



Allured (Love and Burlesque #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Alek

Is the angelic man I met actually a devil in disguise? I really hope so. There's nothing more that I want than to get to know Ezekiel Adler, the quiet and proper professor with fuck-me eyes hidden behind his thick-rimmed glasses.

Dating's been complicated for me in the past but this man has me ready to dive head-first off stage for him.

I can only hope he'll be in the audience, ready to catch me.

Ezekiel

Has my personal journey of self-discovery led to him?

Alek Delgado. The enigmatic, hot-as-sin burlesque dancer who also wears a cat apron while he cooks. He bewitched me the moment I laid eyes on him. Carefree. Animated. Unafraid. The younger man is everything I wish to be.

At a crossroads in my life, Alek has quickly become the determining factor in my path forward.

Cat apron and all

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CHAPTER ONE

ALEK

Thongs might as well be currency around here.

“Goddamnit, T. Stop stealing my thongs!” I yell out to my brother as I stalk up the stairs from the dressing rooms located below the stage. I swear to God, these stairs will be the death of me one day. I’m one shimmery body oil drip away from tripping and eating shit after a show.

I swing open the door leading to the west wing of the stage and quickly see that my target isn’t back there. Huffing in annoyance, I carefully part the side curtains leading to the center of the stage. The front curtains are already open in preparation for our rehearsal. Taking a moment, I look around past the stage and take in the vast establishment.

The Garden of Eden Burlesque Club is basically empty this early before a show. From the stage, all the seats, booths, and the massive bar are clearly visible, especially without the bright lights hitting my face like they usually do when I’m up here. We also don’t have a ton of staff on hand today since the weeknights are our more laid—back performances and the days we book our bachelorette parties.

The club looks so calm and unassuming without the moody lights and the sultry music booming over the speakers. The ornate bar only has a couple of bartenders behind it, prepping for tonight’s Roaring Twenties theme. One of them is my girl, Emma.

Earlier today, I swear I thought I'd never hear the end of her complaining about the special liquor they had to find to make the 'bougie' themed drinks, as she called them. My best friend is a riot, but man, can she brew up a storm about work sometimes. Not that I blame her, really. Her job can get intense.

We get all sorts of clientele here. Some come with more money than they know what to do with. Some come and hang at the bar to let off some steam from the work day. There's always a good mix of people in the audience.

Despite the kind of crowd we might have, I rule it everytime.

I've been dancing at the club since the place opened up ten years ago and have been headlining since our first show.

Ten years? Fuck, you're getting old Alek.

Was it always my dream to take my clothes off for money? Nah, not really. But I love it and damn if I don't look good doing it. It's a bit of a far cry from my original career path in gymnastics but I guess I kind of do a bit of both with being a burlesque dancer. Sure, I'm not winning any gold medals. But I have won the Sexiest Man in Burlesque Award several years in a row.

I'm just saying.

I offer a small wave to Emma when I catch her staring at me like I'm some sort of freak. I guess I was lost in my introspection a little longer than what would be considered normal, so I don't blame her for her incredulous look. She shakes her head at me in question, making the brown curls that frame her face move around wildly.

While I would love to talk shit with my best friend and sample some of tonight's special drinks, I have justice to deliver. Choosing to continue my search, I shoot Em a

playful middle finger in goodbye which she returns with two of her own.

Atta girl.

The other wing of the stage is where I finally find Thomas.

T doesn't hear as I slide through the side curtains. He's still in his gym clothes from our workout earlier. Nothing like a pump before a show, I always say. And apparently there's nothing like the thrill of theft either, according to T. It's not the first time he's taken my shit.

For some reason, my younger brother thinks everything in my locker is up for grabs. Anyone with a sibling knows how it is fighting over stuff. But taking underwear? That seems to be a Delgado family specialty. Specifically, a Thomas Delgado specialty because who the fuck steals their brother's underwear ?

I get a little closer and finally notice Thomas is talking to Vivian, our little sister and costume designer, as they look over some outfit changes for tonight's show. His giant frame blocks the entire view of my sister in front of him, forcing me to the side so I become visible to her. Quietly, I raise my finger up to my lips in a shushing motion. I continue to approach undetected and I'm impressed with myself— big guys like me aren't known for being light on our feet. Viv's eyes are gleaming with mischief the closer I get. But she doesn't give me away.

Stealthily, I reach up and give him a brotherly slap right on his ridiculous man—bun. Viv laughs as T curses and rubs the back of his head, further messing up his already rumpled blond locks. When he turns back to glare at me, I can see my new thong hanging off his hand. I grab his hand and raise the evidence between the three of us. A price tag dangles off the pink fabric.

“Seriously dude, my thong? It won't even fit your big ass.” I chastise him in a way

only a big brother can.

T easily breaks free from my grip as he looks down and rolls his eyes at me, indignant as ever. I'm not short by any means but compared to his 6'6" frame, I'm freaking Gimli to his Legolas.

"Look, I accidentally forgot my bag, and Vivian was telling me I had this new costume, but she doesn't want panty lines to show?—"

T sends a glare over to our sister. The innocent smile on her maroon lips gives nothing away. Someone might think it would be weird for your sister to design clothes you're going to be stripping off, but, one, she's talented as hell, and two, it's not like she watches the shows. No, Viv is always backstage ready to mend up anyone's pants that ripped from too deep of a squat or too high of a kick.

"— and thanks for calling my boxers 'panties' by the way," T continues. These two are closer in age and have always fought more with each other. I scoff and roll my eyes at him before sharing a quick look with our sister, pursing my lips in a way that says as if he doesn't wear tiny thongs for a living.

He looks back in my direction and starts speaking with a somewhat apologetic tone.

"So I thought it'd be okay if I took the new pair you got and reimbursed you later. I don't want to head home right now." T's brow grows heavy and there's a distant look in his eyes now. Shit. I forgot he had recently broken up with his girlfriend. I feel like an ass.

Viv lays a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Our sister has always been like this, kind and caring. She reminds me of my mom and damn, does my heart twist at the thought. I quickly push down the feelings that are threatening to rise. I don't have time for that right now.

“Keep ‘em. They’re more your color anyway.” I smirk and smack T’s shoulder, trying to lighten the mood.

That’s been my specialty since we were kids: Joke, laugh, be the guy who doesn’t take everything too seriously. Make sure my siblings are doing okay. The role comes naturally now with anyone I care about.

Thankfully, Viv speaks up and pulls both me and T from our trains of thought.

“Seb let me know Knight said we need to have a run—through with some of the new guys. Something about a special event coming up.”

T and I look at each other and sigh.

We’re already tired from back—to—back rehearsals and shows this week, but with the holiday season coming up, we have a bunch of new acts and performers joining us. The lag in my brain makes me take a moment to register what she said.

“Wait, Knight’s here? And the son of a bitch didn’t even say hi?” I fake offense as I raise a hand to my chest.

I won’t lie. It’s definitely weird that he’s here on a random Tuesday. I know very well how busy Daddy Big Bucks is and how we’re a small stop among the many business ventures he’s constantly bouncing between. But I’ve known the guy for ten years. We’ve been through a lot together and I definitely deserve a hello and maybe a little smooch or something.

“Actually, Seb said he was looking for you. He said Knight seemed a little angry.” Vivian’s usually easy smile drops for a moment as she points backstage. It’s always odd seeing her anything but happy with a cute little smirk on her face. With a sigh, T turns towards me and crosses his arms while raising his eyebrow in that annoying

way that makes me want to tape it down or shave it off.

“What did you do now, Alek?”

I look at him and frown, thinking it over. As if I’m the only one who’s gotten in trouble around here. Yes , it’s mostly me but that doesn’t mean I did anything this time. At least I don’t think I did anything. Probably.

“Well I guess I’ll find out, huh?” I shrug one shoulder nonchalantly, backing away to the hallway that leads to the backstage office. With my departure, I do a mock salute and throw a wink at them.

“It’s showtime, baby.” I’m about to swing the door open and take my first step downstairs when I hear Thomas yell behind me.

“The show isn't for a few hours, dumbass!”

“Yeah? Well good luck fitting in that thong, you fucking giant!”

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CHAPTER TWO

ALEK

Daddy, chill.

“ I don’t have the time for this, Jack,” a deep voice scolds as I make my way down the dark hallway leading to Knight’s office. Well, more like the office Knight commandeered with his surprise arrival to the club today. Though, technically this is all his.

That deep voice is usually scolding me so it’s kind of nice to not be at the receiving end of the curt words.

“It’s absurd Harriett has to cancel the gala because her chemical face peel did its job too well. It’s even more absurd that she expects me to rearrange what took her months to plan in a matter of four days.”

I lean against the doorway, watching the frustrated way Knight rubs down the side of his face, his thick fingers lightly digging into his heavy five o’clock shadow. His profile is front and center as he sits upright in the office chair, his charcoal gray suit partly hidden behind the messy desk full of show schedules and promotional items. I can tell his eyes are closed. Otherwise, he would have seen me leaning against the doorframe out of the corner of his eye.

“Fine,” he sighs. “We will hold it at my estate and go along with her lie of being sick. I’ll arrange the larger details but I will need you to send the word out to the invite list.

Also, please contact my sick mother and tell her I'm regretting this already." With finality in his tone, he hangs up the phone and sets it on the desk.

"Got an extra invite? I hear rich people's parties, oh sorry— galas — have the best booze."

"Must you always sneak around like that?" he asks with a heavy sigh, still not looking at me.

"I'm light on my feet, you kinda pay me for that. My twinkle toes." I let out an easy chuckle as I walk over to one of the empty chairs in front of the man at the desk. While he's still frustrated by the phone call from Hell, he seems a little more relaxed in my presence. Finally, he turns to face me as he unbuttons the top of his undoubtedly expensive dress shirt. The slight look of relief when he looks at me would make me feel special but it's probably because I'm not pushing some gala on him like his mother just did.

"I need your help," he says with a wince, like it pains him to ask. Knight is a man who enjoys taking charge and lives with a tight schedule. In the time that I've known the guy, I swear he's never done anything spontaneous or last minute.

"And what would Daddy Knight like me to do?" There's a grin on my face as I ask him the question. I'm definitely teasing him but I'm thinking this is the light—heartened vibe he needs right now.

"Again with the nickname?" He arches an eyebrow at me. Honestly, Knight pretends to hate the title but this man forgets that I know some of his secrets too. He shakes his head, resting his elbow on the desk before he leans into his large open hand and taps his finger against his temple with a steady rhythm.

"Look Aleksander, since you were creeping in on my conversation, I'm sure you

heard my predicament.” He glares at me. If I were anyone else I’d be frozen in fear or even running out of his office, but Knight’s armor has never scared me.

“I need a chef for the gala Saturday night. We both know that you’re a talented cook and you’re one of the only people I trust to get this done correctly, even with all of your antics.”

It wouldn’t be a true Knight compliment if there wasn’t a bit of criticism in there. Still, my eyes light up as he explains the help he needs. I fucking love cooking. I swear if I wasn’t dancing, I’d be competing head—to—head in some reality TV cooking shows.

Knight goes on about how the original chef his mom had hired wasn’t willing to make the two hour trip to his place instead. His estate instead of his mother’s mansion. He let me know there would only be about thirty people in attendance and I had full control of the menu with the exception of a couple of food allergy restrictions.

I’ve got to admit, the whole time he was explaining things I was trying to figure out what the Hell the difference between an estate and a mansion was. I still hadn’t come up with the answer by the time he hit me with his last question.

“Am I assured I can count on you, Aleksander?”

“Yeah, I’ve got you.” A genuine smile stretches across my lips. I can do this for him and I’d like him to know I’m taking it seriously. He may not think it sometimes, but I actually do care for this man.

“Let me know when you think it would be best to go shopping and I can either have someone grab the items—”

“Actually, I’d like to do the shopping myself. I wanna make sure to pick out the best stuff,” I interject. It’s something I’m picky about. If I’m cooking I’d like to choose everything down to the type of salt I’m using.

There's a little pride showing through his businessman mask. I know he appreciates how thorough I like to be, ever since I helped him design the club.

“Why am I not surprised? Take this, then.”

The guy reaches into his freaking breast pocket . You know someone is loaded when they keep their wallet there instead of in the back pocket of some worn—out Wranglers. I feel like I’m some peasant compared to his lordship.

With quick precision, he takes a black card out from his wallet. Meeting my eyes again, he slides it over the desk. “And I’ll have my assistant email you a copy of the dietary requirements for some of our guests.”

“Sounds good. See you Saturday morning, then? You mind me showing up early to prep?” I ask as I get up from my chair and lean over the desk, meeting his stare with one of my own.

“Of course. I will make sure Ernest knows of your arrival and that you’re not just some vagrant passing by.”

Ernest is his head of security and I swear I get the stank—eye from him any time I’m over. It’s been a freaking decade. Surely, the guy knows me by now but he still makes getting into Knight’s place like getting through the TSA.

Taking the card, I clutch it to my chest like he took a shot to my heart, dramatically stumbling as I start making my way towards the door. “You wound me.”

“Leave, now.” He’s reaching for his phone. I’m sure he’s got other fires to put out because of this surprise gala.

I wink as he begins to turn away and I fit his shiny black card between my index and middle finger. Oh damn, it’s embossed and everything.

Teasing him, I put my lips on the fancy card and blow him a kiss with it. “Thanks, Daddy!” I step backwards toward the door with a little wave of his credit card in goodbye.

“Stop calling me that.” The stoic man rolls his eyes in dismissal, but I know there’s no real threat in the command. If the man had any soft spots, I would be one of them.

“I’ve got your card, I’m gonna use your money– I think that’s the definition of a sugar daddy.” A soft chuckle escapes my lips at the same time he lets out a pained groan. I can’t see him as I’m walking out but I know he has at least a tiny smile on his face. Whatever kind of smile the bastard can muster, at least.

“Hey everyone, I’ve got a sugar daddy!” My voice bounces off the walls of the hallway as I walk away holding more money than I’ll ever see in my lifetime.

CHAPTER THREE

ALEK

You better work, bitch.

Friday night hits faster than I expected it would. I spent my week training the new dancers brought onto the team and creating the menu for Knight's gala tomorrow.

It's still early September and nearing the end of our summer show season but we've got a lot of new material to learn for the fall. Typically I love showing the newbies the ropes and getting to know them. I'm 'painfully extroverted' according to T, but he's a grumpy fucker. He's one of the reasons this week hasn't gone as great as it could have. He's broken up over his ex—girlfriend and taking it out on people around him.

"Dude, they're ready, you don't need to be freaking out," I reassure my brother. I catch T's eyes through the dressing room mirror as I apply a second layer of mascara to my eyelashes. What can I say? It makes my eyes pop .

"I know they're ready, Alek," he sighs and sets down one of his contour brushes onto the dresser. "I've just been in a funk."

"Nah, really?" I ask rhetorically, a playful tone in my voice. "Didn't notice that when you barked the newbie's head off the other day." Crossing my arms, I turn toward my brother to get a good look at him. Setting free a sigh of my own, I put down my mascara wand.

He's tired, I can tell. It's not easy training new dancers, especially ones that come in with a prima donna complex because they recently graduated from a fancy dance academy. I don't necessarily blame T for getting upset at one of the new guys. Jason was being a dick because he didn't get a lead part, but the yelling was harsher than it had to be.

"I apologized to him, Alek." He mimics my pose and crosses his arms as well. "I was gonna say, I'm gonna be taking next week off. I've got some clinicals coming up and need to focus on my residency," he voices quietly, not wanting to share the information with the rest of the dancers in the dressing room.

I honestly couldn't be more proud that my little brother is within reach of his dream to become a doctor but I think he takes on too much. He's working at the club in order to make money and pay off what he can for school, but I can tell balancing everything has been wearing him down lately. Savannah leaving him was just the thing to make him realize it.

"Good," nodding, I continue, "you need some time off, T. Shit's been a lot for you lately." T narrows his eyes and tilts his head at me with a confused expression. He looks like some giant puppy when he does that.

"You're okay with that?" His tone doesn't do anything to hide his surprise. Why would he think that I would be against him taking care of himself? "It's gonna be a lot more work for you, Alek."

"It's not a problem," I reply, brushing him off with a wave of my hand. It honestly isn't a problem for me to take on some more hours. I won't lie— the club is my life, and it's not like I have any outstanding commitments after Knight's gala tomorrow.

"The new dancers are trained and we've only got a few bachelorette parties next week until we start the Halloween shows. Nothing I can't handle." I explain as I clean

up my station and pack my makeup bag.

“Alek...” T’s voice is soft as he places his hand on my forearm. “I appreciate you taking over, I really do.”

I turn to him as a small, sad smile begins to play on his face. “My mind’s been messed up lately and I think this will give me some clarity.”

I pat the hand he has resting on my arm and meet his green eyes with the hazel of my own. “I’m always here for you, y’know? If you want to talk, drink, or punch it out, I’m game, bro.” I earn a genuine laugh with that one.

“No, fuck you, you play dirty.” He shakes his head, shoves me away, and begins clearing his station as well. Our prep time is coming to an end with only fifteen minutes until the show starts, and I’ve instilled in these guys that any messes are their own.

“It was an accident!” I huff out an annoyed grunt. “You,” I start, pointing my index finger at him, “should have watched where the pool was, idiot.” How dare he say it was my fault that he fell into a half empty pool last summer. We were having a bonfire with a couple of friends that night and we both ended up drinking too much. For some reason, a wrestling match sounded like a great idea. So great the night ended with T needing stitches on his upper arm after I tackled his big ass into the pool. Still, I say it’s his fault. He double dared me.

“I have scars, Alek!” he shouts his fake offense and slaps my finger out of his face. There’s no anger there, just good ol’ teasing about a brotherly fight taken too far. He’s totally mad I kicked his ass.

“You got a concussion Alek, I wouldn’t say that you came out clean.” Viv laughs as she appears out of the corner of my eye and begins to fiddle with some of the tassels

on my costume.

I've got to admit the costume she whipped up is gorgeous. It's a sparkling shade of champagne with tassels and small gems shining on the criss—cross straps that surround my torso. And of course it's topped off— or bottomed off I should say— with a matching metallic thong that shows off this ass I squat five days a week to have. The coverup of my costume, a rip—away three—piece suit, sits in my chair behind me. I'll definitely need her help with that. Funny how easy the velcro is to tear off, but so damn hard to put on by yourself.

“You're supposed to be on my side, Viv.” I pretend to scold her as T snorts smugly. He's reaching for his three piece—suit too.

“I'm not on anyone's side. You're both ridiculous. Now, turn around so I can help get this suit on you.” Her tiny hands feel anything but small as she practically man—handles me away from the vanity and expertly slips the suit on me.

“Thanks, Mom .” I might as well call her that with how she's got me feeling like some toddler that can't get his own clothes on. I love taunting her but I know I'd accidentally flash the audience way too early in the show if she wasn't here to make sure the costume was in place.

T howls with laughter as he and one of our long—time dancers, Benny, help each other get their costumes on. They're dressed in something similar to me but their costumes have underlying black and silver strappy lingerie. We've got a fun show planned tonight and the excitement is starting to get to me. Nothing beats the rush of knowing you've got the crowd's attention, admiration, and desire. The electricity of it all causes some serious adrenaline to run through you.

“Showtime, my beauties!” Seb, our master of ceremonies, announces over our intercom system. A loud smack of his lips over the speakers punctuates the

announcement. Our nightly kiss for good luck.

Once the final piece of my costume is in place, I turn away from my siblings to take in the room full of about a dozen other dancers. It's time for our pre—show prep rally.

“You better what?” I deepen my voice and it fills the room as if I'm some commanding officer yelling at his soldiers.

“You better work, bitch!” A loud chorus of masculine voices salute back to me.

Music to my fucking ears.

CHAPTER FOUR

EZEKIEL

What in God's name does 'sus' mean?

Yet again, I've almost fallen face—first into this pretentious pond. The landscape designer might as well have called it a death trap due to its ridiculous location.

The flowers I'm currently trying to keep intact are wrapped in my arms and blocking half of my vision. I never knew that flowers could be so expensive and smell like the inside of a nursing home.

I'm not quite sure what my aunt was thinking when she made the last minute switch of floral arrangements, but apparently, she wanted me to "see them through." Which meant I had to drop grading my student's exams in order to get to my cousin's house early for the gala this afternoon.

While I do love my family, I've never been one for formal events such as these. I would much rather have a night at home, reading by the fire and ignoring the world around me.

It's kind of hard to ignore the world right now, though. Including this oaf. Knight strides by me, nearly knocking me into the pond.

"Unless you would like these to be a floating centerpiece, I would watch where you're hurrying off to." My tone is annoyed and I'm not sorry for it. It was he and his

mom who roped me into this, afterall.

“Oh, get over it.” He turns around while dismissing me with a flick of his hand. “I’ve got to direct all these unwanted strangers in my home so I would hope I wouldn’t have to babysit you as well, cousin.” His hand stills on his phone before grins wryly and glances up at me.

Things between myself and Knight have always been like this. We’re both grumpy, no—nonsense men, but we tend to get along most of the time. He’s one of the only people I would drop my plans for. Hence, why I’m here playing florist at his estate.

“Why is the gala happening at your place, anyway?” I walk over to an empty table and set down the large vase filled with those putrid flowers.

“While Mother is ill she would still like some control over the situation and didn’t want to ‘leave it in some stranger’s hands’ as she said.” Knight reaches his hand over the table and begins to minutely move around the vase I just set down. I roll my eyes and smack his hand away. “It was fine where I put it. Don’t you have other things on your to—do list besides shoving me into your pool?”

There’s a familiar glint in his eyes as he stares at me. A glint I know very well. It’s the one he would usually get before we did something that got us in trouble when we were children. “Well yes, actually. I do need some help with the dining options. Would you be willing to see the chef about the special dietary needs list?”

That doesn’t sound as terrible as handling the spiny flowers. And it would be a good opportunity to get a quick snack since I had to skip breakfast to obtain said spiny flowers.

“I can do that. Is there someone else who can get the rest of the flowers?”

Knight is already walking away as he responds over his shoulder. “Oh, I’ll find someone. Good luck!” I definitely don’t like the cheeky quality in his last two words.

What am I in for?

If I hadn’t already been familiar with my cousin’s house, I swear I could have found my way floating through the air like I was in some old cartoon, dragged by the delicious smells coming from the massive kitchen.

Whoever Knight was able to wrangle at the last minute to cater the gala is making a name for themselves solely based on the aromas invading my senses.

Turning the corner into the large kitchen area, I look toward the granite island and go still. While I am not usually one for exaggerations or overtly colorful language, a little quip slips through.

“Be still, my fucking heart.”

Before me is the most attractive man I have ever seen.

Which is a thought that leaves me confused. I’ve seen attractive men before. Objectively, I am able to see one’s level of attractiveness regardless of gender, but I have never been attracted to men. At least, not so suddenly and outright.

At first glance I wouldn’t have guessed this man was a professional chef. Light brown waves that look almost blond in the sunlight frame the strong contours of his face. There’s something soft in his delicate but still masculine features, despite the way his nose is scrunched and his brow is furrowed in concentration. But it’s his lips that have me enthralled. Plump and naturally colorful, the bottom one is caught between his teeth as he carefully tops a small dish with an herb. What I wouldn’t give to be the one biting down on his lips...

My eyes continue to trace down in my observation. He's wearing a black band t-shirt that looks like it's about as old as I am, with some rather tight fitting faded blue jeans, and a Hello Kitty apron tied around his waist. His body moves so fluidly as he shimmies from counter to counter.

I can't look away. What is it about him?

Is it the way the man is singing at a level I'm sure he thinks is quiet, and dancing around like this is a normal Saturday morning to him? What do his Saturday mornings usually look like? And why do I suddenly want to know?

Is it the way he skillfully and purposefully mixes, cuts, and plates his ingredients while he makes what smells to be the best lunch I will ever have in my life?

No, no. It's the way that, while he's doing all those things, there's a certain life and brightness he brings to the room. He radiates confidence. Like he's never afraid of being truly and wholly himself. This is a man who everyone wants to be, or be around.

This is a man I have to get to know. A voice in the back of my head nags.

There's the sound of a whistle from somewhere. With it, I'm pulled out of my trance and find myself taken aback by my borderline obsessive thoughts. I have to brush a hand down my face to ground myself. Suddenly, I also remember I'm at the kitchen entrance where the person I'm gawking at can probably see me staring like a stalker.

"That's a little sus, man." A deep, rich voice playfully chastises me with a tsk. Through my hands, I catch a glimpse of the man staring at me as he takes out his earbuds.

What I wouldn't do to implant that voice directly into my brain, so my inner thoughts

all sound like this man. I wish I understood what on Earth he said to me though.

“What in God’s name does sus mean?” I certainly know that is not the biggest question that needs answering but it seems to be the right question to ask. I’ve earned a full—bodied, genuine laugh from him. I gasp at the lovely sound and I feel something spark within my chest.

CHAPTER FIVE

ALEK

Taste it for me.

My not—so—secret and not—so—subtle admirer has me doubled over in laughter. I can't help it. I've never heard someone with such a serious tone and a look that screams Clark Kent say the word 'sus' before.

Letting out the last of my laugh, I tuck away my headphones and marvel at the shy smile the man is offering me.

"It means I've seen you staring at me for the past five minutes, man," I reply in a friendly tone, wiping a tear from my eye as I finally calm down enough to talk to him.

"It means you were being suspicious, but I figured you were just watching the food." I know damn well the food wasn't what had him drooling, but I want to see where this goes.

"Yes, well— your technique is quite precise."

I notice how he completely leapt at the chance to cover his staring, and that's alright. I'll let it pass. My quiet little Clark Kent is blushing so hard I think those sexy glasses of his might fog up if I tease him any further.

I might tease him a bit more though. I'm no saint and the blush looks damn good on that handsome face. I lick my bottom lip as I brace both my hands on the counter and eye him the way he was eyeing me moments ago. It's only fair.

A soft—looking, navy blue v—neck sweater with the oxford collar of a dress shirt peeking out fits his lean build perfectly. He stands only a few inches shorter than me. Along with the dark gray slacks and polished black shoes he's got on, he definitely doesn't look like another one of the dozen workers hurrying around the place to get the event set up. He looks more like a hot librarian I'm dying to have shush me for being too loud.

Who is this guy?

There's a permanent furrow on the pale skin of his brow, almost like he's squinting even though he's wearing glasses. It's got me wondering if the guy ever relaxes. Maybe he's observing, or taking me in, or something. But it's what's behind those glasses that has me in my own creeper moment.

Holy shit. His eyes. The perfect shade of azul in them has me hypnotized, feeling drunk and sober at the time in a way I can't put into understandable words. I can't stop staring but it's not like he's breaking away either. He's not backing down, lost in the moment like me. His thick, black eyelashes slowly close and open as he blinks, those milliseconds are the only break he gives me from staring into those endless pools of dark blue. It's cliché as fuck but it feels like time really has frozen.

“Mierda !” I jolt when a timer goes off on the counter, freeing us from our game of gay chicken as I twist to grab it and turn it off.

“Sorry, gotta get these.” I change the stove settings with one hand, and with my other hand, I reach into the pocket of my apron. My Hello Kitty oven mitts don't work as well as they used to but I love them too much to get rid of them. They were one of

Viv's first sewing projects and I'm going to keep using them even if it means I need to be quick about taking shit out of the oven.

Out of the corner of my eye I see him brush one of his elegant hands against the side of his neck. The moment we shared is gone and I could cry for the sudden sense of loss I'm feeling.

"I— uh, Knight sent me here to check on the dietary restrictions list," he murmurs.

"Oh, are you an event planner or assistant?" I ask as I take the empanadas out of the oven, fully aware I'm giving him a view most people pay for back at the burlesque club. If there's an exaggerated bend to my waist and a little pop to my ass, I don't hear him complaining about it.

It's the opposite, really. I can feel his stare burning into my back.

A throat clears behind me and I smile to myself before sliding the empanadas onto a cooling rack.

When I look back at him, I find it cute how much he's purposely not looking in my direction. I'm sure the kitchen backsplash is what's got color in those cheeks and not my award—winning ass.

"Well no, I'm an attendee that was somehow swindled into helping out." He's stepped a little closer by this point. He's actually taking an admiring look at my food now and not only using it as a bad excuse for checking me out.

On one counter there's some gazpacho soup topped with ceviche and garnished with cilantro that I need to get into the fridge soon. The other counter holds my fresh out the oven beef and veggie empanadas on cooling racks.

I love how he can't keep himself from eyeing the steaming pastries. A man lusting after my food is a man lusting after my heart.

"Ah, a guest, huh? I guess you'll have to wait for a taste, then."

There's a low growl somewhere. I can't really tell if it's coming from his throat or stomach but it's got me feeling proud, either way.

"Surely, you need a taste tester?"

His tone betrays the joke and there's a little pleading in his voice that's sexy as fuck. I figure he might have come into the kitchen on Knight's behalf but I know a hungry man when I see one. The guy was practically salivating when he came through the doorway. As he damn well should. My cooking is amazing.

Grabbing a fork, I cut into one of the extra empanadas and prepare a small sample for him. He stares at me the entire time, his eyes fixated on my hands and the food equally. I'm realizing how much I like this guy's eyes on me. I should really get his name at some point. And his number.

"It's a little hot." The fork is clutched in my hand as I take a few steps forward to where Clark Kent is around the counter. Fuck it, I'm flirting. I'm not a professional here. I'm just a guy who can cook and is under no contract or code of conduct.

Standing right in front of him, I bring the fork between our faces, a scooped hand underneath the tip of the utensil in case there's any fallout.

There's an idea flowing in my brain, part one of my seduction of securing his number. Oh, Clark Kent has no idea what he's in for. I'm sure my grin looks feral to him at this point.

“Let me blow on it for you,” I whisper. My lips part and we’re so close that I’m feeling more heat coming from him than from the pastry. A gentle puff of air leaves my lips and I see the steam of the food travel toward his gaping mouth. His lightly stubbled jaw trembles only inches from my fingers.

Screw it, here goes part two of my seduction.

“Taste it for me.”

He makes a soft, involuntary sound as his lips wrap around the fork. Never once does he take his eyes off of me as he chews and fuck, do I find that eye contact hot.

CHAPTER SIX

EZEKIEL

Starvation or salvation?

At the moment I can't remember if spontaneous human combustion has been disproven or not. What I am sure of is that after hearing that sentence leave this man's mouth, I might become one of the recently recorded cases of the phenomenon.

My eyes dart from the flaky, delicious—smelling pastry to his amber eyes. I don't know whether he's joking or not but I can't detect any malice from him. There's nothing but anticipation as his own eyes lock on my face. We're so close there's not even a forearm's breadth between our chests.

I'm hungry. I'm confused. I'm enthralled.

And I can't resist. I don't know what I'm feeling, and I don't think that I want to reflect on the perplexity. For once in my life, I'm listening to my body and not my mind.

Without another word, I inch my face forward and wrap my lips around the morsel; attempting, but failing to look anywhere but in his eyes as I retreat from the fork. His expression is downright lustful, eyelids hooded and looking at me through his long, curled lashes.

I'm lost in the moment. A satisfied moan ripples through the air and it takes me a

moment to realize it's coming from me.

Eyes widening, I step back and make the mistake of trying to breathe in while my mouth is still full of the appetizer. I'm mortified when I begin to gag. If I don't die from choking, I'm sure the embarrassment I am feeling will finish the job. I ask myself, was that bite worth my potential death by trachea obstruction?

Backing away even further, I cough and bring my fingers to my lips, my other hand resting on the counter to catch myself. I can breathe. I've escaped death and only wounded my pride by a small amount.

"S'ry just a little hot," I mumble after swallowing the rest of the bite. Not an outright lie. The food wasn't extremely hot, but I felt like I was burning from being in his proximity.

"You alright?" The look of concern from him matches the softness in his voice as he sets the fork down on the counter and rests a hand on my forearm. Heat sears me from his touch. Were those thread—bare oven mitts so far gone that they burnt his hand and he's now branding me in return?

That's the only reasonable explanation for the feverishness that is radiating from our connected flesh. It's the only reasonable explanation for why I'm feeling so flustered.

I lie to myself.

"I— I'm okay." I nod. Humiliation settles within me as I move my arm away from his touch. I rub small circles around my chest and it feels like my hand is a physical barrier preventing the outpouring of emotions simmering beneath my fingertips.

He was only checking to make sure I wasn't choking anymore, his touch was nothing else. I'm sure the chef of this meal wouldn't want an attendee eating his food to

choke on it. That must be why he had been so worried and kind.

Oh, hell. I need to let him know I was choking by accident. It had nothing to do with the quality of food. The food itself is divine and I wouldn't want him thinking anything less.

“That was delectable, thank you.” The compliment leaves my lips once I've finally gathered my composure and I muster the courage to look up at him.

The smile that blooms on his face from my praise is one that I will never forget. What's it mean when the little sign of pleasure from him, a pleasure that I caused, makes it feel like there's a knot in the middle of my stomach?

“Thanks, man. I actually gotta get to finishing up the rest of these before they get appetizers out in twenty minutes.” The man points behind him and throws a little nod toward the counter where his food rests.

“Oh yes, of course. I didn't mean to be a distraction.” Embarrassment sweeps me once again. What am I doing? Knight sent me in here to check on one simple thing and I haven't even accomplished the menial task.

“Is the dietary checklist in order?” I ask.

“Yes, Sir.” The man mocks a salute my way. He's chuckling as he takes a list from his Hello Kitty apron and produces a marker from behind his ear to check off some items.

I would laugh with him but that knot in my stomach comes back full—force with how he addressed me. Sir . Many people have addressed me in such a manner, I should be accustomed to hearing it, but why did it sound so alluring coming from him?

“Ezekiel Adler, just Ezekiel is fine.” The words leave in a rush, as I speed things along to hopefully help me forget that jolt of something I experienced seconds ago.

“Well, Just Ezekiel. I’m Aleksander, but I go by Alek, he replies, sets the list down and continues, “your list is all taken care of, man.” He slides the list toward the opposite side of the prep station where I’m currently clutching the counter for my life.

“You gonna keep me company while I finish up?” Alek asks, twirling the marker between his fingers in a quick show of skill. In the fifteen or so minutes I’ve been in his presence, the man has yet to stay still for more than a moment or two. “I could use the company.”

Did I hear hope in his words? Does he want me to stay?

“Ezekiel!” I jump at the sound of Knight’s booming voice. A voice belonging to a man I would like to push into his stupid pond for interrupting whatever this is between Alek and I.

Unsure of what I’ve discovered, how I am feeling, or where my thoughts are going, I know one thing for certain. This can’t be the last I see of this man.

“I have an upcoming event.” Blurting out the words, I catch Alek’s stare once more. Knight yells for me once more. Now I know Alek certainly heard Knight and knows I need to leave soon. The man’s voice is hard to miss, after all.

“It seems I’m needed elsewhere...” I comment, knowing there are still things to prepare for the impromptu gala. Would it truly be so terrible if I was to stay in the kitchen during an event I don’t even want to attend? The temptation is all—encompassing.

“Wait. Your event?” Alek asks and if I’m not mistaken, I perceive some trepidation from him as well. His body shakes from where he is bouncing his leg. I’m sure he’s anticipating my next actions as much as I am dreading leaving him.

“Would you happen to have a card or some way to contact you for catering services?” This is my attempt at trying to keep everything at a somewhat professional level with the practical stranger whose eyes I’ve been staring deeply into for a quarter hour.

Perhaps I can even catch him after the gala and we can... oh, who am I kidding? I’m in no position to be flirting and admiring Alek, but being the strong-headed bastard I am, I also can’t allow for whatever I’m feeling to simply vanish.

“Nah, I don’t.” Alek’s voice sounds resigned but his face tells a different story. A slow, easy grin plays on his lips as he twirls the marker from behind his ear and wraps his thumb and forefinger around my wrist to drag me toward him.

“What are—” The question dies in my throat. He’s uncapping the marker with a pinch of his lips, the cap balanced between his teeth while he writes his number onto my upper forearm.

The numerals might as well be gibberish to me right now. I’m fixated on the plush of his mouth around the marker cap. Never in my life would I have thought I would be jealous of a marker.

“Text anytime, Ez.” My thoughts are interrupted by his sultry tone and the even sultrier wink he gifts me before getting back to work. How Alek manages to keep his composure while I am a melting mess of a man, I do not know.

“Of course, Alek.” I manage to say. It feels like I have to drag my body away from his gravitational pull when it wants nothing more than to stay within his orbit.

A louder shout of my name kicks my departure into gear. Right , I need to leave. I turn around and haul my unwilling body out of the kitchen. And away from the man who has stolen my breath away, quite literally.

Once I am in the main hallway I peer down at my arm, and without hesitation, I memorize his phone number. The numbers scribed in pigmented black ink are signed off with a winking smiling face. I purse my lips to contain a smile and shake my head at the ridiculousness of it.

I fear Alek has branded me with more than just ink.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALEK

Is it worth it? Let me work it.

It's only Thursday and my ass is sore. Besides the several bachelorette party performances and rehearsals for our new shows, I've also been keeping up gym sessions with my brother and the guys this past week. I'm exhausted.

Thirty—four years old and I feel like I need one of those chair lifts for these damn stairs leading up to the stage.

With Thomas out for his residency, it's been a busy time at the burlesque club. I'm not really complaining though. This all comes with the territory of being a lead dancer. And if I'm being honest, I need the distraction.

I can't stop thinking about him .

“Fuck!” I scream.

Skidding to a stop, I hang on for dear life to one of the rails on the wall leading up to the main stage. My dumbass nearly tripped up the damn stairs again . I'm a former gymnast and a six—inch step almost took me out. Remembering how to walk is apparently second in line to thinking about Ezekiel. The man I met last Saturday with a shy smile and wide, sapphire eyes that have etched themselves into my brain.

The same man who hasn't texted or called.

Mindful of my steps this time, I make it up to the empty stage. Brightly lit with just the overhead lights, the stage doesn't have the same appeal and glow it has during a show, but there's something so comforting in the quiet of it. Glancing around, I check out the wings of the stage to make sure some of my props for tonight's bachelorette show are in place. Looks like we're all set.

"You look like you need a drink!"

Emma has her hands cupped in front of her face in a makeshift megaphone to amplify her soft voice. I'm going to take her up on that offer. I can definitely use a drink.

I hop off the end of the stage and step through booths and tables where my best friend is behind the freshly—polished bar at the other end of the large room. Emma's already getting out the ingredients for my whiskey sour by the time I plant my ass on one of the bar stools.

"Is this your way of telling me I look like shit?"

"Well I'm not not saying that. What's got your fine ass all moody this week? Is it still that guy?"

Being my best friend, Emma knows all about what went down with Ezekiel last weekend. Monday night pizza and TV show binging at her place is probably my favorite part of the week. I dished out every detail while we ate our food, put on facemasks, and watched Buffy Summers be a badass on screen.

"He still hasn't called?" she asks. A slow shake of her head accompanies a frown on her full lips.

“Not a peep,” I reply, the disappointment in my voice echoing through the empty bar area. Thankfully, she finishes making our drinks quickly. I gulp down a good portion of my whisky sour before I continue talking.

“I don’t know what it is about this guy.” My finger traces some of the condensation building on the outside of my glass, slipping down the engraved pattern. It’s the truth. I’ve never really been one to obsess over someone else but I can’t shake Ezekiel from my thoughts.

Dating hasn’t really worked out for me in the past. Things start off fine for the first few dates but when the person I’m seeing finds out what I do for a living, or when I open up about my past, they tend to take a big step back. I prefer to keep things casual and not get too attached for that very reason. Avoidance, Vivian calls it, but it’s what’s best for me. I’ve been down that road and I never like where it winds up.

“Alek.”

Emma’s delicate fingers wrap around mine, halting my nervous fidgeting. Her big brown eyes stare into me, stopping my thoughts from overtaking my mind.

“I lost you there,” she says. A line of worry fits between her eyes, the only wrinkle in her smooth complexion. I don’t want her to be concerned over me. She’s got enough going on in her own life.

“Sorry, drink’s a little strong. I’m good.” The fingers from my free hand fit over hers, sandwiching her small hand in mine as I pat the back of her hand gently. I put on a smile as I free the glass from our grasps and bring it to my lips again.

“Good shit, though.” One large sip and my drink is finished. I set the empty glass back on the coaster perched on the bar.

“I’m gonna try to forget about him. If he’s in with Knight’s crowd, chances are he’s a snob or living off his daddy’s money.” I’m looking for excuses to make myself feel better. One meeting between us and I know that’s not Ezekiel’s style. There was nothing but life, curiosity, and want in the man.

“Look, I’m not telling you to get all hung up over this guy, but maybe give it a little time? By the way you described him, it seems like he was a little lost in how to talk to you, Alek.”

Emma takes my glass and wipes down the little droplets of water I absent—mindedly splattered around.

“You never know what could happen.” Her bright vibe almost fills me with hope. A small shrug accompanies her smile, the motion moving the fabric of her black dressy shirt.

She’s not wrong. I shouldn’t be closing things off right away because I think there’s a chance of it not working out, and I’d really like something to work out with Ezekiel. Whatever that something might be.

“Alright, I’m staying open to the idea and that’s all I’m committing to.” It’s safe in the gray area of *lo que será, será*. I need to believe things will work out for the best and if Ezekiel is meant to be in my life, the universe will make it happen.

I glance at my watch and see there’s about forty—five minutes until the doors open for our guests tonight. I need to head backstage soon.

“I’ve gotta get going, mu?eca.” Hopping up, I lean my upper body across the bar and plant a quick kiss on her cheek, careful not to mess up any of her makeup.

I leave with a new sense of determination in my gait.

It's time to put on my big boy panties.

CHAPTER EIGHT

EZEKIEL

A pain in the sash.

This is the fifth time I've reread the same sentence. Breathing out a long sigh, I decide to give up on my attempt to grade and close down my computer for the afternoon. As much as I like to be efficient with my time, it wouldn't be fair of me to grade my students' work when the only thing on my mind is him .

My week has been terrible. Full of stumbling through lectures, accidentally making the simplest mistakes, like adding salt to my coffee in the professor's lounge. I swore my mouth was as dry as the Atacama Desert for the rest of the day.

Which would explain the stumbling after that particular accident, I suppose.

Longing thoughts have been all the company I've kept this week. I wouldn't even know who I could talk to about what's going through my mind at the moment, specifically due to the fact that I don't understand any of it, myself. I don't think my therapist specializes in homosexual awakenings.

Alek .

The name repeats itself in my brain, invading any minute I find myself free, and in several instances, when I can't afford to be distracted.

Running my hand through my hair, I lean back into my office chair and close my eyes for a moment.

I'm taken back to last Saturday. It feels as if it has been both a lifetime and a single second since I met the man who plagues my thoughts. It's only been five days, to be exact.

The number he chiseled into my forearm is long gone but I find myself running my fingers over the area without thinking, like right now. The fingers of my left hand glide over where Alek's number was marked, carefully not applying too much pressure as if the numbers were still there to be preserved. I can't explain the bit of peace the motion brings me. My forearm was never so noticeable to me before.

I haven't called. I haven't texted. I've been too afraid to look at my phone at the contact I made for him. Being the linguistics enthusiast that I am, I had immediately thought to research the etymology of his name.

Aleksander: Greek origin; 'defender and protector of man.'

I had saved his number with his name and the definition. I couldn't stop thinking about how it would fit him.

I've been fascinated by the notion of names carrying some sort of predetermination for how someone's personality will form. Is Alek protective of others? Does he defend and love fiercely? The questions swirled in my mind all week.

Meanwhile, the origins of my name came from my mother's love of her religion. Ezekiel: Hebrew origin, 'God strengthens.'

How often have I been puzzled by my own name's etymology? There have been major parts of my life and mistakes made in the past, all due to my lack of strength

and conviction. I didn't feel like predetermination was a factor with me. I wouldn't be in the situation I'm currently in if that were so.

"Ezekiel?" A familiar feminine voice coming from the hallway reaches my ears.

My eyes open slowly, adjusting to the overhead lighting of my office. I must have been lost in thought for longer than I realize and I have to get used to the bright lights once again.

A tingling sensation remains on my arm as I remove my hand and set it back on my desk. I make myself busy and pack away my belongings for the day, seeing as it is now nearly six in the evening. Hopefully I'll at least look like I'm in a better mindset than I truly am.

"There you are!" Anna chirps, her auburn hair taking an extra moment to stop as she all but twirls into my office. If there were ever someone who embodied a princess, it would be my cheery sister—in—law.

"Are you ready to go?" Her tone isn't impatient, only eager, as she notices me packing the last of my things away.

"Of course." I stand and respond with a smile and a nod, grabbing my messenger bag and pushing in my chair before walking over to her.

She must have changed in her office, unless she taught her classes today in a frilly dress with a glittery sash that reads TROPHY WIFE.

I pause my stride and gaze at her with a questioning look.

"Is it customary for me to wear a sash as well?"

If it isn't evident already, I've never attended any bachelorette parties and I don't know the requirements for attire. I don't often find myself in large groups with big celebrations but Anna needed a designated driver, and I did say I was happy to assist in any way that I could. Additionally, I have also been quite curious about Knight's entertainment establishment. Why the solemn man was the owner of a burlesque club, I wouldn't know, but maybe a night out of the ordinary is something I need after the week I've experienced.

Anna's responding smile is devilish to the point of almost making me uncomfortable. If it wasn't for her kind eyes and the fact that she is family, I would be terrified.

"Oh I've got one just for you." She reaches into her bag and produces another glittery pink sash. The menace dangles it between her fingers and waves it in front of my face in a teasing manner, purposely moving it too quickly for me to read it.

"What does it say?" I ask and reach for the offending item. Extending the sash in front of me, I finally read what it says. My mouth pouts and I cannot help but to roll my eyes at her.

"Seriously, Anna? I have to wear—" Her snorting laugh cuts off my question that I already know the answer to. She takes the hideous sash and lifts it in her hands near my head, a clear indication that I do, in fact, have to wear this obnoxious thing.

"I regret this. I should be watching Jeopardy in my pajamas, not putting on this ugly?—"

"Oh hush, you know it's all for fun." Anna smiles and I bend forward so she can loop it around my head, and then below my shoulder. I remind myself how I agreed to this, and I want her to have a good time. I know I can endure this sash for a night and get everyone home safely.

“There you go, now everyone will know you’re our designated driver.” She pats my chest and smooths out the embarrassing ribbon that reads I LOVE DOUBLE D’s.

I groan and flick at the sash like it’s burning my skin. It’s a justified reaction, in my opinion. I could be watching the Jeopardy Tournament of Champions right now. Instead I am parading around in an inappropriate sash.

Let’s go for ‘Ways to Get Punched by Women’ for 200, Alex.

CHAPTER NINE

EZEKIEL

All these feathers seem unsanitary.

A catchy pop beat spills out from inside the Garden of Eden as we move up the long line to enter the burlesque club. People are dressed in all sorts of outfits and makeup looks. I couldn't name half of the styles but there's a warm feeling in my chest seeing so many people from different walks of life out celebrating tonight. A bit of the heaviness of the past week is lifted off my shoulders immediately around all their animated faces.

When we first arrived, we encountered a few others in our bachelorette group as they came out of their rideshare. Anna quickly introduced the two lively, and probably already a little intoxicated, women as Olive and Tatiana, friends of hers from college.

"I cannot wait to see the show! Tati. How did you get tickets for this? I heard their bachelorette parties are always booked up!" Olive shouts over the music, so excited she doesn't realize the vice grip she's got on my forearm.

"Girl, you know I got my connections and we only want the best send—off for our bride to be!" A devious smirk plays on her face as she purposely doesn't elaborate. Her arm is looped around mine, the one not currently being squeezed to a pulp. I've somehow become a support beam for the two while Anna walks ahead and arranges our entry with the bouncers.

“I’m sure this isn’t shocking to hear, but I’ve never been to a burlesque show before,” I comment as we inch closer to the front doors of the club.

“Ah— a virgin?!” Olive screams the question with enthusiasm, releasing her grip to deliver spirited little slaps to my arm instead.

“What— no, what does my status on relations have to do?—”

“They mean you’re a virgin to the show,” Anna laughs, turning her head over her shoulder to look back at us before one of the bouncers motions a hand to welcome us in.

“Let’s go!” Tati and Olive scream simultaneously and all but drag me to the double doors. As we walk past the entrance checkpoint, the bouncer that motioned us in, a tall woman with short silver hair and lipstick black as night, blows me a kiss before whooping out.

“Have a good time, virgin!”

It looks like a species of pink bird was driven to extinction here .

I can admit to myself this is an odd first thought to have when coming into the club, but there are feathers everywhere . There must be a dozen other bachelorette parties at the Garden of Eden tonight and so, so many people are wearing fluffy pink boas and cowboy hats; hence, all of the feathers on the floor.

Before I know it, the girls drag me near the stage to a round table and booth upholstered in a luxurious maroon leather, where we meet the rest of our bachelorette party. Along with the bachelorette and the two I already met, other friends of the bride, Kate, Laura, and Rhi, sit along the cushions. I perch myself at the end of the u—shaped seat nearest to the stage.

I'm here to make sure they all get home safe tonight. My immediate thought is to mark the girls with a sharpie so that I don't accidentally mix them up. But I find myself thinking it's an odd first thought in reaction to meeting new people.

I'll have to be on high alert, not that I'm not already with how my eyes are constantly pulled to every bit of decor. The club is gorgeous; deep reds, dark woods, and high end finishes give the place an inviting yet exclusive feel. It's simply astounding and I cannot stop myself from taking in every detail of the space.

The group of women are chatting and catching up with one another as my gaze drifts from the audience area to the stage directly ahead of us. It's quite large and there is a runway that connects to another small stage near the center of the room. I wonder what type of show we'll be seeing tonight. I have the sense Anna purposely gave me little detail in an attempt to surprise me.

"Ezekiel?" Tati has no problem being heard over the playful song blasting through the club.

"Yes, Tati?" I ask her with a bit of concern in my tone. I want these ladies to have a great time, and I often hear from my female colleagues how awry a night out can go.

"Do you wanna come get some drinks with me?" The smile and her easy nod toward the bar tells me there's no need for worry and I'm probably overthinking things.

"Of course."

I'm out of my seat and walking over to the bar with her when she turns toward me and looks me over.

"You don't usually party it up like this, do you?" she inquires.

“How can you tell?” My smile is a little self—deprecating. As much as I enjoy my solitude, the loneliness of the last few months has gotten to me.

“Anna told me a little bit about your situat—” Suddenly, Tati isn’t staring back at me. Instead, bright pink feathers now crowd my face.

“Oh shoot, ‘m sorry!” A woman in a cowboy hat, glittery bikini top, and not much else removes her feather boa from Tati’s face and begins plucking away loose feathers caught in my charge’s hair.

This is a very messy, but still very welcome distraction. I didn’t want to damper the night with talk of my circumstances.

“My, my. Well, this has got to be the most gorgeous audience I have ever seen!” An enthralling voice suddenly booms out of the speakers. A soundbooth off to the left of the stage is lit up as a man in a sparkling blue dinner coat and matching ascot speaks.

“Fifteen minutes and the dancers will be all yours! Just let them finish getting those muscles nice and shiny for you!”

The screams and cheers from the audience are almost deafening and I cannot contain the smile on my face. Being around this type of energy is not usual for me but the energy is winning me over in being open to these kinds of experiences.

“Okay, now that I’m not looking like a fabulous chicken, let’s go get those drinks real quick!” Tati continues the energy, talking eagerly about how she saw another burlesque show on a trip not too long ago.

Thankfully, the bartenders are both friendly and efficient as they fulfill our order of many drinks. And right as we begin to traverse our way through the audience, the lights above us start to dim in warning. The show will be beginning any second.

“One and all, welcome to the Garden of Eden, the original sin.”

CHAPTER TEN

ALEK

Something to choke on.

Seb's voice is loud over the speaker system, though I'm sure my flamboyant friend could be heard from his booth fine without a mic. While he finishes off the spiel about audience participation and introduces the brides and grooms—to—be, me and the guys are doing some last minute checks in the wings of the stage.

"Ah shit, I ripped my damn pants." Benny attempts to whisper somewhere behind me.

"Bitch you're gonna fucking yank them off in a few minutes, I think you'll be fine," Dean emphasizes.

"Yeah— just give 'em a little peek!" Andre whisper—shouts.

"Serves you right, lugging that fat ass around everywhere," Laz sasses.

The guys are horrible at whispering so I'm glad Seb's voice demands all the attention of the audience right now. Also, I can't be mad when it's these fools' banter that gets us energized for a great show.

It's a Thursday before a long holiday weekend for most, but today's the start of our hectic work week. After having a drink and an almost crying sesh with Emma earlier

this afternoon, I'm feeling a little better about this whole Ezekiel situation.

If he's not interested, I can't do anything about it. If I'm too interested the only thing I can do is get over it. Sure, it was the first time I've felt such an instantaneous connection with someone, but what good does that do if he doesn't feel the same way? It kills me that I was possibly wrong about him being attracted to me and a tiny part of me is still holding onto hope that he is.

"Without further ado—" Seb's voice takes me out of my thoughts right in time for my opening speech.

"Please welcome our main attraction, and the reason you're leaving hot and bothered tonight, The Bad Boys of Burlesque."

A quick blackout is our cue to head onstage. To the audience it looks pitch black on here but we've got hidden little markers on the stage floor to set up our formation. Good thing too because some of these bitches are clumsy.

Double checking the mic taped on the side of my face, I set up near the edge of the stage, arms in front of me, one hand over the other clasped over the v—shape of my hips and one of my legs is kicked out casually. The pose makes my abs even more visible in my plain white crop top. To be honest, one of the reasons I love Bach Night is because I get to wear a cotton tee, some cowboy boots, and fairly comfortable jeans. A man can only wear thongs so many days of the week without suffering the consequences.

Chafing thoughts aside, the spotlight turns on and illuminates me in a bright white—pink.

The rush of seeing the inviting shadows of the audience is something I'll never get over. They're screaming and jumping as I toss a teasing smirk over to Seb in the

sound booth.

“Now, Seb.” My voice drops just a bit, in a faux chastising tone I typically only use on stage and in the bedroom. I plant one hand on my hip while I shake my finger at him with the other. “I think you forgot one of the most important rules.”

“My, my, Alek, now what would that be?” I can barely make out his silhouette through the hazy glow of the stage lights but I know he’s glancing at the audience and making some kind of gesture or cheeky face at them. They eat it up, a chorus of ‘ooh’ filling up my ears.

My eyes drift back to the crowd. My arms cross over one another on my chest, purposely placed so that my muscles strain over the fabric of my white tee.

“The dancers may invite you to play, but you need to be a good little audience member and follow their rules.” I begin, a raised eyebrow accompanies my smirk as I scan the silhouette of the crowd.

“Is this show fun? Sure. Frisky? Hell yeah. But it’s nothing without mutual respect. If I’m understood, I need you to say yes, daddy.”

Among the different variations of ‘yes, daddy’ from the crowd, I also hear a cough so violent I’m nearly rushing off stage to help the poor guy. It seems like it was a loud enough noise that some people in surrounding booths go over to help the man. Although the commotion is close to the stage, I can’t see much detail past the blinding lights. I can barely make out the blurred shadow of a man sitting and waving the helpers away.

Is my next joke low—hanging fruit and at the expense of this guy? Oh, you fucking bet.

“Let’s get started and give that guy somethin’ to really choke on!”

A laugh leaves my lips as I throw my arm around like I’m tossing a lasso towards the front row. The movement helps me turn to the side and set up in my next position as the lights go out once again.

‘Dance the Night Away’ by Dua Lipa starts playing over the speakers.

Just as the audience starts to sing along, the stage is blasted with pink and white light, illuminating the rest of the performers behind me. For this opening number the boys and I are arranged at the front of the stage and we’ve got all the supporting acts behind us. There’s our guest aerial silk artists, our drag queens, and some of our singers already dancing to the beat and spreading throughout the stage behind us as we dance in what is basically a conga line, hands on each other’s hips as we sway to the beat.

The song continues and it’s organized chaos; dancers begin to spread out and tease our patrons with flashes of skin, the aerialists twist, wind, and own the silks with their moves, while the drag queens strut off stage and begin mixing with the crowd.

The lyrics right before the catchy chorus starts are a cue. The guys and I are set to do one of our signature moves in sync, where we fall forward, catch ourselves with our arms, and do a pushup on the way down to the floor before we thrust our hips down a few times. Yes, it’s basically us dry—humping the stage but it’s hot.

Ready to start the move, I wind up close to where I was introducing the show a few seconds ago. I fall forward to the floor and begin my move. My biceps flex as I lower my torso in a controlled manner and here comes my favorite part. Let the humping commence.

During this move, I love looking at an audience member and shooting a little wink

their way. Yes, I'm a fucking tease and I know it, I own it. As soon as my legs are lowered onto the floor, I look up toward one of the front booths occupied by a large bachelorette party.

Only, I'm caught dead by sapphire eyes behind thick rimmed glasses staring back at me. So caught by surprise that I missed one of my fucking stage humps.

Holy shit, it's him.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EZEKIEL

More than a handful.

If it wasn't for the stinging pain lingering in my throat from inhaling my lemonade, I would have believed the last five minutes were a figment of my imagination. My brain's final flashing thoughts as the lack of oxygen terminates all bodily functions and sends me to an early grave.

Twice. Twice I've choked in the vicinity of Alek.

Choking was my reaction to seeing him on stage in that outfit. What a lovely last memory to have. He looks resplendent. Alek is a god upon his dais, his worshippers throwing bras onto the stage in offering.

The party of women I'm with have moved on from my spluttering incident and are now captivated by all the performers on the stage. While I'm fully charmed by one dancer. My eyes couldn't wander away from him even if there was a miracle being performed on stage.

Alek.

Along with the pain in my throat, I feel a pull in my chest. Either the extent of my injuries were more than I first realized, or I am filled with so much emotion at seeing the man that it threatens to burst from my chest.

At this instance, I know I am a fool for thinking I could resist all that is Alek. No matter how hard I tried to scrub away the aching want that followed me all week, there is no escaping something of this magnitude. I have been utterly at the mercy of the man I met just a week ago.

But, I'm also confused. Why is the chef from my Aunt Harriett's gala dancing at a burlesque club? Did I miss the announcement stating that the cooks and bartenders traded places with the dancers for the night? What is happening?

"Hey, are you okay?" Anna asks as she moves closer.

The bewilderment must be painted on my face. She takes notice of my line of vision and smirks as her eyes bounce from me to Alek.

A hand decorated in pretty white nails lands on my shoulder before I feel the breath of her words near my ear. "That's Alek."

Judging by said breath, my sister—in—law is well on her way to a drunken night.

"He's the lead dancer," Anna continues, her front pressed against my back. "Don't blame ya for looking." Her laugh is soft as she pats my shoulder, kisses my cheek, and sits back into her seat to join her cheering friends.

The music begins to build up and the performers scatter along the stage. Alek is dancing closer. And closer. And closer. And now he's...falling? I have to stop myself from the instinctive jolt that drives my body forward.

It took a second but I realized that his 'fall' is part of his dance and he's not in danger. He's close enough that if I leaned over in my seat and stretched, I could reach him. The thought of doing so is too tempting for my liking.

His proximity also means I can no longer hide behind the lights. My breath hitches when he suddenly lifts his face and connects his eyes with mine.

Instantly, I'm fighting both the urge to run away and the urge to grab him by the collar of his cut—off shirt and pull him down into my lap.

“Holy shit, it's him,” Alek breathes. It would seem I'm not the only one in panic.

Alek freezes for a second after the words slip. Recovering quickly, he continues his dance move and catches up to the rest of the dancers, but his shining hazel eyes never leave mine.

I would be a little tiffed at how quickly he recovered, but I remember that he is the one on stage performing and must keep his composure. No, I can tell by the slight tension lining his jaw that he is as affected as I am by this surprise reunion.

Alek continues dancing and I take the moment to admire his body. The muscles on the man's abdomen are defined and tantalizing as his hips thrust once, twice, thrice down into the stage, the rest of his torso rolls to meet the movement. A tendril of lust surges up my spine at the sight of him moving in such a decadent way.

While I'm certain I've seen male figures similar to his before, my own body has never quite reacted in such a way. I'm shifting in my seat, my pants feeling much too tight as my desire makes itself evident.

Swiftly, Alek jumps to his feet, the formation of the dancers changing once again as he and the others jump off the stage and into open areas near the sides. From my periphery, I see the other dancers begin to walk around the crowd.

Even when I'm looking around, my concentration remains on Alek. And dear lord, he's now only a few yards away and marching directly toward our booth. The

screaming from my companions would be deafening if my senses weren't already drowning out everything but him.

He stops directly in front of me.

A pink tongue traces across his bottom lip as he does nothing to hide his appreciative glance from my face down to my body. He seems to pause at the ribbon on my chest, letting out a husky chuckle at my ridiculous moniker for the night. I find that I cannot help but laugh with him. I would wear this idiotic sash any day of the week if it earned me such a beautiful sound from those lips.

Alek steps even closer, his tanned hand reaching for my sash slowly and teasingly. Before I can say anything or react to his immediacy, I find myself hauled forward as he wraps his hands beneath my thighs, pulling me suddenly and effectively.

The shift makes it so that I'm at the edge of my seat, my hands at my sides, and my lap free for the taking.

And he takes .

Alek sits himself on my lap like he has every right to. The women around me are laughing and yelling out encouragement. The smile on my face refuses to leave my lips and my eyes refuse to leave him as Alek grins back and keeps fiddling with my sash.

“Double D's huh? I took you for more of an ass man.” He's forced to lean closer so I can hear him properly. We're as close as we were at our encounter last weekend. Even when he's taunting me about my obvious appraisal of him during our first meeting, it puzzles me just how much I missed being in his presence.

Can a forty—two—year—old man blush? I think I'm proving so and Alek, the brat,

is enjoying every minute of my torture.

His hands leave the sash to brush against the outside of my arms, still covered in the suit jacket I wore to work today. The tweed fabric does nothing to shield the heat of his touch. He takes the opportunity to lean down, his face now parallel to mine as he whispers in my ear.

“You mind getting a little hands on?” he questions.

The words feel more intimate than his previous teasing question that was meant to get a reaction from the table. He’s genuinely asking and checking to see if I would approve.

“Not at all,” I respond in a heated whisper. We’re so close that the slight nod of my head brushes my dark hair against his light brown waves. I shiver at the contact.

While I am aware it is not the time to apologize, I want to turn and tell him I’m sorry for not contacting him. I want to tell him that I was scared of the strong pull I feel towards him. I want to tell him that I couldn’t be what he needed or deserved but his voice silences my thoughts.

“Good boy,” he purrs.

Gripping my hands, Alek tugs them to his torso and plants them on his abdominal muscles. I gasp, my eyes magnetically pulled to where our skin meets. Heat sears my shaking fingertips. His large hands cover mine and sandwich them to his unyielding flesh before he begins to slowly drag them under his cropped shirt.

“Now, these aren’t double d’s but... I think they’ll do,” he says loudly, jeering and winking over at my friends behind me. The group of women lose their minds and I hear a couple of drinks fall over on the table as they react to Alek’s showmanship.

I have to fight the groan that threatens to escape my lips. The feeling of his taut skin and firm pectorals beneath my fingertips is like nothing I've ever felt before. The menace encourages me to squeeze his chest by tightening his hands on mine.

I'm not used to the pure masculinity that drives my desire at the moment. I cannot deny how attracted I am to this man, as new as the feeling may be.

What is he doing to me?

I could get lost in my stupefaction, denial and arousal mixing to create the perfect storm in my mind, but I'm too aware of my surroundings. Having a crisis in the middle of a burlesque show would be unspeakably rude.

“Hey—”

I've been staring at the bulge of our hands beneath his white shirt, lost in thought while this spectacle of a man sits in my lap. I hope I didn't offend him by retreating into my own contemplation.

Alek is staring at me like he can read the thoughts running through my mind, the ones that I am unable to understand, myself. His face is warm and kind and I am overcome by it. There's promise in it and it's more than I deserve after failing to communicate with him for a whole week.

Gently removing our hands from his chest, Alek keeps ahold of mine as he places a tender kiss on my knuckles. The touch of his lips calms me as much as it pains me. As quiet and quick as the gesture was, it speaks volumes. His stare and the serene brush of his lips hold forgiveness, possession, and a pledge.

The movement was obscured by how close our bodies are to each other. I know the reassuring action was only for me.

Too soon, he's lifting himself off my lap and my heart yearns to follow and stay in his presence for just a second longer. It doesn't seem right to leave things as they were and I crave his company more than anything.

My hands lay numbly in my lap as I keep staring up at him, my revelation in a pair of pink cowboy boots.

His parting smile is more blinding than the beaming lights from the stage could ever be, and his parting words fuel the desire coursing within me.

"I'll be seeing you later, angel."

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALEK

Unleash.

In the near decade that I've been performing, I've never wanted to end a show early. Not even that time when I overdid it at the buffet during a pre—show group dinner. I couldn't back down though, Benny would have bragging rights for life. In the end, I ate my weight in food, managed to put on a good show, and I got fifty bucks from that fucker.

Right now, though, I'm surprised I've made it to the end of the show with all my limbs still intact. I'm distracted and antsy as hell.

Ezekiel is in the front row and currently watching as we perform our closing set. I haven't decided exactly how I'm going to approach him after the show but I know there is no goddamn way that he's slipping through my fingers again. Especially not after that moment we shared at the beginning of the show.

Finally, the last note of our ending song plays, the stage goes black, and the crowd erupts in loud cheers.

All the performers start heading downstairs to wrap up for the night. Many of them will stay around and have a drink or get a quick bite to eat since the club turns into more of a casual bar vibe once the show is over. The crowd is invited to stick around and mingle too.

I can't get down these stairs fast enough. In seconds, I'm in the dressing room and changing into something a little less festive. As I'm finishing up and pushing my way out of the room, I hear a couple of laughs or questions as to why I'm in such a rush, but I ignore them to quickly make my way back upstairs.

Shit . I pause at the top of the steps.

What should I say to him? What if he didn't stay after the show?

He's already forgotten about me once. I didn't hear a damn peep from him since last weekend. What if he's actually not interested?

No, no.

The look in his eyes as I climbed into his lap earlier and the shaking of his hands when they were on my body tell me the opposite. I don't know exactly what's going on in that beautiful head of his but I have enough experience to know that he is interested, and so am I. So fucking interested.

Ezekiel's got the whole 'nerdy and proper looking gentleman, but secretly a freak in bed' aura going on. And the dude is unintentionally funny as fuck, how am I not supposed to be interested? Ez is a walking wet dream.

My thoughts trail as I begin to walk out the side of the stage and into a hallway that leads to the common area of the club.

I'm not even five steps into the hallway when I spot Ezekiel holding a purse and leaning against the wall outside the bathroom.

His body is turned so I'm only seeing part of his profile. Those damn glasses of his are so slid down his nose that I physically have to restrain myself from the temptation

of pushing them back in place.

I know I've got to play it cool. By how he's reacted in our last few meetings, he either doesn't have much experience with dating or he's straight—up shy. I'm still going to tease him, of course, but I might dial it back a bit.

“Hey, Ez,” I say softly, a couple of steps behind him now.

I swear I'm watching him turn in slow motion. The dude is a knock—out and nothing is better than seeing those bright azul eyes looking at me behind those thick glasses of his.

A few more steps and I'm standing in front of him, both of us tucked against the wall in this little section of the hallway. I meet his gaze, my head lowered slightly to find his eyeline.

“Alek.” One word, one shining smile from those lips, and I'm in heaven.

“You stayed.”

“I did, but I didn't know If I was going to see you after the show. I wouldn't have expected your interest in speaking to me, not after I've done the terribly discourteous act of ignoring you for a week,” Ezekiel replies with slight hitches in his words and a frown takes over his gorgeous face.

Just then, the bathroom door opens to reveal one of the women in the party he was with during the show.

“Oh hi! You were so good on stage, Alek!” she praises, taking the purse from Ezekiel's hands and putting it back around her shoulder.

“Alek this is my friend, Tati.” Polite as ever, Ezekiel gives us an introduction.

“Thank you,” I reply to her with my signature smirk and wink.

“Oh, and you guys were awesome too!” Tati hops and waves down the hallway.

With my full attention on Ezekiel, I didn’t notice some of the other dancers coming out from backstage. Benny and Laz are walking side by side and stop to talk to Tati for a moment.

If Ezekiel and I were really going to talk it over, we would need a quiet space without all the interruptions of the club. By looking at him, I could see he was uneasy and needed a little space for this too.

“Hey Ben, Laz?” I interrupt the pleasant conversation between the three.

“You guys mind escorting Tati back to her group while I talk with Ez for a second?” They’re great guys and I know Ezekiel’s party is going to be in good hands with them and with Emma behind the bar tonight.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Got it, boss.”

They begin to walk over a very happy Tati, who immediately took up their offer to loop her arms with theirs.

“They’re in good hands, Ez.” I point down the hallway where we can see a glimpse of his party light up once they see their friend bringing over the two biggest dancers.

“Thank you,” Ezekiel breathes.

I can tell this night has been overwhelming for him for a lot of reasons.

“C’mere,” I say, taking his hand in mine and leading him into my sister’s costume closet down the hallway. It’s a small space, no bigger than a tiny bedroom, but it drowns out the noise and lights from the club.

I flick the lights on, the room illuminates from a few neon signs as we walk in and close the door behind us. Ezekiel looks around the space. I’ve noticed he likes observing and taking in all the information in his surroundings.

“It’s the costume room,” I say and he nods. Ezekiel’s quiet demeanor is more calming than I thought it would be. I usually yap away but I’m in no rush to fill the space with words when I’m with him.

“I want to apologize.” Ezekiel begins to nervously pace around the room, a hand on his chin as his thumb toys with his lip in thought.

“Ez—” I begin trying to tell him that it wasn’t that big of a deal.

“Please, Alek. There truly was no reason for me to not have at least texted you after our encounter last weekend and I am sorry for that. I know it’s impolite to leave people waiting and wondering, and I should not have done that to you.”

The way he is apologizing is so determined and intentional, I can’t help but keep hearing him out.

“I’ve— I’ve never experienced such an immediate connection with anyone, much less with any men, you see, and I—” Ezekiel is looking at me now, paused right in front of me as he takes a deep, centering breath.

Oh. It all clicks. Ezekiel has never been with a man? No wonder the guy was

everywhere with his body language earlier tonight. It also explains why he was hesitating to initiate anything. Now I know I'm the one that needs to make the first step.

"I like you too, Ez." With a shuffle of my feet, I'm standing right in front of him and speaking my own truth.

"You do?" His eyes look up into mine, full of hope and relief.

"Why do you think I gave you my number?"

"I thought you gave it to me because of my catering inquiry."

"Ez, I thought you were lying about it to get my number."

We share deadpan looks with each other before we start laughing. Neither one of us stops until there's tears in our eyes.

"We're idiots, aren't we?" I ask playfully as I admire the smile still shining on his face.

"It would seem so." He nods in agreement. His posture looks less stiff than before.

Another moment passes and I realize how close we have gotten to each other during our little laughing fit. It feels like I'm breathing the same electrically—charged air as him.

I'm still by the entrance of the room, my back a few feet away from the door, and my front only an arm's length away from Ez. Gone is the crinkle at the edge of his eyes. The previous joyful gleam is replaced with an intense stare that has me squirming in the best way.

“You were phenomenal on stage, Alek.” He says it like a confession, immediately building the tension in the room.

Fuck. I get compliments on my dancing all the time but when did a compliment get my dick hard? Never. Two can play at this game.

“I thought you liked it better when I was in your lap?” I ask, unable to keep myself from flirting and biting down on my bottom lip. “It sure felt like you liked it.”

Our staredown only lasts a second. Suddenly, I’m pressed against the back of the door, one of Ezekiel’s hands wraps protectively around the back of my head, acting as a cushion, while the other lays flat beside me on the door

“You are quite the tease, aren’t you?” he growls . It’s the sound of a man pushed to the brink of his control. Apparently, the constant temptation is all he needs to unleash.

I fucking knew it. Behind that serious composure and all those pretty words, there is a sex god waiting to be unleashed. And damn if I’m not ready to worship.

“Nah, a tease wouldn’t follow through,” I reply in a strained voice. We are standing so close that my breath mixes with his. Not being able to help it, my eyes dart from his eyes down to his lips and back.

“Kiss me, Ez,” I plead into our hold.

And there’s nothing controlled about the way he kisses me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EZEKIEL

Frenzy.

I feel I would have perished if my lips didn't meet Alek's the very second after he asked me to kiss him. There is nothing I could remember yearning for more than the feeling of Alek's pillowy lips pressed against mine.

My hand tightens in his hair as all the frustration of this last week seeps into our embrace and our kiss. Mine, the frustration of trying to make myself pretend I didn't want this, and his, the frustration at my perceived rejection.

I feel Alek's desperation grow as his lips press more firmly against mine. His hands intertwine in the lapels of my jacket, tugging me closer as if our bodies weren't already plastered to one another. I feed into the desperation, licking and pleading for entrance past his plush lips. My tongue meets his in a frenzy, our matching moans filling the quiet room with sounds of pleasure and agony.

My hands are gripping him tightly as I refuse to let him move an inch away from me. I'm afraid that the slightest release of my grasp will send him away forever.

It's been ages since I've been intimate with anyone, and never with someone of my gender. As new as this is to me, and as many reservations as I had, everything in this moment feels right.

I would have been lost in my thoughts if I weren't already lost in the feeling of Alek surrounding me and guiding me.

Tugging his head back by his hair, I take advantage of the angle and move my mouth along his jaw, down his neck, to the glistening muscles where his shoulder meets his throat.

My lips seal on his skin in a motion that is both a bite and a kiss.

"Fuuuck, angel, please, " Alek begs, his hips incessantly seeking mine.

"No." My voice has a quiet snarl as I command him. The hand I had previously placed on his shoulder moves down to his hip while I pin him in place against the door.

The lust doesn't melt away as Alek squirms in my grasp and stares at me with curiosity.

"So it's like that, huh?" he asks. At first, I'm unsure of what exactly he means, but the heat in his eyes and the submission in his body language enlightens me immediately.

"Yes, now listen , you brat."

"Yes, Sir." The grin that spreads on Alek's face makes me want to continue to kiss him to tame that cockiness. The reply isn't mocking, per se, but there's a challenge in it that awakens something in me.

"You like saying that, don't you?"

"Probably as much as you like hearing it, Ez. Oh sorry— I mean, Sir ."

Alek's near giggle of a laugh lasts only a second before I stifle it with another hard press of my lips. 'Bruising' is the word I would use to describe our make—out session in all its ferocity. I am pleasantly surprised, and very aroused, at how rough this is. I love that I feel hard muscle, firm and unyielding, beneath my fingertips. I love the wholly masculine slew of moans that reach my ears. I've never had a partner test me in such a way.

Oh. My partner.

The thought causes me to slow my motions in our continued search of one another. Alek senses my retreat and calms as well.

While the physical distance between us doesn't grow, it's as if we both had a bit too much time for introspection. The meeting of our lips becomes slower, sensual, and lingering in opposition to our previous frenzy.

I would spend the entirety of my night cherishing Alek within my hold if it weren't for two things. As a designated driver, I am responsible for a horde of drunken women. Also, I am unsure of what the next steps are for him and me.

With a few more gentle caresses of our lips, we slowly drift apart.

Warm hazel eyes find mine in a look that is so intense it nearly makes me turn away. But no, I have no choice but to stare and admire Alek in all that he is.

Does Alek want me as his, whichever form that may take?

Am I ready, at this point in my life, to be his?

"Ez, I can hear you thinking."

“How does one hear another person think?” My head tilts, slightly confused and wondering how he knew I was overthinking.

“You look nervous again, angel.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” I ask at the same time Alek removes his hands from my chest and instead softly cups my face. The roughness of his hands catches on my stubble and I have to resist the urge to close my eyes and lean into the motion.

“You think a face as beautiful as this ain’t got something divine to do with it?” A thumb feathers along my jaw until he’s brushing it against my bottom lip.

“These lips though—” Alek begins, applying more pressure to my bottom lip so that it drags slightly in his touch.

“They’re sinful as fuck.” He shifts down, his lips meeting mine in a soft peck and I am almost cajoled into slamming him back into the door so we may finish what we started.

But I know we need to take it slow. There are things he needs to know, things I need to figure out. And I have to remind myself that this is only the second time I’ve been around this man. This delightful, delectable, and devious man.

“Alek,” I groan in warning and step back to look at him, but still stay within arms reach. “I must get back to my group soon.”

“Oh, right. Yeah.” It pains me when I hear the dejection in his voice.

“Alek, we aren’t leaving things like this. I would like to talk, get to know you, and grow this feeling between us.” The desperation in my voice was just as strong as the dejection in his.

“You askin’ me out on a date?” Alek attempts to joke, but I see the hope in his wide eyes. It calls to the hope that blooms within me.

“Yes, I am.”

“You like burgers?” Alek straightens up my glasses and jacket as he asks.

“I love burgers.” I smile at him and he smiles back. Cheesy smiles. Excited smiles. At this moment it all feels so easy with him. I haven’t felt this comfortable with anyone in years.

“I’m only working the pre—show tomorrow if you wanna stop by and get a late burger with me. There’s a great diner down the road.”

“Nothing would make me happier,” I reply quickly, the immediacy of the response involuntary.

“Good.” Alek brushes my hair back into a presentable manner. “Don’t leave me hanging again, Ez. My poor little heart can’t take it,” he pouts but the playfulness doesn’t reach his eyes.

The brief thought of Alek in pain brings a lightning shot within my own heart. I am done trying to deny myself and, in turn, deny him.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Alek,” I say sincerely, leaning on the tips of my toes to plant a small kiss on his cheek. “I will be here tomorrow.”

As I leave the safety of the costume closet, a place that will now forever be sacred within my heart, I take out my phone and dial a number I’ve memorized since last weekend. I barely make it down the hall and the phone only rings once before the call is picked up by him.

“I promise, Alek.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALEK

After hours.

“O h shit!” The bear of a man next to me pushes his stool back from the vanity as he fails to escape the falling mascara wand.

“Goddammit, my pants,” Benny huffs. He attempts to brush off the black smudge but instead makes it larger and a lot more noticeable.

“Dude, relax.” I reach down and pick up the fallen mascara wand. “You can just use T’s pants tonight and we’ll sort these out after the show.”

With the mascara wand secured on the vanity, I walk over to T’s locker and get Benny the extra tear—away dress pants for tonight’s show.

It’s technically my day off but it’s also Benny’s first time taking the lead, and I can see he’s a little nervous about it. He shouldn’t be though, we’ve been dancing together for almost five years and the dude knows how to shake his ass.

“You’re gonna be amazing, Benny.” I pat my friend’s shoulder before I set down the extra pants on the counter. “You’re lucky T’s giant pants were here for you to borrow.”

“I’m not nervous. It’s just different, y’know?” Benny’s drawl turns into a sigh as he

sits back on his stool.

“Yeah, I know.”

Lots of things have been changing lately. Between T taking time off, the new hires, and the need for new leads, the Garden of Eden is in a whole different bloom. And I’m not even touching on what happened with Ezekiel last night. A night off couldn’t have come at a better time.

“Let me help you with your makeup.”

“Thanks, Alek.” With a tone that’s part defeat, part relief, Benny hands me the mascara wand.

“ De nada, mi osito .”

I’m leaning over him at an unflattering angle, trying to follow the natural contour of his lips when he begins to ask me about last night.

“So you wanna tell us about your costume closet hookup with Professor Hottie last night?” he mumbles, making me mess up the line of his lips.

A chorus of ooh sounds off behind us as the rest of the nosy fuckers listen to our conversation. It earns them a roll of my eyes and a flick on the nose for the beauty queen sitting in front of me.

“None of your business, chismosas . Now pucker up.” I swipe off the excess line of makeup that smeared on his chin.

“You gonna kiss me like you kissed Ezekiel last night?” Benny taunts and makes kissy noises.

How did he know— oh of course Ezekiel's bach party told the guys everything. Who am I kidding? Benny and Laz were probably leading the gossip themselves.

"Oh fuck off, line your lips yourself." I set the liner back on the vanity and cross my arms to look down at him. "I don't know what's up with him and me, or where it's headed— happy?" I confess to my friend and the whole damn eavesdropping dressing room.

"I'm just sayin' you two were looking at each other like y'all were more than a closet hookup, bud. I thought he was a pretty cool dude and those girls seemed to love him too." Benny shrugs casually before turning back to the mirror to finish his makeup.

The guys all get back to their pre—show routines and I leave the dressing room with the excuse of having to set up some props for tonight, but really, I need a breather. I wanted so badly to dig for more information about what happened when Ez returned to his party last night.

Hidden and alone backstage, I check my watch for the time. Curtains open for the show in forty minutes. It's not unusual for my heart to race this close to showtime but I know it isn't racing because of the show tonight. Taking off my clothes makes me feel less nervous than what I've got planned tonight. My date with Professor Hottie.

If things go well, I might be taking off my clothes tonight either way.

"Mixology is an art form."

The voice I hear as I'm approaching from the back of the bar on my last pre—show stop sounds all too familiar. Entering the space, I see Ez and Emma in the far corner of the bar.

"Yes, thank you , someone freaking gets it." Emma is beaming behind the bar as

Ezekiel leans over it as he watches her mix a drink.

He hasn't seen me yet because he's so focused on what Emma is adding to her shaker. I can see how his eyes track every movement and measurement while she explains the cocktail. I've noticed he puts his full attention on something when he wants to learn more about it. It's endearing as hell.

"And there you go, a drink to share." My best friend winks as I approach. Ez doesn't look to the side yet, still engrossed in the cocktail. He might not be looking at me but I take my fill of him.

Ez, bent over the bar with his long body stretched out on the polished wood, has me suppressing a moan. I know I saw him, and kissed the shit out of him, last night but damn if this isn't permanent spank bank material.

Clearing my throat, I finally steal his attention away from Emma's cocktail.

A little dressed down from yesterday, but no less striking, Ez straightens and stands tall on the patron side of the bar. I swear this man was pulled out of the latest fashion magazine. He's in a fitted black turtleneck sweater and dark—washed jeans with a burgundy leather messenger bag strapped across his chest.

The outfit screams broody with a side of grumpy and I fucking love it.

"Alek." Ezekiel fidgets with his messenger bag and smiles shyly at me. "I arrived a few minutes early and Emma told me you were preparing for the show."

"Hey Ez," I reply with a much less timid smile. I mean, I was checking the guy out a few seconds ago. I'm not feeling shy about anything that happened last night.

"I hope there isn't an issue with my early arrival."

“You’re good, Ez,” I reassure him. “What did y’all make me?”

Throwing my arm around my best friend, I take a look at the bright drink in front of us and raise my eyebrow at it before looking at both of them. As much as I’d like to hurl Ez over my shoulder and run out of here so we can get some one—on—one time, I’m curious about this drink too.

“Why’s it green?” I ask, a little suspicious of the lab experiment in the glass in front of us.

“It’s a themed cocktail for tonight called Death in the Afternoon,” Emma explains at my side.

I’m a simple guy when it comes to alcohol, I only need a beer and some shots to call it a party. This looks a little too fancy for me.

“So is it poison?” I joke and Emma tosses my arm off her before gesturing to the drink.

“Just try it, you drama queen. Ezekiel was about to.”

“You wanna share?” I glance a bit eagerly over at Ezekiel while I pick up the small coupe, pinching the stem between my thumb and forefinger. “We’ll be walking over to the burger joint so no worries about either of us driving.”

“I’d be delighted. Thank you,” he answers.

Now it’s my turn to bend over the bar. Angling carefully, I bring the coupe to Ezekiel’s lips and encourage him to sip. He looks a little stunned at first but the look quickly melts into a heated stare instead. My gaze never once leaves the sight of his lips carefully wrapping around the rim of the glass as he takes in a long sip.

Is this a new kink? Feeding this guy has quickly become one of my favorite things to do. But I don't want to think too much about it and I don't want to look it up, thank you.

"That was hot," a feminine laugh sounds behind us. Emma seems to be enjoying the show. Meanwhile, Ezekiel's cheeks begin to turn pink as I remove the glass from his lips.

With a bit of a strangled laugh of my own, I gently nudge Emma away with my foot. She continues giggling while moving to the other side of the bar and finishing her prep.

Keeping my full attention on Ez, I lean back to stand again and take the drink with me.

"So, how was the slime—looking thing?" I ask, swirling the glass around in my grip.

"Flavorful," he begins. Sneaking out his tongue to lick any remaining drops of the cocktail from the rim. Glancing to the right, he makes sure Emma is out of earshot before he continues. "But not the best thing I've tasted recently."

The way he switches from angelic to devilish should be studied, honestly. One little naughty comment from him and I already know it's going to be a hell of a night.

"I'll fucking drink to that." I bring the shared coupe to my lips and not—so—subtly press my lips to the very spot Ezekiel's were a minute ago before I down the rest of the drink.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALEK

I probably shouldn't cry on our first date.

E z and I decided to walk the few blocks to the restaurant and happily chatted it up along the way. He told me about his day full of grading papers and touching up on some administrative work at home. And I finished telling him about the changes going on at the club as we approached the entrance of the diner.

The smell of delicious greasy food is one that I'll never get tired of. I was born and raised on that smell. The Burger Shop, while lacking an original name, never lacks in flavor. It's been the performer's go—to spot since it opened up a few years back and it also happens to be where my brother's best friend works.

One of my hands sits at the small of Ezekiel's back, the other holding the door open while I guide him in. I try not to think too much about how the simple touch sends a tingle of warmth up my arm and through the rest of my body.

“Hey, Alek!” Rhett greets us as we walk in, all smiles and charm from behind the half—wall separating the eating area from the bar and kitchen. I respond with a big grin of my own. Rhett's energetic aura has always been infectious. I don't know how sunshine personified can be roommates with a grump like my brother. They both lived with me a few years back and some days I could barely stand the bickering that went on between the two of them.

I'll make sure to introduce Ezekiel once Rhett gets a chance to sneak away from the kitchen. For now, I walk my date over to a secluded booth in the corner of the restaurant.

It's an odd time of night, nearly 8 pm. People are either finishing up their dinner before heading home for the night or enjoying some food on the first stop of a Friday night out. Thankfully, we've arrived when there's not much overlap. The half-filled restaurant means that we won't have to be yelling to hear each other.

"I don't imagine Knight is a very involved owner given the large amount of business he conducts," Ezekiel continues his train of thought from our earlier conversation as he sits down on one side of our shared booth. He looks around the restaurant as he says it and I see his eyes take in the every small detail of the hipster eatery.

"Honestly, I'm a little confused as to why he owns a burlesque club in the first place," Ezekiel questions, his eyes focusing back on me. There's a cute little tilt of his head in a silent question. I'm not sure if I can, or even want to, answer the questions he might have about the club right now. It's a long and complicated story.

"You know Knight well?" I ask while fidgeting with my menu even though I know exactly what I'm going to order.

"Yes, he's my cousin."

"Oh—" Well, that might complicate things. Maybe. I assumed Ezekiel was a supporter of the charity the gala was hosting when we met last weekend, not Knight's freaking cousin.

Shit, I need to talk to Knight.

I'm unable to start my panicking because a waitress comes over with some water and

begins to take our orders. It's not that I don't want Ezekiel to know everything about me but there are things I'm not quick to open up about.

After we give the waitress our orders, I take advantage of the interruption and change the subject.

"You're the kinda guy that likes sweet potato fries, huh?" I tsk playfully at him, back to my usual demeanor. I can't get hung up on what—ifs when it's our fucking first date.

"Yes, is that such an issue for me to be tutted at?" he replies with a surprising amount of sass.

"You can't beat a good ol' french fry, Ez. It's classic for a reason." I lean back in the booth, raising my right arm so that it lays over the top of the bench seat. I don't miss the way Ezekiel's eyes track the movement. I can almost feel his eyes tracing the outline of my biceps in my henley.

"I understand you may be the chef between the two of us, but respectfully, no." It's the no—bullshit tone in his voice that brings a smile to my face.

"Ah—ah, chef slash amazing dancer," I correct, wagging a finger at him. A huge chocolate milkshake and a soda are set in front of us and I turn to thank our waitress for bringing our drinks.

"When did you start dancing so amazingly, Mr. chef—dancer?" Ezekiel asks coolly, rolling up the wrapper from his straw into a little shape as he waits for my answer.

"Shit, it's been ten years now," I admit.

"Did you always want to be a dancer?"

While people usually ask this question with some judgment, I'm relieved to only hear pure curiosity from Ezekiel.

"No, actually. I wanted to be a gymnast."

"Well you certainly have the build for it," Ezekiel adds, his lips wrapping way too seductively around the straw.

"You're flattering me."

"It's entirely true. You're an Adonis of a man, Alek."

Holy shit, this man's honesty and blunt nature are so refreshing. I feel my heart beat faster as the weight of his compliment sinks in.

"Can you tell me more about your gymnastics venture?" Ezekiel asks after my pause.

"Sure." I nod and move closer to the table, my forearms resting at the edge as I lean towards Ez. "My mama was an Olympic gymnast representing Mexico in the late 70's, and early 80's," I begin.

"She would show me all these old tapes and we'd try to recreate the moves at home together. I fucking loved it. The way the athletes would move their bodies and show off their strength— I thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. I also loved learning about the history of it all. Mama was obsessed with ancient Greece."

I smile fondly. I don't get to talk to a lot of people about my mother. Anyone who knew her isn't in my life anymore.

"She was there through all of my early training, taking me to every practice and cheering me on from the sidelines. I..."

I clear my throat.

“I didn’t get much support in my training after she died.”

“Aleksander, I am so sorry.” Ezekiel reaches across the table and wraps his hand around mine. I’m so caught up in my memories. I hadn’t noticed the nervous tapping that came from my fingers.

“I’m not trying to ruin our night with my sob story, I promise.”

“You are not ruining anything. I want to know everything you are willing to share.” I swallow down the guilt I feel at his statement. In my gut, I know I can tell Ezekiel anything but the doubtful voice in my head nags at me, making me think that I’m talking too much.

Ezekiel’s eyes tell a different story. They’re soft and concerned and the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes scrunch in his look of condolence. He makes me feel safe to continue.

“My dad took my mom’s death hard for a few months. We both did. But within the year, he was married to Thomas and Vivian’s mom.”

“They are your siblings who also work at the club, correct? The other burlesque dancers mentioned them last night,” Ezekiel explains.

“Yeah, they’re a lot younger than me so I kinda raised them too.”

“What about your dad and their mom? Were the two of them not there to raise them?” Ezekiel asks, but I have a feeling he might already know the answer with the slightly indignant tone I’m hearing.

“Dad was never the same after Mama and Julie, my stepmother, is more interested in family image than actual family. I haven’t seen them since I turned eighteen. Not much else to say.” I run my thumb over his knuckles and sigh softly. Hitting my sharing limit for tonight, I take a look up at my date and see so much kindness and care that I’m nearly brought to tears.

“Thank you for listening, Ez.”

“Thank you for trusting me with your story, Aleksander.”

Storytime is over but our hands stay entwined.

“Alright, who’s the heathen that ordered the sweet potato fries?” Rhett walks up with our burgers. I burst out in a laugh, giving Ezekiel a shrug that says I told you so.

Ezekie’s death stare is strong when he breaks my gaze and looks up at Rhett.

“The heathen would be me.” Resignation accompanies his long sigh.

“You’re on a date with my friend, so I’ll give you a pass this time handsome,” Rhett winks at Ezekiel and I kick at his knee from under the table.

“Ow, Alek!” Rhett shrieks as he sets down Ezekiel’s food.

“Ezekiel is my date, so don’t be winking at him, you ass,” I begin and look over at Ez biting his lips between his teeth to hold back a laugh.

“Fuck, okay. Hi Ezekiel, sorry for thinking you’re cute,” Rhett winks again before he drops my plate at the table and steps back. The asshole manages to get out of kicking reach. “And the pig—out with extra pickles is all you, Alek. Bye!” He jogs back to the kitchen.

“I’m gonna have T kick his ass for me.” I roll my eyes and take a drink of my milkshake.

“You’re the one ordering extra pickles and I’m the heathen?” Ezekiel asks, shaking his head and popping in a sweet potato fry.

“What can I say? I’m a pickle girl, Ez.”

“Surely, that’s not a thing, is it?” He sounds genuinely concerned.

“Eat your food, angel.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EZEKIEL

Profound.

Alek's candor inspired me to open up during our dinner as well. While I wasn't ready to admit my deepest character faults to him, I certainly told him more than I usually shared with most people. All while we sat and shoved delicious greasy food into our mouths.

I couldn't recall the last time I had been on a date, much less a date this casual and carefree. I wished it didn't have to end.

During dinner, I told Alek that I am forty—two, a linguistics professor, own a terrible cat named Peaches. Opening up about my childhood, I told him how I grew up with Knight and his mother. It didn't feel like the time to get into the specifics of my childhood but I did let Alek know how I was orphaned at seven—years—old after my parent's fatal car accident. I had become mute in response to their death and while I hadn't really spoken to anyone but Knight during my childhood, I fondly remember picking up books from my aunt's library and learning bits and pieces of a variety of languages. With time and therapy, I began to speak again at the age of thirteen. Somewhat shockingly, I was able to communicate in several languages due to my independent studies.

Alek listened and offered reassurance, his leg softly brushing against mine under the table while his eyes were a pool of sympathy. It wasn't the regular pity that many

would show when hearing about my past. With Alek, there was a deep understanding only those who have been through the grief of losing a parent can attest to.

“Is that why you’re a linguistics professor now?” Alek asks, pausing his pursuit for the last drops of his milkshake. Earlier, he had let me know it was his cheat day and he was going to swallow every bit down. Unsurprisingly, his words had my face flushing with heat.

“Yes, essentially,” I began, wiping off the oily residue on my hands with a napkin and then applying hand sanitizer from my bag.

“While it was something I wasn’t physically able to do, I became excellent at speaking within my mind, and the love of both written and spoken language stemmed from there.” At my confession, Alek nodded in understanding with a thoughtful and sympathetic look on his face.

I am aware of how my mental processes are different and at that moment, it truly felt like Alek did understand why and how I operated.

“I know it can be hard to share, Ez. I can’t pretend to know what you went through, but I want to say I appreciate you opening up. I was feeling kinda nervous that I spilled too much earlier.” Alek sets his empty glass to the outer edge of the booth beside our stacked, empty plates.

The solid warmth of his leg against mine feels so natural that I immediately miss its presence as Alek straightens in his seat.

“We each had a therapy session over incredible meals, Alek.” I joke, attempting to lighten the mood. Divulging everything we did tonight truly feels like a sort of intimacy I had not experienced before.

Alek's deep laugh steals some of the heavy sensation forming in my chest. I only hope my accompanying laugh can do the same for him.

Our laughter quiets and only a moment passes before Alek speaks up. "I'm not ready for this date to end, angel," he admits.

"I couldn't dare leave your presence right now, Alek."

His breath hitches visibly and my eyes hone in on the broad muscles of his arms as he digs into his pockets. Within a second, Alek pries his wallet from his tight-fitting jeans and places several bills on the table.

"Take me home then, Ez."

The short trek back to the parking lot of the burlesque club feels much longer than it did earlier. A welcome tension fills the miniscule amount of air between us as we walk, pressed side-by-side and hand-in-hand.

Not a word is exchanged between us. It feels like we said more than enough tonight and now is the time to fully sink into the feelings growing between us.

Trust, understanding, and anticipation mingle just as our fingers are intertwined.

It is Alek that finally breaks the silence as we enter the now-full parking lot.

"You'll me if I'm— if this is too much, right?" Alek asks suddenly, and somewhat shyly, as we approach my car.

"What do you mean?" I'm typically at least a little better at reading people, but Alek's question and expression leave me confused.

“I mean this, Ez.” Alek lets go of my hand and gestures between us as he leans against the bumper of my car. “You haven’t told me outright but I know that this is kinda new to you.”

“You aren’t wrong.” There’s too much distance between us now and I don’t care for it. I want our hands to be wrapped around each other again, for my skin to bask in the warmth of his.

“The extent of my attraction to people, namely women, has— well, it’s never felt like this, Alek.”

I step closer to the taller man, planting my hands on either side of his hips resting against the trunk of my car. Alek undulates slightly as I press against him and I can see there is certainly no qualm at my closeness.

“Don’t know why it’s me but fuck if I’m gonna question a good thing,” Alek murmurs, although it seems the statement was more for himself than for me. His eyes roam my face, my neck, my chest, and down to the sliver of space between us.

I’m bewildered by his statement.

It couldn’t be anyone but him. And I intend to make him believe it.

The slouch of Alek’s body against my car puts us closer to a matching eye level and I take advantage of our positions. My hands caress up his sides and I pull him against me. Alek’s legs fall open immediately, allowing me to step in between them until I have him pinned to the car.

“This all may be new, but I promise you, I’m an apt student if you’re willing to teach me.”

“I thought you were the teacher here?” Alek jests, though there’s not much humor in his lustful tone. His words drip with it.

“I’m willing to reverse the roles.” Grasping where the back of his hairline meets his neck, I launch myself forward and stroke my lips against his.

Alek responds with a needy groan, his hands immediately moving from being crossed at his chest to gripping at the fabric of my sweater.

Not for the first time since last night, I’m transported back to our tryst in the costume closet. The memory of his lips against mine was so prevalent in my thoughts earlier today that the only thing that would pacify my mind was fisting my cock in the shower as a silent scream of Alek’s name fell from my lips.

As I feel that mouth pressing, biting, and licking against my own, I know that memories would never be a substitute for the real thing. My obsession, in the flesh.

“Ez, angel—” Alek pleads against my lips, using his strength to press against my chest to afford us some space. I find the action more attractive than I ought to. “I’m two seconds from getting on my knees and worshiping your cock in the middle of this damn parking lot.” The tips of his fingers curl into the waistband of my pants, mere inches away from my growing arousal.

“And I am two seconds from allowing it,” I confess, my breath coming out in a harsh cadence.

“Oh, fuck.” Running a hand through his already tousled hair, Alek takes a moment to look around the lot. I follow his gaze and find the parking lot and front of the club free of both patrons and security.

“Get in the car, angel,” Alek commands and moves away from the car. He nudges me

easily toward the driver's side. Again, the fact that he can manipulate my body in such an effortless way is only adding to the problem presently making itself shown in my pants.

Entering the car at alarming speed, I slam the door, and see an already buckled—in Alek smirking at me. There's something diabolical behind the lopsided grin of his and I am more than willing to play with the devil.

“Drive, Ez. I'm not far from here.” Alek punches his address into my navigation while I begin backing out of my space.

I don't even make it past a single row of cars before Alek stretches his long body over the center console.

“What are you—” My question is cut off when I feel Alek's dexterous fingers pulling away at my belt and zipper.

“Just need a little taste, angel. Mind if I keep your cock warm on the way home?” Alek begs.

“It is already quite warm in my pants, Alek.” I reprimand him but still invitingly tilt my hips toward him. “Take me out then, you impatient boy.”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Alek notices my body's eager reaction and quickly obeys my command. In a very purposeful and agitating move, Alek brushes his palm against my stiff erection and applies torturous pressure.

“Baby, I need to be able to keep us alive and I am entirely unsure of how to do so if you're going to be teasing me,” I reply somewhat gruffly. I do not miss the way Alek relishes the affectionate term.

“Then you better focus, angel. My place is eight minutes from here and I’m gonna fucking use that time wisely.” He reaches his warm, calloused hand into my boxers. I stiffen and hiss at the sensation of Alek’s fingers wrapping around my bare flesh.

“Get driving, Ez,” he demands, and as I said, I am nothing if not a willing and hands—on student. Checking my surroundings, I set the car to drive and begin the eight minute torture session to Alek’s apartment building.

“Good boy,” Alek praises, rewarding me with a single flick of his tongue to the bulb of my aching arousal.

How the steering wheel hasn’t crushed under the stress of my fierce grip as this brat drags his tongue against me, I do not know.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ALEK

Did he have to have a perfect dick, too?

After a single stroke of my tongue on Ez's cock, I know I've found my new favorite hobby. I can't help but smirk when I hear a small whimper pass his lips. I'm purposefully taking it slow, well— as slow as you can take it when you've already got a guy's dick down your throat on the first date— but fuck those needy noises are encouraging as fuck.

“Focus on the road, Ez.” Drawing out the words, I take my time putting my mouth back onto his cock and I can feel the desperate twitches of it under my fingers. Listen, I've got big hands and a tight—ass grasp, but I can barely get my fingers to touch around the width of him. Even though I can't see much in the dim light of the car, I'm already salivating for more.

“Aleksander if you keep teasing me?—”

“What, you'll pull over and spank me?”

“Tempting but no, I would prefer that we have some privacy for that.”

“I'm literally sucking your cock in a car, on a public road, angel.”

“That's why I said some .” The growl in Ezekiel's voice is encouragement enough to

get back to business, but I can't resist making him beg for more. "How about instead of sassing me, you put that bratty mouth to better use?"

Ah, there it is, the bossy tone I'm coming to love leaves his lips.

"Yes, Sir. " My last word is more of a murmur as I wrap my lips around his engorged head, sinking onto him so that his cock hits the back of my throat.

A hiss leaves Ezekiel's lips at the same time I feel a warm hand tangle in the long waves of my hair.

"This is all incredibly unfair." He complains and it makes me chuckle around him. I can feel the vibrations from my chuckle affect him as he grows impossibly harder between my lips.

Pausing my inhaling of his cock, I stroke him firmly so that I can look up and meet his gaze, a few strands of my hair blocking the view of him.

"You're the one that's getting deep—throated and it's unfair for you?" Bright blue eyes sneak a look down at me. Ezekiel's free hand moves to gently remove the wayward pieces of hair from my face.

"Well yes. I would like to touch you too." Ezekiel responds, tucking my locks behind my ear. The amount of annoyance in his expression makes me snort.

"Oh trust me, angel, you'll get what you want in just about..." Looking over my shoulder to spot a street sign, I assess how close we are to my place. "Four minutes."

"But, if you don't mind, I'm gonna keep sucking you off." I wink at him.

"Be my guest." Ezekiel grips my hair, pushes me down, and thrusts his hips up within

a second. The size of him leaves me gagging. A guy that can put me in my place with his cock? I might be in love already.

The way Ezekiel shifts from lovingly petting my hair to pulling it in a fierce grip leaves me feeling a little lightheaded by the time we finally make it to my place.

There's a covered carport attached on either side of my duplex, and I can feel Ez pull into my spot from the welcoming bump and incline of my driveway.

Putting the car into park, he not—so—gently lifts me off his cock and tugs until I'm arching my neck to look up at him.

The look in his eyes would be alarming if it wasn't so damn hot. He's obviously had his limit with my teasing, but there's also a small curve to his lips that tells me he's enjoying it.

“You are an insufferable little cock tease.”

With the scold, he seals his lips on mine in a fierce kiss.

“And I want more,” he adds, pulling away only to lift me by my hair so I'm sitting upright in the passenger seat once again.

If we leave this car, I'm afraid it might burst this horny bubble that we're in, and I'm not ready for that. I know there are things I need to tell him if this is going to go anywhere and fuck, do I want it to go somewhere. But I also know that people have left me for less.

“C'mere,” I mutter softly, outstretching my left arm towards him as I quickly pull the lever to push my seat back with my right.

“Won’t we be going inside?” he asks, darting a look toward my entry door.

“We will, I—” Clearing my throat helps me hide the sudden crack in my voice.
“—please don’t leave.” Never leave.

“Alek...” I don’t give him a chance to reply. I hook my arm under his shoulder and around his back and haul him into my lap.

“ Jesus Christ .” Ezekiel exhales, bracing his arms on my chest and settling into his new position. His legs are spread open, knees on either side of my hips as he settles his ass onto my knees. And of course, his cock is still out and now rests on the zipper of my pants.

“You throw me around like I’m weightless,” he comments.

The shot to my ego has me puffing my chest out with pride.

“Thought some messing around in the car might be fun.” I run my hands up his thighs, my palms applying pressure as I inch closer to his hips. My eyes continue to follow the path to his still—hard cock. Raising an eyebrow, I meet Ezekiel’s eyes once again and nod downward. “Looks like he’s up for it.”

“It seems unjust that I’ve been exposed this entire time while I haven’t even gotten a glance at you.” Fuck . He’s pouting for my cock.

Gripping his wrists, I drag them down from where his hands rest against my chest, slowly moving them down my torso. I work hard for my body and I want Ezekiel to feel every inch of it. The man is squirming in my lap by the time our hands reach my lower abdomen.

“Expose me then, angel.” I buck my hips.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EZEKIEL

A sense of belonging.

My hands tremble but my eyes never waver from Alek's as I begin to unbutton his jeans. While this is all new in so many ways, I only feel safe and cherished in Alek's embrace. I would never trust or want anyone else to bring me onto this journey of discovery.

"That's it, angel." The man below me praises. Slotting into the fabric of his boxers, I still at the first touch of my hand on his cock. It's so incredibly warm and feels foreign despite being accustomed to my own.

Alek takes notice of my pause and places a hand on my forearm. "Ez, if this isn't comfortable for you?"

"Alek, if you keep me from your cock I will be sorely upset," I interject. "It is just both dissimilar and familiar, the feeling of it. May I continue?" There is a bit of bite in my tone that I was unable to leave out. I may be new but I do not want him thinking I am delicate.

"You may." With a surprised look on his face, he removes his hand from my forearm. Permission granted, I delve into his boxers, grip his length, but struggle a bit to free him.

“Must your pants be so incredibly tight?” I grunt.

“You like it,” Alek replies.

I absolutely do.

After a moment of crafty movement, I’m staring down at both of our cocks, side by side, just barely illuminated in the soft glow of the lights inside my car.

“Hmm...” I hum.

“Hmm?” Alek asks.

“I have never considered the nuances a penis can have.”

My statement draws a small laugh from Alek.

“I never thought I’d be getting hard while hearing the word nuance .” Alek reaches for my free hand and moves it from resting on his hip toward my arousal. “Here, feel mine and feel yours.”

I do as he asks, each of my hands now wrapped around our cocks. I experiment with him, twisting slightly in an upward motion that I enjoy. My eyes are trained on his face, watching for his expressions as I continue to work both of us.

“Fuck,” he pants and I feel my breath quickening to meet his excitement.

“And here I thought you were giving off shy little librarian vibes,” Alek admits, his eyes drawn to the meeting of our bodies with reverence in his eyes. While I am drowning in the sensations, I feel no urgency to finish. More than anything, I am relishing just being here with Alek.

“I never—” A groan leaves me as I continue to pump my hands. “I never understood the idea of being shy about your needs.”

“Noted.” There is a glimmer in those wicked eyes as he shifts underneath me so that my length now lays on his. A shiver races up my spine when I feel the heated skin of his cock directly on mine for the first time.

“Alek.” I breathe.

“I’m not shy either, Ez.” Suddenly, Alek’s hand wraps around mine, our flushed cocks in the middle of our combined grips. He begins moving his hand up and down, faster than before and no longer teasing.

No, Alek is a man on a mission to completely shatter me.

The impossibly tight grip he has on us, the exposed, tan skin of his abdomen, and the needy harsh noises spilling from him have me nearly seeing stars.

“Baby—” I shudder. “I need more.” I am shaking at this point.

Alek takes his free hand and clasps under my jaw. Roughly, he angles my face so that our colliding cocks are directly below me and in my eyeline.

“Spit.” It’s not a question or suggestion. It’s a direct order.

And I follow it.

My saliva lands with a wet plop, directly onto both of our tips. Alek maneuvers our hands up and then back down, spreading the wetness and easing the friction between us. My spit is cool and slipping between our hot skin as he continues to work us.

“More,” he demands, pulling on my jaw once again. I barely manage to let the saliva drop before Alek moves my face toward his for a clashing of our lips.

Tongues and teeth meet in the rush of our kiss, spurred on by the deep moans emanating from both of us and the slick heat between our cocks.

“Fuck my hand and rub against my cock, angel.” Alek takes a quick moment to guide me, his own hips thrusting forward into the embrace of our hands.

I am overwhelmed in the best way as I slide my length between our hands and feel the ridges of Alek’s cock against mine. My heart beats as if I’ve been running a marathon. My clothes feel all too tight at once, and I know I am reaching my peak.

“Alek, baby, I’m going to come,” I moan into his lips, and Alek takes advantage and bites down on my bottom lip forcefully.

“Fuck, do it, Ez. Mark me with it.” Alek’s own breathing is ragged and his words are spoken rapidly.

The moment I run my thumb over both of our slits while Alek pumps us, I feel both of us begin pulsating madly in our shared grip. There is nothing I want, or have ever wanted, more than to come with this whirlwind of a man beneath me.

“Fuck, fuck!” Alek practically screams and his hips shudder against mine as I feel hot ropes of his release begin to coat our hands and exposed skin.

“Alek!” I scream and follow behind him. Feeling the warmth our combined release sets off fireworks in my mind and body.

Never in my life have I felt so completely satiated after an orgasm. I’m a mess of a man as I slump down onto Alek, bury my face into his neck, and breathe in his

inviting scent.

Alek detangles our hands, wipes them on the fabric of his henley before he pulls me even closer. His strong arms wrap around my back and he embraces me firmly to his chest. For what feels like a lifetime, we sit, breathe deeply, and hold each other tightly. My eyelids are beginning to flutter closed when I hear Alek's voice near my ear.

"We gotta get cleaned up, angel."

"I'm too tired," I fuss. Truth be told, I am up much later than my typical bedtime.

Alek laughs but keeps ahold of me while he reaches between us and carefully puts us back into place, zipping up our pants as well.

"Can't have anyone else seeing what's mine," he jokes but I delight in the possibility that his man wants me as his .

Opening the car door, Alek keeps a firm grip below my ass with one hand and encourages me to keep my arms wrapped around his neck as he easily steps out of the car. I am not a slight man and the fact that Alek can carry me with minimal effort has me hardening against his abdomen once again.

"Easy soldier. Let's get inside." Alek kisses a sensitive spot behind my ear.

I'm sure we make quite the sight; a grown man carrying another very sleepy grown man who clings to him like a baby monkey to its mother.

"I'm going to need to borrow clothes," I grumble as we cross the threshold to his apartment. Alek has yet to set me down until we walk down a hallway and into a bedroom. I take quick notice of my surroundings. An inviting and fluffy bedspread

decorates the large bed in the middle of the room. Cool, gray colors surround us and minimal, but tasteful, furniture decorates his bedroom.

“I’ll get you clothes, Ez.” Alek sets me down onto the bed softly, the stickiness of our combined releases making itself evident when we separate.

Carefully, I take off my sweater and trousers as Alek opens up a drawer and looks around for clothing.

“I think I’ve got a shirt that will fit alright,” he begins, turning around with a black t—shirt and exercise shorts in hand.

“Oh fuck, you need to be naked next time and we need a fuckton more light,” he remarks, his eyes hungrily taking me in. My body is certainly leaner than his but I stay lightly muscled with my running.

As much as I would love to make next time happen right now, I am tired and still coming down from the high of my intense orgasm.

“Alek.” I warn.

“I know, I know. We need some sleep.” He groans with obvious protest in his words as he begins to undress himself as well. Walking over to me, he grabs my discarded clothing before making his way out of the room. “Be right back.”

I take the time to weigh my options to get dressed or not. The comfort of the bedding beneath me and the fact that my skin would be pressing and touching against Alek’s in our sleep makes it no contest. I’m sleeping in my boxers and putting on his clothes in the morning.

It’s been months since I’ve shared a bed with anyone. At first it was difficult to get

used to the feeling of sleeping alone when I had always had someone with me for over ten years.

“I’ve got some water.” Alek returns, my thoughts on the past immediately escaping my mind when I see him walk in, tanned muscles all on display with only tight boxers covering his middle.

“Thank you,” I yawn as he passes me a cool glass.

We settle in quickly, with a sense of comfort like this is all part of our everyday routine. Fluffing pillows, moving blankets, and finally settling in. My phone and glasses are perched on the nightstand like they belong there.

Once we’re in bed, I face Alek with my hand under my cheek, and he mirrors my position on the other side of the bed.

“Why does this feel so normal?” I ask, unable to keep my thoughts to myself.

“I don’t know,” he responds. Moving closer to me, Alek wraps a long arm around my waist and I shuffle slightly to meet him in the middle of the bed.

“But I’d have you in my bed every night if I could.” His eyes are closed, there’s a sweet expression on his face, and his words are spoken almost as if he’d been dreaming.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ALEK

What's the tea?

Ez can't cook for shit. I learned that this morning after we had woken up in each other's arms. There was a relaxed smile on his face when I blinked open my eyes from a long night of peaceful sleep. Handsome and awake as ever, Ezekiel was sprawled out looking like he always belonged in my bed. We took our time detangling from each other, passionate kisses and heavy touching made it almost impossible for us to leave the bed. It was only the combined noises from our growling stomachs that put a pause to the makeout session.

We spent the morning making pancakes and bacon side—by—side. Ez insisted on helping out in the kitchen. And my angel burned the fuck out of our bacon and set off the fire alarm. That's how he ended up sitting on my shoulders, reaching for the alarm so we could turn the damn thing off. We took so long trying to turn off the alarm that my pancakes also burned.

By the end of our disastrous breakfast, we sat giggling with each other at my small dining table with our burned food still smoking between us as we tried to look for any edible pieces. Despite the chaos, it was still the best morning I've had in a long time, even with the nagging thoughts trying to invade my mind.

For the sake of having a good morning, I had internalized the anxiety that had been in the back of my mind since Ez told me he and Knight were cousins. I have to confront

Knight later today and possibly ruin something with Ez before it even has the chance to begin. This morning might have been the last time I would get to see my angel like this and I was going to treasure our time.

“You’re interrupting my morning tea.” Knight sits back in one of the dark leather chairs in his study, a small cup of tea halfway lifted to his lips.

I texted Knight and sped over here right after saying goodbye to Ez. He had some work to take care of for the upcoming school week and I had errands to run before the show but we agreed to call later tonight. Kissing him goodbye felt especially bittersweet knowing I needed to have a tough encounter afterwards.

“Oh, I’m sorry , I didn’t know it was morning tea time. Did I just fucking miss the Queen of England?” I finish entering the room and cross my arms once I’m in front of him.

“You smell like you’ve eaten a pack of cigarettes.” Knight’s mustache shifts upward as he grimaces. He sets his cup of tea down on a coaster and turns to give me his full attention.

“Yeah, well you can thank your cousin for almost setting my house on fire this morning.”

Knight’s eyes narrow and his brow lowers in a look that screams equal parts protective and pensive. After a moment, he offers nothing more than a small “humph.”

“Humph, really? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Letting out a long sigh, Knight leans back against his chair and steeples his hands in front of his torso. He looks at me the way a parent might look at a misbehaving child.

“I should have realized this would have been within the realm of possibility,” the man admits. “I assume you hit it off at the gala last weekend?” he asks, but I know he already knows the answer.

“Did you set us up?” I ask outright.

Suddenly, Knight stands up, buttons his suit, and hurries past me to walk over to his desk on the opposite side of the room. I don’t know why he’s even wearing a three—piece suit if he’s in his own damn house.

“No. I thought you two would annoy each other and I would get a good laugh out of it. However, other business kept me from visiting you two in the kitchen. It wasn’t my intention to play matchmaker. Although, it seems I should make it a business venture if Ezekiel’s already spending the night,” he smirks.

“Did you know he was going to that bachelorette party at Garden of Eden?”

“Anna’s party? Ezekiel was part of that?” he calls over his shoulder, confusion in his tone.

“Down to the pink boas,” I reply.

“Oh, I need to get a video of that,” he laughs but it sounds odd, like he’s hurrying to do something behind his desk.

Suspicious at his tone, I follow Knight over to the other side of the room and I see him quickly shuffle some papers into a file and slam it closed.

“You’re being weird and not weird about this.” Choosing to ignore whatever the Hell that was with the file, I instead bring up the elephant in the room. “Knight, you hired me as an escort ten years ago.”

“I was there, Alek.”

“You don’t think Ezekiel’s going to freak out over this?”

“Ezekiel doesn’t freak out . He is the most understanding person I know. While he is not aware of the specifics of that time of my life, he was there through it all.”

“You really don’t think he’s going to have a problem with it?” I ask with a worry in my voice. I’ve been stressing about keeping this from Ez.

“Will he have an issue with us having had a few lackluster dates with awkward intimacy before becoming business partners instead? No, I don’t believe so, and it was a decade ago, Alek.”

Flopping onto one of the chairs facing his desk, I let myself sink into the velvet cushions. I run a hand through my hair and push it out of my face before looking back at Knight as he leans against his desk.

“You are serious about him, aren’t you?” Knight asks with an eyebrow raised in my direction.

“Yeah, Knight, I am.”

“Then you need to speak to him. I’m sure both of you have things you need to disclose.”

It’s my turn to look at him with a questioning expression. Things we both need to disclose? What does that mean? Is he talking about Ezekiel’s childhood?

A sudden, loud notification goes off. Knight quickly picks up his cellphone and glances at his screen before tucking it into his breast pocket.

“I need to go, Alek,” he says coolly, though I see small beads of sweat gathering at his temple. He’s being really fucking weird.

“Yeah, sure.” I get up and rub at the back of my neck. I’m still worried about all of this. As much as I’m not ashamed of my past and think that Ezekiel is an understanding guy, it’s not information that’s easily said and shared.

“I wouldn’t be an elder sibling figure if I didn’t say this—” Knight walks right up to me, meeting me toe—to—toe. “Do not hurt Ezekiel, Aleksander.”

“I’d never hurt him,” I reply just as steely.

“Wonderful, make sure to say bye to the Queen on your way out!” Knight pats my chest a little too hard, turns me, and pushes me out of his study.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EZEKIEL

An empty space.

A neat stack of full moving boxes and a very perturbed Peaches meet me in the foyer when I arrive home. The bowling ball shaped cat could surely go a night without her food but she is looking at me like I have committed the ultimate betrayal.

“I apologize, Peaches.” Setting down my messenger bag onto the hall tree, I turn to pick up the fluffy cat and cradle her to my chest.

Walking down the hallway, past the parlor and into the kitchen, I rummage through the pantry to find her a little treat to go with her serving of food.

“I was out later than intended and hadn’t meant for you to starve, sweet girl.”

Once Peaches was settled and greedily consuming her food, I took a moment to breathe and center my thoughts. Last night with Alek was intense for a multitude of reasons and my body is responding in kind.

I observe myself in the mirror hanging in my dining area. There are angles in which my hair is sticking out that I didn’t even think were achievable. My eyes are slightly glassy and it both looks, and feels, like I could make use of another eight hours of sleep.

But, as I look lower, there is a smile on my face and a relaxation in my composure that I haven't seen in months. Continuing my observation, I see the too large athletic shirt and shorts Alek let me borrow after my own clothing had become unsuitable following our time in my car.

Without an ounce of restraint, I grab the fabric of the borrowed shirt and bring it to my nose. Alek's scent is one that perplexes me. There is a floral undertone—lavender that isn't too heady but instead, mixes beautifully with the natural scent of him.

I could get lost in all the sensations brought on from remembering our time together.

The scent of him wafts off of me with every step I take towards my bedroom. If it weren't for the fact that I needed to shower and complete some work I have been putting off, I would stay in these clothes so that Alek's scent continues to envelop me.

My aching muscles scream for a hot, steamy shower. Alek may be a gymnast but I have no such flexibility. Being crouched in another man's lap in the small space of the passenger seat of my sedan has done a number on my back.

A towel and new razor sit on the bench just outside my walk—in shower. My face cream, aftershave, and my toothbrush are set on one side of the counter, making the empty side of the dual sink that much more... empty.

I don't want to dwell on it. Not now.

Turning the water on as hot as I can comfortably get it, I strip off Alek's clothes and set them on the unoccupied side of the shared vanity.

Though, I suppose, with Alek's possessions taking up the space, it is no longer

unoccupied, is it? It's as if Alek is finding every desolate part of my life and filling it up.

It terrifies me in the most welcome of ways.

Fifteen minutes later, I am freshly showered but unable to resist the compulsion of wanting to be close to Alek, so I find myself in the man's crumpled clothing once again as I head to my study to begin marking papers.

Peaches is my only companion for the afternoon. I mark papers easily, providing both praise and criticism for my linguistics students with a purring puff of light orange on my lap. I also made sure to eat a decent lunch and do some more clearing of the house.

It's nearing five in the afternoon when I receive a text from Alek. It's a brief question along with an image.

Aleksander

How much do you weigh?

Attached image.

My first mistake is taking a sip of water right after Alek texts me. My second mistake is, while trying to save my phone, turning in Peaches direction. Water expels from my nose and onto my unfortunately placed cat. I earn a few claw marks on my thigh but not unjustly so. Peaches is glaring at me from the rug as she licks off the excess water plastering down her long fur.

I don't feel myself weighed down too much from her ire, not when I'm looking at a gloriously shirtless, tan, and sweaty Alek smirking at me through my phone. He

seems to be in a stalled changing room of sorts, a wicked smirk on those beautiful lips as he looks into the camera and flashes his torso.

Me

This requires a NSFW warning, Aleksander.

Aleksander

It's pg13 at best, Ez

but if you're asking for NSFW I can do that too, angel

Don't you dare, you brat. I can see you're in a public space.

And I weigh 170 lbs, if you must know.

I must. give me a minute

Curiosity eats at me. I want to see where this is going. I bite at my thumb to stifle the anticipatory grin on my face. Two minutes later, a text appears with an attached video.

Aleksander

lightweight, baby

Attached video.

Alek is lifting a barbell that looks to have a weight load of 185 pounds on it. He is easily lifting it over his head for several repetitions in a row. It's not only the action

that leaves me swooning in my seat, but the noises. The man grunts with every movement. The groans are seductively similar to the ones I heard from him last night when our cocks were choked in our shared grip.

I'm highly tempted to fist my cock and finish from just the noises alone.

Me

Is there ever an instance where you would have to toss me around like so?

Aleksander

you just gotta ask angel

if you wanna talk and beg for it with your own words, I'm gonna be done with the show by 10pm tonight

Me

Hm... I may be in bed at that time.

that's where I want you

I scoff and shake my head at his reply. He is incorrigible and I find myself loving the banter.

Me

Ever the flirt, aren't you?

Aleksander

call me at 10 and find out

try not to fall asleep on me, old man

I should put you over my knee.

that's gonna do the opposite of help the situation, Ez

gotta go get ready for the show, don't forget to eat your early bird supper

His last message is time stamped at 5:17 in the afternoon. I roll my eyes in annoyance. I am eight years his senior, not thirty. I'll humor his game, though.

Me

Goodbye, Alek. It looks like I'll have to teach you some manners tonight, seeing as you're disrespecting your elders.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ALEK

You can't be sad while wearing a thong.

There's a shiny thong still stuck up my ass, a garter around my waist, and makeup still lines my eyes as I make my way home from tonight's show. While I can admit that my body looks fantastic in this get—up, I really don't know how anyone could wear something so uncomfortable all day.

After the show, I was the first one to leave the dressing room. My gym shorts were quickly thrown over my lacy ensemble, deciding that I would wash it at home and bring them back for the shows we have at the end of next week. Pretty soon we'll be moving onto our new shows so it's the last time I'm going to wear the strappy lace anyway.

Shirtless and rushing to make it home by ten so I can call Ezekiel, I might be driving a little over the speed limit. I can't wait to see Ez.

I'm well aware I just saw him this morning, but after my morning tea with Knight, there's been a heavy feeling in my chest that I know won't go away until I open up to Ez.

A little part of me is constantly worried that it will ruin us.

As I drive, I reflect on that time in my life. I was eighteen with nowhere to go and

nothing to my name but a high school diploma I barely graduated with. I had been doing anything from bussing tables to fixing up cars on major highways until I made it from Utah down to Texas. That was a good five years of scraping by and working hard, but at least I was free to be myself.

I could have stayed home. Some people might have called me ungrateful for leaving. I'm sure a lot of people back in Utah do. A whole life had been chosen for me by my dad and stepmom, and it was one I wanted nothing to do with.

Antonio and Julie wanted me to clean my act up and work for them in the family business. Nevermind that I had no fucking interest in accounting and numbers didn't work with me. The reason I almost didn't make it through high school was because of all the damn math classes I had failed and the suspensions I had gotten.

A little rebellion? That was something Antonio and Julie could work with. They were confident they could get my ass into gear.

Supporting an openly bisexual son? Not so much.

The day I turned eighteen, I got the speech about how I was a bad influence to have around two growing kids. Thomas was eleven at the time, and Vivian was only nine. Heartbroken, I left them behind. I was only a kid myself and couldn't take them with me or stay somewhere I wasn't wanted. Guilt tore away at me years until Viv had somehow found my phone number and reconnected the three of us. I may have not been with them in person but I was at least able to text my siblings and still be a part of their lives as they grew up.

I was twenty—three when I made it to Texas and decided to finally settle down. Years of back-breaking labor and my past in gymnastics had helped sculpt my body into a form many desired. Honestly, it was one of the few assets I had, so I used it to my advantage.

It had started easy enough, taking clients from ads posted online; both men and women that seemed to need the company. It wasn't always sexual in nature, but sometimes that's all it was. I became so good at reading people and talking or directing them through their desires that it felt good to provide a service where people could truly be themselves and ask for what they wanted. Not to say it was always a smooth ride, but thankfully nothing I couldn't handle myself.

Eventually, those dates lead me to more exclusive clientele and higher paying jobs, and ten months into my escort work, I met a recently—divorced Knight.

Without spilling all the details, the divorce was fresh and hit him so hard that he was questioning a lot of things. His sexuality being at the top of the list. That's where I had come in and we started casually seeing each other.

Through our time together we discovered two major things: one, Knight is definitely heterosexual, and two, we worked well together as friends and surprisingly, as business partners. Our many conversations and outings hadn't led to love but instead, the creation of The Garden of Eden Burlesque Club.

My thoughts halt as I look at the time on my dashboard while pulling into my driveway. Bright blue lights read 9:55. I've got time to pop inside before the call but not enough time to freshen up.

Grabbing my gym bag and hopping out of the car, I let my memories fade away for now. I'll have to rehash everything when I tell Ez, but I can't bear to do something like that over the phone. Our call tonight is for fun and I've been worked up since our flirty texts earlier today.

When it is time, I already know his physical presence will relax me when I tell him the rest of my story. It was hard telling him about Mama and the years after her death but I felt nothing but support, and actual damn gratitude, that I opened up to him.

My phone rings as soon as I sit my ass down on my bed. Ezekiel is punctual, got to give him that. My smile beams when I see it's a video call.

"Miss my face that much already, angel?" I ask as soon as I see Ez's face pop up on my screen.

"Well yes," he replies. "I know we only parted this morning but I do miss you." His matter—of—fact tone would be a little intimidating if it weren't for the warmth in his stare.

"Missed you too. You get all your work done?"

Laying back onto my pillow, I place a hand behind my head while the other keeps my phone steady above me.

"Yes, and then some." I look at his surroundings as he replies. He's actually not in bed but on a reclining dark leather seat instead.

Ezekiel raises an eyebrow at me with a disgruntled look on his face.

"It's quite easy to get work done without a distraction. Thankfully, I was already finished by the time you tried tempting me with that display of yours."

"Tried?" I scoff. "You telling me I didn't tempt you?"

"Oh you certainly did, but I am a man of resolve, Alek. I couldn't in good conscience fuck my fist to your video when there was still a list of chores to do."

Is cursing a kink? Because I feel myself getting hard every damn time he taints that impressive vocabulary of his with something so dirty. My naughty professor is always surprising me.

“Please tell me you got your chores done.”

“Of course I did,” Ezekiel smirks as he replies. I see him lift a cup of tea from somewhere off-camera and take a sip before he continues. “To be clear, I fully intend to hear those grunts again, fuck my fist, and aid in your release, at the end of this call. If you behave, that is.”

I groan in protest, palming my cock down so that it behaves.

“Watch it,” Ezekiel demands. “No touching of the sort until I say so. Now tell me, what did you have for lunch today?”

My cock is hard and at the ready, and he wants to know what I had for lunch. It’s endearing as much as it is frustrating.

“I made a caldo de res because I had a bunch of vegetables to use before they went bad.”

“What’s a caldo de res ?” he asks, pronouncing the name of the soup perfectly.

I spent a few minutes going over Mama’s caldo recipe and explaining how it was my favorite dish growing up. I missed it so much after she passed that I learned to make it myself when I was younger, often making it for T and Viv when they got sick.

Ezekiel takes the information in like it’s going to be on a test the next day. He asks detailed questions and makes me promise to give him some caldo to try.

Our conversation continues easily. We talk about each of our days, with me leaving out the little visit I had with Knight. It’ll be better left to talk about it in person. While Ez tells me about his weekend routines, I’m hit with the realization that I’ve begun to fall for this man even with how little I know about him. It’s nice getting to know

small details of Ezekiel's life.

I ask Ezekiel about the room he's in and he takes me on a tour of his study. There are huge shelves lining the walls with all sorts of books, but what catches my eye is the cover of a book that is splayed open on top of his massive desk.

"Ez—" I interrupt, moving my eyes back to his face on my phone screen. I sit up as if that would get me a closer look at the cover. "Is that a naked guy on the book behind you?"

"Oh, well yes, I was reading for research." A small blush begins creeping along his face but he doesn't try to hide the book. Instead, I can see him struggling to keep his eyes on mine once a piece of the shiny garter from my costume comes into view.

He brings the book cover into focus. "Have you heard of MM romance novels?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

EZEKIEL

Once a brat, always a brat.

“ I ’ll admit I’m not much of a reader, Ez. Care to share with the class, professor?”
Alek’s lips turn upwards in challenge, but I can see the heated amusement in his expression.

Work kept me busy for the majority of the morning. I would have loved to stay in Alek’s clothing all day but I had to change into something more appropriate for a lunch conference call. After finishing my work duties I found myself with ample time. Time that I used to read a few queer romance novels to try to wrap my mind around my newfound attraction.

Through my evening reading, I discovered that the role of the dominant intrigues me the most and I’m eager to put my newfound knowledge into practice. In my limited experience, I have always been aware I required a certain kind of control but had never been fascinated enough to truly research.

“This novel, specifically, is about a dominant and submissive relationship between a physical therapist and his athlete patient. It goes deeply into the intricacies of BDSM and the forbidden aspect of their relationship. Quite riveting.”

Reflecting on previous encounters between myself and Alek, it is my theory that he is closer to the submissive side, as bratty as he may be about it. My cock twitches in my

pants at the thought of putting the theory to the test. Since I was unable to avoid thinking about it for the majority of the day, I am determined to find some answers tonight. It is certainly odd, how every facet of my being, even sides I wasn't previously aware of, ache for Alek.

"Fuck, this is the hottest book review I've ever heard." Alek shifts on camera and more of his costume comes into view. There is a tease of shimmering straps and I twitch in anticipation to see more. Thankfully, he is blessing me by keeping the angle lowered so I can keep admiring the bit of costume. However, I suspect that he has his motives behind the kind gesture.

"If this is truly a lecture, it is outright uncouth to interrupt the professor, isn't it, Mr. Delgado?" My eyes narrow at the man on my screen.

"Yes, sorry Sir ." Alek bites at his lower lip, a teasing smirk gracing his features. Even when he's provoking me, he takes to my instruction so beautifully. Responses like this do nothing but further confirm my theory.

"A good little listener, you are." I praise. I don't miss the quick shutter of his eyes as I address him.

"As I was saying, I was intrigued by the dynamic of both sides, but I will say the role of dominant seemed to further awaken something in me, not that I'm opposed to experimenting. I have never given sex much thought other than it being something that was enjoyable, and at times felt somewhat necessary. With you though?—"

I pause for a few seconds. Partially to gather my thoughts, and partially to see Alek's desperation grow. "—with you I find myself wanting more."

Alek's hazel eyes shift on the screen. I can see he is taking time to process his thoughts and I am patiently waiting for his response to my revelation.

“Gonna be honest, Ez,” Alek begins, and I gently set my book down onto my desk before nodding in encouragement for him to continue.

“My training, my cooking, my dancing... it’s all precise shit that I’ve gotta be in control of.” There is a nervous pitch to his voice as he drags his hand down his face. “I’ve never been with anyone that I feel comfortable losing that control with,” Alek pauses and I feel my breath pause with him. “But I’m willing to try with you, Ez.”

Relief is visible on my face as I glance at the bottom corner of our video call. I have never had many qualms about speaking my mind and expressing my desires, but with Alek, I find myself hanging on his every word in response.

“I have only had the desire to explore this with you ,” I admit.

The noise of a quick breath fills the empty space, though I could not tell you if the breath was mine or Alek’s.

“Well damn, let me get my explorer hat and let’s go,” Alek replies.

“Why would putting on more clothing help with this kind of exploration?” I purposely respond to his joke. One of my favorite pastimes has become teasing this man right back.

“What, you don’t want me dressed up? Don’t think the hat will go with the rest of my outfit?” Alek pouts on screen before trailing the camera down, and down, and down.

Any quip I had planned flies out the window as I see gorgeous, olive muscled skin on my screen. His abdomen still glistens and whether it is from sweat or the copious amount of glitter this man wears, it entrances me all the same. When the camera reaches his waist, I observe silvery straps of a costume across his torso, overlapping and connecting in intricate patterns astride his defined muscles. It comes to a

conclusion worthy of applause, the lower straps of this godforsaken costume tracing the v—shape of his hips like a beacon leading to his cock.

“You are certainly lucky that I am not there.”

“Uh, I think that makes me the opposite of lucky, angel.”

“No. The costume would meet its demise in my hands, Aleksander. What I wouldn’t do to peel the bejeweled straps off of you. While I am a patient man, I promise that anything keeping me from your beautiful body would be torn to shreds. Do you understand, baby?”

The camera is still angled down so I get an eye full of Alek’s abdomen, but the man’s face is nowhere to be seen. Though, I don’t need to see his face to gauge his reaction. I note that his muscles are rippling quicker, his breathing sounding more rushed through the speaker of his phone.

“ Fuck, I understand,” he groans as his hips shift upwards slightly, revealing the waistband of his black sweats, which graciously settles below the bulge of his covered cock.

“Now...” Moving behind my desk, I make a show of pausing as I sit down on my office chair. My phone rests on the bottom side of my briefcase, angling the camera so that Alek can see my leisurely recline. My thighs spread wide in invitation.

“Show me the rest of your pretty lingerie, baby,” I demand. Alek makes it easy for me to demand such things when he is so wanton and willing. The simple fact makes my head dizzy in the same magnitude that my cock grows heavy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ALEK

Torn.

A ching. It's the word that comes to mind but I'm not sure that it describes exactly how I'm feeling right now. Desperate might be more accurate.

For someone so new to this, Ezekiel is a fast learner. Smartypants has been fucking edging me this whole phone call. Not only did he pick up the call wearing the hottest professor wet dream outfit ever, but he also had to start talking about some of the sexiest shit I've ever heard.

'dominant seemed to further awaken something in me'

He wants to dominate me and fuck I am more than game. If that wasn't already obvious from the way my lingerie stretches against my crotch.

My hands fly to the front of my pants, quickly undoing the loose tie of my sweats after he asked me to show him the rest of my lingerie. Without much struggle, I manage to loosen the waistband and slide the sweats down my legs.

"Show me." Ezekiel's deep and gravelly voice has me looking back at the screen just in time to see him open up the buttons of his collared shirt. Damn.

Obedying, I lean back against my pillows and angle my phone to where I can still see

him, but he's getting a full frontal of my abs and silver—clad cock.

"It's truly disarming how perfect your body is, Alek."

I groan, my hand instinctively trailing across my hip and palming at my dick.

"Alek." Ez chastises me.

"What? You expect me to keep my hands to myself when you're telling me about the characters in your book fucking each other?" I reply, my hand still applying delicious pressure to my straining cock.

"I expect you to keep your hands still until I tell you what to do. And I certainly did not say you could start touching yourself."

I whine in response but move my hand to settle back down on my hip. Instead, I anxiously toy with the straps of my lingerie.

"While I appreciate all the patience you have shown me thus far, I do expect you to apply some of that patience to yourself, baby," Ezekiel comments as he carefully rolls up the sleeves of his blue dress shirt.

"What should I do, then?" I ask, surprising myself with the lack of fight or sarcasm in my response. I might be eager as hell to relieve some of the tension in my cock, but surprisingly, I feel like I'm more eager to please him. Which involves following his directions.

When a few quiet seconds go by, I tilt my phone up to look at an expectant expression in Ezekiel's face as he meets my eyes.

What does he want? Oh...

“What should I do, then, Sir ?” I’m quick to add, unable to stop a sneaky smirk from forming on my lips.

“A little smirk does not make up for that insolence of yours, wicked boy.” Ezekiel unbuttons his shirt slowly, purposely taking his time, I’m sure, to make me squirm.

“I’m being perfectly patient while you’re taking your sweet ass time.”

A tilt at the corner of his lips is all Ez gives as a reply. And a groan is all he gets from me.

“Will you tell me if something becomes uncomfortable?” he asks, unbuckling his belt in what I hope is the last accessory in his strip tease.

“Yes, Sir.” I nod and lick at my suddenly dry lips. Any thoughts, anxiety, or concerns I had previously today wash away as I give in and fully let Ezekiel take over.

“Good.” A satisfying sound comes through the phone as Ez whips his belt off.

“How does it feel to wear lingerie?” His eyes narrow with pure curiosity as he efficiently unbuttons his pants.

“Sexy, kind of naughty, but—” I toy with the straps cutting across my hips. “It feels good, showing off a bit.”

“I would argue you’re showing off more than a bit.” I see Ezekiel’s hand travel down his pants, palming on his cock like I was doing to myself just a few seconds ago.

“Angle the phone on a pillow and turn around, Alek. I’d like to see more of your beautiful outfit.”

Holy shit. My shy little angel's asking me to show my ass off to him. "Fuck, okay. Give me a second."

As gracefully as I can, I quickly make a stack of pillows and balance my phone before turning around to face my headboard while I settle on my knees. Turning around to see how much Ez can see of me, I immediately feel a heat fill my face.

I'm aware I literally dance for people like this and they might very well get a similar angle from the stage, but no one has ever looked at me the way Ezekiel stares at me through the screen right now. Lust incarnate with a touch of devotion is what I see. He's disheveled and looking like he's fucking starving for me.

"Would it be too rude of me to demand you only wear these when we see each other?" Ezekiel asks, his serious tone earning a laugh from me.

I look over my shoulder and barely see myself peeking at him in the corner of the screen. "What? You don't want to see the rest of my collection? Just these ones?"

The moan that escapes his lips causes my eager dick to twitch in the flimsy silver material. By the look of deep concentration on his face, it seems like the camera caught the twitch.

"I need to see you, baby." Desperation lines Ezekiel's words this time.

Taking some pity on him, I move the lingerie to the side, exposing everything to the man who controls my every action tonight.

There's a nervous fluttering in my stomach and I can't tell if it's from arousal or if I'm feeling a little shaken. None of my previous partners have made me feel so cherished or so deeply cared for as Ezekiel has. I want my body to be pleasing to him.

“Alek...” It’s a near whisper, barely audible. The reverence with which he’s spoken my name has my muscles spasming on screen.

“ Christ, Alek. You are divine. The annular slopes of your ass, and the way your cock hangs heavy, and thick, and perfect between your powerful thighs. I have never set my eyes on a sculpture that could compare to your form.”

His words are setting me on fire. Every bit of praise from him adds to the deep pit of want in my body. I’m desperate to seek any kind of friction, my hips driving forward into nothing.

“Ez, please .” I’m begging, my face half hidden in my shoulder, trying my best to keep an eye on him.

“Lay your chest down, keep your ass up, and grasp that pretty cock for me, baby.” he instructs.

The cool feeling of my sheets does nothing to tame the heat coming off my skin as I follow Ezekiel’s orders. I slide my hand underneath me to stroke my cock for all it’s worth when I hear Ez again.

“Aleksander, you are doing so beautifully. Fuck your hand and let me hear all those lovely noises you make for me.”

Unable to see him, I listen to his voice and any sounds coming from my phone. He sounds rattled, his breathing heavier as he mutters incoherent words. Fuck he’s fucking his hand to this. To me.

It’s all the encouragement I need to really jerk myself. My hand squeezes near the top of my cock, pulling my skin back to expose the engorged head that leaks onto the bed sheets.

I imagine those pouty lips wrapped around my shaft in place of my own hand, fucking into his warm mouth while those blue eyes look up at me through crooked glasses.

“I am overcome by the singular image of you, Aleksander,” Ezekiel pants, the background noise of slapping skin louder and more evident.

Groaning wildly, I pick up my pace, tugging downwards so that he gets a clear view of what he’s doing to me.

“I need to see where you want me, baby. Show me your greedy little hole.”

Oh fuck. The second I hear those words, I’m on the edge of coming. With my free hand, I make quick work of the lingerie to expose myself to Ezekiel.

“Fuck, baby. I need to sink myself into you. Would you let me inside you, Aleksander?”

There are tears stinging my eyes from the pressure building and from the pure need I hear in his question.

“Y—Yes, Sir, it’s all yours. Please .”

“Please what, baby?”

“I want to— need to— see you Ez, please. ”

A harsh breath sounds behind me before I hear Ezekiel reply. “Turn around, but stay on your knees.”

I swear I’ve never fucking moved so fast in my life. I nearly lose it when I see

Ezekiel's reclined form on his office chair. His dark hair is disheveled as if he's been tugging on it. His blue oxford shirt is wrinkled and as I follow the trail of his exposed abdomen, I see his hand in a vice grip around his leaking cock. His movements never stop as I settle into my new position, my own cock now taking up a large amount of the screen.

"Your gorgeous cock has haunted any free thought I've had all day, baby. I need to see you peak again. I need to hear my name on your lips while you do."

Stars dance in my eyes as I'm fucking finally given permission to come. I struggle a bit to keep my eyes open but there's no fucking way I'm missing a second of Ez stroking his huge cock for me.

My hips drive my dick into my hand, my precum helping the delicious glide as I keep pumping. Ezekiel is groaning, tugging his cock upwards and licking at his lips as he watches me fall apart.

"Ez, fuck, Ez, I'm gonna come." My body begins to shake with the intensity and my balls draw up as I empty onto my bedsheets. My orgasm seems to trigger his as I see white bursts of his cum land on the exposed part of his chest and abs.

"Alek..." Ezekiel murmurs, sated and smiling on camera. "That was incredible. You're incredible."

"I could say the same thing about you, angel." I can see the easy smile on my face in my camera, my eyes twinkle looking at him.

"We uh, do have a problem though," I sigh. Ez can only see me staring down at my bed.

"What happened? Is something the matter?" Ezekiel asks, a furrow of his brow

showing worry on his face.

“You owe me some new lingerie.” Holding up the ripped—up silver thong, I laugh and throw the garment into the trash. Ezekiel shakes his head at me, the grin on his face giving away his enjoyment at my joke.

“I will purchase any lingerie you would like if you promise every one of them will meet the same demise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

ALEK

Sugar grandpa?

I lug the fancy cheese and wine—filled cooler into the backseat along with some blankets and pillows for our picnic date. It's been a busy ass week, but I can't complain when I've gotten a handful of calls and a ton of texts from Ezekiel. I don't care if it makes me whipped to say it, but even a simple good morning message from him makes my day.

We've talked about anything and everything this week. Our favorite colors, foods, movies, and the rest of the cliché things you talk about when getting to know someone. Ez's burnt sienna to my hunter green, Ez's mom's beef bourguignon to my mom's pozole recipe, and Ez's secret love of 2000s rom—coms to my heist flicks.

While our calls have stayed fairly PG due to Ezekiel getting ready for midterms and my extra rehearsals, the highlight of my day has still been talking to him.

Well, they've been PG except Wednesday night. You can't blame a guy for starting to stroke his cock to his boyfriend's voice when Ezekiel naturally sounds like pure sin, even when he was complaining about grocery store parking lots and the lack of people following the zipper rule when exiting. Getting off to a man's rant about traffic? Not my proudest wank.

But, It's been a full week since that video call.

I'm adjusting myself in my shorts sitting in my car just at the memory of it. As much as it brings the obvious shot of arousal, there's also another emotion that I can't fully wrap my head around. Something changed within me that night. I gave something to Ez that I don't know I'll be able to take back.

Typing in the address Ez gave me, I start making my way out to the university's library for our lunch date. I only had a vague idea of how to get there from dropping T off a few times. But I was not super sure, so I figured it was better to type it in. My angel had organized a Saturday morning study session for his students with their exams coming up.

I let the sound of my thoughts and my GPS lead me there while I continue my reflection.

I've had sex, a pretty decent amount of it with a pretty decent amount of people, but that's all it was. Just a quick hookup, sex with a client, or a fun time with someone I was casually seeing.

None of it has made me feel like what I felt with Ezekiel.

It was like every damn cell in my body was screaming to get direction and praise from him. And when I got it— fuck , when I got it— I knew I wouldn't experience that with anyone else.

This seemingly shy, exceptionally honest, unintentionally hilarious, and bossy man had become the one thing I would pray for, and the only one I would pray to, all at once.

And here I was about to potentially ruin it all.

The quicker I tell Ez my past involvement with Knight, the quicker I can navigate

whatever happens after the revelation. I'd like to think I'm prepared for any outcome but I'd be lying if I said I knew what I'd do if Ezekiel called us off because of it.

The steering wheel groans under my tightening grip when I turn the corner to pull into the university. After following a few signs, I park in front of the library and let Ez know I've arrived.

Within a few minutes, my angel walks out of the library's huge double doors followed by a couple of students who smile and wave goodbye before they go off on their way.

Ezekiel spots me immediately and starts a cute half—jog, half—speed walk over to my car. I reach over the center console and pop the door open for him, but I stay leaned over the seat with my head peeking out the car.

“Aleksander, I'm delighted to see you.”

I don't even get a word in because within a second, Ezekiel's large hands are on the sides of my face, pulling me into a tender kiss that grows so heated quickly and I'm nearly yanked out of the open car.

I laugh against his lips while trying to balance myself on the passenger seat. It would be a lie to say I wasn't as eager as him, if not more, at this moment. The fact that he was so excited to see me sends flutters racing through my stomach.

“Ez,” I mumble against him. “Ez, you're gonna make me fall.”

My angel separates from me enough so he can angle his head down and stare into my eyes. His deep blue meet my brown irises like waves crashing on the darkened shore at dusk.

“I’ll catch you.” The certainty in his voice makes my throat constrict for a second and now, more than ever, I am hoping he means it.

Pressing my lips against him softly, I chase away the anxious feelings rising in my chest. I motion for him to hand me his messenger bag so I can plop it in the back with the picnic supplies.

“C’mon in, angel.” I grin at him, patting the passenger seat in invitation.

Ezekiel settles himself into the passenger seat. While clicking on his seat belt, he notices the blankets and picnic basket sitting in the back.

“Are you courting me with a picnic in the country and perhaps a pleasant promenade afterward?” Ez kids around but I see the truth behind his question. He looks surprised and excited, given the grin on his lips. Unfortunately, the picnic isn’t going to be the biggest surprise he’s getting today.

Swallowing down my nerves, I start the car and chuckle lightly.

“Yeah, sorry dude. I wasn’t able to find a chaperone, so it looks like you’re gonna be compromised.”

“Ah—ah. See,” Ezekiel chastises and waves a finger at me. “That’s precisely the time when you propose to save my reputation.”

I shake my head through full—belly laughter, joining his own as I get us out of the parking lot. As ridiculous as his statement is, I don’t find myself freaking out over the thought of committing myself to Ez like that.

I feel the heat of his stare before I actually see it from the corner of my eye.

“Also, I would say we have gone far beyond what would be deemed as a compromising situation.”

Oh, fuck him and his sexy words.

I do not need to be thinking about those compromising situations right now.

“Keep talking like that angel and you’re gonna compromise our safety.”

An honest to God fucking snort comes out of him.

“That didn’t prevent you from taking me in your throat last time we were in a car together.”

Oh damn, he’s right. The bastard’s got to be getting me back for that. It was after our first date and I was eager. He can’t blame me for it when he was just as thirsty that night.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I smirk and bite down on my lip in anticipation of poking his buttons right back.

“Yeah, well you’re supposed to be the more mature one in the relationship, angel. Y’know— being a lot older and wiser and all that?” I peek at him for a second.

“Aleksander, I am eight years older than you.” Ezekiel crosses his arms and rolls his damn eyes at me. He’s clearly a little annoyed.

Holy shit, why do I find that so hot?

In this moment, I make a promise to myself; I’m going to fuck that sass right out of him someday.

“Yeah, whatever you say, gramps.” I let out a laugh and my lungs struggle to find some relief from my chuckling.

Steadying my breath, I glance down at the center console between us and lay my hand on it, palm up. It’s more the need to feel him that drives me to do it, rather than it being a gesture of apology. But he doesn’t need to know that.

Ezekiel uncrosses his arms and lays his left hand on top of mine, his fingers finding purchase against my own as he interlocks them together.

“Shameless boy.” His tone is gruff, the total opposite of the sweet kiss he places on our intertwined fingers as I continue our drive to Picnic Hill.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ALEK

Confessions.

It doesn't take us long to get to the outskirts of the city. Big structures become smaller and more spaced out, until they just about disappear on the way to our picnic spot: a nice grassy field with some large trees for coverage.

Ez and I chat lazily about upcoming events we have this week and things we are looking forward to. Even with the building anxiety of telling him about my past, it was so easy to mention the Sunday dinner with my siblings that I was hosting tomorrow. It was even easier to invite Ezekiel to it because something deep in my heart has faith this confession of mine will be accepted and understood by him.

"We're here, angel."

Leaning over to place a peck on his cheek, I take the opportunity to run my hand up his thigh as I park the car.

"Aleksander—" he warns and I smirk in response.

"I'm just gettin' your seatbelt, Ez." My lips brush against his face much softer than my fingers dig into his thigh, but in the end, I really do unbuckle him. Not being the best time for teasing, I figured this conversation would go better if we both didn't have raging hard—ons.

“C’mon, there’s a gorgeous spot I want to show you.”

I’m pulling everything out of the backseat, looping the picnic basket and small cooler on my forearm and tossing the blanket and pillow over my shoulders when Ez calls out.

“Would you like some assistance?” Ezekiel asks beside me, peeking into the backseat to see if there’s anything else left to grab.

“Nah, I got it, Ez.”

“It seems like a lot to carry and I am perfectly capable of helping, Alek.”

Stepping back, I let the car door swing shut between us as I stare Ezekiel down.

“Actually,” I begin, taking a few small steps towards him. “Hmm... this is feeling a little light, like I might be missing something.”

Ezekiel spots my grin and realizes what I’m doing too late to stop me. I lunge at him.

“Alek, don’t you dare!”

His complaint is cut off quickly when I wrap my free arm underneath his ass and toss him over my shoulder on top of the pile of blankets.

“Ah, there we go,” I say triumphantly, adjusting him so that he’s comfortable on my shoulder.

Ezekiel squirms for a few seconds until he relaxes and laughs against the fabric of the pillows. I take it as my cue to walk us up the hill and towards the shady little spot I love.

“You are a brute,” he sighs.

“Yeah, and you love it.”

I close the distance with a couple more strides. I’m definitely not missing how Ezekiel’s hands press against the top of my ass.

“Alek, baby.” Astonishment coats his voice.

Setting down the basket, and cooler first, I keep an arm firmly wrapped around Ezekiel as I carefully slide him down my body to get his feet to the ground.

“This place,” My angel stays in my hold but his eyes take in the secluded beauty of the hills around us. “It’s heavenly.”

I agree, this meadow is nice, but what’s really heavenly is the man before me. Ez is describing the hills while my mind only sees him in the description.

“Yeah, it really is.” My smile is soft while my heart is heavy.

I need to tell him. I can’t take it any longer.

“We should set up food before my stomach eats itself.” I break up the moment, too afraid to let anything so sweet and good continue when it’s possible I won’t experience it again.

“I am still amazed by the amount of food you can eat.” Ezekiel jokes, taking my hand in his and leading us to the picnic supplies so we can set up together.

I take a moment to explain the food once everything’s set up. Simple stuff, really. A variety of cheese, meats, some nuts, pickled veggies, breads and fruits I prepared

earlier today.

“It looks excellent Alek, thank you.”

We dig in, pouring ourselves some crisp white wine once we’ve filled our plates.

A comfortable silence settles over us while we snack on the charcuterie and sip the refreshing wine.

It’s now or never.

“Ezekiel.” I begin and scold myself slightly for using his full name. He picks up on it and immediately pinches his brows together in doubt. The fact that this man can read me so well already validates my need to tell him now before my secrets can fester between us.

“I’ve got to tell you something, and I want to lead with... I understand if it’s something that you can’t accept.” I clear my throat as I set my plate down to give him my full attention.

“Alek, please continue.” He mirrors me and sets his food down onto the blanket as well. The look of concern on his face is eating away at me.

“You know I came here with nothing to my name other than a beat up car. Well, I wasn’t making ends meet with the odd jobs I had at first.” I begin, recapping what I’ve already told him during our first date.

“Income wasn’t steady for me until I picked up being an escort. I’d go on dates or spend nights with people who hired me. The money was good, the job wasn’t bad, and at that time in my life, I was happy doing it,” I confess, knowing that the hard part hasn’t even come up yet. With partners in the past, this was about the time they

started questioning their standing with me or they'd flat out end things here.

But Ezekiel is listening. I can see he's processing and he's not showing any judgment as I lay it all out.

"My last client was Knight. He was getting out of a nasty divorce with his second wife, and as you know, that was a dark time for him. I can't speak a ton to his motivations but he decided to hire me as his escort. I think I was an experiment for him after his divorce and he was using me to try to feel something." I can't prevent my voice from sounding sad at the statement. It was a rough time for Knight and that man really did worm his way into my heart.

"Did you, or do you still have feelings for him?" Ezekiel asks, his eyes wide in what I think is worry.

"No. Not like that. He was a client and I was providing a service and that's all it was until we actually hit it off as friends."

My angel nods slowly, his lips pursing together as he's stuck in thought. So I continue.

"Like I said, it turned out he was just using me to get over a divorce. It was like that with a few of my clients, using me as a rebound for something that didn't work out. It's what I was good for."

Ezekiel's breathing picks up as a pained expression crosses his face.

"Don't feel sorry for me, angel." I move closer to him on the blanket, my hand reaching out to console him. "It was a job and I dealt with the emotions that came with it. It's in the past."

“You are not anyone’s rebound, Aleksander.” He says it with a determined tone, squeezing my hand back with equal force.

Ezekiel searches my face, his breath is still heavy, but now closer so that it brushes against my lips.

“You are everything and more. I am sorry that anyone has ever made you feel less than.”

It’s my eyes that round in surprise now, but I still can’t comfortably meet his stare.

“This isn’t a deal breaker for you?” I ask, confusion in my tone as I fidget with a fray in the blanket.

“Aleksander, your past is your past. It would be hypocritical of me to judge your history when we all have one of our own.” Ez raises his hand to cup my jaw and tilts my head so my eyes meet his. “I only hope that you know this is different.”

His last statement takes me by surprise. Of course this is different. I know that. Ezekiel has been nothing but open and understanding with me. I’ve never felt used by him.

“I know, angel. I trust you.” I relax into his hand, laying my cheek into his touch.

I notice the visible shake in his chest as Ezekiel lets out a ragged breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

EZEKIEL

Isn't all just grapes?

The documents in my briefcase feel heavier than they did this morning, before Alek had picked me up and taken me to a scenic and revealing lunch.

Deep down I know I will never be able to erase Alek's pained and defeated look from my memory as he disclosed his past. The momentary wide-eyed panic with which I responded certainly didn't help the situation.

The truth of the matter is that I was scared at that moment as well. Not so much from the fact that Alek was involved with Knight, but more due to the way he had described his past. There wasn't an air of shame, nor should there be, when he was sharing his truth. But it was the sense of sadness that came with it that alarmed me.

Sadness from how people have reacted to his past. Sadness from how he immediately thought we were through because of it.

Most of all, it was the sadness that came from his statement saying all he was good for was being a rebound.

The man I've been waiting for all of my life perceives himself to be less than and it torments me to think I could be a contributor to those emotions.

Our picnic date continued. The previous levity had been broken but a deeper, more meaningful, atmosphere surrounded us. Alek felt safe to share more of his past as he laid his head on my lap. The clouds above us were lazily forming into new shapes in the bright sky as I stroked the wavy hair at his temple.

Preferring to listen and still trying to process not only Alek's past, but my own as well, I let him lead the conversation until it was time for us to gather our things and separate for the day.

I hope he didn't notice the slight tremble in my hand as he held it during our ride to the university's library or the desperate way I had clung to him while saying our goodbyes.

My lone drive home from campus after Alek had dropped me off felt ages longer than usual.

Closing my front door, I set my belongings down in the foyer. For now, I could pretend to forget what lies in my briefcase. It's a matter of time either way, and I shouldn't spend the weekend agonizing over it. The thought on the forefront of my mind instead should be how I am meeting my Alek's family for the first time at dinner tomorrow.

"Cousin! I hear congratulations are in order, or rather, should we start with you thanking me for making this most fitting match?" Knight's smirk can be heard through the phone.

Huffing into my phone, I prop it against my ear as I sort between various wine bottles that mean gibberish to me at a local shop.

After my picnic with Alek yesterday, I needed some more time for reflection before I called my cousin. Deciding to call him while shopping for a gift to bring to Alek's

Sunday dinner, I figured that the snobbish man could also come in handy in helping me pick out a wine.

“Yes, I am entirely sure that was your only intention when sending me to do your bidding at the gala. Whatever it was you had to do while I checked on the allergen list in the kitchen was so much more important.”

Knight clears his throat and I hear the distinct sound of papers shuffling in the background.

“Yes, well, I did have an entire event to set up,” my cousin replies, almost skittishly.

“I was calling to let you know Alek told me about his past, and specifically, your involvement. What do you think of a Syrah?” The bottle in my hand has a unique label to it. I run my thumb over the embossing of the letters as I wait for Knight’s reply.

“And how do you feel about that involvement? A bottle of Syrah and a bottle of White Cuvée should give you a nice variety.”

“Thank you, Knight. To answer your question, I feel happy that he told me, and saddened by the stress he felt in revealing it to me.”

“I would assume the past is not an easy thing for most to reveal, Ezekiel. I am sure you can empathize.”

His words cut deeper than I thought they would.

“I know,” I reply, setting the bottles gently into my cart before making my way over to the cash register.

A soft sigh echoes in my ear. If Knight weren't like a brother to me, I would assume it was a sigh of pity, but I know better. My cousin cares as deeply for me as I do for him. We were all we had at one point in our lives. A sense of childhood nostalgia washes over me just speaking to him, and I make a note to give my aunt a call soon as well.

"Please let me know when you're having dinner with Harriett next, I would love to join you two."

"I'm sure she would be delighted to see you, I hear her chemical mask redness has finally gone down and she no longer looks as if she's wearing a Freddy Krueger mask," Knight jokes, laughing softly.

I join in his laugh, trying to set the bottles onto the cash register at the same time. The cashier begins scanning my items and it's my cue to say my goodbyes.

"Knight, I'd like you to know that this changes nothing between us. What Alek revealed to me about his past and in tangent, yours, has no bearing on how I see you."

"I know, cousin. That was never a worry of mine. I'll be seeing you soon."

"Goodbye, Kni."

"Goodbye, E."

With that, I tuck my phone into my coat pocket and retrieve my wallet to pay for the wine. After a quick thank you to the cashier, I make my way out of the small shop and into my car.

Setting the bottles securely in the backseat, I turn around and buckle myself in. A slow breath leaves my lips before I type in Alek's address into the navigation. There

is no guarantee that this dinner will go amazingly but just the fact that I am seeing Alek once again, and that he wants me to meet his family has me smiling the entire ride to his duplex.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ALEK

Stop feeling—up my boyfriend.

“I think that’s enough garlic, dude.”

A large hand wraps around mine, which was previously mincing a whole head of raw garlic. I may have been spacing out a little and chopped up more than the recipe called for.

“One, get your fucking paw off my knife.” I slap Thomas’ hand, probably rougher than necessary. “Two,” I continue as I set my knife down and turn to face him, “you can never have enough garlic.”

“Jesus, Alek. I didn’t realize you had a vampire infestation.” The larger man crosses his arms and raises an eyebrow at me in question.

“You’re nervous, aren’t you?” I can tell by his tone that it’s a rhetorical question but I go ahead and answer anyway.

“I just want tonight to go well and I don’t want y’all chewing his head off.” My eyebrow raises right back at him in our brotherly standoff.

My siblings and I are all overprotective of each other. Growing up the way we did, we only had each other to look out for one another. I had been the one to advocate

and look out for them when they were kids. Once they had aged up, T and Viv have proven themselves to be just as protective, even with me being over seven years their senior.

“We’ll be nice!” Viv calls out from the dining area as she and Rhett set up the table together. Rhett, previously the neighbor kid of ours back in Utah, is like a sibling to us too. There’s a whole story behind that for another day, though.

“Uh—huh, like how you guys were nice to Stephanie?” I ask, tilting my head behind where T now leans against the center island of my kitchen. “Gimme the butter and make yourself useful if you’re gonna be in here.”

“She was a dick, Alek!” Viv yells from the dining room and I hear Rhett chuckle in agreement.

“Viv’s right, man.” T walks up with the bowl of softened butter in his hands and holds it steady as I pour in the minced garlic and parsley.

“Stir that up while I clean this board.” Orders given, I turn to the sink and begin washing off the white and green remnants on the wooden surface.

Deep down, I know my siblings aren’t wrong. Stephanie was my last quasi—relationship nearly a year ago and it did not go down well. She not only turned out to be jealous, but she even tried hooking up with some of the other dancers while we were supposedly exclusive. That scenario is one of the reasons I hesitate dating someone who knows me from my dancing.

Viv strides in from the dining area as I’m drying the cutting board with a dishtowel.

“Does Ezekiel look down on you about your job?” Viv asks, no filter on that one.

“God, no. He doesn’t.”

“Then I like him already.” Tearing off a piece of the baguette, Viv joins T in dipping pieces of their stolen bread into the garlic butter mixture.

“Y’all can’t wait ten minutes to toast it? You fucking animals.”

“Bread is bread,” Viv mumbles in between bites of stolen baguette.

At that moment, the doorbell rings and when I turn in the direction of the door, I see my siblings turn to each other and share a devious look.

“Rhett, could you grab that please?” I ask, hip—checking my siblings out of the way so I can toast up this damn garlic bread.

“I’ll grab it!” Viv and Thomas rush out of the kitchen and nearly start a fist fight trying to get to the entryway.

When I pop in the garlic bread, the exhausted sigh I let out mixes in with the heat of the oven.

“Oh holy shit, you have to let me make you an outfit!”

Stepping out of the kitchen, and down the short hallway to the living room, I hear Viv practically bouncing with excitement. Viv is standing right in front of Ez, her hands skimming the lapels of Ezekiel’s coat as she observes the stitching.

Ezekiel gives me a confused look, like he doesn’t really know what to do at the moment, but it’s more of a fascinated look than uncomfortable.

“Stop feeling up my boyfriend, Viv.”

With a shy smile, Ezekiel hands Viv his coat so she can inspect it closer.

“She said it was nice to finally have someone in the family with any kind of fashion sense.” Rhett laughs, making his way around Viv and Ez to close the front door.

“Madame Zh?n made this for you?” Viv’s eyes go wide and I have no fucking clue what she’s talking about, but there seems to be recognition in her stare.

“Yes, she is our family tailor. You know her?” Ezekiel asks, with shock of his own.

“She’s in school for fashion design.” I clarify, taking Viv’s stunned moment to finally make it over to Ezekiel and wrap him up in a hug while I kiss his stubbled cheek.

“Hey, angel,” I whisper against his skin, relishing in the way he hugs me back.

“You got something hard in that bag or are you just happy to see me?” I ask quietly, a smirk plastered on my face as I back away and meet his gaze.

“Can’t both be true?” He says it only loud enough so that we both hear it while my family is in the background putting away Ez’s coat and chatting amongst themselves.

“But if you must know, Knight suggested some wine to bring that will go with dinner.”

A choking noise that turns into a cough has us turning in the direction of the coat closet where Viv stands, patting her chest.

“Sorry— just love this coat so much.” She smiles reassuringly at us before running off to the kitchen. Probably to steal some more bread.

“She’s a weirdo but here, meet my other weirdos.”

Placing a gentle hand at the back of Ezekiel's dress shirt, I take a moment to enjoy the feeling of having my hands on him again before I lead him to where Thomas and Rhett sit down in the living area.

"This is Thomas," I begin, nodding over to the giant that makes my loveseat look tiny.

"Hey Ezekiel." Thomas gives a kind smile and a small wave.

"And this is?—"

"Rhett, from the burger shop." Ezekiel nods in acknowledgement.

"And you're sweet potato!" Rhett chuckles, snapping his fingers and pointing over at Ezekiel.

"Dude, don't tease him." Thomas smacks Rhett in the chest with the back of his hand. Rhett rubs at his chest while trying to reach over and hit Thomas back.

"Apparently sweet potatoes are the inferior potatoes to order with a burger." Ezekiel looks over at me and sighs. "I had to hear it from Alek, too."

"They just don't have good taste like we do, Ezekiel," Thomas defends.

The timer goes off in the kitchen and Thomas and Rhett offer to go get everything set up. Ezekiel hands them the bottles of wine he brought.

Once they're out of sight, I move to stand in front of Ez, rubbing the back of my neck in a move that's part nervousness and embarrassment.

"So uh, that's my family."

“They’re lovely, Alek.” Ezekiel takes my hand away from my neck, and places a calming kiss to the knuckles.

His facial expression changes suddenly as he narrows his eyes over at the hallway closet. “Your sister isn’t going to steal my coat, is she?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EZEKIEL

New experiences.

“Dinner was outstanding, Alek.” The praise leaves my lips while my hands are occupied with loading Alek’s dishwasher. Only he and I remain in his apartment, clearing the kitchen and dining room of discarded plates and serving materials.

The meal with his family was unexpected in the most entertaining of ways. Growing up with a relatively small family, in which we were more serious than not, I was not prepared for the amount of shenanigans these four got into.

Our time together was filled with recollections of embarrassing stories about Alek, some current events, and talk of school from myself, Viv, and Thomas. Thomas entertained us with stories of residency in his medical school. Rhett and Alek argued animatedly about the best shape of pasta. And Viv delighted in sharing the details of a gothic wedding dress she recently designed.

I was fascinated with the way conversation flowed so easily between them. Though, they didn’t let me just observe. Viv was curious about my family as well and I divulged information that I assumed to be appropriate for dinner talk.

At the end of our meal, Viv excused herself, saying she had to get back to a project she was working on. Thomas had to get back to his studies after dropping off Rhett for a late night shift at the burger shop.

“You can’t go wrong with Italian food.”

Jumping slightly from the sudden proximity of his voice, I peer over my shoulder in time to see Alek wrapping his arms around my waist and pressing himself directly into my back.

I bask in the moment. My eyes close while the back of my head gently rests on the upper swell of Alek’s chest. From this angle, I’m able to place a tender kiss on the sleeve of his shirt.

“Thank you for inviting me,” I whisper.

“Thank you for putting up with us.” He kisses my temple in reply and begins holding me even closer to him. “Spend the night, Ez.”

Alek’s kisses are growing less sweet and more heated as he inches further down my face to my neck and behind my ear. His statement is not a question and I don’t find myself considering any other option but to stay in this man’s arms for the rest of the night.

Reaching a hand toward his face, I cup Alek’s jaw and turn his face so our lips meet in a breathy kiss. My fingers intertwine in his hair, pulling him closer to deepen our kiss which grows more desperate by the second.

“Take me to bed, Aleksander,” I plead.

“Hang on, Ez.” Those three words spoken much too quickly for me to properly comprehend are my only warning before Alek heaves me up with one arm while the other adjusts my legs to wrap around his waist.

“Should I be concerned about your enjoyment of lifting me?” I tease, shaking my

head at him as he leads us away from the kitchen, down the hallway, and into his bedroom.

“Oh yeah, angel. I feel your concern poking into my stomach right now.” Alek punctuates his sentence by grinding himself into me.

My moan cuts off any retort I may have had in store. Once in the bedroom, Alek is quick to turn on the light, and even quicker to fling me onto his bed.

“Alek!” I bounce and can’t help but laugh at the playfulness of this man.

Propping myself up on my elbows, I peer past the end of the bed to see Alek rid himself of his long sleeve, pulling it off and over his head in a fluid motion. He catches me staring and a devious little smirk grows over his features.

“Enjoying the show, angel?” he asks, hands paused on the top of his dark wash jeans.

“Yes, thoroughly,” I reply, aware that my voice is coated in arousal.

In return, Alek slows his movements, roaming a large tanned hand down his chest and abdomen, caressing all of the places where my hand should be trailing. My burlesque dancer certainly knows how to put on a show, albeit a more private one than what he’s used to.

Taking mercy, Alek finally unbuttons his jeans, dragging the zipper and lowering the waistband to the bottom of his Adonis belt at the same time. The fabric settles, revealing a thin trail of light brown hair that taunts my vision. Instead of stripping himself bare, Alek chooses to discard his jeans onto the floor. With determination on his features, he begins a slow descent onto the bed, and up my body.

“Seems kinda unfair that you're still in all your clothes, angel.” Alek mouths against

the exposed sliver of skin at my neck.

“Take them off, cut them, burn them for all I care.” I am fully aware that I am whining and clawing at Alek’s body in impatience, but it’s been over a week since our last encounter. A profound craving for more of Alek has underlined my entire week.

“Nah, keep the clothes on.”

As much as I crave the feeling of Alek’s heated skin on mine, the look in his eyes as he lifts off me will have me agreeing to anything he will suggest. Pure hunger radiates from his features and it torches my body in turn.

“Fuck. I’ve been thinking about your cock all week, angel.”

Alek kneels at the edge of the bed with his head resting between my spread legs, his upper torso flat on the sheets, and his perfect ass in the air. Though I lament that it is still covered in his dark blue boxer briefs, I’m immediately taken back to our video call not that long ago, where he exposed every inch of his perfect body to me. There’s no curbing the deep groan that escapes my lips, nor the indecent twitch of my cock, just inches from the very object of my desire.

“Damn, Ez. Worked up already?” Alek teases and simultaneously puts me out of my sweet misery when he unzips my pants and grasps my cock free from its confines.

“This teasing will catch up to you one day, my boy.” My voice is a near growl as I reach my hand into the wavy strands of Alek’s hair, tugging roughly.

“Promise?” The question is mumbled from how close Alek’s mouth is to my hardened cock, and I swear, I feel my soul ascend when he licks a line up the underside of it.

“I missed the taste of you.” Alek peppers open—mouthed kisses along my shaft that make me whine in an almost embarrassing way. I find it hard to be skittish about the noises this man draws from me when I am rewarded with the delicious feeling of Alek’s sinful mouth wrapped around me.

“Jesus Christ, Alek,” I curse, my eyes focusing only on where Alek keeps taking me deeper and deeper. The sight of those pouty lips stretching to their limit as Alek reaches my base and the gathering tears in his eyes while he fully envelopes me in his throat has me reeling.

“You take me so well, baby.” I caress the hollow of his cheek, down to his jawline where I gently cup his face in my hand. My other hand is still tightened in his hair, simultaneously keeping him in place and providing an anchor for myself.

Now that I control his movements, I pull at his light brown waves and slowly ease Alek’s mouth off my cock. A line of saliva drips down his chin as he catches his breath.

“Alek, look at me,” I demand, my hand guiding his chin to tilt in my direction. “You are going to play with your cock while I use your mouth, understand?”

I revel at Alek’s hungry nod in response.

“Good boy.”

Alek rushes to free his cock from his boxers as I plunge myself back into his waiting mouth. We fall into a rhythm of thrusts, groans, and grinding. I feel the searing skin of Alek’s cock against my calf as he fists himself in time with my thrusts, gifting me with another point of needed connection.

As heavenly as Alek’s eager mouth feels around me, I cannot help but desire more. I

want the luxurious feel of Alek's body molding beneath my fingers. I want to know how the man's cock feels between my own lips.

With a firm pull, I guide his lips off of me. Only the anticipation of what comes next dulls the needy ache in me. Curling my body towards Alek, I strain to reach his swollen and used lips to cover them with my own. A foreign taste coats them and it has me exhaling shakily into his mouth as I realize it's my own taste. I lick into his mouth, digging for more of our combined flavor that I already know I am utterly addicted to.

"Alek, I need to taste you," I beg into our kiss, and Alek smiles against my lips.

"Lay on your side and follow my lead, angel."

Alek's answering smirk is downright devious as he finally lowers his boxers and reveals himself to me. Bulging muscles line his body, smooth skin perfect and glistening calls to me like a beacon.

I would be distressed from him cutting my admiration of his body short if he wasn't settling himself onto the bed next to me. Curiosity courses through me when I realize he intends to lay opposite of me... and upside down.

Strong thighs fill my vision, framing his rigid and flushed cock only inches away from my face. I lick my lips in high—strung anticipation.

"Best of both worlds." Alek kisses my thigh, his breath warming the spot instantly.

"Alek," I begin as I rub soothing circles on his thigh, more to comfort myself than him. "You will have to guide me," I admit and grasp at the base of his waiting erection, unable to keep my hands off him any longer. My experience with an uncut member is even lower than my experience with cock in general.

“Grip at the top and pull the skin back slowly,” Alek instructs.

At the same time I begin to do as he says, I feel a calloused hand stroke my pelvis before it cups my balls gently. A shiver rakes through my body at the touch but my eyes stay open and observant as I move my hand and reveal more of Alek.

“That’s it, angel. Take me in your mouth,” He groans before surprising me by shoving me fully into his throat and it feels like I’m being welcomed home.

My first taste of Alek is tentative as if I’m sampling a delicacy. My lips are parted around him and I add only a bit of suction to start.

Alek’s responding whine shoots vibrations through my cock and encourages me to continue. I take him deeper, stuffing as much of his gorgeous cock as I can into my mouth, only pausing momentarily as his shaft reaches the entrance of my throat.

I’m exhilarated, my excitement motivating me to take him deeper every time I retreat and fall back onto him. Alek meets me with the same enthusiasm, our movements rocking the bed as we practically devour each other. I want to provide Alek with the same pleasure he bestows upon me. I want him as addicted and needy as I feel for him.

“Oh shit.” Alek only spares a moment to curse out his pleasure before his mouth is back on my cock like a magnet chasing its opposite.

“I could live with your cock in my mouth,” I admit, taking the liberty to tongue between the skin at the tip of Alek’s arousal while my hand works him quickly at his base. Then, I feel it. A sudden and tense tightening of Alek’s body and I know I am about to make him come. Heat trickles through my body, causing an anticipatory rigidity of my own as I thrust and chase my release within the plush walls of Alek’s mouth.

“F—fuck.” A near incomprehensible mumble leaves Alek’s lips through the slight gap of his mouth wrapped around my pulsing cock.

My needy whine pierces the fervid air between our bodies. With abandon, I bury myself deep into Alek’s throat, the tight channel spasming around me as I empty deep into him.

Through some miracle, I am able to keep my wits about me as I mark Alek’s wicked throat with my cum. My hand grips Alek tightly while I take in the majority of his pulsing shaft. A hot and sharp taste fills my mouth, and I attempt to swallow it all down, but a small trickle escapes my lips as we both come down from our peaks.

Alek is the first to move, releasing an exhausted sigh while he maneuvers himself upright, playfully kicking me in the process.

“You are ridiculous,” I laugh, pushing him back, though I want nothing more than to bask in his proximity.

“Says the guy with the fucking bat between his legs. Y’know how hard I had to work at that?” Alek settles himself beside me, his head resting on his arm as he turns toward me.

“Oh yes, I’m sure the noises I heard were purely out of complaint.” Rolling my eyes at him, I turn and mirror his position.

Alek’s eyes darken as he skims over my lips. A large hand reaches up between us and his thumb settles on my chin. I’m unable to look away as he closes the space between us and seals his mouth over mine, paying particular attention to the corners of my lips. Suddenly, I remember the bit of Alek’s cum I was unable to take in and I realize what he’s doing.

Alek is licking his cum from my face and driving it back into my mouth through our lazy kiss.

I cannot think of this experience as anything less than a benediction. Any reservations I may have still had regarding my sexuality have been absolved. Alek is all that remains.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

EZEKIEL

Those pants should be illegal.

The coffee machine in the staff lounge has always poured much too slowly for my liking. My fingers tap an unsteady beat against the counter as I wait. My head is hung low as I face the languid appliance, trying to not fall asleep.

A week has never dragged so slowly.

After dinner at Alek's house last weekend, I stepped into the hell that was midterm week at the school. Well, it may not have been hell, really, but until I've had my coffee, I reserve the right to be as dramatic as I would like. Also, I am personally not a fan of standardized exams when people are anything but standard. Through my childhood experiences and more recent revelations, I have come to appreciate how unique we are as humans and how we do not all perceive things the same way. A certain burlesque dancer with a vivid personality might be, at least a little, responsible for my new perspective.

All in all, it's taken a lifetime to get to Friday.

Other than the proctoring of what seemed to be endless test sessions, I have also had a lot on my mind. Namely, the gnawing and all-encompassing feeling growing in my chest for the very object of my yearning.

Alek.

His name lingers on my mind as I finally raise the mug of much-needed caffeine to my lips. The mug reads ‘the past, the present, and the future walk into a bar...’ on one side while the other reads ‘it was tense’ and I roll my eyes at the gifted mug from my Anna.

Thinking of her only reminds me of the other reason this week has gone by so slowly.

I had been going for so long, just living life in the way that was expected of me and what I had believed to be proper. I’ve never been one to want for much, always comfortable in my routine, but eventually, the constant pacing tends to erode the foundation the routine is based on. When the foundation was never strong to begin with, it all implodes.

And I am unwilling to have Alek come into an unresolved implosion.

My mug could already use a refill by the time I make it back to my desk. I settle myself into my leather chair, a neat stack of seemingly unimportant papers stares back at me since I had forgotten to pack them away. I don’t suspect anyone would come in here while I was on my coffee run, with it being the last day of midterms and all. The university campus might as well be deserted.

Still, by propriety and not much other motivation, I tidy up my desk and take a deep, centering breath while I wait for students who are most likely on their way to vacation and not their professors' office hours.

Thankfully, Alek seems to have a talent for texting right when I need him.

Aleksander

you still coming to the show tonight?

Me

I wouldn't miss it for the world.

I'd hope not bc I'm wearing this

Attached image.

When Alek let me know that their opening week of October act was going to be inspired by the Rocky Horror Picture Show, I didn't expect to see this.

I am very much tempted to print, frame, and display the picture on my desk so I wouldn't forget the sight before me.

Alek is in a black sequined corset that exaggerates his already trim waist. His body is an upside—down isosceles triangle in all its glory. Straps hang at the bottom of the corset, only showing a peek of the black silk panties beneath before they are hidden underneath low—slung black leather pants.

His face is what leaves me breathless, though. Alek has very simple makeup on for this performance, but his hair is slicked back with stylish waves edged around his face. A sense of endearment rushes my heart when I see the stubborn tresses of his tawny hair still curled around the base of his neck.

I think to myself how I've never had the honor of claiming such beauty as mine. Until now. He is mine.

Me

There isn't a bouncer that could keep me away from your performance if that is how I will be seeing you.

Aleksander

Idk man, Bri is pretty tough

Was she the one that called me a virgin at the bachelorette party?

yeah that sounds about right

I'll tell her to be nice to you though

since you're bringing me flowers

Is that your way of asking for flowers?

I roll my eyes, partly in annoyance, but my smirk betrays me. I'm a tad disappointed
Alek guessed I was going to bring him flowers after the show. I had read that it was a customary gift for performers.

Aleksander

It's my way of telling you my favorite color is purple

Noted. I'll get him purple flowers.

Aleksander

you spending the night after?

not to beg but that would be an even better gift than flowers

Me

I love it when you beg, though.

But yes, I would like to spend the night. It's been a long week without you, Alek.

I know, angel. I'm all yours after the show.

“Virgin!”

The head bouncer, who is a Viking of a woman, yells out to me as I approach the beginning of the line to get into the Garden of Eden Burlesque Club. Bri, as I recall.

“Well, technically, I'm no longer a virgin since this is my second time at the show.”

I present my digital ticket to her and she quickly scans the code with a friendly smile on her face. The fallen strands of short—cropped platinum blonde hair reflect the neon lights from the signs at the entry as she hunches over to move the velvet rope.

“Oh, I'm sure Alek took care of that.” Bri laughs as she winks. “It's nice to meet you, Ezekiel.” She motions me and a few other patrons inside.

“Nice to meet you too, Bri.” I offer a smile and a polite wave as I walk into the building.

Something tugs at my chest knowing that people are aware of my and Alek's relationship. There's excitement, pride, and a slight sense of trepidation. I want to be the man that Alek deserves, my sunshine incarnate deserves nothing less.

Only a few steps into the building, I glance at the bar and see another familiar face. Alek's best friend, Emma, is busy taking orders. But as soon as she gets a moment she jogs over to greet me with a beaming smile.

"Emma, hello." I lean into the bar at the corner that's currently unoccupied by customers ordering their pre—show drinks.

"Hey, Ez!" Leaning over the polished wood, Emma plants a kiss on my cheek, and then quickly digs around the undercounter refrigerator beneath the bar.

"It's gonna be a busy one tonight. It's the first week of our Halloween—themed shows and people are freaking loving it," she explains as she hands me a bottle of pineapple cider.

"I remembered that you're not a beer guy and prefer the sweeter stuff— does this sound good to you?"

I examine the bottle curiously and I nod in reply. The fact that she remembered such a small detail about me and kindly offered this drink leaves me a little shocked.

"It's perfect, thank you so much, Emma. I'm sure it's a much more simple drink order than the last one I had to place with you."

It was just last month that I was here for a bachelorette party with Anna's group of rowdy women, but it certainly has felt like a lifetime since then.

Emma offers a soft laugh. Her eyes shine in the light as she takes a moment to look me over. "You're good for him, you know? I've known Alek for a while now and he's never been crazy about someone like he is with you. Y'all are goals."

Emma's bright smile turns into a slight frown and her eyes become misty. I don't

think it would be the time or place to pry into her business, but I will make a note of it. Emma is quickly becoming a friend and she is my partner's best friend. Of course, I want her happiness as well.

"Emma, you don't know how much it means to hear that from you."

Taking my hand off the bottle, I lay it over hers, which is resting on the bar. Flipping her hand, she presses her palm to mine and offers me a reassuring squeeze.

"And I am beyond honored to say that I feel the same for your best friend. Alek has been a revelation I didn't even know I needed and he's unveiling truths I didn't know were hidden," I confess.

"Don't start spouting poetry here, Ez." Emma rolls her lips inwards, suppressing a smile as she shakes her head at me

"Save it for Alek, and go find yourself a nice seat, honey. I've gotta get back to work." Emma says her goodbyes, but not without giving a knowing look over my shoulder.

"Ezekiel," a very familiar voice calls out behind me.

Turning with my cider in hand, the smiling mustache of my cousin fills my vision for a moment before I lift my chin to peer up at him.

"Good evening, Knight." While I haven't seen my cousin since the gala during Labor Day weekend, I can see he looks a little worse for the wear. I am immediately concerned that he is working himself too hard, just as he always is.

"I'll walk you to your seat if you don't mind. There is something I'd like to discuss with you." With that statement, Knight wraps an arm around my shoulder and leads

me to a private booth near the front of the stage.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ALEK

Sinning never looked so good.

We're not supposed to, but I peek my head past the side curtains on stage to try to catch a glance of Ezekiel. It's not that I'm nervous about the show. Hell, I haven't been nervous about performing since my first year here. But I am anxious to get a glimpse of my boyfriend and see where he's sitting tonight.

"If you can see the audience, the audience can see you, Alek," Benny chides, using a phrase I ingrained into the newbies a few weeks ago.

"Yeah, yeah." I wave him back. Benny's too much of a gossip to resist peering over my shoulder to scan the audience as well. I don't even have to tell him who I'm looking for. I'm not shy to admit that I've been gushing over Ezekiel since we've been going steady.

"Hottie Professor at ten o'clock." The large man smacks me on the back before retreating into the wings where the rest of the dancers are lined up and waiting for the show to start.

I glance over to one of the booths on my left and see Ezekiel sitting comfortably with Knight, though I notice how his hand is gripped a little tightly around his drink.

I can't hear what they're talking about but something tells me that the vibes are a

little tense between them. My anxiety spikes thinking it might be because of my past with Knight, even though Ezekiel had promised it wasn't an issue for him.

As I keep watching their conversation, I notice Knight give a sad smile before wrapping his arm around Ezekiel's shoulder in a quick goodbye. My angel takes a moment to compose himself before directing his eyes back to the nearly pitch—black stage. I made a mental note to ask Ez what that was all about.

He can't see me, especially with any glare coming off the house lights, but I swear I feel his eyes lock in on mine. Excitement shines in my angel's eyes and I can't believe I've found someone so supportive and understanding of every facet of me.

It strikes me then that I'm not worried about what exactly was said between Knight and Ezekiel, but I'm concerned about his momentary unmasking in response to the news Knight must have given him. For as stoic as Ezekiel's learned to be, he still wears his heart on his sleeve for those who know him. I feel like that includes me now.

My admiration of Ezekiel is interrupted by a captivatingly loud voice and I shove my thoughts away to fully focus on the show.

“One and all, welcome to the Garden of Eden, the original sin!”

Hearing Seb begin his welcome speech and layout of the rules, I slide my head back between the curtains with a grin spread across my face.

“You fuckers all ready?” I whisper—yell to the men lined up behind me. I can hardly see their features in the dim light but I know the routine of the show like the back of my hand, so I'm aware of where they're all standing.

“Dude this thong is stuck up my ass,” someone complains.

“That’s what it’s supposed to do, dumbass!” Benny huffs in reply.

A loud shush from Viv shuts us up. She’s probably the only person who can control a room full of rowdy performers with a single command. While she’s there to take care of any costume emergencies, she also acts like a shepherd rounding up some stubborn asses that were let loose.

With a chorus of apologies towards Viv, the guys and I saddle up for a hell of a show. Tonight, the burlesque dancers all have on Rocky Horror Picture Show—inspired outfits. Viv had a blast with these costumes. I’m quoting her when I say ‘nothing like seeing some big—ass dudes in femme clothing’ and honestly? Yeah, I can agree.

Keeping with the decadent and sensual theme, we’ve got a cirque trio made of fucking runway models, Gia, Lyot, and Gale, performing with us. And our last act is a BDSM magician named Dom. It blew my damn mind that those two things could be combined at first, but within a few minutes, Dom had me volunteering to show off his tricks during rehearsal.

An ensemble full of muscles, corsets, and lace? You can bet our shows have been all sold out this past week.

“Summoning Alek to the stage!”

Seb introduces me and I step out in all my leather pants glory to greet the audience tonight. The cheering is instantaneous and it helps fuel my energy for the show.

“Looking a little weighed down in those pants tonight, buddy,” Seb jabs at me, making the audience laugh and whistle at my outfit. The corset is all angles and shine, my pants, a reflective black leather, glisten in the lights of the stage while I stand centerstage in a casual pose.

“Nah, I’m light as a feather, baby—” Running my free hand through my hair, I nip at my bottom lip and give a cheeky wink to the man in the sound booth.

“But I can see you’re stiff as a board.” Seb’s perch isn’t far away from where Ezekiel is sitting, so I take a quick second to send over a discrete wink his way too. I catch him blushing before I turn away to continue my introduction.

“Y’all are really in for it tonight. Alongside me and the burlesque boys, we’ve got some amazing guests. The wicked and sultry cirque trio and the devil himself, Dom the magician. I swear the shit that guy does ain’t holy by any means.”

The crowd cheers. Their level of excitement increases my adrenaline and goosebumps form from the anticipation. Every show is special to me but they’re even more exciting when I know my man is here watching me.

The stage lights above me suddenly go out, leaving the stage pitch black for a moment before a crimson light shines in front of me, casting my silhouette on the illuminated back curtain. I don’t look behind me but I know the audience sees the horns that have sprouted on my head— a cute little headband mechanism set up by Benny.

With lust dripping from my voice, I say the last line of the show introduction.

“I hope you’re ready to drop down on your knees and... confess early Sunday morning, because you’re gonna need to repent after tonight!”

Smoke begins to fill the stage while the audience goes wild. The next blackout gives us all the handful of seconds we need to set up for the opening number where we’re also joined by our guest performers.

Gia, Lyot, and Gale are set over by their straps, discreet glow—in—the—dark tape

marking their positions in the dim light. Dom is positioned on the opposite side of the cirque trio with a rigged up and scandalously dressed down assistant on each arm.

Lastly, the boys and I are on the outer end of the stage closest to the audience. Benny rolls over a gold throne for me to sit on, which I immediately fall into and pose my legs over one arm of the chair while laying my back over the other arm.

The burlesque dancers all surround me in some kind of blasphemous, but also kind of hot, recreation of the Last Supper.

3...2...1...

The lights turn on, the music blasts, and we're all organized chaos on stage for the opening number.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

EZEKIEL

Muscles and cardigans.

S turned .

One would think I wouldn't be so affected by witnessing Alek on stage, as I have now seen him perform in all connotations of the word. But I can't help but join the dozens of others in the audience in a standing ovation when we reach the end of the show.

The entire performance was spectacular. There was a certain kind of hedonistic darkness present throughout the show that left me on the edge of my seat.

Most of all, it is Alek's wardrobe, or lack thereof, by the end of the show that has me practically running towards the corridor entrance leading to the dancers' dressing rooms. The sight of his form—fitting corset cinched over, what I know to be a tightly toned waist, had me shifting in my seat the entirety of the show. By the final act, Alek was stripped down to just a pair of black silk underwear that stretched taut around his assets and connected down to a pair of fishnets by a ruffled garter.

In that instance, I was thankful that Knight had gotten me to a tabled booth so that the evidence of my arousal wasn't shown to a room full of people.

I highly doubt they would have the attention to spare my way, though. Every single

second of the show was filled with striking acts that one would not dare shift their gaze from.

A bouquet of flowers in one hand and the cardigan I had stripped off in an attempt to cool down in the other, I lean against the wall of the hallway and wait for the center of tonight's attention.

Alek and Benny burst through the door leading below the stage. Alek is doubled—over in laughter as Benny slaps his back.

"I'm tellin' ya dude, I knew that frog was gonna get him!" Benny wipes his face free from the tears that spill from his chuckle. I can see Alek taking a moment to close the door behind them before he turns and zeroes in on me. There is a cheerful, full-bodied laugh still shaking his body as he happily waves my way.

This man is the definition of sunshine and confidence. I mirror the sentiment with a wave of my cardigan—covered hand.

"Benny decided to put a frog in one of the guy's lockers tonight," Alek explains, pointing a thumb over to his large friend while they make their way down the hallway toward me.

"Professor Hottie, you shoulda seen it!" Benny hollers and it causes him to burst out into a laugh once again.

"Hey, angel." Alek's smile turns softer. His eyes roam up and down my body before pausing at my lips. He doesn't hesitate to lean in and greet me with a tender brush of his lips and a quick lash of his tongue. It certainly is more than a peck, but still less than something that would get us kicked out of a public setting. After getting our fill of each other for the moment, I step back and narrow my eyes at Alek as my brain catches up to my new moniker.

“I was surprised you didn’t greet me as ‘Professor Hottie’ as well, Alek. Though,” I pause and look at Benny over Alek’s shoulder as I continue, “I assure you Hottie is not my family name.”

“But it’s fittin’ as hell though,” Benny responds with a wink. “Y’all have a nice and restful night.” With that, the man walks away while making kissy noises at us.

Without the distraction of another person, I can fully observe and appreciate what Alek is wearing. He’s sporting a black tank top and loose gray sweatpants and— my god— he’s still wearing his smokey makeup look. His eyes look phenomenal. They are pools of dark honey luring me into their depths, and the fact that I am the sole focus of their attention causes my breaths to become uneven.

“Those for me?” Alek asks, snapping me out of my momentary stupor.

“Yes. I attempted to find the bouquet with the most shades of purple.” Lifting the artfully wrapped bundle of flowers between us, I feel my smile turn shy as I present them to him.

“They’re beautiful, angel. I didn’t expect anything. I was joking around about the flowers earlier,” Alek admits. But he takes the bouquet and holds it to his chest anyway.

“You deserve beautiful things, Alek. If you wish, I will bring them to you after every show.”

A silence passes between us. Our eyes meet but the moment feels too sacred for words to trespass. The underlying current of lust that always seems to be present is second to the intimate moment of connection traded between us.

“You would, wouldn’t you?” Alek asks like something as simple as buying him

flowers is the most monumental thing in the world.

“Of course, Alek.” I cup his cheek and run my thumb over the trimmed hair there, hoping the physical touch conveys the devotion in my reply.

“Will you come home with me?” he asks, his eyes turning round and soft with his plea. As if he ever had to beg me to spend time with him.

“You wouldn’t want to stay and mingle with your friends?” I ask with a turn of my head, taking a second to glance over my shoulder to the full bar area.

“Not tonight. I just want you.” His words carry a devastating sincerity to them. One I don’t fully think I deserve. Not yet, at least.

Turning away from the wall and toward the exit to the common area, I extend my hand to his, waiting for his large hand to sink into mine so that I may lead us from here.

Alek cheekily steals a peck at my cheek before he entwines his fingers into mine and we set off for his duplex.

During the short drive to his house, Alek animatedly recalled the performance and spoke with admiration about all the performers. It was quite adorable hearing him passionately explain performance using extensive dance and performance terms. Though I hardly understood many of them, his chipper tone had me beaming a smile back at him. I made a mental note to find books on dancing and stage performances so that I could properly share in his passion.

As I was pulling my car into his driveway, Alek asked me if everything was alright between me and Knight. I assume he must have seen my cousin and me speaking before the performance began. No longer wanting secrets between us and knowing

that this secret was at least one that I could tell him now, I talked about how Knight had come to me to say that he would be delegating a lot of his business and wanted to spend more time at the burlesque club. Alek just hummed in response and said he'd ask Knight more about it later.

"C'mon in, Ez." Alek is the first to exit the car. He opens the trunk and retrieves both of our bags before I make it out of the driver's side.

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own bag, Alek," I declare, following him up the steps of his apartment. While the statement is true, I don't believe I could carry them with such ease as Alek does. The man easily outweighs me by nearly forty pounds of pure muscle.

"I don't know, old man. I noticed it took you a bit to get out of the car back there." Shifting the bags over to one hand, Alek fishes the keys from the front pocket of his sweats and unlocks the door for us. He uses his already full arm to hold the door open for me and gestures widely so that I may enter.

"I will say, even when I was young I never possessed your hyper energy. Let's put it to good use." I strip myself of my cardigan, fold it neatly in half, and place it on top of his already overflowing arm. Alek laughs at my gesture and for good measure, he flexes the already protruding muscles of his bicep.

"Thank you, brattish boy." I step into the entryway after patting his cheek with a bit more force than would be considered gentle. A heat instantly gathers in his eyes in response.

One might think that Alek offering to do so many physical things for me would be a strike to my ego, but I find myself genuinely grateful for his care of me. The feeling is not new to me, but the way I now receive it is.

The door slams closed behind me and the noise echoes as I look around his apartment. Alek sets our bags down on his couch and then moves to hang my cardigan in the hall closet. The last time I was here, his siblings were also over so I didn't get my fill of observing the space properly. And the time before, I was too busy making sure I didn't accidentally burn down his apartment in my attempt to help with breakfast.

My eyes roam over a bookshelf tucked in the corner of his entertainment system. I admire the photos of Alek and his siblings when they were younger and I notice the absence of parents.

"You're lucky I didn't carry you in here too."

I startle at his voice but relax when he wraps his brawny arms around my waist. His head rests on my shoulder and I feel his bearded cheek rest against my stubbled one.

"There are no pictures of your parents."

"I haven't seen them since they kicked me out, Ez."

I nod in solidarity. I cannot fathom what Alek had gone through. I remember my parents as kind and warm—hearted individuals in the little time I had with them. Even Aunt Harriet was tender, in her own way. Alek's parents were unsupportive and ashamed of him. Merely recalling the way Alek's voice shook as he told me about his treatment at their hands had rage simmering inside of me.

"I've got Mama up there, though." Unwrapping a hand from our embrace, Alek points to the highest shelf where I see an older photo of a beautiful woman with a shining smile. Her eyes twinkle in the same way Alek's do, their hair a matching shade.

“You look a lot like her.” I turn, meeting Alek’s eyes. That same shining smile spreads across his lips, though a tinge of sadness accompanies it.

“Thanks, angel.” He kisses my temple before turning me around in his arms. It is evident that he doesn’t want to steer the night into one of sadness and mourning and I respect his choice. When I am with him it seems as if all life’s ailments are dulled and only the radiant energy of Alek surrounds me. I hope I provide an equal haven for him.

“What do you wanna get up to tonight?” he asks. His hands stay at my waist and his fingers rub small circles below my rib cage. My hands find their place on his chest, the tips of my fingers touching the bare skin of his collarbone.

“Truthfully, I’d be asleep at this time on most nights.” My statement makes him laugh. “But I feel quite awake after your performance tonight.”

I track Alek’s glistening tongue tracing over his bottom lip. The familiar heat I felt during the show invades my body once again in response to the motion.

“You wanna hear something naughty?” Alek asks before pulling me flush against him. He bends down to whisper into my ear. Nodding in answer to his question causes the end of his chestnut hair to softly brush against my temple.

“I brought the costume home.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

ALEK

MINE

Well, my statement wasn't entirely true. Viv would have killed me if anything happened to that corset. She was going on and on about how she had to tailor it specifically to fit my 'stupid bulging muscles' and I figured it would be safest out of Ezekiel's reach tonight. So no, not all of my costume is here but the parts that Ez couldn't keep his eyes off of during the show are hidden under my gray sweats.

"Would it be desperate of me to say that I was hoping you would?" Ezekiel leans back to put a few inches of distance between us. Instead of looking up at me, he looks down, toward the tie of my sweats.

My angel uses his fingers to toy with the elastic of my pants and fuck, I'm getting hard already. These silk panties don't do much to hide it but damn it if I was going to wear my dance belt under it like I did before. If it were up to me, I'd be naked in Ezekiel's arms as soon as I finished up the show.

"You know, I have always been a collector of beautiful and precious things..." Ez finally dips his fingers below the waistband of my sweatpants and slides his fingers through trimmed hair, lower and lower until he's squeezing my cock.

"Yet nothing in my collection could compare to you on stage in those fishnets and black panties." He pumps me while staring directly into my eyes. "You'll keep them

on tonight.”

I want to be a brat and tell him that was the fucking reason I brought them home but his hand feels so fucking good to protest. I’m also not in the mood to be edged tonight. I need Ezekiel in me more than I’ve ever needed anything else in my life.

“Yes Sir,” I reply with a smirk on my lips before I dive in and begin to nip at his jaw. He groans and pumps me faster, my hips unable to resist the urge of thrusting into his movement.

“Invite me to your bed, baby.” Nothing about his statement sounds like a question, especially when he pushes me backward to the hallway that leads to my bedroom.

“Please come to bed, Ez. I fucking need you in me,” I murmur against his jaw before I shift down to bite at his throat.

Ez continues to push us toward my room but I stiffen slightly in surprise when I feel his hand let go of my shaft to squeeze my sack instead.

“Fuck, angel,” I hiss into his collarbone.

As we reach my bedroom, I kick open the door, and with impressive will, I take Ezekiel’s hand out of my pants. Right now, I only want to kiss him until he’s breathless and begging for me.

His lips are the perfect mixture of soft and hard against mine. In just our kiss I can feel the anticipation rolling off of him. It’s like a heat I can taste through the clashing of our mouths.

Unable to resist at least playing around a little, I quickly lift Ezekiel and toss him onto the bed. He breaks the kiss to let out a squeal of protest. My body follows his

own as I carefully land on him and shove my tongue back between his lips.

His smile feels good against my own.

We make out and grind against each other for a few minutes. I can't resist holding him close to me and running my fingers along his body while my mind floods with images of what it'll feel like when he's finally inside of me.

I feel Ezekiel push against my chest even while his lips continue to chase mine.

"Let me see you, Aleksander," he whispers into my mouth.

I push up with my forearms and ease off of him to plant my feet on the ground. As I'm getting up, I can see the clear outline of his dick through his pants, and without thinking, I dip down and lay an open—mouth kiss against the clothed bulge.

Ezekiel groans loudly as his hips buck and I'm met with an even bigger mouthful than before. He stares at me intently with a dangerous promise in his eyes while I thoroughly kiss up and down his shaft for a few more seconds. I pull myself the rest of the way up and off of him.

Admiring my work, I love seeing the wet fabric at his crotch clinging to that big cock of his. That big cock of mine.

"I'd like to see you too. Sir." I nod at his clothing. He looks fucking hot in his professor getup but I fucking need what's underneath.

Just as Ez leans up and starts unbuttoning his dress shirt, I peel off my tank top and toss it over my head. I know I've still got a pump going after the show and no matter how hard I try, that glitter and shimmer never comes off on the first try. I swear I almost see the reflection of my glistening skin in Ezekiel's eyes as he finally pulls off

that damn shirt.

Showing off my body has always been something I've enjoyed doing but it somehow feels different with Ez. I'm not someone he's paid to see for a night or two. No, he wants to own me in every sense of the word, but he wants me to want him back just as desperately. And shit, I really fucking do. I'm falling for Ez and there's no questioning it. I'm ready to give all of myself to him.

"Pants off, Alek," Ez commands and begins to strip off his pants while he waits for me to catch up.

Hooking my thumbs into my sweats, I push them down so that they are a pool of fabric over my shoes, which I toe off at an alarming speed.

Ez is down to his boxer briefs in front of me, the black fabric a similar shade to the color of the panties I'm wearing but entirely different in every other aspect. Kind of like Ez and me.

Goddamnit, I'm gonna leave the poetry up to Ez or I'm gonna compare us to socks next.

"Is something humorous?" Ezekiel asks, leaning back on his elbows as he looks at me with that adorable tilt of his head.

"Just thinking, angel." I shake my thoughts and smile at him.

"Come closer, you brat."

I move so that I'm all but in Ezekiel's lap, my legs spread wide on either side of his knees and pressing against the edge of the mattress. My angel reaches up and fingers where the garter clings to my thighs.

“It’s quite alluring, you know? Watching such powerful and thick thighs strain against the intricate design of the stockings. Though, not more than seeing your cock nearly rupture the fabric of your pretty panties.”

Ezekiel’s hand travels in a lazy line up and down my thigh, stopping short of where I want him. I do my best to stay still, knowing he wants to both admire me and rile me up.

In a sudden move, Ezekiel takes handfuls of my thighs and uses the leverage to begin lifting himself off the bed. Before I even get the chance to react, he positions us so that I’m the one flat on my back, face up on my bed. Ez looms over me.

“Fuck, that was hot, angel,” I say after the shock leaves my system.

Ezekiel grins down at me, obviously proud of the move. I’m not going to lie, I’m impressed too. I’m a lot of weight to move around.

“Everything’s in the nightstand, Ez. Please don’t make me wait any longer to feel that huge cock in me,” I plead, fully aware of the whine in my voice.

As he looks back and forth between me and the nightstand, I notice Ezekiel looks a little nervous. It makes me wonder if he’s nervous because it’s his first time with a man, or if his nerves come from the same place mine do. It’s not like it’s either of our first sexual encounters but it still feels monumental.

After a second, he leans over to take out the lube and condoms I bought a few weeks ago in anticipation that we’d get to this step.

“We uh,” I begin feeling a little shy about what I’m going to ask but I’m fucking desperate to feel him raw. “I’m good without a condom, if you are? I was tested when I got a physical for work if you want to see my results,” I begin, licking my lips in

anticipation. “I bought those just in case.” I rub my hand on my neck as I look up at him. Ez continues studying the bottle and condoms in his hands and I can almost see the thoughts going through that big brain of his.

“I’ll be taking you bare, Alek. I’ve been tested recently as well, and I don’t want anything else between us,” he says with a definite nod and steely resolution in his tone.

Placing the condoms to the side, Ezekiel sets down the bottle of lube by my hip and runs his hands up my stocking—covered thighs. He takes a moment to stare at me and the heat of his gaze has me rock hard and squirming as he pins me down.

“These pretty panties will stay on, though,” he states and I nod. I’d agree to just about anything right now if it got his perfect cock inside me quicker.

“I assume I won’t be hounded down if these were to meet a demise?” He edges the silky fabric of my panties with a single finger, teasing the barrier but not going underneath.

A small laugh escapes me and I prop myself up so I can see exactly where he’s teasing me. The sight of his hands, so slender and soft looking compared to the olive skin of my thighs, has my mouth watering for more of his touch.

“They’re a dime a dozen, you’re good, angel.”

“You are perfect.” Ezekiel’s voice is breathy as he admires my cock beneath the panties. Just one little shift of fabric and I’d be exposed to him.

I gasp when, instead of a gentle movement, Ezekiel all but rips the fabric off of me, causing my cock and sack to lean to the side where the ruined silk isn’t bunched. His long fingers play with the fabric of the stockings on the side of my thighs, switching

between gentle touches and deep kneading.

“Baby, you’re this anguished already?”

“I’ve been thinking about your cock in me since I first saw you, Ez.”

He looks at me sternly, stopping his movement up my thighs which causes a frustrated growl to leave my lips.

“I’ve been thinking about your cock in me since I first saw you, Sir, ” I correct myself, knowing this is the game he wants to play tonight. And I’m fucking here for it.

Ezekiel parts my thighs, making the panties slide fully over and completely exposing me to him. He applies delicious pressure to the inside of my knees, making me shift and spread so I’m bent like a fucking pretzel. My legs are pressed firmly against my chest.

“I can see your greedy hole clenching for me, baby. Do you need me to fill you so badly that you’re willing to look so obscene beneath me?” Ezekiel asks, the domineering tone in his voice tells me there’s no more playing around. He’s ready to take and I’m so fucking ready to give.

“Y—yes, Sir,” I nod desperately. My eyes track the movement of his hands along my inner thighs. I feel his thumbs hook between my asscheeks and push the flesh apart so that he can get a better look.

A satisfied hum leaves his chest. That noise combined with the feeling of his thumbs so close to being inside me, have me clawing at the sheets beneath me.

“Please,” I manage to beg.

“Please what, Alek? Would you like me to continue just doing this? I am having quite the time admiring your tight little hole.” Ezekiel pushes his thumbs closer and I feel the beginning of the stretch I’m aching for. I need more.

“Please, open me up for your cock, Sir.” The sentence trails off as Ezekiel pushes his thumbs forward and backward, fucking massaging my asshole but still not going nearly as deep as I need him to.

“Do you want me to use your greedy hole, Alek?” Ezekiel asks though he doesn’t need to.

I cry out and throw my head back onto the mattress when I feel his hands move away from me. I only hold back a curse when I hear the bottle of lube open up and my body finally starts to relax from pent—up frustration.

“Grab the back of your thighs and hold yourself open for me, baby.”

I open my eyes to see Ezekiel coating his fingers in lube while he calmly sits back onto his calves and waits for me to comply. I wrap my hands around the back of my thighs, exposing myself fully to him. I strain, my core tight, as I try to keep a good angle so I can still see everything.

“You’ll need to tell me if I’m doing this correctly.” Ezekiel moves his slickened hand toward my ass but pauses to look at me. “I do not wish to cause you any displeasure.”

“I will,” I nod reassuringly, a warm and pleasant feeling in my chest from the care that he’s showing me. I don’t get much time to think about how genuinely careful he is of me. Any thoughts I have go out the window as Ezekiel’s long fingers prod my hole.

“Fuck, that’s good, angel.” My neck strains as I lean forward but I need to see what

he's doing to me as much as I need to feel it. One of Ezekiel's fingers is buried deep within me, moving quickly past the first, then the second knuckle, and I lose control of the noises leaving me. I'm pretty sure I thank him and curse him in the same sentence when I feel him retreat only to plunge back into me with two fingers.

"Are you sure you'll be able to take my cock? I feel you sucking in my fingers already, Alek." His fingers become more forceful as they go deeper and I'm thankful. I'm not a delicate little thing he needs to be careful with. I can take everything Ez can give me.

"I need more, Sir."

Ezekiel shifts forward so that he's leaning further into my space. He places his hand flat on my chest and applies pressure. Without questioning, I lay back against the bed, my core and neck muscles thanking him for the break.

"You aren't ready for my cock yet, baby."

I suddenly feel Ezekiel's breath against my lower abdomen, right below the garter belt. My plea is cut off when I feel the warm, wet suction of his mouth around the head of my cock.

Ezekiel tongues around the flesh at the top of my dick, lowering the skin there to suck up the gathered beads of precum. His tongue laps my slit at the same time I feel him enter a third finger into my ass. I want to fucking thrash but his hand on my chest and my own on the back of my legs makes it so I can't move much.

He's got me right where he wants me, growling his name louder and louder the deeper I feel his fingers go into me. My breath is unsteady and I'm sure my heart rate is through the fucking roof at this point. If I wasn't so focused on making sure I didn't immediately come down Ezekiel's throat, I'm sure I would be better at making

my case for him to put his dick in me already.

Instead, I can only whine and beg for his cock. My thighs are trembling, and the sweat gathering there makes it hard for me to keep my legs held up.

I don't hold back, I scream his name when I feel his mouth leave me with a loud pop and his fingers retreat from my body. Looking back down at him over my pecs, I only get a tiny moment to see his slick hand rub over his cock. He must have shed his boxers at some point while he was fucking me with his fingers but I was so damn lost in sensation that I didn't even notice.

“Don't you dare scream at me unless you're coming on my cock, you brat.” With a stern tone and narrowed eyes, Ezekiel surges forward, plunging all of himself into my ass.

At this moment I'm beyond thankful that Ezekiel took his time with me. There's no unpleasant stretch or sting, just a pleasurable sensation that is bringing tears to my eyes. He stays still within me for a few seconds, his eyes tightly closed as his body fucking shakes against mine. I want him to use me, claim me in a way no one ever has before.

I reach my hand up to his face, cupping his jaw and brushing my thumb gently against his cheekbone. Ezekiel slowly opens his eyes. His face fights between the slack of relief and the tension of our joined bodies.

We are connected in every way and the tears I feel slide down the sides of my face aren't only from the relief of having him inside of me. “Make me yours, Sir.”

Ezekiel's lips meet mine as he retreats, only to thrust back in so roughly it makes the bed shake. One of his hands settles on the bed by the side of my head, while the other wraps around my throat possessively. He peers down at me. His grin is feral and I

know he is loving the sweet devastation he sees on my face.

“You are mine, Aleksander,” Ezekiel snarls.

His hand tightens around my throat while his thrusts become faster and more primal. The bed is rocking and I press my feet against the mattress so I can meet him thrust for thrust. His cock is filling my ass over and over in a searing, wet slide and his sweat—slick abdomen provides all the friction my cock needs.

I’m seconds from spilling my cum between us.

“I want you to come, please. I need you to fill me, Sir,” I whine. Fresh tears leaking from my eyes as I do my damn best to hold back my orgasm.

Ezekiel responds by gripping my throat tighter, using the hold to pull me downward as he thrusts up into me.

“Take my cum like the good little slut you are.” Ezekiel completely cages me with his body, every inch of him presses against every inch of me and it gives me the last bit of friction to come against his stomach while I scream his name. My head hits the mattress with a thud and my hips buck against him in the aftershocks of my release.

The intensity of it all and Ezekiel’s continued use of my body leaves me feeling weightless as black spots move around my eyes.

A few thrusts later, I hear Ezekiel grunt his release inside of me. The sensation of his cum leaking from my ass is heightened, the heat of our union marking me in all ways possible. I realize then that I must have closed my eyes from exhaustion at some point. My body is limp and languid as he settles on top of me. My bigger form easily takes his weight and I wrap my arms around him to really appreciate the afterglow.

Our chests move together as we lay wordlessly and catch our breath. There's a sticky mess between us and it's uncomfortably hot but I need this. I want to feel Ezekiel's body relax into my hold, knowing I did that for him. I want to feel his arms wrapped around me like I'm precious to him. I want everything Ezekiel has to give and I want to give him everything I am in return.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

EZEKIEL

Daddy issues.

Waking up wrapped in Alek's powerful arms is something I have grown accustomed to, though I have only spent the night a handful of times. His soft breaths tickle the back of my neck and his chest is pressed delicately against my back as he holds me as close as he can, even in his sleep.

His arms around me are a blur as I peer down at the tangle of our limbs. Never have I slept so utterly unconcerned about my personal space. I choose to laze in the too—warm embrace of our bodies.

Trying to decipher the time based on the small amount of morning light proves infeasible, so I scan around the room for my phone and glasses. I find my personal belongings set neatly on his nightstand beside me. I cannot recall taking off my glasses after our lovemaking, nor do I recall cleaning them until they nearly sparkle in the streaks of light sneaking past Alek's closed curtains.

Once I had gently cleaned Alek up and assisted in a quick change of his sheets, I only remember the feeling of holding him against my chest as I peppered kisses on his face and sang him praise. I must have drifted off with him in my arms but I distinctly remember my vision was clear as I was admiring the pout of his lips peeking over the bridge of his nose.

He must have taken them off of me after I fell asleep. I smile at Alek's attentive nature and suddenly, it's as if a new cognizance burrows into my brain.

I am in love with Alek.

Truthfully, I know the seeds of love have been present since our very first meeting. I wager that they were planted when Alek fed me the first bite of his food. He had been nothing short of a revelation at that time and the biggest blessing of my life ever since. Unbeknownst to him, he had pulled me from a torment my heart was still learning to remedy.

Come Monday, the torment that is ever—so—present within my soul will finally feel terminated. Closure, as my therapist calls it. I have been working to become the man that Alek deserves, and the man that feels genuinely worthy of him as well.

“What time is it?” Alek murmurs into the back of my head.

I lean forward to reach for the nightstand, causing my lower half to press firmly against his front in the process.

“Oh fuck, I don't even care what time it is,” Alek sighs as he grinds himself against my ass, evidently very willing to stay in bed instead.

An airy laugh escapes my lips while I put my glasses in place. A grumble of protest echoes between us when I move to sit up against the headboard of the bed.

“Your ass felt good,” he whines in displeasure.

“First of all, I believe I should be the one saying that to you.” I brush his hair from his eyes and I can see the lingering sleepiness in them. “Second of all, it's already—” I tap the screen of my phone and see it's late morning. “—ten in the morning.”

“Oh shit, I’m supposed to be meeting Thomas and Viv for brunch in a few hours,” Alek replies. But he remains unhurried in getting out of bed and chooses to lay his head in my lap instead.

“We should get our day started, sweetheart,” I continue brushing his hair and he makes content noises that muffle into my lap. A loud noise erupts from his stomach, obviously not a noise of contentment.

“Are you sure you can wait a few hours for some food?” I joke, reaching my hand as far down as I can to rub at his belly.

“I can make us somethin’ and then eat brunch too.” He looks up at me, a lazy grin on his face as he’s being petted that reminds me of something Peaches would do.

“Oh, believe me, I know how ravenous you can be.” I tug at his hair so that his face angles towards mine and plant a tender kiss on those perfect lips of his. Much to Alek’s chagrin, I pause our kiss before it can get heated. One of us needs to keep us in line.

“Food, Aleksander.” I pat his cheek. “You’ve got a full day, as do I, and as much as I would treasure a repeat of last night, we need to at least get clothes on.”

Alek pouts as I escape the grasp he tries to keep me in. I am almost fully dressed before he finally makes it out of bed and pulls on those enticing gray sweats again. I assume that is the only article of clothing he usually wears at home since he doesn’t bother with a shirt. Though I will be last to complain and the first to enjoy the view.

I turn and begin to gather my overnight items to pack away my bag when Alek speaks up from behind me.

“You could leave that stuff here, Ez.” He hesitates slightly, making it sound like he is

a little unsure of himself.

“You would welcome that?”

“Yeah, it’ll be easier than lugging all your shit around. And I like the idea of having pieces of you here even when you’re gone,” Alek speaks softly.

I turn around with my half—packed bag hanging open in front of me. Alek is by his dresser, clearing out a drawer and motioning me towards it. There’s an adorably bashful smile plastered on his face.

“It’s all yours, baby.”

A doorbell ring echoes through the apartment, breaking the tension.

“I should go get that, it’s probably my neighbor. Sadie sometimes needs some help with chores on the weekend. It’ll just be a few minutes if you wanna wait around?” Alek asks, deciding to put a shirt on as he makes his way towards the door of his bedroom.

“Look, I’m not trying to pressure you or anything,” he pauses, looking back at me and shuffling on his feet. “But, my home is yours, Ez.”

Silently, I drop my bag and rush over towards Alek. He’s surprised for only a moment before I have him pressed against the wall near his door.

“I want the same, Aleksander. I want to share my home, my life , with you as well,” I confess as I cup his face with both of my hands. I want his eyes on mine, not shifting away from the anxiety he still carries. “Please do not doubt that, ever. ”

The kiss we share is brief but so full of emotion. We show our commitment to each

other in the small moment our lips connect.

The doorbell rings again and it takes us out of our shared daze.

“She’s usually not this annoying,” Alek laughs and uses his hands on my waist to back me up towards the dresser once again.

“Claim your spot, Ez.” Alek points over at the empty drawer before heading toward the front door. I do as he asks, grabbing my bag to arrange what I’ll be taking and what I’ll be leaving.

“What are you doing here?” Alek’s question is barely audible from the opposite end of his apartment but something doesn’t sound right. Abandoning my task, I begin making my way out of his bedroom when I hear another voice join him.

“I don’t even get a ‘hi, dad’ from you?”

I turn out of the room to see a burly man taking up the doorway. Alek seems to have backed up several steps and stands there, just looking at the man. His father, my brain fills in.

From my vantage point, I can see them but they can’t see me. I take a moment to assess the situation before me. I know Alek hasn’t seen his father since he was kicked out at eighteen and never welcomed home again. I know his father was still in contact with Thomas and Vivian for some time but never bothered to reach out to Alek. Why is he here?

“I’m not here for cafecito , Alek. I just want to know why your sister and brother haven’t been talking to their mom.”

“Seems like it’s their choice to make. I have nothing to say about it. How’d you even

know where I live?" Alek asks, and I can see the tension building in his body.

"I found your address in one of Viv's old journals. This is your doing, isn't it? What kinda mierda are you telling Vivian and Thomas, or getting them into, to turn them against Julie?" His father points accusingly. I see Alek shrink into himself and I jump into action.

"You do not speak to him that way." I prowl towards Alek's father. Alek looks surprised at my reaction, almost as if he might have forgotten that I am here.

"Who are you?" Alek's father, Antonio, I finally remember, stares bewilderedly at me.

"I am Alek's partner and you will speak to him respectfully or you will not speak to him at all. I am also Thomas and Vivian's friend, and truly, if this is how you speak to your family, I can only imagine why they wouldn't want to speak to you or your wife any longer."

My stance is protective in front of Alek. I have never been a person who is quick to anger nor one to get physical, but I feel my blood pulsing and my fists clenching at my sides in thin restraint.

Antonio takes a moment to decide if this is a fight he wants or not, and while he may be a terrible father, at least the man knows when it's smart for him to back down.

"You aren't welcome here and I will never let you use me to get to my siblings. As far as I'm concerned these are the consequences of your and Julie's actions. How dare you come to my damn door and ask me to betray my siblings like that when I haven't heard shit from you in over fourteen years!" Alek speaks up behind me, slowly moving closer and closer to Antonio as he pours everything out.

Alek stands beside me now, reaching his hand towards mine and I hold his hand tightly, knowing he needs an anchor.

“You made it clear you’re no son of mine with all of the bullshit you pulled in your teens. I don’t want any part of this. ” The man hisses with venom in his tone, motioning aggressively towards Alek and me, obviously uncomfortable with the show of affection between us two.

“I’m going to find them myself.” With that statement, he leaves, not bothering to close the door or say anything else to either of us.

I close the space between us and the open door frame, shutting the door softly and locking it before I look back and see Alek staring at me with tears forming in his wide eyes.

“Baby.” I wrap him in my arms, encouraging him to rest his face in the crook of my neck. Alek only takes a few shuddered breaths against my skin before he pulls back and wipes at his face.

“I’m sorry you had to see that, Ez.” He looks at me guiltily.

“Alek—” I begin, only to be cut off.

“You know what’s the most fucked up part? I first thought he was here to mend things with me.” Anger flashes in his eyes. “He just wanted to use me to get to Viv and T. Shit, I need to call them!” He digs frantically in his pockets for his phone.

“I will call them.” My hands land on his, stopping his frenzied movement.

“I want you to cook us breakfast,” I state calmly.

Alek seems a little shocked at my request but I know that having something to do and concentrating on the extensive process of making food can help regulate his emotions right now. Once again, I am thankful for the well of knowledge from my therapist.

“Please,” I add softly. “I will call your siblings and make sure they know what is happening. I need you to focus and prepare us a meal.”

I bring our joined hands up to my lips and kiss his knuckles softly. His hands relax at the touch while he merely nods and blinks away his tears.

“Thank you,” he leans his forehead against mine for a moment, and I take the chance to place a kiss on the corner of his lips.

With a few more soothing breaths between us, we pull away from each other and move to start our respective tasks.

“Please make it a meal for five,” I ask, pulling my phone from my pocket and pulling up his siblings' contact numbers. Thankfully Viv, T, and Rhett had all given me their phone numbers during our dinner a couple of weekends ago.

I stay in the kitchen as I make the phone calls. I am grateful to see there's light coming back into Alek's eyes as I watch him consider the possible combinations of foods for an impromptu family brunch.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

ALEK

Confession on a Sunday.

“Y ou should have punched him,” Vivian waves a piece of bacon in Ezekiel’s direction as we all sit around my dining table. I’m thankful my siblings didn’t have to see our father earlier this morning and I’m grateful Ez arranged for all of them to come to my place for our brunch.

“I am usually not one to resort to violence,” Ez replies as he carefully smooths butter onto a homemade biscuit. “But I will not lie and say I was not tempted in that moment.” After he finishes topping his biscuit with some honey, he places his free hand on my thigh and squeezes gently.

Thomas and Rhett sit across from us while Vivian sits at the head of the table to our right. Our boozy brunch plans had turned into a makeshift family therapy session. Though we didn’t share our blood family with Rhett, he was just as shaken up by the visit of a ghost of his past life. Believe it or not, Rhett’s old man is even more of a piece of shit than ours is.

“I am sorry that he found you because of me.” Vivian wipes her hand on a napkin before placing it on my forearm. “I didn’t realize all the shit I had left behind when I moved out for college.”

I pat her hand softly and brush my thumb over her black acrylic nails.

“You didn’t know he’d try using me to get to you.” The whole situation still hurts. I had thought that I made peace with my lack of relationship with my father but when I first saw him on my doorstep I felt like that little boy who shared grief with him after Mama passed. My father was never the same after my mother’s death and pretty soon, our mutual grieving turned into anger and distance on his part.

“I went no contact with them a few months ago,” Vivian admits and takes a deep breath before continuing. “Mom was guiltting me into still having a relationship with her and it was working, but she had a major fit when I wouldn’t see some guy she was trying to set me up with. She called me every name she could fucking think of and said it was time to give up my ‘experimental’ phase and settle down instead.” Viv rolls her eyes as she recalls the conversation between them.

“Her constant invalidation of me was what fucking sealed the deal. I know you two haven’t talked to them since you moved out and I’m sorry it took me longer to realize how things were with them. I wish I was as strong as y’all.” She looks over at me and then towards Thomas and Rhett. “And I’m so sorry that I dragged y’all into this.”

“You didn’t drag any of us into this. Antonio shouldn’t have shown up to do Mom’s bidding like that.” Thomas tries to reassure Viv. Both Ez and I nod in agreement.

“Look, y’all are the only true family I’ve ever known,” Rhett speaks up, not sounding like his usual easy—going self. He’s right, we’ve treated him like a fourth Delgado sibling since we were neighbors and Rhett needed a safe place to escape to. “Just like all three of you kept tellin’ me— you deserve to have people in your life that love you ‘n accept you as you are. Y’all will get it sorted out and I’ll be here all of the way.”

I can see Thomas’ eyes soften as he listens to Rhett. A small smile forms on my brother’s face before he leans over to side—hug his best friend.

We continue eating our food and again, I'm thinking about how grateful I was to have Ez here. Seeing my dad... I realized that I didn't really miss him. I didn't miss the man he became after my Mama's death. I was holding onto a memory of a man that didn't exist anymore.

Continuing our meal, Viv and Thomas reassure me there's no reason Antonio or Julie would have either of their addresses but they'd keep an eye out and keep me updated if anything happens. We know they wouldn't be much of an actual threat but we also don't want shit escalating. I know my siblings; they're smart and capable of taking care of themselves but the big brother in me will always be worried.

After a lot of greasy bacon, buttery biscuits, and laughs together as a family, we are feeling a lot better than we did a few hours ago. My heart lights up with how comfortable and seamlessly integrated Ezekiel is with my family. He is my family now.

"Alek, would you like to come to my house on Saturday?" Ezekiel asks as we are in the middle of scrubbing pots and pans from today's brunch.

I've never been to Ezekiel's house before and I'm immediately excited at the idea. Curiosity takes over my thoughts as I imagine him spending his evenings with his face buried in a book. I wonder where his favorite reading spaces are in his house. That's just a fraction of things I'm wondering about and I'm honestly jumping at the chance to say yes.

"I'd love to, angel." I lean over to kiss his cheek and try my best to keep the soapy water in the pot that I'm holding over the counter.

I hear Ez let out a breath. I don't know why he'd be nervous that I'd say no. I want to know everything about him.

“I would like to share everything and bare my all to you, Alek,” Ez begins. He throws the drying towel over his shoulder and leans his hip onto the counter so he faces me. From the corner of my eye, I can see some tension lines form on his face.

I’m aware I don’t know all of Ezekiel’s story yet, but discovering things about each other kind of comes with the territory of a new relationship. Just as Ez never rushed me to spill information to him, I would never do that to him either.

“You got some weird collections or something?” I ask, trying to add some levity and see that bright smile appear on my angel’s face once again. Taking the towel off Ezekiel’s shoulder, I dry the last pot and place it onto the drying rack before twisting to face him fully.

“Well, that would depend on your definition of weird,” he adds, the corner of his lip turning upward in a smirk.

“You know what?” I ask, crossing my arms across my chest and lifting my hand to tap my finger against my chin in thought. “Don’t tell me. I wanna see your freaky shit in person.” I wag my finger at his face and he playfully slaps it away.

“Alek...” Ezekiel begins, the serious mood in his tone reappears. His eyes are wide and sincere as he stares back at me. “I want to assure you that whatever you may discover this weekend, it does not change my love for you.”

While my mind focuses on why he would say that, my heart focuses on his confession. A love confession that was thrown out so casually like it’s something he thought I already knew.

“Wait, your love for me? You love me?” I ask, my eyes darting around his face and searching his expression while I wait for an answer.

“Alek, I believe I have loved you since the day I met you. I cannot explain it but it is like a part of me has always known,” Ezekiel replies. His voice and face are so kind and soft while his determined tone implies that his confession is unwavering.

I’m frozen. My hands are stuck, still crossed at my chest as I stand in front of Ez and gaze down into his eyes. For as long as I am quiet, Ezekiel’s face doesn’t change or question why I haven’t said it back.

Honestly, I don’t have the slightest fucking clue what it feels like to be in love. I know the way I feel for Ezekiel is different from anything I’ve ever experienced before. I know that I am, and will keep trusting him with my heart. But how the fuck am I supposed to say, without any doubt, that I am in love with someone when I don’t think I’ve ever felt anything but face—level satisfaction from a previous partner?

“Aleksander, I didn’t mean to make you panic.” Ezekiel’s voice is closer now. I look down and see his hand placed across my forearms. “I am not offended if you do not feel the same or say the words right now. In all honesty, I wouldn’t expect you to when I have not given the same courtesy of exposing my life to you. All I am saying is that I am ready and I am fully committed to you.”

“I don’t want you to think that I don’t feel a similar way, Ez.” Uncrossing my arms, I take the opportunity of him being so close to rest my hands at the base of his neck and I feel his heartbeat. Nice and calm. Not a single ounce of panic or worry within him even when he just confessed his heart to me.

Ezekiel smiles softly and moves his hands to my waist, pulling me in closer to him.

“I didn’t say that I love you so that I could hear it back, especially if you need the time to process the feelings that you are experiencing.” Ezekiel rubs slow, relaxing circles into my stomach. “Baby, I’ve waited my entire life for you, keeping patient for as long as you need will not break me. It was only recently that I have truly

understood my circle of control and that includes not being in charge of how anyone else might be feeling.”

With his kindness and understanding, I already feel like those three words will be easy to confess. Soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

ALEK

Cats and old ladies.

“So what are you gonna make with your boyfriend tomorrow?” Emma asks beside me. Her arm is looped through mine as we walk around the farmer’s market. Thankfully, with the cooler season coming in, these places are popping up more often. Having a Friday off doesn’t happen a lot for us, so we’re taking advantage and having a movie night with Viv at their place later tonight.

The burlesque club was booked for a private event tonight hosted by a charity that Knight works with and the boys have got the performances all covered. It’s been nice giving up the reins a bit and training other people for lead positions. At one point it felt like I was spending so much time at the club I might as well live there. This is healthy. Exploring other passions, spending time enjoying myself, and having someone special is what I’ve needed.

“I was thinking of making caldo with him,” I respond, guiding her over to one of the farm stands so I can look through all the seasonal vegetables. I thought caldo would be a great dish because it involves a little of everything when it comes to kitchen skills.

“Oh shit, if y’all have any leftovers I call dibs.” Emma lets go of my arm and nudges me aside as she starts looking over the produce as well.

“Sorry, I couldn’t make it to dinner last weekend,” she comments while putting a few pieces of zucchini into her tote bag. “I wanted to but...” Emma pauses and purses her lips in thought. “Caleb and I got into a stupid—ass fight again.”

I didn’t like that. To be honest, I tolerated Caleb but these fights between them have grown more frequent and it’s worrying me.

“Emma,” I begin, but she sets her hand up to stop me.

“I know what you’re gonna say, Alek, and I’m telling you it was just a stupid fight. We have them and we get over them,” she breathes, steeling herself.

“Mu?eca , you know I worry about you.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, I promise. I’d tell you if there was. You get the corn?” Emma is nothing if not stubborn and she deflects like no other.

“Yeah, I got the corn,” I sigh. I need to trust my best friend when she says she has it under control. She’s one of the toughest chicks I know. Still, I’m keeping an eye on that fucker Caleb either way.

I feel her arm link back with mine as we walk over to the cashier. Taking a moment to pay for the produce, I steal a peek at Emma. She’s stunning. Her sienna skin is glowing in the morning sunlight as she smiles and thanks the cashier for us. My mu?eca is wonderful and deserves someone who is crazy for her. I just wish she’d think the same.

It hits me then.

Why can’t I see myself in the same light as I see her and all of my loved ones? Is there something truly so broken within me that I don’t feel like I deserve the same, or

am I the one getting in my own way?

I have a man who is genuine, kind, funny, and hot as fuck. A man who said he loved me and I panicked when I heard it. Ezekiel is not a liar. He may have his quirks and his specific way of doing or saying things but he would never toy with me like that. I know it now. It wasn't panic from him saying that he loved me. It was panic from thinking anyone could feel so deeply for me.

Ezekiel gave me time to think. He relieved any of the pressure I felt at that moment so I could reflect. Fuck, did he know I'd come to this conclusion? I swear to Christ that man is in my head somehow. Either that or I'm really easy to figure out.

Well, I'm saying it now. I am worthy. I deserve love.

I love Ezekiel.

Emma watches me with a large smile that reaches her eyes. She must have realized who I was thinking about. It wouldn't surprise me if there was an actual damn lightbulb lighting up above my head right now.

"Go to him and take your caldo stuff too."

Taking the totes from her, I plant a quick kiss on her cheek before I start jogging over to my car.

"I am so getting those leftovers, Alek!" Emma shouts after me.

Ezekiel's place is a gorgeous brown brick house with black, almost gothic—looking accents. My first thought is how Viv would lose her mind over this place. His house is in one of those neighborhoods where the houses are spread out, and old enough that there isn't an annoying homeowner's association. At least that's what I think because

all of these houses seem like they were made to specification.

I sit in my car and keep looking around. While I didn't fully think it through before starting the drive over here, I am glad I'm here. Ezekiel said he had virtual office hours today since he had to take care of stuff at home. So I hope I'm catching him at a good time.

Mental pep—talk done, I reach over to the passenger's seat and grab my totes of produce for tomorrow's date. Within a second, I'm out of the car and my feet are stepping on the bricked pathway leading up to his front door.

Stopping at the large black door with glass cutouts, I notice a little movement from behind a navy curtain covering the opening. A cute chunky cat pops their head out at me, clearly shouting at me from behind the glass but I can't hear the meows through the barrier. To be safe, I ring the doorbell just in case Ez wasn't already alerted by the yelling cat.

After a few seconds without an answer, I start beating myself up for not calling first. That was probably the normal thing to do when going over to someone's house but that damn realization and confession I had in the middle of a farmer's market didn't leave me thinking about anything else other than needing to see Ezekiel.

"Hello?" A sweet and high—pitched voice that definitely doesn't belong to my boyfriend interrupts my thoughts. I look to the right and see an older woman leaning over the porch fence of the house next door.

Shit. I don't know if Ezekiel has told anyone about me, or if he's close enough to his neighbors that they even know personal details about him. I've got to play it cool.

"Oh hi ma'am, I need to drop off some groceries for Ezekiel. Would you know if he's here to receive them?" I move a little closer so I'm not shouting across the wide space

between us.

The older woman looks at the bags of produce I'm holding and then back to Ezekiel's house.

"Oh you know, Ezekiel gave me a spare key to his house if he wasn't back in time today to feed Peaches," she begins, slowly making her way down her porch steps to meet me at the fence between their yards.

"Isn't she the sweetest little thing?" The lady points over to Ezekiel's door, where Peaches is pawing at the glass. "I've got a cat too, her name is Susie, but she doesn't like seeing Peaches through the kitchen window. She throws a little hissy fit every time. Susie wouldn't stand a chance. Did you see the size of that Peachy girl?" She points to the very large cat still pawing at the glass door.

"Oh my, yes, the groceries. We wouldn't want them going rotten. My name is Maude, by the way. I can't believe I told you the names of all the cats in the neighborhood before I told you my own." She chuckles and motions for the grocery bags.

"I'm Alek, nice to meet you," I reply almost automatically. I'm busy thinking about where Ez could be when he told me he was working from home today. I lift my hands to hand her the tote bags full of groceries. I don't blame her for not letting me into Ezekiel's home to put them away myself. I am just some stranger to her.

"I'll go ahead and put those in when I feed Peaches later today. Might be that Ezekiel and Elizabeth are back from the airport before then, though. You never really know whether these pesky flights will be on time or not." Maude hugs the groceries against her body as she continues.

"Been too long since I've seen Elizabeth. That one's been gone for almost two

months, can you believe that? Being away from your husband for so long,” she tsks and shakes her head.

I sputter and cover it with a cough, raising my hand politely at her in apology.

“I’m sorry, did you say Ezekiel is her husband? Ezekiel has a wife?” I could have probably asked the question a little better and not so surprised but fuck, the guy I’ve been dating for nearly two months has a goddamn wife?

“Yes, the Adlers, that is who you were delivering the groceries to, correct?” she asks, looking at me a little more suspiciously now.

“Yes, I am sorry. I only saw one name under the grocery order, that’s all. I will leave you to it. Have a nice day ma’am.” A weak flick of my wrist is all I can offer her before I bolt and practically run back to my car.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

EZEKIEL

A bittersweet goodbye.

“I had the last of your boxes delivered to your new residence.”

A part of me still feels somewhat detached from my body as I speak the words to Elizabeth. My now ex—wife. While we have been separated now for nearly four months, it is still difficult to erase the feelings that come with the twelve years we shared our life. It’s tragic to admit a partnership spanning over a decade is over, but we both had foreseen this. Over the last handful of years, we both knew our marriage was not what we wanted it to be. If anything, we felt stuck and remained together for appearance more than love.

I must admit, the feelings of failure and remorse are morphing into a bearable bittersweet nostalgia. It has taken months of reflection, journaling, reading, and new experiences to allow me into that mindset.

“Thank you, Ezekiel. I appreciate how you were willing to take charge of my belongings,” Elizabeth replies with a serene smile. I lay my eyes on her for a moment. She looks relaxed and enlightened in a way that I only recently became accustomed to myself.

While on our trek to my car at the airport, Elizabeth recounted her adventures in the Camino de Santiago, a month—long pilgrimage she thought would afford her

spiritual clarity. Her eyes were brilliant as she shared her memories of the other places in Europe she also visited. I cannot remember the last time she radiated such ease and positive energy.

“I haven’t seen you this delighted in years,” I comment, the low classical music on the radio providing a background to my voice.

“And I don’t think I’ve seen you this tranquil in the entire time I’ve known you,” Elizabeth replies, turning her body marginally in the passenger seat. I feel her eyes study me as I drive.

“I am not pressuring you to divulge specifics, but...” she pauses for a second before continuing, “therapy has treated you well?”

“I do not mind sharing with you,” I start. “Therapy has been enlightening, surely, but words are words. It wasn’t until I began to open myself to new experiences and truly allowed myself to express my emotions that I felt progress. In a way, I’ve had my own Camino of sorts to walk through.”

A flash of light from my right turn signal illuminates her form in the darkening cab of the car as the sun sets behind us. There are unshed tears of happiness and a gentle smile that travels up to her green eyes.

“I’m so happy for you, Ezekiel. Really, I am. I’ve never known a man more deserving of true happiness.” Elizabeth breathes deeply as she pats my forearm.

Pulling my car into the driveway, I park the car and turn to stare at her.

“I am happy for you too, Elizabeth,” I say. There’s no need to repeat any sorrowful feelings of regret or what—if scenarios. At this point in our journey, we have both come to terms with the fact that we simply were not one another’s true love.

Not another word is spoken between us as we step out of the car and head into our—my home. There are a few items Elizabeth has to sort through before I drive her over to her new apartment and we separate one final time.

Opening the door, a cheerful Peaches greets us. This tells me that she has been fed since she is not screaming or clawing at either of us to fetch her dinner.

“I organized a final copy of the divorce papers for you.” I lift Peaches into my arms and motion over to the top of the cabinet in the foyer.

Elizabeth nods to me in thanks.

“Would you like water or tea? The flight must have been exhausting for you,” I comment, walking over to the kitchen where I pause in surprise. Peaches takes the opportunity to leap from my arms onto the counter to sniff at the foreign objects I’m staring at.

On the counter, there are grocery tote bags. Some emptied and some holding what seem to be vegetables. I certainly did not leave these here before I left for errands early this afternoon. I have the mind to check my phone to see if I may have missed a grocery delivery or if Maude had left me some food, but I see nothing but a black screen. Not knowing when exactly my phone died today, I sigh and walk over to the charging port in the wet bar area. After the few virtual meetings I had this morning, I was so preoccupied with driving and seeing Elizabeth that I completely ignored the dead device.

As I am walking back to the kitchen counter, I see a note tucked underneath one of the bags. I can already tell from the handwriting that it’s from Maude.

Ezekiel, honey, I went ahead and fed your little Peachy girl this afternoon since I saw you and Elizabeth weren’t home yet. Please do have her come by to say hi. It’s been

much too long since I've seen her. I put away the groceries the delivery driver dropped off for you at noon.

I pause, scrunching my face in confusion. I hadn't ordered anything for delivery today. I continue reading.

I reckon a man as fit and good—looking as him should have been a model for a gym or something and not delivering groceries. Anywho— I put them away for you. Whatever you're making, please do send a bowl over. It looks delicious already.

A wave of panic surges through my body.

Alek was here this afternoon to drop off groceries.

Alek met Maude and I can only assume she gossiped her little heart out to him.

No. No. No.

It was supposed to work out perfectly. Alek would come over tomorrow and everything would have been finalized and resolved. My life and my mind clear of anything that had been holding me back with him. I berate myself as I pace back and forth, it feels like I'm burning a hole into the tiles as I drag my feet over them.

"Ezekiel?" Elizabeth appears before me, clearly worried at the wreck of an impression I must be making.

"Elizabeth, I'm sorry. I just need a moment." I take a deep breath and pinch at the bridge of my nose to calm myself. I need to talk to Alek but I know my phone is useless for at least a few minutes until it charges the minimal amount.

"I may have just ruined my relationship," I blurt out and Elizabeth frantically motions

for me to continue. Within a few minutes, I told her about Alek and the whirlwind of a love story we've had over the last two months. Her reactions were encouraging and reassuring throughout my retelling of events. She did not force me to hurry when my voice became weak, my words tough to physically speak as my throat constricted. Not once did I feel a pang of jealousy or doubt from her. It felt like when we were best friends before our marriage and the few years after we became wedded. Having her listen as I bared my emotions was more comforting than I could process.

"You love him," she simply states and I nod. "Then you need to explain the situation to him. Ezekiel, I don't mean to chastise you but this should have been something you told him upfront. Alek seems like a kind and understanding individual, why wouldn't you tell him?" I know the anger seeping into her tone is justified.

"The failure of our marriage was still fresh when I first met him, Elizabeth. How could I have started something with him if I didn't have closure from such a huge part of my life? I needed time to think. Time to be right with myself." I rub my hand down my face, agonizing in the wait for my phone to turn back on.

"I tried to stay away from him. I did. I didn't feel I was prepared nor was I deserving of someone like him when I was still healing from ruining my marriage to you. But something larger than me kept connecting us in ways that I can't explain. No matter how hard I tried, everything always came back to Alek."

Elizabeth steps up and reaches toward my hands clasped in front of my face. She lowers them down and places them on the counter so that I have no choice but to look at her.

"Ezekiel. You did not fail me. I failed me, you failed you. And it's up to us to make it up to ourselves and ourselves only. I don't want an apology or any sorrow from you and I don't want to be the one holding you back from someone you truly love. I know you wish the same for me."

At that moment, my phone pings with the sound from the starting screen. Elizabeth leaves my side and walks over to remove my phone from its charger.

“Here, make your call and do whatever you must to get that man back. I’ll be packing the last of my items and asking Anna to pick me up.” She places the phone into my hand, the heat from the charger slowly bringing sensation back into my shaking fingers. I begin to unlock my phone while the sound of her footsteps retreats into the hallway.

“Thank you,” I call out to her. She responds with a soft sound of contentment.

Even through the hardships we faced in our marriage, Elizabeth was still friendly and caring with me. I knew then that this failure I kept perceiving was nothing more than an amalgamation of self—pity. If we could still care for each other in this way and wish each other the best in our endeavors, nothing was lost.

“You need to fix this!” Vivian’s voice pours through the speakers of my phone after I finally get an answer from Alek’s phone. After the third attempt at calling, I was afraid he wanted nothing to do with me. I was hoping to talk to him directly but upon hearing the enraged tone from his sister, I can safely assume that Alek is upset.

“Ez,” Vivian begins. Her voice sounds flustered and wavering. “We know you’re a great guy but it’s fucked up that you didn’t tell Alek you were still married. Why do you Adlers think that you can do everything on your terms only?”

The phone sounds out a noise like it’s being dragged through gravel before I hear Emma’s voice take over the call.

“Sorry, Ezekiel. They’re a little drunk right now. We’ve been having a girl’s night.” The loud music recedes as I assume Emma steps into a place where she can better hear me.

“Look, Alek had the shock of his life this afternoon and he’s trying to process it all. With bad wine and bad singing.”

Just as Emma finishes her sentence, I hear Alek belting out the lyrics of some pop song I’ve heard on the radio recently.

“Emma, I never wanted to hurt him. I was only waiting for the right time to confess it all and show my commitment to him now that I finally set my affairs in order.”

“I know Ez but he is hurt. He just wishes that he could have known so he could support you better.”

My heart shatters hearing these words. After everything, Alek is more concerned about my well being rather than the fact that I had been keeping information from him. Ever the tender—hearted man, Alek keeps putting my emotions before his. Just as he does with his loved ones.

I want to be the one that puts him before anything else.

“Emma, I need to see him. I have to apologize and explain the situation before it tears him apart any longer.”

A sigh of frustration leaves her lips as she grumbles into the phone. As his best friend, I am sure it is difficult to see Alek in such a state. But I also know it must be difficult for her to put her trust in me.

“Fine. We are at mine and Viv’s place. I’ll text—” Emma stops, interrupted by a loud creaking noise and animated singing that must be coming from the next room.

I suddenly hear Alek’s and Viv’s voices through the phone, practically shouting the lyrics to a sad—sounding song. Something about a vampire bleeding someone dry.

“Jeez, what the hell?” Emma pauses and then starts shouting too.

“Get the hell off the coffee table! Y’all are too grown to be acting like this!” Without a further word to me, she hangs up the phone to deal with the situation at hand.

I am gathering my coat and keys when I see a text come in from Emma, containing her address.

If it was the last thing I did, I was going to fix this and I was going to make entirely sure Alek knows my feelings for him are unmistakably sincere.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

ALEK

Glittery threats.

Emma shuts off the TV and takes the microphones from me and Vivian. Angrily, she points at the couch with a silent command to sit our asses down. We do, of course. I've trained enough with Emma to know she can pack a punch.

"If y'all are done wrecking my shit." Em winces at the coffee table that now has a large hole in the middle of it before she looks back over at us, "Ezekiel is coming over to talk to you."

"Me or her?" I ask, pointing back and forth between Viv and me and letting out a laugh when I meet my sister's eyes.

"Oh, is his wife coming too?" Viv asks in between chuckles but stops for a second to see my reaction to her question. Goddamn, my sister could be an asshole but at least she was funny. I can't help but keep laughing. If I wasn't here with my girls, I think I'd be crying into my pillow at home.

"Ayy, we got enough margaritas to offer one to my boyfriend's wife?" My question makes Viv laugh so hard that she falls off the couch. I don't know the specifics of anything but I can tell my sister needed to let off steam too. Our laughs and antics have always been what helps us heal and there's no one I laugh harder with than my little sister.

“Y’all are fucking on it tonight. Alek, drink some water and sober up so you can talk it out with Ez,” Emma commands, throwing a water bottle in my direction. If I wasn’t still so drunk, I’d confront her for throwing it to my face. But some water does sound amazing after singing for so long.

“Fine,” I grumble and open the bottle of water.

A knock on the door is the only thing that stops me from fully downing the sixteen ounces. Shit . He’s here already. I’m going to have to confront him about this and I’m hurt . I can’t hide that.

Emma steps out of the living room and toward the front door of the apartment. I keep my eyes on the door as it opens and suck in a breath when I see Ezekiel standing there. He’s disheveled and wide-eyed but walks in with confidence.

Viv glares, peeking from the floor beside me, protective of me as ever with all her five-foot self. If I had said that aloud I know I’d get a smack on the side of the head as she corrected me that she’s five feet, five inches tall. I calm her by rubbing my hand over the arm she has laid over the couch cushion.

“I got this,” I whisper over to her.

“Viv, let’s go, we’re getting milkshakes,” Emma announces, her hands full with her purse and Vivian’s fanny pack while she waits for my sister at the door.

“Oh fuck yeah, let’s go.” Viv hops off the couch super quickly for being as drunk as she is.

Upon passing Ezekiel, she grabs his forearm and tugs him towards her so that she can say something I can’t hear into his ear. He only offers a small nod in return but it makes Viv happy enough to smile and leave without another word.

“Do I wanna know what she said to you?” I ask, after hearing the door close and lock behind Ezekiel.

“She said she would glue glitter into my entire wardrobe if I didn't make things right with you,” he explains as he sits down on the couch, leaving a decent amount of distance between us.

“She’ll fucking do it, Ez.” I turn so that I am facing him. My body slouches against the soft cushions as I move back slightly, too afraid of how even now I want to wrap my arms around Ezekiel and pull him onto my lap.

“Well, I suppose it is a good thing I am here to explain myself. Threats of glitter aside, I know that I need to apologize for hurting you, Alek.” Ezekiel’s eyes shine as he speaks, glassy in a way I’ve never seen them.

“What about hurting your wife?” I ask, worry in my tone for the hurt I could have caused to her.

“My ex —wife, Alek. Elizabeth and I have been romantically uninvolved since the beginning of this year and officially separated in June. With the issue of our combined finances and inheritances, our divorce took longer than we had expected. Today is the day that it is official,” Ezekiel begins to explain. I sit still, listening and trying my best not to sway from the pitcher of margaritas Viv and I shared earlier.

“It was never something either of us wanted to announce to the world until things were properly severed, though those close to us have known our marriage was over for quite some time,” he continues. He only stops when he sees me open my mouth to say something.

“Why the hell wasn’t I one of those people, Ez? I think you’re kinda close to a guy when you’ve put your dick in his ass.” My words are a little harsh and I know it but

the usual people—pleasing filter is gone right now. I need answers.

“As crass as you make it sound, you are correct. I should have told you but I selfishly kept the information to myself out of fear and from feelings of failure that plagued me at the time. It is no excuse, but when I first met you, Alek, a relationship was the furthest thing I felt I needed at the moment. I look back now and consider myself a fool for many reasons; namely, for thinking the immediate connection between us was forgettable. Even when I tried to erase you from my memory.” A self—deprecating laugh escapes him as he runs his hands down his face and pauses for a moment.

“You are inevitable as death itself and you came at a time when I was so low nothing short of a rebirth would have saved me.”

Oh, fuck this man and his beautiful words.

“Ezekiel, I wish you would have trusted me to understand, just like I trusted you with my past when I fucking cried my heart out to you,” I speak the words softly, a lot of the fire I had in me has died down from my initial reaction when I ran away from his old lady neighbor.

“I know a simple apology will not earn back your trust, Alek. I had planned a special night for us tomorrow. I was going to reveal everything and show you exactly who I am and what I have been going through for the past few months. I was going to show you a house that was empty of so many possessions and memories, spaces I was hoping we could fill together. I was going to show you my journal entries about you and tell you how healing it has been to write about our love.”

Feeling painfully sober now, I let a trickle of tears fall down my face. Ones that had been gathering since the moment Ezekiel stepped into the apartment.

“Sweetheart...” His voice cracks and so does the dam struggling to hold back my tears. Fuck, I don’t want to be crying right now.

“Alek, please let me hold you,” Ezekiel asks and I just nod in response.

He wraps me in his arms, his body now pressed to the side of mine as he guides my head to rest on his shoulder. Crying has always been cathartic for me, but ever since my teens, I had only done it when I was by myself. I hated letting other people see me as anything but fun and flirty.

Crying doesn’t feel bad with Ez. Not when he’s holding me so tightly the physical pressure relieves the emotional turmoil I’ve been keeping in. The truth is, when I first heard that he was married, I knew, I fucking knew he didn’t have a relationship with his wife anymore.

There was no way the Ezekiel I knew would have lied when he bared his soul with his confession of love while he was still married.

What made me spiral this afternoon were the stupid doubts that crept into my mind any time I would think of the what—ifs or question his love for me.

As I sit there, Ezekiel’s lean arms stay wrapped around my frame as he lets me soak his shirt with tears and let it all out. I know there’s nothing this man wouldn’t do for me. It may take some time to quiet the voices questioning our commitment to each other but they are practically gone at this moment.

“Ez.” I sit up, wiping at my face with my t—shirt before looking my boyfriend in the eyes. His sapphire irises stare back at me, hanging on my whisper of his name.

“I’d like to see it all now. Your home. The journal. The spaces you want me to fill. Show me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

EZEKIEL

A particular kind of love.

After agreeing to bring Alek to my home and texting Emma to let her know he would be staying at my house tonight, I practically had to force more water and a snack bar down his throat so that he would sober up a little before our ride.

“They don’t even have the tasty granola bars,” Alek pouted but ate the bar all the same. He made me smile. He always has.

I was only separated from him for a week, but after the events of today, it was like I was seeing him after a lifetime had passed. I despised the feeling. I wish it would have never come down to this. To the point of Alek shedding tears over my mistreatment of him. Whether or not it was intentional of me to do so, I did hurt him and I must atone.

“Are you ready?” I ask softly, holding my hand out so I can get rid of his trash before we depart. Alek nods and stands up, walking over to the entrance of the apartment and lifting an overnight bag off the hall tree by the door.

As I am locking the door, I feel Alek step closer, his chest so close to my back the heat rolls off in waves and absorbs into my body. A nuzzle of his chin on my back has me sighing so deeply that my back pushes against his chest.

“I missed you,” he murmurs into my skin and stays there for a moment, only moving away once he ensures the apartment door is securely locked.

The moment may be over but the promise from the display of affection has my heart leaping into my throat. I know I can still save this. While I am wholly undeserving of his touch, and his forgiveness, Alek has proven to be a gracious man.

He waits for me at the stairs that lead down into the parking lot and I join him, descending step—by—step. Little droplets of rain fall on us as we walk down the stairs. It feels like we are moving in the right direction with every damp stony step we put behind us.

“Peaches was screaming at me earlier today,” Alek comments as he places his overnight bag into the back seat. “It’s like the damn cat was trying to warn me to stay away until tomorrow.” He laughs, though his smile is not as radiant as normal, and then shakes his head before dropping down into the passenger seat and buckling himself in. I follow suit and get myself situated for the short drive home.

“She has quite the dramatic flair to her, doesn’t she?” I respond, speaking fondly of my little deviant at home.

“She good with other people?” Alek asks, his hands fidgeting with the dampened ends of his shirt, wet with his tears. The marks on the shirt are nothing compared to the stains his crying left on my heart.

“Peaches can take some time to warm up to others but I have a feeling she will easily adore you,” I reply and offer my right hand, palm up on the dividing console of the car.

Alek breathes a little easier, grasping my hand and weaving his fingers through mine in a grounding grip.

“I am excited to see your place.”

“We’ll be there soon, baby.”

I see his body relax at the pet name and I am thankful that my presence and my words are having a calming effect, even with all I’ve put him through today.

We sit in silence for a few minutes before turning onto my street. The silence should be awkward but just as I am comfortable with over—sharing information with him, I am also comfortable merely sitting in a quiet car with him.

The soft strokes of his thumb against the skin of my hand tell me that Alek feels the same. My sweet boy anchors himself with touch and I am more than willing to provide it for him.

Pulling into the driveway, I park the car and turn toward Alek.

“Any questions you have, anything you’d like to see, I will give it to you, Alek. Please let me.”

Taking our joined hands, I place Alek’s knuckles on my lips and brush a soft kiss on them, all while keeping my eyes on him.

“Show me your home, angel.” The small smile he gives me reaches his eyes this time. He does not say it aloud, but I believe his statement implies he wants to see more than just my home. He wants to see my heart.

And I am ready to tear myself open.

Alek hasn’t let go of Peaches since we came inside. The traitor is now curled up on his shoulder as he holds her like an infant being burped. Not a touch of jealousy is in

my mind but I am truly surprised that Peaches warmed to him within seconds.

Though, it is fitting in a way, for my cat to love Alek so suddenly since I took to him so quickly as well.

We've toured the downstairs living area, den, dining area, powder room, and guest suite but we spent the majority of our time so far in the kitchen. Alek's eyes shine brightly in the recessed lighting that lines the ceiling. I will admit I have never had much of a mind for cooking so I do not have the same appreciation for the area as Alek does. My parents had this house built with a big family in mind. Sadly, it never came to fruition for them, or me.

Alek looks like he belongs in this space, like he belongs here with me. This is all his and he doesn't even know it yet. I am more than willing to give him everything I have.

"Would you like to come upstairs?" I ask after having ensured he had enough time to look around the kitchen and wet bar area.

"I'd love to, angel." Alek sets Peaches down on her bed in the living room and begins to follow me to the stairs. Before I can make it to the second step, I turn around, my eye level slightly above Alek's in a height reversal.

"Thank you for opening up to me." Alek's rough hand cups my cheek as he brushes his thumb against the stress lines I assume are showing full force underneath my eyes.

"Thank you for giving me a chance to right my wrongs." My hand tangles in his hair for a moment, holding the back of his head as I lean forward to place a soft kiss on his forehead.

A rumble of contentment sounds from his chest, echoing as I lower my hand into his and guide him up the stairs. Once we reach the top, we see the loft area that looks over the den and foyer. As we stare down, I can imagine family gatherings in this house with Alek's siblings and my own family mingling and enjoying each other's company.

I think Alek imagines it too but the wistful smile on his face tells me he is not fully believing it could happen.

Without letting go of his hand, I show him to the rest of the second floor. A few rooms, the ones that had belonged to Elizabeth and her hobbies, sit empty now. Sadness lines his features as I explain how the house had felt empty, even when my ex—wife had lived here. I explained how there were times when we hadn't seen each other for weeks with our busy schedules, and over time, we discovered that we simply wanted time away from each other.

"I'm sorry, Ez," Alek sighs beside me as we continue down another hallway, true concern in his voice for what I divulged.

"I do not want to sound horrible saying this but much of our marriage felt like an obligation in the last few years. Elizabeth had mentioned that it felt like we were robots playing house when she first brought up the idea of divorce. I couldn't find it in me to fight for our union because I knew she was right."

I stop us in front of a set of dark mahogany doors.

"Alek, I need you to believe I have found closure and I'd like you to know a huge part of my healing journey started when I met you. You are not my rebound, as you stated earlier tonight. You are my reason to fight."

"I believe you, angel." Alek dares to blush at the moment as if he didn't already know

I felt so strongly for him. The pink tinge of his cheeks has me desperate to pull him into my arms and kiss him senseless.

“I would be honored to show you my favorite room, if you allow.” I free my hand from his, only to push open the double doors of my study. During our video call, Alek had peeked glimpses of my most sacred space, but now, he is one of the only few people I’ve allowed in my sanctuary in years.

“Holy shit, I knew you were a nerd but damn, Ez. There’s gotta be thousands of books in here.” The shocked look stays on his face as his gaze roams over my bookshelves.

“Truthfully, I lost count of my collection about ten years ago.”

Alek lets out a full body laugh and it has me giddy with emotion.

“Don’t tell me you’ve read all these books?” He looks at me, eyes wide and mouth agape in a look of a mix of fear and admiration.

“Well, no. I’ve read a good majority,” I admit, walking along the shelves on the opposite side of the room. “But it is not as if they expire anytime soon. There are books for reading and there are books for collecting. Many consider them to be separate hobbies.” My fingers roam over a small pile of books on the corner of my desk. They are the ones I wish to read within the week.

Alek catches my movement and walks over to see what books are in my pile.

“The Theory of Dance, and a post—apocalyptic romance?” Alek questions, taking the two books at the top of my stack. “Scratch that, post—apocalyptic, reverse harem romance? Sounds fucking hot.”

“Quite so, actually. I would be happy to read it to you sometime.” My tone is dangerously at the edge of flirtatious and of course, Alek picks up on it immediately.

“Maybe we should set this down in your bedroom, then.” Alek tucks the book at his side, his way of letting me know he’s ready to see my bedroom. Though it is not the last room I need to show him.

“The door behind you leads directly into the bedroom,” I motion toward the lone door off the study. I follow Alek closely as he steps into my bedroom. The room is undressed for the most part. Once Elizabeth moved her things, redesigning the bedroom had been the last of my worries.

“How’d my stuff get up here?” he asks, looking over his shoulder as I close the door behind me. When I turn back around, I see him set the book down on the bed beside his overnight bag.

“I brought it up while you were taking ten minutes to admire the pot filler in the kitchen,” I playfully remark.

“Oh c’mon, you don’t see those in houses really often, you can’t blame me.” Alek explains.

“It is yours to use, Alek.” I step closer to him, removing his hand from where he was rubbing it nervously against his head. “There is one more room I would like to show you before the night is over.”

Alek responds with a nod in agreement. My hand finds its place within his once again as we walk out of the bedroom and into the far end of the hallway. I open a slim door that leads to another set of stairs.

“Seriously, you have a whole other fucking floor?” Alek asks incredulously.

I simply lead him up to the wide and open area. Mirrors line the wall of the simple dance studio. There are ballet barres on parallel sides of the room and a speaker system that lines the back wall.

“Ez? What is this?” Confusion takes over Alek’s expression.

“It was originally my playroom when I lived here with my parents. As you know, after their passing, I lived with my Aunt Harriett and Knight. Harriett had been able to arrange for the upkeep of my family home as she raised both Knight and me. When I came of age and moved back here, the playroom no longer sat right with me. I had it changed into a simple room that we mostly utilized for storage while Elizabeth lived here.”

Alek follows along patiently but I see the curiosity burning in his eyes.

“I wanted to show my commitment to you by giving you a permanent space within my home as you have taken a permanent space within my very being.”

Tears are forming in his eyes again and I am afraid I may have done something wrong.

“I am sorry if I’ve overstepped, Alek, you could convert it to a gym, an extra kitchen, whatever you would?—”

My rambling is cut off by Alek’s plush lips colliding with mine. It was only hours ago that I was dreading never getting to feel his lips on mine again and now I am drowning in his show of affection.

Surrounded by the sound of the pattering rain from the building storm outside, I think to myself how forgiveness has never tasted so sweet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ALEK

Listen. Flexibility is a superpower.

He built me a fucking dance studio.

My mind is racing. I'm in a mental frenzy that matches Ezekiel's claiming kisses and nips of his teeth against my lips. The margaritas have long worn off. The light-headed feeling is all from how thoroughly this man kisses me back.

While I was upset and crying a few hours before, deep down in my heart I knew that Ezekiel must have had his reasons for not fully letting me in. After hearing his story, glimpsing his most special places, and seeing all he prepared for me to feel comfortable within his home, I know, without a doubt, that we are meant to be.

A needy groan leaves Ezekiel and suddenly, I'm pressed against the wall of mirrors with a ballet barre digging into my lower back. His hands spread across my hips, pinning me in place while my arms wrap around his neck and my tongue dives into his mouth. Damn, I am never going to get over how fucking hot it is when he commands my body like that.

"I need you to fuck me, Ez," I whisper the words into his lips. He backs away in order to look up and meet my eyes.

"Gladly, sweetheart. Let's go to the bedroom—" Ez begins to answer.

“No. Here. I want you to take me here.”

A flash of lightning bounces off the mirrors and brightens the room for a moment as Ezekiel’s gaze heats. I lean forward and teasingly take his lip between my teeth, as I reach my hand into my back pocket and take out a small packet of lube.

Ezekiel’s eyes are fluttering closed when I bring the packet up between us.

“This should do.” I grin at him. He opens his eyes and his gaze lands on the blue packet.

“Producing a packet of lube out of nowhere? One might think you’re an apprentice to the BDSM magician,” Ezekiel replies. My laugh makes my body curl closer to his.

A howl of thunder sounds outside. A second later, the lights flicker and we’re surrounded by darkness.

“Now you see me, now you don’t!” I joke and it makes Ezekiel laugh so hard he falls forward onto my chest. I take the opportunity to laugh and hold him as we catch little peeks of one another whenever lightning comes through the window.

“Wait. You had this prepared in your pocket the entire night?” Ezekiel asks. He traces his hand down my arm until he gets to the lube.

“Well, yeah. I was upset. But I was thinking of the makeup sex too,” I admit.

“You truly are a devious little thing,” Ezekiel chides. “Now strip and turn around so I can fuck you hard enough to draw more tears from your eyes.”

I’ve never stripped so goddamn fast in my life. My clothes are in a pile on the floor before Ez even finishes removing his belt and dropping his zipper.

“Turn around, Alek. I will not say it again,” Ezekiel demands as he comes into view in a flash of light. He’s got his belt in his hand and his boxers peek out from his pants. The opened zipper can’t contain the large bulge there.

As much as I’d love to keep stealing looks at him, I know I’ll be rewarded when I listen. And fuck, I want to make him proud of me.

I turn around and place my hands onto the bar.

“Left leg on the bar,” he instructs.

I listen to him without hesitation and stretch to rest my leg on the bar. Just as I’m settling into the position, I feel a smooth, cool texture trail against my thighs. The belt.

“I am going to use this—” Ezekiel emphasizes his words with a hard hit of the leather on my ass. I thrust forward in reaction. “—to tie your leg to the bar. I am going to need you wide and open, Alek. Do you agree?”

“Yes, Sir,” I groan. My cock rests heavy on the bar. The tip is already leaking precum and making a fucking mess as it presses against the mirror.

Ezekiel makes quick work of wrapping and securing the belt around my calf. A hard tug has him humming in approval. I’m completely at his mercy in this position. But let’s face it, I’m always at his mercy. In any position.

I still can’t see much more than what I can catch with the small bursts of light from the storm. Somehow, not being able to see shit makes all my other senses heightened. I can smell the rain from outside just as strongly as I smell Ezekiel’s woodsy and sharp scent beside me.

“Aleksander,” Ezekiel calls out. His fingers run from the belt, up my thigh, and settle at the top of my ass. I wait for him to continue speaking.

“Did you honestly think I would do anything to jeopardize what we have?” he asks. I can hear from his displeased tone that he does not actually want my reply.

“That I would want to have you as a dirty secret on the side?” he asks, raising his voice. One of his hands smacks down on my asscheek. And then the other. My body tenses but I stand still, letting him continue.

“You are worth more than that, Alek. You are my first thought every morning and my last thought as I drift to sleep, hoping I will be blessed with dreams of you. You are my everything. ”

There’s a tightening in my chest as I hear him declare his love for me. I push my lips together to hold in a sob that threatens to escape.

“I love you, Alek. Will you let me show you?” he asks.

I nod in reply, forgetting that he is unable to see me right now.

“Words, sweetheart. I need to hear your consent.” Ezekiel softly rubs my side.

“Yes, Ez. Please show me you love me.”

I hear a thud behind me but I’m unable to really turn around in this position to see where the noise came from. My thighs tense when I feel Ezekiel’s hands push to spread me open from below. I realize he’s on his knees behind me. A hint of warm breath is the only warning I get before I feel his warm, wet tongue move up my thighs and to my hole.

“ Fuck!” I bang my head against the mirrors in front of me. I try my best to stay still even when my cock is begging me for more friction.

“Be careful, baby. I just bought those for you,” Ezekiel swats at my ass once again and dives back into licking me. His hands are gone for a moment and I hear a quick tear of the lube packet. Shivers go through my body when I feel one of his fingers inch closer to my hole and hook past the ring of muscle, gliding in covered in spit and lube.

“I cannot wait to bury myself in you, baby.” Ezekiel’s face rests against my ass and the stubble there scrapes my skin. Another finger joins his first and a loud moan rips from me when he curls his fingers inward.

“Then don’t wait. Fuck me now, Ez. Please ,” I beg. My muscles are tense in anticipation. A third finger spreads me wider for him.

“I will not risk hurting you. I will feed you my cock when I deem you ready,” he replies. Ezekiel emphasizes his statement with a rough bite on my ass. His fingers keep pumping inside of me and every movement makes my cock slide against the cold mirror. Just as I was about to start begging again, I finally feel Ezekiel’s fingers leave me.

The random flashes of lightning give me a chance to see Ezekiel’s reflected form standing behind me in the mirror. He’s still in all of his clothes but his cock is out and he’s spreading the lube on himself unrushed. He smirks when he catches me staring. I don’t blame him, I’m practically drooling over his cock right now.

Ezekiel walks forward until he’s pressed behind me. His right arm wraps around my torso and his hand settles at the base of my throat like it belongs there. The blunt head of his cock pushes against me and he slides in with a wild thrust. A creak from the bar joins our combined moans.

I feel Ezekiel's hand move into the space between the bar and the wall of mirrors where my cock aches as it hangs over the wood. A thrust jolts me forward at the same time his fingers circle my tip.

"You've been making a mess, baby," he comments. His voice is deep and sultry, matching the lust fueling my body right now. He plunges into me, using gravity to sink me down onto him at the same time.

I gasp when he moves his fingers down the head of my cock, pulling the skin back and exposing my leaking slit. My body is shaking. My mind is empty of any thoughts that aren't about him claiming me.

An unyielding thrust, a tightening of his hand, slick from my drooling precum, takes me right to the edge of my sanity.

"I can't— I can't hold back, Ez. It's too fucking good!" I scream and he grasps my throat harder, cutting off my breath even more. I can tell from his heavy breathing that he's close too. Fuck, I need to feel his cum inside of me. I'm so desperate to feel it that I begin to sob within his hold.

"I need you to come, Alek. Come on my hand, come in this space I created just for you. Mark it," he pants into my ear. His thrusts become brutal, lifting me several inches upwards every time.

"I'm gonna come, Ez!" I cry out. My body stiffens as the intensity of my orgasm causes my vision to fade. I feel myself going limp but Ezekiel commands my body and holds me close until I feel him tense and then relax in his release. He traces his hands down my sides soothingly and backs up as he pulls out of me slowly.

Ez helps keep me balanced as he reaches over and unbuckles the belt from my leg strapped to the ballet barre. We quickly find out how important the support from the

belt was. A yelp of surprise leaves my lips when we start tumbling down toward the floor.

Ezekiel lets out a pained groan as all 225 lbs of me crashes down on him.

“Sorry, my leg fell asleep.” I chuckle but do my best to roll off of him. I end up crashing right into the mirrors when I do. Ezekiel howls with laughter at my pained sound. Something cold and sticky on the mirror distracts me from our shared giggles.

“Shit. We gotta clean that up.” The streaks of my cum on the mirror are highlighted even in the low light. I turn to see Ez tucking himself into his pants and getting his phone out of his pocket to use as a flashlight. The phone creates enough light that I can see Ez now. An expression of bliss covers his face, eyes relaxed and glasses all crooked.

“Well it’s technically your space to maintain, Alek,” Ezekiel states. He pulls his sweater over his head and moves over to where I’m still laying on the floor.

“Yeah, well you’re the one that fucked the cum out of me,” I reply, taking the offered clothing and wiping myself down with it. “Hey, do you think we can get some hooks in the ceiling?”

“Do I want to know what they’re for?” he asks with a questioning glance.

“Oh, you definitely do, angel.”

CHAPTER FORTY

EZEKIEL

Happy endings... not like that, you pervert.

Two Weeks Later

October has gone by in a whirlwind of experiences and emotions. It all began on the night Alek trusted me to reveal my life to him and to show him the places I had carved out for him. Both figuratively within my heart, and literally as I had constructed a dance studio for him within my home. I fondly remember the storm that passed by that night, illuminating the dance studio as I fucked him against the ballet barre and stared into his bliss—filled eyes through the floor length mirror. The memory of it has me shifting in my seat at quite an inconvenient time.

Alek has been staying at my house more often than not, much to my absolute pleasure. I don't think I would ever want to experience this house alone again, much less without my Aleksander sharing the space. The man has invaded every nook and cranny in my home, but he usually takes his sanctuary in the kitchen and dance studio. One would think hearing his heavy footing as he practices would pester me. However, I find comfort in the rhythmic steps falling from the ceiling of my study. I equate it to how I love to hear Alek's heartbeat as we fall asleep together nearly every night. I should ask him to move in with me, though I am not entirely sure he would be ready for such a big step. Having someone move in with you only after two months of dating is not unheard of from what I've gathered, but it is still unconventional. A little chuckle leaves me. As if Alek and I have been conventional about anything.

“I assume you still prefer your bourbon neat?” my cousin asks from beside me, pulling me from my reflection. I turn away from the window facing the backyard to see Knight holding two highball glasses at the entrance of the den.

“Are you being driven to drink already?” I ask him, rearranging myself to sit more upright while I offer him a seat in the armchair beside me.

“Harriett has found herself new best friends and they are practically swooning over their celebrity crushes while downing cosmos on the patio,” Knight explains. He steps further into the room and hands me the whisky before he unfastens the button of his suit jacket and sits down.

“The ladies are lively, aren’t they?” I ask, hiding a proud smile behind my glass as I take a sip of the amber liquid.

Emma, Vivian, and Aunt Harriett have somehow formed an alliance in the last hour or so. Upon first entering my home on Knight’s arm, Harriett had immediately zoned in on the gorgeous cocktail in Emma’s hand and loudly asked who she had to seduce to get that drink. Vivian had taken Harriett from Knight’s arm within seconds and announced she had been thoroughly seduced with that ‘banging’ dress. The three women have not been seen since, though we could still certainly hear them from outside.

My heart feels as full as my house is occupied for our first family brunch. Along with Knight and the ladies, Thomas is also roaming within the house. From what I know, I don’t think Alek and Rhett have even left the kitchen since they arrived. The two wanted to dive into the preparations immediately.

“Did you ever think this kind of joy would be possible for you? Given all we’ve been through?” Knight asks, a solemn expression on his face as he swirls the liquid in his glass.

While I know he is referring to our childhood and shared tragedy, I also sense that there is more at play given the severity of his question.

“No. I did not. After my separation, I believed this kind of happiness was reserved for others, not for me. Or it was something only found in fairytales. It took meeting Alek for me to realize this,” I motion in a general direction to all the people who have become so special to me, “was what I needed and what I deserved.”

“It’s what you deserve as well, Knight,” I conclude.

“Tell that to the person I was two divorces ago.” He laughs but there is no humor. My cousin has always had his demons but something seems to be haunting him more as of late.

“Kn–” The heartfelt speech I planned in my head was interrupted by Rhett letting us know food would be ready in fifteen minutes.

“I’ll be taking a walk before we’re seated.” Knight drinks the rest of his bourbon, stands up, and leaves without another word.

“Anyway dude, I still can’t believe I was the other woman just a few weeks ago.” Alek comments to Rhett as he stirs a pot of soup but from the sly smirk on his lips I can tell he saw me enter the kitchen.

“You were never the other woman, Alek. You are my man , an annoying one at that, but mine all the same.” I walk over to the stove and wrap my arms around his waist the second I’m within reach of him. Setting his utensil down onto a spoon rest, Alek twists within my hold to face me. Strong arms loop around my neck and he invades my space so my senses are filled with nothing except him.

“Call me yours again and we’ll need to sneak off and make good on that, angel.” his

pouty lips murmur, so close they're nearly pressed against my own.

"Y'all know I can hear you," Rhett announces, side—eyeing us from his position in front of the cutting board.

Alek's answering laugh is interrupted as I press my lips against his, stealing a quick, deep kiss. He groans against my lips and pushes himself closer for more.

"No, no sir. Y'all either need to take it upstairs or let me join in 'cus I've been single way too long to be around this shit."

"Rhett gross, that's my brother." Breaking our kiss, Alek and I peer over just in time to see Thomas shoulder—bump Rhett and stand beside him.

"You need help peeling these?" Thomas asks Rhett, already holding up the vegetable peeler and a large carrot. Alek and I stand at the side, watching the interaction unfold.

"Yeah, nice and slow big boy." A wink from Rhett causes a blush to form on the fair skin of Thomas' cheekbones.

Without saying a word, Alek tugs me backward and into the alcove of the wet bar. From his expression, I can tell there's a bit of confusion lingering from the scene we just witnessed but he does not elaborate on it.

"How's it going out there?" he asks instead.

"It's manageable chaos," I reply. "It would appear Emma, Viv, and Aunt Harriett have become best friends."

"Sounds about right." Alek leans his hip against the counter and crosses his arms. "What about Knight?" he questions.

“He has been testy this morning.”

“Knight’s being testy? You’re joking,” Alek replies sarcastically.

The response earns him a sharp glare from me.

“Watch your tone, wicked boy.”

“You’re just proving it’s a family trait, Ez.” His grin is wide and his eyes mischievous. Alek knows exactly what he is doing. Our dynamic of give—and—take is one that I will always play into.

Grabbing at his crossed arms, I wedge my hand in the space between his forearms and chest and pull him down to meet my eye level.

“I think you deserve to be put over my knee tonight.” My voice holds a dark promise.

Alek appears unperturbed except for the bobbing of his Adam’s apple. The motion tells me his cock is most likely moving in a similar fashion. I have the impish urge to reach down to check but ingrained propriety prevents me.

Not backing down, Alek purses his lips against the corner of my mouth, both kissing and whispering in one motion.

“I’m looking forward to it, Sir.”

Unable to resist, I kiss him with such ferocity it almost drowns out the loud thump of his body against the wall of the pantry. He kisses me back as if he is starving and the sound of a timer beeping in the kitchen does nothing to break our magnetic pull.

But the sound of a throat clearing nearby is what finally moves us apart.

“Uh, Rhett was saying there’s about ten minutes left on the food if someone could start setting the table.” Thomas stands a few feet away from us, shyly avoiding eye contact with both his brother and me.

“I will take care of it. Thank you, Thomas,” I reply, watching him leave after he gives Alek and me a curt nod.

“You are making an exhibitionist out of me, baby.”

“You can’t be saying shit like that, Ez,” Alek groans and adjusts himself in front of me. I have to begin guiding him back into the kitchen otherwise my previous comment may become a prophecy instead of a joke.

“I will see you at the table, Alek.” I swat at his ass flirtatiously and turn to make my way into the dining room.

As luck would have it, there are three people at the ready to assist in setting the table, I just need to convince them to set their drinks down for a moment.

Deciding to make myself known after a bout of feminine laughter, I approach my aunt, Emma, and Vivian.

“Ladies, may I ask for your assistance with setting the table?”

They all turn to me in an almost eerily synchronized manner.

“I suppose we each have one hand free,” Harriett agrees but makes her reluctance known. She holds out a dainty hand to Vivian.

“Do help me up, girl.”

The three of them make their way to the empty dining table, with me in step behind them.

“And what is the tone of this brunch, Ezekiel? We must know to properly set up.” Harriett walks over to the ornate dining cabinet and begins looking over the options of napkins, plates, and silverware.

“From the state of those in this room, one might think the theme is a bachelorette party,” I comment, pointedly directing my eyes over to where Vivian and Emma are giggling as I attempt to hold back a smirk.

“Hmm. Well perhaps it would be more fitting if the theme were divorce party, would it not?” Harriett asks, her question rhetorical and meant to match my sarcasm. It certainly had to be inherited from somewhere.

“Oh shit, she got you, dude!” Vivian hollers as she clasps my shoulder.

“Touché, Harriett,” I sigh in defeat with a smile still on my lips. My aunt gives me one of her secretly sincere smiles that she doesn’t let anyone but me and Knight see. I approach the cabinet and join in her search for dinnerware.

A few months earlier, a joke like that would have put me in a state of gloom. However, as I search within myself, I find no lingering sorrow. Elizabeth had even sent over a friendly note and basket of pastries for this brunch. The gesture filled my heart just as the pastries had filled Alek’s stomach early this morning.

“An autumnal color scheme will do,” I comment and begin to pull out napkins in shades of brown and sienna.

Alek is sitting beside me. His hand is wrapped around my thigh underneath the table in a possessive way that has a steady undercurrent of heat pumping throughout my

body. If his touch wasn't there to ground me, I have a feeling this gathering would have felt surreal.

Emma sits at my other side, listening to the story Harriett is telling as we all settle in for our brunch. Alek and Rhett have done an amazing job with the menu, highlighting the fresh seasonal fruit and vegetables they shopped for this morning. Fragrant, freshly baked calabaza empanadas, a glistening and colorful salad, and a variety of cheese and fruits run the length of the table with a steaming pumpkin soup sitting at the center of it all. The two had insisted this brunch would be best served family style.

Family . I look around the table at the mismatched group of individuals who have somehow found a sense of belonging with one another. It is beautiful.

Harriett is seated at one head of the eight—person table, while Thomas sits opposite her. In front of me is Knight, wedged between Vivian and Rhett, and of course, he is looking solemn as ever.

My eyes catch on Vivian picking a piece of cheese off of the charcuterie and eating the nibble with an impatient look. Knight sees it as well and I can see him fail to contain a smirk that looks to be part admiration and part incredulous.

“As fabulous as this looks, we are not only here to stare at the food, or am I wrong?” Harriett speaks up, effectively quieting and commanding the room.

“Did you get your pictures, sweetheart?” I take a second to ask Alek before I begin to proceed with inviting everyone to serve themselves. Alek is in the beginning stages of widening his client base for his catering business and needs the pictures for his website.

“Yeah, I got it, Ez.” Alek smiles, and a grateful tilt of his lips accompanies the happy

crinkles in his eyes. Nodding in reply, I stand up and shift my stance so that I can see everyone at the table. I hold one of Emma's apple cider mimosas in my hand.

"Thank you all for joining in this lovely brunch provided by Alek and Rhett." Looking at the two, I raise my glass in thanks. "And the lovely cocktail provided by Emma."

"Yes, it does go down quite easily," Harriett comments, only having just stopped taking a sip from her glass.

"That's what she—" Rhett snickers, though he is interrupted and mutters an 'ow' before he has a chance to finish his statement. I shoot a thankful expression over to Thomas.

"I am sure I am not the first or the only one to think how grateful I am for all of us having found each other. As many of you know, my family has only consisted of myself, Harriett, and Knight for so long, but I am delighted and fortunate to have the Delgados and Delgado—adjacent family members joining us here today."

Placing my hand on Alek's shoulder, I stare down into his hazel eyes for a moment before continuing.

"And to think it was all made possible from a botched chemical face peel," I add, unable to keep myself from a dig at my aunt.

Knight bursts out laughing, nearly tipping his glass over in his hysterics while the rest of the table either looks confused or, if they were present at the replanned gala in early September, they laugh along before explaining the joke to their table mates. Harriett, on the other hand, narrows her eyes at me and I can see her beginning to plot her revenge.

“Without further cause for my aunt to become more angry with me, please everyone, dig in.”

A small cheer from the table echoes against the walls before we all settle in and have our first meal as a family. In a manner incredibly similar to our first meeting, Alek grins as he feeds me a flaky piece of empanada. At least this time I have the decency to not nearly choke to death on the morsel.

Whether it was divine intervention or the simple allure of human nature that first brought us together, I am certain that I will cherish being within Alek’s grace every day for the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

In which Batman tops Superman for once.

ALEK— HALLOWEEN

“ I am questioning the accuracy of your shorts, Alek. How is Batman supposed to fight crime in them? They do not seem ergonomic in the slightest.”

Ezekiel’s eyes stare at me through the mirror in his bathroom as I adjust myself into my dance belt. The thick frames of his glasses are really doing it for me in that outfit. I can also see my leather shorts in question dangling from the tips of his fingers as he waits for my comment.

“Batman doesn’t wear a leather crop top either, Ez but it shows off my abs—” I manage to reach behind him and snatch the small black and yellow piece of fabric from his hand before Ezekiel interrupts me.

“Quite marvelously, I might add,” Ezekiel’s breath trails over the sliver of exposed skin between my mask and my cape. Simultaneously, his cold fingers drag down the skin of my abdomen, the pads of each one tracing the muscles there. I tilt my head toward him and my lips are instantly lost within the short waves of his dark hair.

“Just like those shorts are gonna show off my ass,” I murmur against his soft locks.

“You’re telling me you aren’t showing off right now, baby?” A sharp bite accompanies his question. More of Ezekiel’s front presses into my back and he teases

his fingers along the band of the dance belt. A jock strap is a uniform that goes underneath my burlesque costumes so the thin bands do nothing to cover the globes of my ass. Ezekiel could bend me over this counter right now and fuck right into me if he wanted to. The thought makes me arch my back and shamelessly rub against his dick.

“What do you need, Aleksander?” Ezekiel’s hand cups me through the thick fabric. His other hand wraps around my neck and the strap of the cape digs into my throat underneath his tight grip. I fucking love the way it stings.

“You, Ez.” I find his eyes in the mirror, mine are wide and hazy with lust while his are sharp and dangerous. The connection breaks when Ezekiel roughly spins me around to face him. His lips are on me within a breath and while it wasn’t the longest kiss, the possessive nature of it has me whimpering and chasing it as he takes a few steps back.

“On your knees, sweetheart.” Ezekiel softly slaps the side of my face. “And the mask stays on.”

Oh fuck. I’ve had wet dreams about this. Tom Welling in Smallville was a goddamn sexual awakening in my early teens.

I’m on my knees faster than I’d like to admit. Dark, pleated pants fill my vision and I slowly start looking up Ezekiel’s body. He agreed to dress up as Superman’s nerdy alter—ego for the Halloween party at the Garden of Eden tonight, but only after first refusing to wear the ‘onesie with the red underwear’ as he called it. Instead, Ezekiel sports a half—opened white oxford shirt, a loosened black tie, and a t—shirt with a printed Superman symbol.

“I had reservations about having you keep the mask on at first,” Ezekiel confesses, cupping my jaw and tracing the edge of my mask near my laugh lines. I hear his belt come undone but I don’t dare break my gaze from his face. His thumb in my mouth is

my reward for keeping my attention on him. I stick out my tongue to taste him, only to have him shove his thumb in as deep as he can.

“Then I thought better of it. This beautiful mouth is all I need and it is at the ready for me in this mask, isn’t it? Would you like to have your mouth used, pretty boy?”

“Yes, Sir,” I mumble and nod desperately, the action causing spit to drip down the sides of my mouth and onto Ezekiel’s hand still placed at my chin.

Another shuffle of fabric reaches my ears before there’s a thick and heavy cock in front of me. Fuck.

“You really are the man of steel, huh?” The question slips through my lips before I can help it. Mind filter be damned. My involuntary chuckle lasts a half second until Ezekiel presses the swollen head of his cock into my mouth.

“Shut up and suck my cock, Alek.”

Keeping eye contact, I swallow his cock down my throat and wrap my hands around his thighs to pull him in even closer. I’d like to say that I can’t believe I’m on my knees in front of him in nothing but a tiny crop top, a jockstrap, and a fucking mask and cape, but this isn’t that crazy of a scenario for us. I’ve learned Ezekiel’s down for just about anything.

“You truly are a little slut for my cock, aren’t you?” Ezekiel’s hands grip the ears of my latex mask and he begins using them as handles to guide my mouth up and down his shaft.

Right when I begin to struggle for a breath, Ezekiel pulls me up so I’m back on my feet and looking down at him. He looks at me intensely, keeping eye contact even when his hand reaches into my dancer’s belt and shoves the material down. The elastic stretches against my sack like a makeshift cockring.

“I would like for you to use that pretty cock to fuck me, Alek.”

With a sweep of my arm underneath him, I pull Ezekiel up against my chest before I start walking us over to the bed. This won't be the first time I've fucked him but it's still new. Being the dom that he is, Ezekiel still demands control even when I'm ramming into his ass. It's hot as fuck.

I drop Ezekiel onto the bed and pull out a bottle of lube from the nightstand.

“Open me up, baby,” Ezekiel both commands and pleads, trying his best to shove his boxers and pants down his legs. I catch his hands and stop him from taking them all the way off. I'm going to teach him an exercise in restraint tonight. Literally.

He stares at me, trying to figure out what I'm doing as I twist the fabric between his ankles until it is taut and his feet are unable to slip through the pant legs. He raises an eyebrow at me.

“You'd have me at your mercy?” he asks. I push down on the fabric between my fingers, making his knees bend and his thighs open for me. Bent in half and completely open to me, I take my chance and spit directly onto his exposed hole. Ezekiel gasps in surprise and his body writhes in pleasure.

“Good lord, I cannot believe I am admitting this, but the mask is arousing. Not a word of this to anyone, Alek.”

“Yeah, yeah. You're lucky Batman is a good guy,” I growl at him, easily popping open the top of the lube bottle and squirting some onto him. The clear liquid mixes with the spit as I circle a finger around his twitching hole. My index finger eases in as I keep pressure on the makeshift restraint with my other hand.

“More, Alek, I need more.”

Goddamn, do I love hearing Ez beg for me.

“More, like what, Ez? Like this?” I ask, moving two fingers into him and pressing upwards against his walls. He whines when I press the tips of my fingers directly against his prostate.

“Or this?” I ask again, a satisfied smirk on my face when I feel his body shake against me once I’m three fingers deep into his ass.

“Your cock, you bastard. I need your perfect cock in me, now .” Ezekiel’s eyes fly open, his hair disheveled and glasses askew as he scowls at me.

Without hesitation, my fingers leave his hole and I lean my full weight onto him. His ankles are near his ears when my cock first enters him, seating deeply like it belongs in there. It fucking does.

“Fuck!” Ez screams and claws at my sides. I can’t tell if he’s trying to ground himself or pull me even closer. My angel’s face is blocked slightly from the restraint until I pull it down to see his expression. He looks like he’s seconds from coming. As much as Ez loves to top, the guy really does have a sensitive ass. He’s come a handful of times just from having me in him.

“Never gonna get tired of this tight ass, Ez.” Using the restrains to my advantage, I pull down on the fabric with every thrust up and impale Ezekiel. One hard thrust after the other, his body is completely in my control.

He’s a whimpering mess underneath me, the pleasure on his face so intense that he’s having a hard time keeping his eyes open. I’m not fucking having that.

“Open your eyes,” I order him and I really plant my shins onto the bed to fuck into him even faster and harder.

Watery azul eyes meet my intense stare and there's a line of sweat beading on his forehead. My lips curl up in a satisfied snarl seeing him in this state. Knowing I'm the one that made Mr. Prim—and—Proper cry and scream in pleasure that I'm in control of.

“You are gonna come on my cock. You are gonna thank me for fucking you so hard that you'll still feel me in your ass. Next. Week.” My last two words are punctuated with thrusts that have the bed skidding on the floor.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Ezekiel manages to follow my order as his legs shake and his eyes roll to the back of his head. Fuck . With the way his ass is pulsating around me, I'm right behind him.

Oh shit. His damn costume! Frantically I look for something to catch Ezekiel's cum as he screams my name. I feel around for the bedsheets and barely manage to wrap them around his cock to catch the cum spurting from it.

Relief and pleasure mix into one as I come inside Ez, my cock unable to stay still even when it is spent inside of him. The roaring in my ears finally calms and my breaths begin to sync with the man laying underneath me. If it wasn't for the growing smile on his face, I would have thought Ez passed out. I pull my cock free from his twitching hole, taking a second to admire my cum leaking from it while I hold him spread open.

“Would it be too much trouble to ask you to keep this costume on hand?” His whisper is hoarse and barely audible but it has me laughing as I move his legs to untwirl the fabric restraints.

“No trouble at all, Ez.”

Ezekiel winces a little as he sits up, looking down and noticing the pooling pile of cum underneath his ass. I stand and back up a little to take off my jockstrap.

Thankfully, I have a few extra here from when I go to shows after hanging out with Ez. I walk over to the bathroom and toss my dirty strap into the laundry. I pick up a clean towel from the linen closet on my way back.

“Alek?” Ezekiel asks, looking around the bed. “I’m unsure of how to ask this but where is my cum?” He scratches at his temple.

I hand Ezekiel the towel and look over to where I thought the sheets had caught his release but I don’t see anything there.

What the fuck?

I bend over the side of the bed to see if it fell or if I grabbed a pillow or something.

“Oh, I see,” Ezekiel comments and it sounds like he’s trying to hold back his laughter. I turn around to see what he means and I catch him eyeing the bottom of my cape. There’s a huge white stain on the bottom corner of the satin fabric.

“I really liked this cape,” I sigh, picking up the corner of it and inspecting it. There’s no cleaning it off.

“Would it be the wrong time to say that I liked it as well? It felt exquisite as I came into it.” Ezekiel keeps laughing as he cleans himself off and puts his costume back into place.

“Fuck it. Cut the cape. It was worth it.” I shrug, my defeat not feeling as bad as it should have. Ez kisses me on the cheek after I get the rest of my costume on.

“I’ll get the scissors, sweetheart.”

EZEKIEL

By some miracle we manage to make it to the Halloween party on time. Alek and I walk hand—in—hand through the parking lot to reach the decorated main entrance. A blaring neon sign reading ‘Hotter Than Hell’ illuminates the club entrance while cutouts of flames rise from the ground to really seal the theme.

The club entrance is without a bouncer tonight as there are no lines of show attendees to manage. From what Alek described earlier, this is a fun and casual event for the Garden of Eden staff and their invited guests. Alek also mentioned that this is the first year Knight has had any actual involvement with the planning of the event.

Viv greets us outside of the double doors leading into the club in a Phantom of the Opera costume. And no, she is not Christine. She is the Phantom. Half of her visage is illuminated in neon red while the other is covered by the Phantom mask. A tight frown is visible on the exposed part of her face as she eyes Alek’s costume.

It’s almost as if the tatter of Alek’s cape summoned the costume designer herself. I stand to the side, praying that she does not make a connection to what really happened to the cape. But I also wouldn’t be shocked if Alek outright confessed to her.

“Alek! Is there a reason you decided to butcher your cape?” Vivian asks as she attempts to grab at Alek’s ruined article of clothing.

“Chill, Viv. Just had an accident,” Alek swats her hand away from him. “Trust me, you don’t want to touch that.” His roguish expression paired with the obvious reddening of my cheeks gives us away, I fear.

“Oh, you guys are fucking gross,” Vivian exclaims, shaking her hands in an exaggerated manner.

“It really was a beautifully made cape, Vivian,” I say, in an attempt to placate her.

“He said it was exquisite to come on,” Alek blurts and wraps his hand around my waist to tug me closer, completely ignoring my look of mortification.

“Alek!” Vivian and I yell in unison.

The front doors of the club swing open and nearly hit Vivian. I completely welcome this disruption if it keeps us from continuing the previous conversation.

A tall figure dressed in a black suit, billowy white shirt, and.... a Phantom of the Opera mask suddenly joins our group. The thick mustache that fights the cover of the mask gives the person away.

“Hello, Knight,” I greet my cousin with a smile and a nod of acknowledgement.

Vivian’s narrowed eyes look as if she is trying to shoot Knight with lasers where he stands. I am once again thankful to Knight for diverting the death stare from me. Beside me, Alek snickers as he observes the situation and it almost has me losing my composure.

“Did you copy my costume?” she asks Knight.

“Really, Vivian. You’re asking if I’ve copied your costume as if you are the only person who has ever enjoyed Phantom of the Opera?” Knight replies. His arms are now crossed over his chest, mirroring Vivian’s stance.

“That’s our cue to go, angel,” Alek whispers close to my ear. I let my partner pull me into the club and we make our way over to the bar.

“What was going on out there?” I ask Alek as I am dragged behind him.

“I don’t know. They’ve been having little tiffs for a few weeks now that Knight’s been at the club more often,” Alek replies. His muscled form eventually settles onto a

barstool and he maneuvers me toward one next to him.

“They’re both stubborn as fuck so it doesn’t surprise me,” Alek shrugs it off and waves down one of the bartenders hired for the party.

I process what Alek has recounted as he finishes ordering drinks for us. From what I’ve witnessed, and knowing how Knight can be, I definitely have an inkling that there is more going on between those two. But it certainly isn’t my place to gossip on pure conjecture.

“Ez?” Alek calls my name and it pulls me from my thoughts.

“I asked if you wanted to dance a bit with me?” he repeats. His eyes are wide and eager with hope.

“Of course, baby,” I lean forward and place a gentle kiss at the corner of his upturned lips. “You’ll have to forgive me now for my missteps. We can’t all be incredibly talented in that area.”

Alek laughs cheerfully as he picks up our drinks from the bartop and hands me a cranberry vodka.

“If you take direction like you did earlier tonight, I think you’ll do just fine, angel.” Alek sticks out his tongue and slowly licks around the straw of his drink before wrapping it in his lips and sucking loudly. His ruined cape will be a sacrifice for nothing if he makes my cock leak into the very pants he tried to save.

“You are going to be the biggest cock tease tonight, aren't you?” I raise an eyebrow in question.

“Fucking bet on it, Ez.” Alek bites his bottom lip as he runs his free hand up my inner thigh.

“I wouldn’t have you any other way, my wicked boy.”