me.

Chapter 10



Ryder

My brother hits me in the chest to grab my attention. When I look at him, he nods in the direction of the balcony.

I see my beautiful Little Doll coming my way and if it's possible, she looks even more exquisite. Her lipstick is refreshed and her skin is glowing. Her nose and cheeks have pinkened from the cold air outside. I check my watch and see that it's nearly 11:30 pm, meaning it's almost time for me to claim her.

I begin to work through the crowd, walking towards her. "Can we talk?"

She nods and I guide her upstairs. We don't have much time and although she has no choice, I want to make sure she's okay. I look down at the place where my brother was sitting and see Britt on his lap. She takes two fingers and points them at her eyes and then out to me. A threat I'll gladly take because we have the same goal.

We reach the top of the stairs and I lead Krista into the grand room where it's quiet so we don't have to shout or worry about bumping into anyone.

"Hey," I tell her, brushing her hair behind her ear.

"Hey," she says quietly, bringing those beautiful eyes to me. I grab the back of her elbows and pull her close so I can lean in and take in her scent. "You smell so good, Muñeca."

She moves so I have more access to her neck and I kiss her there. "Why do you call me that?" she asks, brushing her tits

up against my chest. She locks her arms around my neck and my cock stirs at the contact.

“Because you are my Little Doll. You are so perfect and beautiful, just like one. Not to play with, but to admire up on a shelf. One of a kind. Perfect.”

She blushes and I cradle her face in my hands, kissing her gently as her lips part for me. “Mine,” I say against them.

“Yours,” she responds. I pick her up and carefully place her on the glass coffee table . She lays back, her hair fanning around her, and I lift her dress. I start to remove her panties, exposing her thick creamy thighs, those muscular calves, and her beautiful pussy.

“Fuck, Krista,” I hiss, biting my knuckle as my cock begs to be freed. But I can’t fuck her. Not yet. She closes her thighs, embarrassed. “No, Little Doll. Spread yourself open and let me see that beautiful pussy, baby.”

She obeys and I reward her.

“Good girl,” I mutter, rubbing her clit gently. She writhes under my touch, her pussy glistening with moisture.

“Look up,” I demand and her perfect ass obeys. “Watch me feast on this pretty, juicy, pussy.”

“Okay,” she agrees quietly.

“Don’t look away, Muñeca. Understand?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“Good girl.” I slide a finger in and out of her a few times before getting on my knees. I slip them in her mouth and she cleans them off. Fuck, it’s the sexiest thing. Seeing those pink pouty lips wrapped around my fingers. I can’t fucking wait until it’s my cock taking their place.

I dip down in between her luscious thighs, using my thumbs to spread her open. Her soft tummy rises and falls quickly, the anticipation of my mouth actually making contact a tease in itself.

“Ryder,” she whispers

“That’s right, Little Doll. Remember who this sweet pussy belongs to.”

My mouth meets the swollen bud and I nibble it gently, teasing her with featherlike sucks, luring a moan from those lips.

“Oh my god, Ryder. Don’t stop.”

I don’t plan on it but I don’t tell her that. I just keep enjoying my meal.

She opens wide, wanting the pleasure, begging for it with her body. She grinds her pussy into my tongue and I feel her juices on my cheeks. I tongue her tight little hole, lapping up every drop of her wetness.

“Fuck me, Ryder. Please,” she begs.

I shake my head no as I circle her entrance and I know she sees me in the mirrors on the ceiling. A thrill runs through me. I fucking love how open-minded she is.

She moans her pleasure, her legs shaking. I move back to her clit, focusing on making her cum. I slide my thumb in her pussy, circling it and moving it slowly in and out of her.

“Ohhh, *fuck*, Ryder. I’m coming. Don’t stop.”

Creamy liquid squeezes out around my thumb, and I remove it, making sure to lick up every last drop of her. “Mmm, you taste so fucking good, Little Doll.”

She sits up, resting on her elbows and I pull her dress down as she reaches for my hand. I pull her up and she fixes the back of her dress. “My panties?” she asks, holding her hand out for them.

“They’re mine now.”

She smacks my arm. “Ryder!” I can’t help the Cheshire grin that appears and she returns it. “Who knew you were such a creep,” she jokes.

“Oh, you have no idea, Little Doll.” I wink at her and she blushes. We move to sit on the sofa and that shy demeanor washes over her again. “Have you ever had someone eat your pussy?”

“Only once,” she admits, “But not like that.”

“Well, I’m glad you liked it.” I lean back and place my hand on the small of her back, caressing her with my thumb. The same thumb that was just inside her pussy.

“Who said I did?” she asks playfully, turning to look at me.

“Oh, you’ve got jokes?” I laugh. She’s so fucking cute.

“I do,” she replies, leaning back to rest her head on my shoulder.

I lift my arm and tuck her into the space there. Right where she belongs. She’s mine. Forever.

“So, you are going to claim me?” she asks, playing with her hands and avoiding eye contact.

“Look at me,” I order and her eyes flash to mine, which I can’t help but love.

Something stirs inside me at her obedience and I know I’ve been missing out. On her.

“I am going to claim you because I’ve wanted you for a while. Not just to fuck and definitely not as friends. I have been obsessed with you. Like a mad man. Following. Watching. Wanting to touch you and admire and possess you.”

Her gaze never leaves mine. “I want that, too,” she admits.

“Good, Little Doll. That’s good. No matter what happens tonight, know that this is what it takes to be mine.”

“Okay. I can handle whatever it is because I have wanted to be yours for so long. Maybe not in this way, whatever *this* is, but yours, nonetheless. You’re the only man I want, the only man I will ever want.”

“Fuck, I’m so sorry I didn’t do this sooner,” I say before leaning in to kiss her.

She straddles my lap. “You should have.”

There's a fire in that whiskey gaze, and it ignites something in me too. I will gladly let her incinerate me with them.

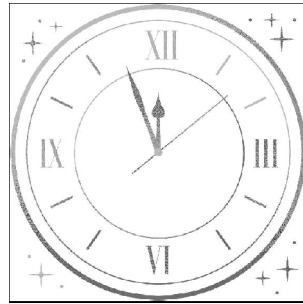
“Oh yeah?” I tease, gripping her hair and pulling it gently.
“Why?”

“Because we wasted all that time.”

“No, Little Doll, we savored it.” I pull her earlobe into my mouth and nibble it before whispering, “I can't wait to fuck you in every single pretty hole you have.” With that, I release her hair and she stares at me.

Then she leans back in and whispers in my ear, “Me too.”

Chapter 11



Ryder

My alarm goes off, causing my phone and watch to vibrate simultaneously. It's 11:50 pm, which means it's time. "We have to go," I say and help her off of me.

"Why? Is something wrong?"

I adjust my suit, walking over to the full-length mirror on the wall. I wave her over to make sure we look presentable.

"Nothing is wrong. It's just time to head into the dungeon." I see her eyes widen with fear and I quickly try to ease her mind. "Don't worry. Britt went through it, too."

She slightly relaxes and I turn to kiss her cheek as she closes her eyes. She takes a deep breath and exhales. "Okay, I'm ready."

I grip her hand tightly and lead her out of the great room and towards the elevator since it's the only way down there.

I push my ring into the button and like usual, it's a perfect fit. The button isn't flat like most elevators. The mechanism will only push with the exact mold of the Knights ring. The doors slide open and once we enter, they close behind us.

I place my thumb on the touchpad and a voice rings through the cabin. "Ryder Marquez. Identified."

Krista looks at me in awe and the elevator descends to the only other floor it has access to. The dungeon.

"Ryder?" she questions.

I face her and cock my head to stare into her eyes. "Yes, Muñeca?"

“Promise me that you will protect me.” Tears well in her eyes and I know it’s because of what she went through in foster care. That fear seems to be what’s surfacing here.

“I swear on my life that I will protect you against whatever and whoever, by any means necessary. Always.”

She nods and gulps down her nervousness, trusting me to keep my promise.

“This only seems bigger and scarier than it is. You won’t get hurt and nothing bad will happen.” I rub her back to comfort her. “It’s just the process of making you mine forever.”

The elevator doors slide open and darkness surrounds us as we step out.

Chapter 12



Krista

The Dungeon

The elevator doors slide open and my heart skips a beat. I'm blinded by darkness as we step out into the room and the doors squeeze closed. It's quiet, too quiet, and I don't know what to expect. Anxious feelings are drumming up inside me and chaos is about to ensue. My mind is a battlefield, but I know with everything inside of me that Ryder will keep me safe, and even more than that, Britt would never let a fucking thing happen to me.

But my mind goes to the little girl locked in that dark closet, with no food or clothes, waiting for her foster father to come get her.

"Let's play a little game," rings in my ears. Before I can spiral too much further, a warm hand rests on the small of my back and slides across my skin, holding me there. He's leading me. He doesn't speak and neither do I as I glance up at where I think his face would be. I squint, desperately trying to make out his features.

I trip and he catches me, not letting me eat shit and I thank God. I should have taken off these heels. What the fuck am I about to walk into?

I hear shuffling in the quiet, and a scatter of different footsteps, causing my senses to heighten even more. How does he know where he is going? It's so fucking dark that shadows start to swiftly move around, white blurs making me dizzy.

His hand tightens on my waist and I flinch at the pain of his fingers gripping the soft flesh. The strange thing is, it doesn't smell like I expected it to. When someone says dungeon, I picture concrete floors and rock walls with sconces lining them. This sounds like marble and smells heavenly. Leather, orange, and something spicy. It reminds me of the stuff my grandma would boil on the stove around Christmas. It's one of my fondest memories of my childhood. Everything changed when she passed away. A tear escapes me and I swipe it away quickly, the scent triggering a stream of memories I packed away in a little box in my mind.

It's also nice and warm down here when I expected it to be cold and wet like a real dungeon. I guess I should be grateful.

We come to a stop and music intensifies through the darkness. Goosebumps scatter all over my body and then Ryder's hand leaves my waist. I reach for him, but there's nothing there. The warmth I felt disappears. Fear swallows me up once more as I sway my hands around to see if he's just a little further than I thought. My hand connects with something that feels like...curtains?

I run my hands up and down the silky fabric that seems to be surrounding the ceiling. I look up, seeing long streams of white cloth. They're bright against the darkness here.

Then I'm lifted, swaying through the darkness. My body immediately tightens up and I hear a whisper telling me to relax, so I do. I let my body become fluid, like dancing. I realize these must be aerial acrobats but I'm terrified that

anything can happen. I don't know how high we are from the floor.

Air whooshes around me, the combination of the breeze on my skin and my adrenaline pumping feels amazing. Low lights turn on and I'm in awe of my surroundings. This dungeon is beautiful with high ceilings, black walls, and maroon and gold accents throughout. I stare at the masked woman holding me.

“Don't worry, Krista. You're safe here.”

How does she know my name?

We slow to a stop, and she brings me back to the ground, spinning us soft and slow as my feet meet the ground. I'm lifted by two men in maroon velvet suits who are also masked. They carry me, making a makeshift throne of their bodies. I look around for familiar faces, but it's impossible. They are all masked and wearing white outfits and have bare feet. A voice booms as I'm being walked to some sort of altar. Wait. An altar? We aren't getting married, are we?

“Kneel to the order of the sons of Knight.”

Every man gets on one knee and the woman next to them places a hand on their shoulders. I'm guessing they are couples. I don't see any single people here. I notice a flash of something to the side and instantly face in the direction it came from. Britt has her hand on Derek's shoulder as he kneels. My heart floods with emotion, my throat thick.

She smiles and I watch her lips as she mouths, “You are okay. I love you.”

I am placed at the top of the velvet onyx stairs and that's when I see him. Ryder. The only one in a Black on Black suit and a black mask. Suddenly, a group of people approach me, removing my clothes and heels. "Wait, no. Please don't," I beg.

I look at Ryder and he just stares at me, unmoving. I glance over my shoulder at Britt, and see she is facing forward like everyone else. They create a straight line that forms the aisle, facing the people on the other side, like statues.

Ryder takes my hand before he spins me and whispers, "You look beautiful."

"Ryder," I beg, needing security.

"Shhh," he says quietly.

He leads me forward and spreads my arms out like wings, dressing me in a sheer, see-through black robe. My hard nipples peek through the fabric and my anxiousness turns to excitement as my heart races in anticipation about what's happening here.

The voice booms in the giant space, causing me to jump at the sudden noise. The drumming music plays consistently in the background, vibrations of its energy reverberating through space, and time stills.

"See the girl." All heads turn. "Praise her, as she is claimed by our son, the Knight, Ryder, a god among men."

"We praise her," they all say in unison.

“Midnight will meet us in five minutes. May the cleansing begin.”

Ryder takes off all his clothes, his chest rising and falling as he removes each piece of clothing. His dick is long and hard and I can't help but stare as a woman behind him grabs every article of his clothing.

He walks up to me, grabbing my hand as butterflies invade my stomach. I smile as he leads me to a huge black stone tub with white marble throughout. He steps in first, the milky substance engulfing him, and he sits on his knees. I step one foot in and roses, lavender, and other dried flowers surround my ankles.

“Sit,” Ryder commands and I obey. The woman who was getting his clothes now hands him a glass pitcher.

He fills it with the substance in the tub and begins to speak.

“Every flower here has a purpose. Purity, love, luck, peace, fertility, and strength. As I cleanse you, I claim you. I remove every negative thing from you and replace it with these things.”

He stares at me with a mixture of adoration and lust. There is a calmness and a storm in his eyes brewing at the exact same time.

“Close your eyes,” he orders.

I do.

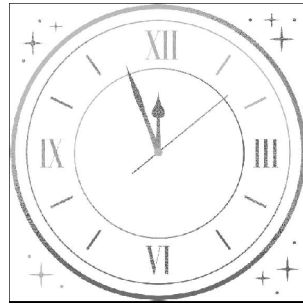
The milky substance washes over me. “I cleanse you,” he says.

The voice from earlier booms, “He has cleansed her.”

“She is cleansed,” the crowd repeats.

“Open your eyes.”

Chapter 13



Ryder

The Claiming

We rise up from the tub and face the crowd.

I'm so ready to claim her, to make her mine, to own her and protect her.

We face each other with three minutes left until midnight. I need to be inside her before then. Our fate is sealed at midnight.

“Krista Celeste Quintanilla, tonight I claim you. Here, in front of the Sons of Knight, to be mine.”

My maid hands me the knife and I slit my palm. Krista gasps. I know her and Britt have this same promise between them, which made her and Krista even more perfect for my brother and I. The loyalty, the promise, the capability of being our equal. Blood runs from my palm to my elbow as I raise it to show everyone. I smear it on my cock and then on her mouth as her tongue darts out to taste it. Fuck, this girl is perfect.

She holds her palm out to me, unprovoked. I smirk.

“Such a good girl,” I whisper.

I cut her palm and blood rises to the surface before she removes her cloak, letting it fall into a heap at her ankles. Her beautiful body is on display like the goddess she is and my cock twitches. I don't give a fuck that everybody knows how hard I am for her. She raises her bloody palm to the crowd and they roar. She smears the blood on her nipples, her pussy, and my mouth. I taste it like she did and we kiss. I'm assuming we

have one minute, so I reach down to her pussy and it's dripping wet.

This is it. I am claiming my girl. For good.

“May she be claimed,” our Elder's voice booms.

“Claim her, keep her, protect her,” the Knights chant.

I turn her around and push her forward. Her body responds to me so naturally.

She bends at the knee and waist, showing me her glistening pussy. The lights fade from white to maroon and I spit in my hand, the fluid combining with the blood. I use it to pump my dick a few times to get it ready. I line up with her and I have to bend my knees to reach because she's so small.

I push the head of my cock inside her tight hole, and she tenses right before I soothe her. “Shhh, Little Doll, it will only hurt for a minute. Relax.” I grip her juicy ass and pull her down the rest of the way. “*Fuck*, you're so tight.”

“She is claimed,” booms through the dungeon.

“She is claimed,” everyone echoes loudly as they watch me take and claim her as mine. Mine.



Krista

His cock fills me, my walls tensing around him. I am so fucking turned on by this. I didn't think I would ever like this because I have never had sex before, but holy fuck it's so hot knowing all these people see him claiming me. I'm his, no longer a virgin, and damn it feels good.

The pressure is uncomfortable at first but as he glides his cock in and out of me, that building sensation gets better and better.

He pulls my hair gently as he takes me. My pussy throbs in response. "Such a pretty little doll. You are taking me so fucking well, Muñeca." I moan and he groans, "You sound so fucking pretty, too." He pulls my head up closer to where he leans in to speak in my ear. "You like this, Little Doll? The way I claim you in front of all these people. This is my pussy." He thrusts. "Mine."

"I love it," I agree, moaning and pushing back to meet his thrusts.

He reaches around and circles my clit as the crowd roars. I look out and see everyone kissing, which can only mean that it must be midnight. Ryder pulls out and turns me around, lifting me up and plunging his cock inside me as he kisses me ferociously. "Happy New Year, Little Doll."

He is so deep inside me like this and the position he's holding me in causes the perfect friction to my clit. I look down at the place where we connect and a power surges through me as I see my juices flow onto his cock. Intense pleasure rolls through me and I scream, "Oh my fucking God!"

He smirks and says, "Yes, baby. I am." He plunges in fast and hard, his abs tightening as he rolls his head back. I stare at him in awe and can't believe it's me who's making him feel this good, bringing him to his climax.

I clench my core around his thick cock and he groans. "Fuck, Little Doll. Fuck!" I feel hot jets filling me up and I throw my head back, rolling myself into him, milking him and claiming him for myself, too.

He relaxes, the tension released.

"This definitely wasn't what I was expecting." I laugh as he pulls out of me and places me back on the floor.

"I told you not to worry, Little Doll. It only seemed scary. Our elders were showmen."

I stare at his cock and see little strings of blood mixed in with our cum.

"I'm not on birth control," I admit.

"I know. I know everything about you. It's okay."

The room begins to empty and Ryder leads me to a side room where fresh clothes await us. "But you didn't wear a condom."

“I know,” he replies, like it doesn’t bother him.

“So, what do we do?” I ask, confused why he isn’t worried about it.

“We won’t be using protection. It’s natural order. You are mine. “If it happens, it happens.”

I scoff. “But doesn’t what *I* want matter?”

He turns to look at me. “I guess. I mean, of course it does. I just assumed. I’m sorry.”

My stomach turns. “I don’t want a baby yet. I have dreams of dancing and becoming a choreographer before I worry about kids.”

He comes up to hold me after buttoning his jeans. “Don’t fret, Little Doll, you will reach all your dreams. I promise.” He pushes my wet hair behind my ear. “I would do anything for you, and I will take care of you and our family if we ever have one. I swear it.”

I see a hint of mischief in his eyes and a little smirk on his lips.

He leans in to kiss me, and I wrap my arms around his waist. “Happy New Year, Ryder.”

It’s clear we have a ton of shit to figure out since this literally happened in one day. He claimed me and I wanted to be claimed, so everything else will just have to fall into place. For now, I’m going to enjoy my life as Ryder Marquez’s Claimed. Wanted. Adored, Safe. Whatever this scary, crazy life brings with him. I’m ready for. It’s what I was built for.

Epilogue



Krista

One year later

“Look at her, Ryder.”

He walks over to my bedside, our beautiful daughter in my arms. She has her daddy’s sea green eyes with a ring of hickory around the irises. She is perfect.

“She is gorgeous,” he admits, his eyes filling with wonder and love.

All of our plans were thrown out the window. We fucked so much the first couple months after he claimed me and we kept putting off the appointment to get on birth control because we were busy.

He bought me a dance studio and since I’m still in school, he hired someone to run it and teach until I graduate. So now I don’t have to worry about it. I danced the entire time I was pregnant. It didn’t hold me back at all. He kept his promise and every dream has been dreamt.

I look up at him and to my surprise, he isn’t there. I look around and he is holding a huge bouquet of roses and a little velvet box. “Marry me.”

I gape at him. “What?”

“Marry me, Little Doll. Because claiming you is not enough. I want you to choose me because I choose you. Forever. I love you. There is no soul on this earth that is meant to meet mine but yours. I would choose you in every lifetime and every

form. If you are a bird, I'm a bird." A few tears stream down his cheeks and I look down at this beautiful girl we created as I cry right along with him.

"Yes," I gasp. "Yes, I will marry you. I choose you, too. Birds, rocks, whatever. I'm yours and she's ours. She is us. The perfect life and family."

He rushes me, kissing me, and then leans down to kiss her before sliding the huge solitary onyx diamond onto my finger.

"Oh my God, Ryder, it's gorgeous." I wipe my tears and look at it.

"It's a diamond forged on the date you were born, literally created for you."

"I love it," I say quietly

"I love *you*."

"I love you, too."

"Ride or die, Little Doll."

"I'm riding, always." He smiles, and I palm his cheek.

I look at the ring and then back at our little angel. There are no words to explain the feeling that overtakes me. I never imagined I would end up with a man who adores me and a daughter who will never want for anything. Giving her the best life is the ultimate dream and because of Ryder, I can.

"Krista Celeste Marquez," I say, trying out my future last name. "Sounds perfect."

"Hell fucking yeah, Little Doll."

The nurse comes into the room. “I am so sorry to disturb you, but I have some paperwork here for the little one. Dad needs to sign her certificate and we need to pick a name for the sweet thing.” Her southern drawl is a comfort because it reminds me of my grandma.

She places them on the dresser and I swear the room Ryder got is like an apartment. The furniture is beautiful and it’s almost like we are staying in a luxury hotel instead of a hospital room.

“Yes ma’am, we will get right on it.”

She looks at me and smiles. “Oh, so you settled on a name?” she asks, fluffing the pillow on Ryder’s bed.

“Yes, her name is...”

Ryder finishes my sentence, “Aaralyn Love.”

The End

Afterword

Author's Note

Wow! I can't believe I wrote this in two days by accident. It was supposed to be a little prompt for our new newsletter, but my mind ran with it and I wrote most of it in one day. So sorry if it isn't perfect, but it was fun! Thank you to Annette, our bookish girl, who gave me the prompt. Thank you to my Britt aka, Britt Elder, who inspired Krista's bestie. Thanks to Sam, Mandy, and Kandace for popping on my live the whole time to be my hype girls. To Kayla, my friend, my PA, my everything...thank you for dealing with all things Issa. LOL. I know I'm a lot. Kassie and Mika, thank you for proofing and editing. You are the best, love you both!

This was a very unexpected crazy ride and I am still in shock at how it came to fruition so quickly. These characters ran to the forefront of my mind and had names, faces and a story to tell. It's still blowing my mind.

I don't know if I will write anything else in this particular story and I don't know why my characters wanted me to end the book with their daughter's name, but I do see her in my mind as an adult, so there's that. First, I need to tell those naughty twins' story.

You can find *Fool Me Twice* in the *Sin For Me* anthology that's up for pre-order. It will be a sneak peek into their full-length book *Fool Me Twice*, which is also up for pre-order, but I highly suggest you grab it first in the anthology that releases April 2024, as I won't release it until much later. Currently, I

am finishing up Alex and Kohen's story from *Little Broken Pieces*, which is available now.

Thank you for reading this far. I know I'm not the best author and probably have tons of imperfections, but I write for myself and I write for the story, however imperfect it comes. It's art and I won't be put in a box.

XOXO,

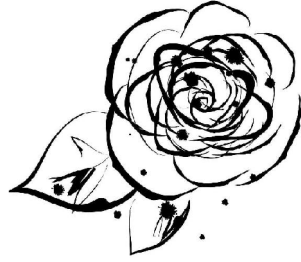
Issa Marie

PS: Keep reading if you want a taste of my book *Little Broken Pieces*.

LITTLE
broken
PIECES

ISSA MARIE

Prologue



Alex

When is love enough? When will I ever be enough?

I stare at the vase of flowers he left on the table and the note beside them. My eyes tear up as, ironically, “Flowers” by Lauren Spencer Smith blasts through the speakers in my bedroom. I don’t want to read it. I don’t want the apologies. If he loved me, he would be here with his arms wrapped around me as my tears fall. He would catch them and whisper, “*Beautiful girls don’t cry, Angel.*”

Why isn’t he here to remind me?

What the fuck is wrong with me? Everywhere I go, darkness follows. I try and try to be my best self and with Kohen, I was, wasn’t I? *Who the fuck are you kidding, Alex? You are a broken doll, no one wants to play with a broken doll.* I feel like I deserve this after the constant flow of mistakes I’ve made in my life. Why couldn’t I just let someone love me? Instead, I sabotage anything that looks like happiness and sunshine, yet that’s all I want; all I’ve ever wanted.

Every time I fight the waves and try to catch my breath, the deeper down I’m plunged into dark waters, the vicious cycle never ends.

I’m like Alice in Wonderland, wandering around in a fairytale land that’s only twisted and corrupt. Every time I think I’m figuring my way out of this labyrinth, I’m right back at the beginning, suffering more loss and heartache.

I scream at the top of my lungs for help, but of course, no one hears me. All I have is this emptiness... no one, and

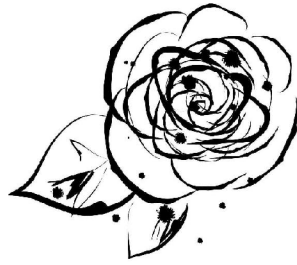
nothing, and it's all my fault. Will it always be this way? I bet we could have been happy; if anyone could've succeeded in making me truly happy, it would've been him.

I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling my wet lashes touch the tops of my cheeks, I beg the tears to stop falling. But, like me, they're stubborn and they don't listen. All I can do is open them again, look out the window, and stare up at the moon praying someone or something up there hears my broken heart's plea.

The sound of a fist meeting the wood of my front door startles me; probably my Tinder match. What's the saying? The best way to get over a guy is to get under another. I shout, "Just a minute," at the door, run into the restroom to check my appearance, and put my bad bitch face on. I smile, almost sadistically in the mirror at myself. "Let's do this shit, Alex. You have played this role several times." One more heartache won't break us.

Like the Mad Hatter told Alice, I tell myself, "We're all mad here." I turn the light off and make my way to the door to meet my next victim. *Damn, I'm toxic.*

Chapter 1



Alex

I sit here waiting for class to start, and all my brain is focusing on is how much I hate my first name. It's a boy's name and it isn't even short for anything. What the hell was my mother thinking? It's a random thought but, I have tons of those, thank you ADHD. My phone chimes in my purse and right on time, it's Cora for her afternoon check-in. I roll my eyes as if I don't love the check-ins. I'm lucky she loves my crazy ass, she is too good of a friend to me. Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve her.

She loves every piece of the angry, fucked up mess that I am, and I don't show her how much I love her enough! Cora is the calm to my storm. She knows what to say to defuse the bomb that is Alex Monroe.

I open up the text thread and see a GIF of two girls partying, which can only mean one thing: she got us into a frat party. We are freshmen in college, and she is determined to get in with the upperclassmen. We haven't been to a party since our Junior year of high school, but we made a pact recently to live our lives to the fullest. It proves to be a little hard because we used to have another best friend that should be doing all these things with us. The three of us were inseparable, but she passed away tragically that year.

Cora: Alex guess what?

Me: what?

Cora: I said guess :(

Me: You bought a pony?

Cora: Alex :/

Me: okay sorry what?

Cora: We got invited to Edward's friends party!!!!!!

Me: oh em gee! girl for serious?!!!

Cora: Alex Monroe, I'm gonna kick you in the pants.

My timer goes off on my phone to alert me that I have five minutes to get to class so I shoot her a quick text while I walk there.

Me: I'm just teasing Cinderella, don't lose your glass slipper, I gtg, class.

She already knows not to message me when I'm in class. The way my crazy brain is set up, if she texts me I'll be anxious about responding the whole time. *Yay, trauma!*

I walk into my class and some dude bumps into me in a rush out the door, causing me to knock into the door frame. I rush to grab the elbow I hit, as if that could aid the shooting pain to my funny bone, and spill the entire contents of my purse in the process. He doesn't so much as look back to see if I'm okay as he rushes down the hallway and out the double doors to the courtyard. I'm instantly pissed and more so embarrassed that everyone is just staring at my dumb ass and whispering about how pathetic I must be.

I feel my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. My elbow is aching, which only causes my anger to rise. Anxious and hyper-aware of these people whispering around me, I look up at the stupid sorority sluts watching me stuff all the shit back into my purse. One of them smirks as she looks straight into my eyes, and I lose it.

“Do you have a fucking problem?” I shout.

Her eyes widen in shock as if she didn't expect me to confront her blue-eyed, blonde-haired ass.

“Umm no. I'm sorry, I was saying we should offer to help you.” Rolling my eyes, pure heat radiates through my veins, and I envision myself yanking her out of the chair by her perfect hair.

There goes your anger issues, my subconscious reminds me.

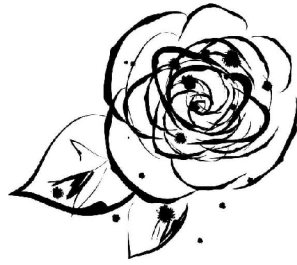
Ah yes, my anger issues. They consume me no matter how hard I try to control them. A small part of me wishes that it didn't take over so easily, but hey, I am passionate about the things I love and the things I hate. My mind and body just react

accordingly. It's the aftermath, though, it will hit me and I'll feel guilty about getting so angry. I fuck up time and time again, reacting to the little devil on my shoulder. That's why Cora is my best friend; she loves me regardless.

Cora!? What would Cora tell me to do?

I grab the rest of my shit and tell the professor I have to go. He nods and continues teaching, not caring either way.

Chapter 2



Alex

Fresh air hits my face as I exit the building my class is in. I make my way to the courtyard, as I pull my phone out of my purse to text Cora.

Me: Hey bitch. I left class because I was about to choke a hoe, where r u?

While I'm waiting for her to respond, I take a seat on a bench near the fountain to try and calm down a little bit. I stare at the sky and take some deep breaths. My brain feels like it's vibrating inside my skull, I'm so overstimulated by that whole situation. It's usually hot as fuck in Texas, but I'm lucky because there is a cool breeze in the air. I close my eyes and imagine I'm at the beach. It's my happy place. My phone pings but instead of rushing to it, I wait a few seconds as I center myself.

Finally able to release some of the tension in my chest, I pull my phone to my face to check the notification.

Cora: At the mall, picking out something new for tonight!

Cora: It's our first party!

Cora: Come meet me, you need an outfit too, Alex.

Me: k

I will never understand why we need new outfits for every fucking thing, but here I go. Anything to make my bestie happy.

Walking into the mall, I see tons of smiling faces and loud laughter. People are just enjoying their lives and I'm immediately annoyed with all the noise. There is a torture that comes with being in public places: I hear everything. The sensory overload drives me crazy.

I know she is going to be inside of Steve Madden. I head there first because, ironically, all the stores Cora prefers to shop in are lined up perfectly one after another, as if just for her.

I would never admit it to Cora, but I am a little bit excited about tonight. I won't allow myself to feel too excited, though. If one thing is certain in my life, it's that if something bad is going to happen, it's going to happen to me.

As soon as I walk in, I can see my best friend's head towering over the racks of clothes. She is at least 6 ft tall, has a long athletic frame, and just the right amount of goods in all the right places. She has subtle curves that I would kill for, my own personal Kendall Jenner. She has long straight strawberry blonde hair. She is stunning. I always try to force her into modeling, but despite being drop-dead gorgeous, my friend doesn't see her beauty.

I walk up behind her and shout her name, she jumps and I burst out laughing.

“Alex! What the heck? You scared the crap out of me!”

“Well, that's kind of the point, Cora. It's not my fault you're taller than the damn racks. You should have seen me coming.”

She smacks her lips in annoyance.

“You know I hyperfocus when I’m shopping, Alex. I’m in the zone. Besides, it’s not my fault you’re so short that the racks hide you like a toddler.” Ooh, burn.

“Ouch, Cora.” I place my hand over my heart. “That really hurt my feelings.”

She stares at me with a flat expression on her face and rolls her bright blue eyes.

“Spare me the dramatics, Alex Monroe. You have no feelings. In fact, how are you even breathing? Do you even have a pulse?” That’s fair, I think to myself.

“Ha-ha. Very funny. Keep looking for your damn outfit and leave me alone. As a matter of fact, I’m gonna go to the side of the store for people with no soul and you stay here in bubblegum pink fairytale land, k? K.”

She sighs in defeat because she knows I never stop talking shit back and she loves me enough to let me win. I walk over to the dresses, short black and skintight. That’s what I’m looking for. I can’t wear anything that doesn’t cling to every curve of my body. I get stared at hard and not just by men. It’s mostly women looking at me like I’m trying to steal their man. That would never happen, girl code and all.

I am 5’1“ and not as blessed as my gorgeous best friend. Listen, I know I’m a bad bitch who is also madly confident, but I am snack-size. I am extra curvy, and I have a handful of tits and ass. I may be short, but my legs are long for my height, and my dark hair falls past my waist in loose curls. I am thick

everywhere it counts, and I'm reminded every time some asshole tries to hit on me. It's so hard to know who is really trying to get to know me, and who just wants in my pants. I can't remember a time when my body didn't place me at the center of attention, even as a kid. Guys always thought I was older, and that put me in several uncomfortable situations. I guess it doesn't help that I never dressed my age either, but that shouldn't mean I'm up for grabs.

My mom never cared and always told me I was asking for attention. Maybe I was but, not from any man. She was fine as long as she had her quiet time. That meant me being gone, and her in a dark room feeling like she was floating on cloud nine. I hate her. I look nothing like her, thank God. She always made fun of my figure. In her opinion, my thighs and butt were too thick and my breasts too big. I needed to lose weight so I could be thin like her. No, thank you. As perfect as she looked, she was damaged and broken inside, never capable of loving anyone as much as she pretended to love herself. Wait, I'm wrong. Let me correct myself. She never loved anyone or anything as much as her drugs.

Aside from the differences in body type, Cora and I typically end up on opposite sides of the store because our styles are so different. Black is my signature color. Cora always jokes about how it matches my soul, and she isn't wrong. Her signature color is pink and she loves every shade, although now that we are in college, I have noticed her trying to tame it down with more nude tones. Her soul will always be bubblegum pink, though.

Cora is the sunshine to my dark cloud. If you placed us next to each other, no one would believe we are best friends. Different aesthetics, styles, and personalities. The only similarity we seem to have is an unconditional love for each other. A love that has been a light in the darkness that was our childhood. We grew up on different sides of the tracks but were equally neglected and lonely.

Our moms were best friends. Also from different worlds, the same small town, doing all the same shit that every generation did before them. They never outgrew it, so because of them, we vowed to leave and make something of ourselves. We promised that we would be the only family we ever needed. My mom gave up her inheritance for my father, a lowlife good-for-nothing drug dealer. I thought she had sealed my fate, but my grandparents saved me. I was given her inheritance and mine. I don't live like I have it, though. I grew up with nothing, so it's hard to allow myself to feel safe with it. I feel like the rug can be pulled out from under me at any time. I only use it to pay for school and necessities.

My grandparents passed away a while back. I didn't even get to meet the people who saved me. Their lawyer contacted me when I enrolled in college. It was the shock of a lifetime. I was already accepted because, despite my reckless behavior, my grades were on point. I had a partial scholarship and used financial aid for the rest. I am so thankful to my dance teacher. She paid my application fee because she believed in my dreams. "Your talent will take you places, Alex," she always said.

I'm so deep in my thoughts, I don't see that Cora is waiting next to me. We have this tradition of not going into the dressing room unless we are together and we can't check out unless both of us find outfits. She is studying me with sad eyes and I roll mine at her.

"What, Cora?" The tone of my voice matches my annoyance.

"What were you thinking about?" Concern laces her tone.

"Nothing," I say, trying to send her vibes that I don't want to talk about it.

"Your mom, then. Figures." She places her hands on her lap, waiting for my response.

How does she even know? "Are you a psychic?"

She giggles. "Because I know *you*, best friend, and I know that look. Your mom was on your brain."

"Ugh, fine. She was, but not just my mom. I was thinking about us and where we came from." I look away from her so she doesn't see the tears welling in my eyes as I force them away.

"Enough of that," I say before she can respond. She doesn't push. She knows I don't like talking about it.

"Okay, but hurry up. I want to try this on. It's getting late." I'm glad for the quick subject change she makes.

I grab two black dresses I was checking out from the rack to try on. They are exactly the same, but depending on how short it is, I may need an extra large instead of a large. Cora is much more modest than me and will definitely have a heart attack if my ass pops out of the bottom. I want tonight to be perfect for

both of us and don't want to cause any unnecessary waves, so I'll try to cover up.

"See, I'm getting one that won't show my ass. I'm not that much of a selfish bitch," I say, smiling at her as I walk into the fitting room she's in.

"Oh, you're so kind, Alex. Thank you for not showing your vagina to the world." Her teasing tone makes me happy. I love when we roast each other.

I laugh at the fact she whispers *vagina* like it's illegal to say when we are adults.

"I thought you would appreciate that. Also, I will wear underwear this time." I wink at her and she smiles.

"You should always wear underwear, Alex," she says, rolling her eyes.

I hate underwear. The only time I regretted not wearing any was when I wore a mini skirt to class the first day and fell flat on my face in front of everyone. I'm sure the hot professor got a nice show, though. Hopefully, I get an A plus because math isn't my strong suit.

I try on the large dress first and I love it. It's a mini dress, skintight with a sweetheart neckline. Thank God it doesn't run small and is the perfect length. Cora won't kill me. We all win. I can picture the heels I'm going to wear with it. My ex bought them for my birthday last year. They are shiny black square-toe pumps that wrap up around my ankle and up to my calf and tie in the back. Sooo sexy.

As I check myself out in the mirror, I notice Cora staring too.

“Damn, Alex. That dress looks amazing on you and it’s the perfect length.”

“I know, right?” I respond, looking myself up and down in the mirror.

“A ‘thank you’ would be nice before your head gets too big.” We laugh in unison, she knows me well.

“Yes, thank you, best friend. So is this okay with no underwear, then?” She smacks my arm.

“It isn’t like you would wear any if I told you to anyway, Alex.”

I turn around to see what she has tried on, and I’m in awe. She stayed modest but looks so good. She is wearing a light pink pleated skirt that looks shorter than it is with her long legs, a nude tube top that covers her breasts and torso completely, and she finished the look with nude peep toe pumps. She looks hot.

Very...Cora.

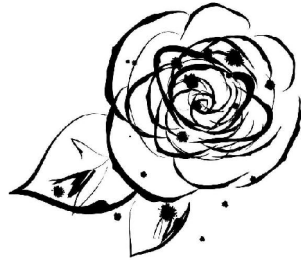
“Cora, you look hot as fuck!”

“Thanks, I definitely thought you were gonna make fun of me,” she admits, smoothing out the skirt.

“Me? Make fun of you? Never!”

We break out of the dressing room in a fit of laughter as we head to the checkout line. Tonight is going to be a good night. I can feel it.

Chapter 3



Alex

“It’s so loud in here!” Cora shouts. I laugh at her. Does she honestly think it would be quiet at a frat party? “What were you expecting? Tea and crackers?” We continue our trek through the house and it’s huge!

The doors are at least 12 feet tall, and when you step inside and look up, the ceiling seems miles high. This place is kind of amazing. It’s very James Bond. The door locks are touch pads and there are what looks like Google Home hubs in every room we have passed through so far. I am loving the modern décor, all sleek, with black and gold accents throughout the entire home.

I’m feeling anxious as we travel deeper into the party. The possibility of things happening that are out of my control puts my senses into overdrive. No doubt, PTSD from the way we lost Cecille. This is part of why we haven’t been to a party in so long. I want Cora to have a good time, so I need to relax. I take some deep breaths, hoping I’m discreet.

She must sense my unease because I feel her hand grab mine as we make our way into the kitchen. It’s quiet here and there aren’t as many people hanging around as there were in the living room. There aren’t many people, period, but everyone that’s here is in there.

It’s 10:30 pm and I tried to tell Cora no one worth it would be here this early, but she insisted. She is a very punctual person, and I’m lucky if I even remember to be somewhere important. You would think she would have learned from our high school party days that being early is for losers because we

were always teased about it. We didn't mind it, though, because, by the time everyone showed up, we were the life of the party. Secretly, I think that's why she liked to be early: to be able to talk to everyone who walked through that door first. As if that somehow made us easier to remember. I guess it worked because we always ended up being the center of attention.

Thoughts of those days bring Cecille to the front of my brain, and I have to push it to the back of my mind quickly. Especially since I already have anxiety. I don't want to go there right now or the night will definitely end up ruined. I faintly hear Cora's voice saying my name and that brings me back to the present. I must have been in my own head for a while because I look around and notice a lot more people have filed into the house now.

"Earth to Alex. Is anyone in there?" She taps a finger to my temple to get my attention.

"Yes, you asshole. I was thinking about what I wanted to drink while checking out the meat market," I lie.

She smirks. "Gross," she laughs. "Meat market? You're such a guy."

"Always thought that I should have a dick, but..." I pause, holding a finger up, "...only if I could fuck myself with it," I laugh out loud, but Cora doesn't.

Her eyes widen as she looks to her left with a slight nod that only I could notice. There are a group of guys surrounding us.

Oops.

“Alex, this is Edward.” She introduces her dickwad boyfriend and I don’t approve.

I look him up and down. *Edward, huh?* “Nice to finally meet you.” The fake smile that adorns my lips must not hold up well because she widens her eyes at me.

He looks like a preppy jock asshole, but hey, who am I to judge? Oh, that’s right. I’m Cora’s best friend, so, hell yeah, I’m gonna judge.

He holds his hand out to give me a handshake like a stiff. “Hello, Alexandra.”

I roll my eyes, and I see Cora’s eyes almost pop out of her pretty little head.

She knows, bitch mode activated.

I ignore his hand. “It’s *just* Alex. Not short for anything.” I don’t even bother trying to be nice.

He swallows and I see his jaw tighten. I’m not sure why because he is the one who assumed my name was short for something else, which I hate. I have a feeling it’s because he thinks I’m out of line for a woman. I caught the vibes and I don’t like him one fucking bit.

“Oh, I apologize, Alex,” he says sarcastically, turning away as he speaks to me like I’m not important.

Asshole.

He excuses himself as some of his douchebag friends call him over to where they're standing.

I make it a point to look around once more, paying close attention this time. This house is full of snobs, dressed as if they belong at a country club instead of a party. I get that I'm the one judging right now, but I must stick out like a sore thumb. Not only because of my outfit of choice but, also because I don't look like these people. The darker complexion of my skin against all the lighter ones in this room is duly noted. This house is probably owned by some spoiled rich kids. Daddy bought them a house, how nice. Life must be really nice when you have daddy's money and daddy's love. Something I will never have.

Cora and I can barely afford the apartment we share. There is a third bedroom, but we haven't had the heart to rent it out. Cecille would have stayed in there. I mean, technically I can afford it, I just don't want to depend on that money, so I pretend I don't have it and live my life like any other college kid.

I want to smack one of the Google things off the wall and make these rich pricks pay. I hope they make some genius mad, and he hacks all their high-tech smart house bullshit. I'm always assuming the worst of people, so I make sure to protect myself. Fight or flight, another stupid fucking trauma response. It takes me a minute to realize Cora is talking to me again. I didn't hear one word she said.

“What did you say? Sorry, I was inside my head again.”

“What did you think of Edward?” Curiosity fills her eyes.

I give her *the look*.

“I hate him, Cora.” Well, that came out a little harsher than I intended, but whatever.

“Alex, you don’t even know him.” I feel bad that I’ve upset her, but I’m not going to sugarcoat it, she knows me better than that.

I scoff, “I don’t need to know him. His vibe is off and that tells me everything I need to know.”

“You and your fucking vibes. I knew you weren’t going to like him once he called you Alexandria. I told him not to.”

“Even more of a reason not to like the idiot. He doesn’t listen to my best friend. Besides, you know my vibes are always right. Mark my words.”

We see him making his way back over, bringing different douchebag friends with him this time. What fun.

Two of them are staring at us with such anticipation, that I’m glaring right the fuck back, not breaking eye contact at all. Both of their eyes rake my body up and down, moving to Cora’s body and back to mine. The dark-haired one licks his lips and I smile a bit, still not breaking eye contact. I have zeroed in on him. He caught my attention first. Probably because he looks like an asshole and I’m a sucker for a bad boy. He is at least 6 feet tall and well-dressed, but not in the way the rest of the guys are. His style is more relaxed. He’s wearing dark wash Levi jeans and a black button-up with a

crisp white t-shirt underneath. He has his sleeves rolled up, displaying all his tattoos. They are colorful and traditional, which is *so* sexy because it isn't the norm anymore. The icing on the cake is his classic black and white Vans. Yup, he has my complete undivided attention.

I'm suddenly so grateful Cora made me meet her at the mall because I know I look like a badass bitch in this dress.

Cora whispers in my ear, "The guy in the black button-up looks like he is undressing you with his eyes."

"Great, maybe he can actually undress me later."

She nearly spits out the sip she just took of her drink, and we giggle.

The guys finally reach us after being stopped several times by girls in the crowd and Edward begins to introduce them. Here we go.

"Ladies, this is Aaron, Eli, and X. Fellas, this is Cora and her best friend Alex."

He looks over at me and smirks. I want to actually slap him for acting like a little bit of a dick, but I let him slide because I want to bang his friend. God, I'm such a slut. Oh well. No shame in my game.

Edward speaks loudly, interrupting my thoughts. Clearly, he is already buzzing. "Has anyone seen Kohen?" he asks.

The guys all look at each other and then back at Edward.

X speaks up first. “He said he was on his way an hour ago.” He’s making serious eye contact with me. He runs his tongue across his bottom lip and I bite mine in response. Damn, he’s sexy.

“He told me he wasn’t going to head here until he heard the house was packed,” I hear another guy say, but all I can focus on is X. His smile, his vibe.

I’m brought back to reality when I hear my best friend’s voice.

“He probably won’t be here at all then because it’s already midnight, babe.”

“Who are you talking about Cora?” I ask, still staring at X.

I’m curious because I love his name. I’m a sucker for a sexy name. Since his name was mentioned, everyone seems excited. You can feel the rise in the energy around the room. It’s at this moment that I realize, everyone is looking at me like I grew another head.

“What?” I whisper to Cora, and even though no one asked him, Edward answers me.

“He is our best friend, and he owns this house. We aren’t a frat, but he lets us live here. We are all brothers.”

Of course.

“So, this is his house, and he isn’t here?”

I don’t know if it’s the alcohol running through my veins or if it’s just the trauma of my past, but it really pisses me the

fuck off that he isn't here at his party, at his house. How irresponsible.

My unanswered question repeats in my head.

It's *his* house and he isn't here.

"Alex, it's fine. The guys take care of everything. He is never here."

She knows me well, and she knows why it upsets me that he isn't here. If this is his house, then he should be here. Anything could happen and the person who owns the home should be here. What if something bad happened? No matter how much I try to push the thoughts down and have fun, my mind goes straight to Cecille. I need some air.

"I'll be back, I need to pee."

"Wait, I'm coming with you. I have to go potty, too."

I love her, she knows me like the back of her hand and why I'm really making my escape. Cora leads me up some stairs and into a guest bathroom that is the size of my bedroom.

I wait for her to start her whisper-yell as I gawk at the unnecessary shit they have in here.

"What is wrong with you?" she asks me.

I scoff. "Me? What's wrong with me?"

"Go on, Alex. Let it all out because when we leave this restroom we will not address it again. I like Edward, Alex. I just want things to go well."

“OKAY, MOM.” I don’t like that this Kohen guy isn’t here. It is his party, his house, and what if something bad happens? I really don’t like any of these guys. They all seem like assholes, but I don’t tell her that.

She stares at me with sadness in her eyes. “Well, it’s pretty obvious you already hate Edward.”

“It’s not that I hate him, Cora. You know how I am. I just don’t like the energy he gives off. If he truly is a good guy, then there’s nothing to worry about and I’ll admit I was wrong.”

“That’s highly unlikely,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“That’s because I’m almost never wrong and you know it.”

Her eyes tear up and it tugs at my heartstrings. Heartstrings I only have for her. I pull her into a hug. I’m not trying to be a bitch. I know I come off harsh when I am just trying to protect the last person on the earth I love.

“I’m sorry C, I’ll try.”

“I want so badly for you to be wrong, Alex. I really like him.”

“Trust me, best friend, I hope I’m wrong too. I want nothing more than your happiness, but you deserve the love you give.”

“I know, Alex.”

“Well, then you also know I won’t let you settle. I’m going to protect your heart.”

“I’m going to protect your heart, too.”

I release her from our hug, take a few steps back, and smile. She returns the gesture, and my heart settles.

“Besides...” she says, as I look back up at her in the mirror and she looks nervous as hell. “...We thought you might like Kohen.”

I begin to turn, slowly taking a moment, so my head doesn't pop off my shoulders.

“Cora, tell me you didn't bring me here as a blind date setup. Tell me you know me well enough to know I would hate that. Tell me you didn't, Cora. Wait, better yet, don't tell me because I'm going to lose my shit.”

She shushes me because the acoustics in this restroom make it sound like I'm in an amphitheater as it is.

“Alex, before you pop off, listen.”

“No, Cora!” I interrupt. “And don't shush me. This could have been avoided by telling me this was a setup.”

“It wasn't a setup,” she whisper-yells.

Cora isn't one to cause a scene and she is constantly defusing the bomb that is me.

“Please fucking explain to me how bringing me here, thinking I would like meeting Edward's stupid asshole friend Kohen, wasn't a setup?”

“Well, when you say it like that...”

“Yes, Cora, because that's what it is. And to top it off, the asshole isn't even here. He isn't here, Cora, at his own party!”

“Stop yelling!”

“No! Stop trying to defuse me. I have a right to feel everything I’m feeling.”

“Don’t be a bitch, Alex.”

“You know it’s easy for me to be a bitch when my friend is a goodie two shoes.”

“That is not fair!”

“Life isn’t fair.”

Cora’s eyes narrow “Oh, I know. I know as well as you do, so can we drop this? I’m sorry. I’m not trying to defuse you, I promise I just don’t want to fight. You’re right, but I did it out of love. I just wanted us to have a great start to this year and Kohen is a good guy. I’m sure he has an excellent reason for not being here.”

“I’m sure he does, Cora. I’m sure he is saving babies in third-world countries. I guess it bothers me because he is responsible for all the people here. Me and you know better than anyone that anything can happen. If something does, he isn’t here!”

She stays quiet. I know she finally pieced it together.

“Cecille,” she says in a whisper with sadness in her eyes.

We stare at each other. Without words, we both decide to let it go. I count to ten in my head and realign my thoughts.

“Okay, I don’t want to fight either. It isn’t worth it. He isn’t here anyway. I’m overreacting. I’m sorry. Just don’t try and set

me up anymore, please.”

“Deal,” she says.

I wonder if anyone heard us outside. Not that I care, I just don’t want to embarrass my best friend any more than I already have. I know how she gets. We can’t have one of her pretty and perfect blonde hairs out of place.

“Okay, enough bullshit. I’ll give Edward a real chance. Let’s go out there, forget this even happened, and have a badass night!”

Her smile is huge. It’s all the confirmation I need to know that all is well.

“Also, have you looked around this restroom?” She takes a look around and giggles. There are bowls of ChapSticks, condoms, wet wipes, and gum. There are at least a dozen different perfumes, colognes, and lotions for people to use at their discretion.

I smirk sarcastically. “Ridiculous, right?”

“Absolutely ridiculous.” She rolls her eyes, feigning annoyance.

We look at each other and laugh.

“Okay, best friend, let’s go let loose and have fun. No more fighting.”

“Okay, pinky promise?”

“Pinky promise,” I state.

We wrap our pinkies around each other and seal it with a kiss before making our way out of the restroom and back downstairs into the raging party.

Chapter 4



Kohen

The party is raging when I walk in the door and the buzz of energy is palpable. The vibrations of the music hum through my body. Erica has been on my ass all night trying to get back with me. I guess the NFL player she tried to level up with didn't like spending all his money on her gold-digging ass. Ditto, bro.

We've been over for too long. I thought she was the love of my life, and I've tried to remain friends, but I just can't do it. She's a cold-hearted user and a cheater. I want no part of it. She says we need closure and I'm sure it's in the form of sex.

This entire house believes I have a reputation of being a playboy and I let them. I give no fucks about what anybody thinks or says. I am the king of this fucking campus, so do girls line up on their knees? Yes. Do I fuck every tight little hole they throw my way? Hell nah. I was with Erica for a long time, and I never cheated. My mom taught me better than that. One thing that stayed with me after she passed is how to treat my woman. Erica isn't my woman anymore and I'll be honest, I'm a little buzzed, so I'm gonna go upstairs to get this so-called closure and call it a night.

I have three weeks of intense training and I need to get focused. Being an Olympic athlete is a full-time job in and of itself, and I have no time for bullshit. I must continue the family legacy as my father would say. He's a dick and the reason I need to be buzzed tonight. He thinks he can pressure me to marry Erica because her family comes from wealth and status. Fuck him and fuck her. Well, I will fuck her. She pulls

me through the party by my hand, loving the way people stare at her while she's with me. I hate it.

I see Xzavien and Edward with a group of our friends. X looks up at me and laughs as I ascend the staircase with Erica. I shake my head and he shakes his back. X is like a brother to me, my best friend if I could say I had one, but our friendship hasn't been the same for about a year now. We have been competitive with each other our whole lives, but it's gotten pretty fucked up lately. It seems like he wants to step into my shoes or my life. I care about the dude, even love him, but I don't tolerate the disrespect and he knows better.

We are almost at the top of the stairs when I see a few girls coming down from the restroom. To avoid one of Erica's classic meltdowns due to jealousy, I keep my eyes to the ground. Last thing I need is one of these women trying to get my attention and then Erica causing a scene. I'm tired of all that shit.

The girls finally pass us and suddenly I'm hit with the most intoxicating scent. Floral yet sweet, like lavender and pear. I must be more buzzed than I thought because it's as if everything around me slows down.

I turn my head to look at where the sweet scent is coming from, and I see the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on. She's flipping her long raven-colored locks over her shoulder. Her thick eyelashes flutter open and closed as she continues to make her way past us. Her caramel-colored skin is flushed, and I find myself wanting to reach over and run my

thumb across her cheek. I want to feel the heat there. My eyes roam the rest of her face as I follow the perfect line of her nose down to her luscious wine-red lips. I want to fucking bite them. Gravity is pulling me to this girl and I don't even know who the fuck she is. I continue my trek down her body. It's heavenly fucking perfection. Her breasts bounce with every single step she takes in those high heel shoes, her curvy body beckoning me like a moth to a flame. I bite the knuckle of my free hand, but I really want to take a bite out of her.

I'm captivated.

I notice Erica trying to lead me to the private set of stairs that go to my room, but I quickly stop her.

"You know we don't go in there," I remind her as I guide her to the empty guest room.

"I know but I thought since we are going to get back together, we could finally go up there." Pleading eyes meet mine, but I don't care. All I can think about is going to find the girl I passed on the stairs. Her scent is banked away permanently in every corner of my mind. I wonder how her pussy tastes. How it feels or what her sexy body will look like writhing under me as I please her.

The door slams shut, bringing me out of the naughty thoughts I'm having about that girl. I turn to look at Erica and excuse myself from the room when I see her standing there completely naked. How long was I suspended in thought? "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to make you feel good, babe."

I cringe. I have a picture-perfect girl standing in front of me, ready to make me feel good by letting me do anything I want to any hole in her body.

Yet all I want to do is get the fuck away from her. Don't get me wrong, her tits are large and perky perfection, and her small waist and long legs may be every man's dream, but not mine.

"This was a mistake." I shake my head in disappointment. I said I'm tired of these same old habits and yet here I am, back on track to repeat the same pattern.

"No, babe. We aren't a mistake." She walks up to me in nothing but her spiky Louboutin heels. My dick doesn't care. "We are meant for each other." She reaches for the place that would usually be a bulge in my pants and her eyebrows raise. Nothing. She leans in to kiss my neck and her scent repulses me. I have to be batshit fucking crazy to have every emotion and attachment to Erica I have ever felt just completely shut off for a random fucking stranger.

It can't be that. I'm just realizing I'm finally done with her.

"Put your clothes on, Erica. Get your shit and get the fuck out. We're done." I walk around her to open the door. I don't care if she's naked. It's not like she doesn't already post her body on Only Fans and Twitter.

She scoffs. "Are you kidding me?" she asks incredulously.

"No, I'm not. Like I said, I'm done." I slam the door closed behind me and make my way down to the party to find out

who this girl is that possessed my mind.



It doesn't take me long to find her in the crowd. Of course, she is with Xzavien and Edward's crew. I should have known she would be. She has that plump ass on display in that tight little dress. Fuck. I don't go to where they are right away. Nah. Instead, I bide my time. I'm sober now, so I'm observing, watching, and I like everything I'm seeing. She sways to the music randomly when no one's paying attention, her body moving to the rhythm like second nature. Every curve on her body deserves to be admired, but only by me.

She flirts with Xzavien, but I have yet to determine if it's innocent or if she actually likes him. I don't want to step on anyone's toes, but I know I need to be near her and it's getting harder to watch her interact with him. He says something to her and she laughs, her hand grazing his arm, and my heart starts to pump. I want her hands on me. They are small and feminine and they look so soft. Images of them wrapped around my cock as she sucks my dick with those luscious lips fill my head and my dick twitches.

The music changes and I see her get excited. Her eyes light up like it's Christmas and I laugh. She shakes her friend to get her attention and they start to dance, all eyes on them. They bump and grind into each other and X has his eyes all over the

girl, my girl. Suddenly, she climbs up on the table, her friend following suit as another shorter girl they were with joins them. A crowd gathers and I remain watching, moving in the shadows because once my boys see me, the entire party will know too and I want to stay under the radar as long as possible.

I guess it helps that everyone is piss drunk and it's two in the morning. I just need to see her for now, her energy is a force to be reckoned with, I can tell. When Taylor Swift said, *'I knew you were trouble when I walked in,'* this must be what she meant. I have to know her name. She is the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen, and her curvy little body is sexy as fuck. She is the perfect size all the way around, and I want to grab all the soft parts of her body. Thick curly, jet-black hair ends right at the curve of her back, and there sits the perfect peach. Her thick thighs and muscular calves are on display as she moves her body, calling me to her. God damn, she's intoxicating.

The song ends and X helps her off the bar. I almost intercede as they begin to dance, but I wait. He places his hand on the small of her back and she moves it. Good girl. He excuses himself to go to the restroom and that's when I come in.

I waste no time telling everyone hi, and I learn the name of the blonde she's with, and that she's Edward's girl. So this is who they were trying to set me up with. Call it fate.

"Hi, I'm Kohen." I move in for a hug but she moves back. Feisty.

“So you’re the asshole who didn’t show up to his own party, where someone could get hurt.” She is drunk for sure, and such a little spitfire. I fucking love it and only fuels my obsession more.

“Yeah, that’s me. Just a big dick.”

She snorts out in laughter and her hand lands on my chest. “Oh, asshole has jokes. Okay, I like it. But next time you have a party, Kohen...” My name on her lips sounds so fucking good. “...make sure you’re at it. I mean, imagine, you may have met me much sooner.” She winks, and that’s it. I’m a dead man walking and I would die happy for her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name,” I smile, laying on the Kohen Ventura charm. Her eyes meet my dimple and she smiles.

“I’m Alex, and no it isn’t short for anything.”

“Got it, nice to meet you, Alex. If I may say so...” I pause and she waits for the next words to come out of my mouth intently, biting her own lip. “You are the most gorgeous woman I have ever laid my eyes on.”

Her honey-brown eyes meet mine and it’s like an electric current flowing through my veins at the connection. I place my hand on her hip as I catch her swaying to the beat and she leans into the touch. Fuck yes. She’s into me, too. Before I know it, her lips are on mine and it’s like everything and everyone in the room disappears. She breaks the kiss and brings her fingers to her lips in wonder, lust filling her eyes.

“I’m sorry, I’m a little buzzed. I wouldn’t normally do that.”

I lean in to whisper in her ear, making sure to graze my chin along her neck and her breath hitches. “It’s okay, Angel. I wanted you to.” I place a soft kiss there and back up a bit, as I appreciate every single bit of the glory that God himself had to have created just for me.