

CHAPTER 1

“I’m eighteen and I’m aliiiiive!!!”

We scream it together: my best friend Zahra and I, with our arms outstretched and our heads flung back towards the summer night-sky. It’s our Power Call. We started it when we were eleven, the first time we were allowed to stay home unsupervised. We’d been so overflowing with excitement and that electric surge of newfound freedom that we had to let it out somehow. I still remember Zahra climbing onto the counter in my kitchen, surrounded by bowls filled with chips and bubble gum and chocolate covered raisins, throwing back her head and spontaneously belting out “I’m eleven... AND I’M ALIVE!!!!”

We’ve been doing it ever since – it’s our way of marking joyous moments.

Tonight we have to holler louder than any times in the past because the air that surrounds us is thick with the rumble of music and weekend partyers – some sober, but most intoxicated to some degree or another.

“Tonight is going to be epic!” Zahra shouts as we take our place in the long lineup outside the Club, waiting for our turn to be ushered in.

I grin back. “Better than epic! We are going to party until...” I pause, laughing as I finish: “...Until we close the joint *down!*”

Which, really, is an embarrassing thing for me to say since technically I haven’t ever “partied” before. Unless you count hanging out in friends’ basements with snack trays and sodas after a group study session.

So yeah, tonight is definitely a big deal – for three reasons.

One: it’s my eighteenth birthday.

Two: this is my first time at Choice

And, three: I definitely *will* be partying. No textbooks, no studying and no snack trays anywhere in sight.

The Club’s oversized neon sign flashes above the steps of the entrance:

CHOICE... CHOICE... CHOICE...

The letters bathe the street below in a pinkish-blue glow that makes the whole scene seem even more dream-like. Or maybe that’s just the haze of the alcohol messing with me. Zahra snuck a bottle of wine from her parent’s basement before we left, which we sipped in the cab on the way here.

“Alice! Hey – Ali! HAPPY BIRTHDAY!” A chorus of cheers pulls my attention from the entrance and I turn to see a group of friends making their way towards us. More people showed up than I thought. You have to be at least eighteen to get into Choice, and I hadn’t realized how many of my friends are older than me. We all hug as they join us at the back of the line. Like me, most of them are too focused on school and extra-curricular stuff to get out a whole lot to parties, so we’re all feeling the same buzz of excitement.

The muted *thump thump thump* of the music seeps through the building as though even the massive walls and pillars and expansive roof cannot contain it. Even the revelers overflow into the night - some dancing on the rooftop bar-garden or on the scaffolding wall sculpture, or climbing in the branches of the glowing fiberglass trees that line the sidewalk. The party is literally spilling out of the Club.

My younger brother, Felix, once told me, "A Choice party is so monumental it's always just a couple of beats away from being out of hand."

The fact that he'd used the word 'monumental' was a dead give-away that he'd stolen the line from someone else: Felix wouldn't have a sweet clue how to spontaneously throw a word like 'monumental' into a sentence. But he knows the parties. In fact, he lives for the parties - he gets paid to. Felix is Choice.

I spot him now, leaning in to say something to one of the bouncers just outside the elaborate main entrance. He's shirtless like all the Choice guys and his golden hair is messy and damp with either sweat or water - or both. The door guy laughs at something Felix says and punches him playfully in the shoulder then goes back to checking ID Flashes and directing people through the doors.

Felix cranes his neck to peer out at the ribbon of Club-goers winding along the sidewalk, all anxiously waiting to get in.

"Hey beautiful! Can you blow us a kiss?" A blonde girl yells to him from the mob, and a chorus of cheers and catcalls follow from her group.

Felix looks over at them and flashes a playful grin. "I'm yours, baby! All of you - all night!"

He runs both hands through his damp hair and they scream louder, but he's looking past them now, searching for me in the sea of people. Finally he spots me as Zahra and I and the rest of our crew wave our arms wildly above our heads. He cups his hands to his mouth and calls out across the crowd.

"Hey Birthday Girl! Get up here!" He motions for me to bring my friends up as well.

I can't believe he's going to just let us skip the line. Mom must have told him to do that. Which is fine; I'm happy to have Felix hang out with us for a bit since he knows everyone here - not just because he's Choice, but because that's simply how it is: everyone loves Felix. It's impossible *not* to love him. I don't think even I have seen him without a grin on his face. Getting paid to party and flirt and entertain women is pretty much a custom-fit career for him.

I wait for people to complain or call out when we walk past the line and up the stairs to the entrance, but no one does. It could be because most of them now know that it's my birthday or, more likely, it's because they recognize me. Not because of who I am, but because of who my mother is. It's a thought that tugs hard enough at my conscience to weaken the smile that's been plastered on my face for the past few hours. And even though I'm good at pretending that I like the second-hand recognition or that I don't notice or even care - I do. I'm aware of it all the time.

Felix pulls me in for a hug. "Hey, lady. Happy birthday." He holds me at arm's length and looks me over. "Wow. Look at you all fancied up."

It's the closest I'm going to get to a compliment from Felix. It's not that I don't dress up a lot; it's just that Felix wouldn't usually notice. But he's on his A-game tonight.

The door guy scans the ID Flash on each of our Cards. He looks up when he scans mine and smiles. "You Felix's sister?"

Huh. validation as someone's sister instead of the prodigal daughter... It doesn't feel any better, but still - at least it's *different*.

The two of them bump fists, then Felix tilts his chin towards the blonde girl and her entourage and gives them a final wink before turning to escort us through the doors. The girls respond with a unison of squeals - a sound so high-pitched and yet utterly un-feminine. I've never heard anything like it and I can't help craning my head for a moment to take it all in. It's obviously familiar to Felix and the bouncer guy, though - to everyone at the Club. They barely notice.

Felix leads us inside through the elaborate doors and my entire body goes into sensory overload. The music pounds louder, the lights flash more brightly and every square inch of the place pulses with energy. I've heard hundreds of stories about the Choice Clubs, seen photos and videos... and still, I never imagined anything like this. Not even close.

The Club looks even bigger inside than it does from the street. One whole section is open to the second story above, where an ornate wrought iron railing rims the perimeter. Giant glass chandeliers lit in deep pinks, purples and blues hang from the ceiling in the areas that aren't open to the upstairs, and fiberglass trees similar to the ones on the sidewalk sprout from the floor. Their trunks and thick branches are transparent, but because they're lit from the inside, they glow in colors that match the chandeliers, bathing anyone perched in their branches in enchanted hues.

Hundreds of people sit on the long couches that snake along the floor, winding among the trees. Most of the partyers are young women, but there are some guys too - probably mostly boyfriends or friends. And of course there are the Choice guys, easily recognizable in their low-slung jeans and perfectly chiseled bare torsos. They are gorgeous, every single one of them.

Felix flashes his most charming smile.

"Welcome to Choice, ladies."

A middle-aged man standing by one of the bar-islands lifts a finger to get Felix's attention. He's talking to a Choice guy whose back is to us, and they continue their conversation as our group approaches. Felix leans in to me, motioning to the older guy. "That's Henri - the big Boss-man."

But it's not his boss that I'm watching as we approach; it's the Choice boy standing beside him, almost a full head taller. His skin is smooth and tanned and every line of his body is perfectly toned. He turns as Henri inclines his head in our direction and I inhale sharply.

The guy is *beautiful*.

Full lips. High cheekbones. Dark hair that's wavy and just a little un-kept. But it's his eyes that steal my breath. I've seen a lot of gorgeous faces in my life, but never eyes like these: an intense mixture of blue and green that is seriously mesmerizing.

"Hey there. I'm Tag."

He has to yell to be heard over the music and there's a raspiness to his voice, like he's been screaming over the noise all night. He rubs his hand down the length of his thigh before extending it to me. "Good to meet you."

His fingers are warm and still a little damp but he has a firm handshake, which he holds a second longer as I continue taking him in. And then Henri clears his throat, as if he's about to say something important, and Tag's grip loosens. He slides both hands into his back pockets and turns his attention to his boss, who's already talking.

"Tag, this is Alice. She's—"

I cut Henri off because I know he's about to tell him who my mother is – and probably about the rest of my powerhouse family lineage. And this guy doesn't need to know that my grandmother opened the first Choice Club fifty years ago. Or that my great-grandmother was the country's first female president – or about any of it. All he needs to know is that tonight is my eighteenth birthday, and I'm here to celebrate. To party with my friends... until we close the joint down.

I smile. "Hey...Yeah. I'm Ali. I'm here for my birthday."

Tag nods with just the slightest incline of his chin.

"Happy birthday."

His eyes stay on me even when Henri places a hand on his shoulder and I have to keep myself from asking if those are contacts he's wearing because the intensity of that blue-green gaze is seriously unreal.

"Yes, happy birthday" Henri repeats. His fingers look pale against Tag's sun-kissed skin. He smiles, nodding at my friends to include them in the conversation.

"Tag will take good care of you ladies. He'll be with you all night, so if you need anything, just let him know." He pats Tag's shoulder and it makes a soft slapping sound that makes me even more aware of his bare skin, just inches from my own body.

I flash Felix a questioning glance. He knows what I'm wondering: if this is normal - to be personally greeted your first time at the Club and to have a Choice guy individually assigned for the night. Or is this because of him, or more likely, because of mom?

But Felix just grins; he's not going to tell me. He's in work-mode and his first love, always, is his job. He combs his messy bangs away from his forehead as he leans in so we're at eye level. "It's your birthday, lady – switch your brain off. Have a drink. Dance a little... Smile..." His eyes widen. "'Cause even though you're probably not going to remember most of it in the morning, tonight is going to be the best birthday you've ever had."

I roll my eyes, but I also can't help smiling. And I'm still smiling when Felix leaves us a few minutes later and Tag leads us towards the colorfully lit stairs that wind regally over the crowd of grinding, bouncing bodies on the dance floor. I feel his hand on the small of my back as he guides me through the mob, and I'm stunned at

how intensely aware I am of his touch – of just the transfer of heat from his fingers to the skin beneath the light fabric of my dress.

I dated my friend, Haim, on and off for almost two years before he left for the army, but I never felt this kind of reaction at the mere feel of his touch. Of course, Haim wasn't Choice. He looked at me with adoration, and respect and warmth– not the promise of all things naughty and dangerously alluring. What I had with Haim was deep and complicated. This thing is shallow and shamelessly transparent. Wickedly easy.

When we get to the stairs, Tag moves ahead of us, leading our group along the sculpted railing to the second floor. Up close like this, I notice there are colorful stones and bits of smooth glass embedded in the intricate wrought-ironwork patterns. The surface of each stair is filled with a moving image of perfectly green blades of grass, rustling lightly as though there's a breeze blowing through the air. Every time I tread on a stair, it leaves an impression of my footprint in the flattened grass, almost real except for the vibrant shade of each shimmery blade.

This place is unbelievable.

Surely this Club is a notch above the rest though, simply because it's the only Choice Club in the U.S. capital. The other Clubs can't possibly all be this huge or this elaborate.

I glance up again and my eyes stray to the smooth surface of Tag's back and the faint dip where his jeans hang low on his hips. Zahra squeezes my hand and when I tear my gaze away to look over at her, she mouths the word "*wow*", over-emphasizing the shape of each letter with her lips.

I nod slowly, eyes locked on hers for a moment before slipping back to the object of our mutual admiration. I briefly consider reaching out to brush my hand against his tanned skin – to feel the warmth of his toned muscles beneath my fingertips. I could, if I wanted to. I could do anything with him. In fact, he's probably expecting a high tip tonight, now that he knows that it's my birthday. But I'm not ready to pursue any of the scenarios weaving through my already crowded thoughts. It's all too surreal. Not just him, but this whole place. For now, it's enough to just take it all in – to look but not touch.

Clearly, my approach isn't for everyone though.

A leggy woman in her mid-twenties approaches Tag as she descends the staircase. She's clutching a glass in one hand and she holds it out as she leans in to kiss him on the lips. "Well good evening, gorgeous. I missed you last night."

"Hey. Yeah..." He dips his chin. "Wednesdays are my night off."

She runs a finger down the length of his chest. "Well I guess everyone needs a little down time." She takes a sip of her drink. "I'll see you later, though?"

"Definitely."

The woman smiles at us as she passes, motioning with her head in Tag's direction. "Smoking... *Hot*"

We witness several similar encounters as Tag leads us past rich velvet drapes that line most of the far wall up here, tied back every few feet to reveal private seating areas tucked along the entire circumference. And it

dawns on me, as he ushers us in to one of the alcoves, that this guy might be not just one of many Choice boys who work at the Club – he might be Top Choice.

He takes our drink orders, then disappears back into the mob of partyers. I can just make out the expanse of his bare torso moving through the tangle of hands that paw at him as he pushes his way towards the bar.

My friend, Thaley, leans in to me now. “So, did you update your Flash yet?”

I put my Card down and they all lean forward as I tap the corresponding icon when it appears on the table surface, recognizing my information. When I look up, I see the anticipation in everyone’s eyes. Because they’re all older than me, they understand what a big deal it is to turn eighteen and finally be allowed to wipe the drab standard-issue ID format from your Card in order to customize it however you want. They get that your Card is about more than the culmination of everything it contains: credit cards, account information, phone, keys, memberships... Your Card is your social identity.

I tap again and my ID Flash suddenly fills the entire table area. Personal video clips weave between the spaces along my ID Scan Code and a large, elaborate icon on the top pulses slowly as though it’s pushing right through the background. The name of my Donor glows even more brightly, with the letters T.C. next to it to indicate that he was Top Choice: the highest rating for any Choice male in the country. Exclusive. And as close to perfection as you can get.

Zahra strokes the corner of the icon with her index finger, zooming in so that the icon fills most of the table now. “Wow...I love it.”

I know some people might be flattered by the hint of envy that seeps into her tone, but I’m not. I could never be with Zahra – I don’t want anything but friendship, and maybe approval, from her. I love her like a sister.

But I know Zahra’s always been a little envious of my Donor. Her parents are well off, but even they couldn’t afford the millions my parents had to shell out in order to have two of their babies from a Top Choice Donor. But I wish she’d realize it’s not that important: I’ve met plenty of kids who’ve done fine, whose parents had them the plain old-fashioned way.

“Bar’s open.”

Tag’s voice draws everyone’s attention away from my Card and I remove it from the table. The surface flickers back to clear glass just as he slides a tray of martinis in front of us.

“So uh, here’s the thing...” He straightens, slipping his hands into his back pockets. “I sort of lost my Card last night. Because, um, some girl took it.” He rocks back on his heels, almost bashful, then he glances at the rest of my friends. “So if it’s okay, you’ll have to pay for your drinks and stuff through the bar at the end of the night.”

Then he shrugs. “Except this round. This one’s on the house.”

I can’t imagine what a pain it must be for him to not have his Card and I automatically ask, “Why would someone do that? Why would they take your card?”

It’s not like they would be able to use it for anything.

He shrugs again. “Some new game. Customers try and steal our Cards - to collect them or something.” And then, as if to reassure us, he adds: “We usually get them back, though. A couple days later or something.”

Zahra trails a finger along his forearm. "Well it's fine. We don't mind paying at the bar."

"Alright then." His mouth stretches into a devilish grin, all charm and confidence again. He leans in to grip the table with both hands and his taut stomach is just inches from my face. "Drink up, ladies." He winks. "We are going to have a hell of a night."

And we do.

I haven't danced this much in years – maybe ever. Or laughed so hard.

The first couple of times that we return to our table for breaks, we talk and catch up, gossip even – topics that aren't in any way related to school or anything important at all, and I love it. I love the way my brain is free to wander here, or even to shut off completely. And after a while, as Tag keeps refilling our drinks, we're laughing more than we're talking. Even more than we're dancing. Then he takes us out a small side door upstairs and into the sculpture that clings to the outside wall of the Club, and we dance some more overlooking the city lights and the lineup of people still waiting to get in.

Tag disappears for a few minutes then returns with three luminescent spheres. He hands one to me and one to Zahra. It's virtually weightless and made of some sort of soft plastic film.

I look up at him. "What is it?"

His cheeks are flushed and it emphasizes his jawline. Then he smiles and his eyes seem even brighter under the pulsing lights.

"On the count of three, throw them. As far as you can."

I lean in. "What?"

But he's already moved towards the edge of the railing, so Zahra and I shrug at each other and follow, laughing.

"One!" His voice carries over the music throbbing around us. "Two!" He pulls his arm back and still, I can't keep from noticing the sculpted lines of his body as he extends his arm. He shoots me a mischievous grin.

"THREE!"

We all launch the spheres and they shoot off into the night sky, twirling and glowing as though they're filled with hundreds of rainbow-tinted light refractions. Suddenly they all burst open with a loud popping sound, and swirls of confetti and tiny glowing lights explode into expanding clouds over the street, sparkling and fluttering like fairy dust all around us.

Tag is watching me again, and his arm is around me. "Happy birthday..."

I'm vaguely aware of the chorus of cheers coming from the revelers beneath us as his other arm circles me. Then he guides me away from the ledge and pushes me gently against the wall. The music pulses in my ears, the cheers scream louder and a flicker of confetti lands in my hair. Tag glides his finger along the blonde strand and removes the sparkle. His eyes are so full of me now that they almost swallow me whole. Then his lips are on mine and I don't see him anymore because my eyes are closed and I'm just letting myself savor his taste and the feel of his hand against my back, pressing me closer to him.

I ignore the tiny voice in the back of my head telling me that this is silly, that none of this is real – he’s Choice and he’s just doing this because it’s his job.

Like most girls my age, I spend the majority of my time focused on school work. And so like them, I need to be okay enjoying these rare moments and accept them for what they are – because this is the one place where we don’t have to be impressive or responsible or intellectual. That’s what the Choice Clubs are for: a bit of harmless escapism.

Besides, it’s my birthday – I’ve earned this.

I relax into Tag’s arms and bring my hand up to hold the back of his head. His hair is damp beneath my fingers, then softer the further I roam away from the nape of his neck. He inhales as I explore his mouth with my tongue.

Then Zahra jolts me suddenly back to reality. “Ali! Hey, ALI! It’s our song!”

I laugh as I back away from Tag, lick my lips and brush my hair out of my face. Zahra’s bouncing around, doing the silly moves to the dance we invented when we were nine – the one we were sure would make us famous.

“Come on, girl: don’t let a drunken lip lock with Choice here keep you from the highlight of your birthday night!” She’s still doing the moves, exaggerating the God-awful choreography. Even Tag is grinning, and seconds later I’m joining Zahra as we complete the full dance.

We high-five each other at the end: “Take that, people! That is how it’s *done!*”

Tag laughs, and I realize it’s the first time all night I’ve seen him with a full-on smile – dimples and all. He shakes his head at us. “What the hell was that?”

“*That* – was two years of mediocre ballet classes and five long nights of practice, choreographing and fine-tuning.”

He arches a brow. “You guys made that thing up? Wow.” He looks even more dumbfounded.

“Oh yeah. We are women of many talents.” I respond sarcastically.

As soon as I say it, I blush at the sexual innuendo, which I hadn’t intended. I hope he won’t notice, but he does – I can tell because his left eyebrow raises into a perfect arch. I guess when you get paid to respond to sexual innuendos, you become pretty good at picking up on them.

But then he just grins again, like he knows I’m embarrassed. “Let’s go back inside. I’ll get you both another drink.” He pauses, then finishes more softly. “Hell, after that performance, I think I need a couple of drinks...” Then his hand is on my waist again, as he guides me back into the Club and towards the bar.

And now I get it: why girls act like Blondie in the lineup outside with her swarm of squealing friends. Because no matter what kind of SAT scores you get or how high-ranking your job title is, when a guy like Tag looks at you with eyes like that, or turns in a way that makes his jeans slip just a little lower on his narrow hips – or kisses you softly and with intoxicating passion – it affects you.

If beauty really is power, then I understand now why they keep these guys contained like this. My grandmother was even smarter than I thought.