

Chapter Twelve

Alex

My stomach is in knots as the sky begins to lighten from a velvety black to a pale grayish blue. Rafael's hard warm body is pressed against my back, one arm locked possessively around my waist.

I know I should have come clean — especially after he told me his secret. The big billionaire alpha stood there and bared his soul, but I was too much of a coward to do the same.

Rafael would hate me if he knew what I was — why I came to work as his assistant. I know I have to tell him when he wakes up. I should have told him out on the deck, but I was too stunned by his revelation that I'm his fated mate.

Part of me thinks I must have slipped getting out of Rafael's hot tub and hit my head on the stone border. Wolf shifters can't be real. Werewolves belong in folklore and bad teen movies. I wouldn't believe it for a second if I hadn't seen him change before my very eyes.

A low buzzing noise reaches my ears, and I see my phone screen glowing through the threadbare fake leather of my handbag. Careful not to wake Rafael, I lift his huge forearm and slide out from under the covers.

My bag is hanging from a hook along the side of the armoire, and when I pull it out, my stomach clenches. It's Roger, my editor.

Wincing, I pull on one of the luxurious white robes hanging in the armoire and step out onto the terrace. It's starting to snow again, each flake melting in the air before it hits the steaming surface of the hot tub.

"This is Alex," I choke, feeling like a monster.

"I was just calling to check in," says Roger. "It's been nothing but radio silence for days."

"It's Thanksgiving weekend," I bite out, crossing my arms over my chest to stave off the bitter cold.

"Yes, and the Black Friday special edition just went live on our site. The news doesn't take a holiday, Alex. So tell me where you're at with the MatchAI piece."

Grinding my back teeth together, I glance through the frosted glass panes at Rafael sprawled on the bed. Asleep, he doesn't look like the asshole CEO who insulted my intelligence or the

boss who whipped me for switching up his lunch. He looks like the man I fell in love with here — the man who wants to make me his mate.

I swallow. “There’s no story there,” I manage to get out. “I thought this position would give me access, but it’s just a bunch of boring admin stuff.”

“Alex . . .” Roger sounds irritated, and I can practically see my editor rubbing his forehead in exasperation. “You once pitched me a story based on a conversation you overheard in the portajohns at Burning Man. Your position puts you inches away from the most powerful CEO in America, and you’re telling me you’ve got nothing?”

“What can I say? Cabrera Garcia is clean.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting you to uncover a web of criminal activity after three days on the job. We’re not The Washington Post, Alex. I’m not asking for Watergate here. In this country, people assume billionaires are corrupt. They don’t care about that. They want to know more about Rafael Cabrera Garcia on a personal level. What does he eat? What’s his morning routine? How does he treat his staff?”

“I’m sorry, Roger.” I clear my throat. “But I can’t give you that.”

My editor lets out a breath of disgust. “Well, I hate to do this, Alex, but you know UltraComm is forcing me to make cuts. If you’re saying you don’t have anything to give me, consider this your last assignment.”

I close my eyes as his words wash over me, bracing for the impact. This is exactly what I was hoping to avoid these last three days, but instead of panic, devastation, and anger, I’m surprised to feel . . . nothing.

I nod before remembering that Roger can’t see me and then clear my throat. “I’ll be by to clean out my desk on Monday.”

I hang up before I start to hyperventilate, staring at the home screen of my phone.

I’ve never been fired before. I’ve been laid off plenty of times due to budget constraints, but I’ve never been fired outright.

The sun is just beginning to rise on the mountains, turning the snow-covered peak a stunning shade of pink. I take a deep breath, and a rogue snowflake tickles my nose. A shiver of excitement rolls through me, and I wonder if I’ve lost my mind.

I’m free — free to think about something other than my story. Free to find another job. Free to love Rafael.

Feeling strangely giddy about my abrupt dismissal, I let myself back in the bedroom. I know I should go home and start polishing my résumé, but I just want to crawl back under the covers and spend the morning making love to the man who thinks I'm his mate.

But the instant I walk into the room, I can tell that something is wrong. Rafael is standing by the armoire in a pair of low-slung jeans, the contents of my bag at his feet. My tattered handbag is still hanging from the hook, but the bottom has finally ripped. Pens, receipts, sunglasses, and scraps of notebook paper are scattered over the floor, along with my wallet and keys.

Rafael doesn't look up when I walk in. He's holding something shiny and plastic-looking in his hands, and when I realize what it is, my stomach drops to my knees.

"Alex Larson?" Rafael says, reading off my press pass. "Your real name is Alex Larson?"

"Yes," I say, my chest squeezing with a mix of horror, regret, and despair.

Rafael whips his head around to look at me, and I'm alarmed to see that his eyes are that molten shade of gold. "You're a journalist." He spits out the word as though it left a bad taste in his mouth, and I realize what he must be thinking — that I slept with him to gain his trust.

"Yes," I whisper, heart pounding in my throat.

Rafael gives a jerky nod, a muscle popping in his jaw. "And you're writing a story about MatchAI . . . or maybe about me."

"I was," I murmur. "But I swear I didn't go into this looking to deceive you. I applied for the job as research for a story. I never expected to get it. When I got the call that I'd been selected —"

"You thought you could use the position to get closer to me."

All my explanations and justifications form a bitter lump in my throat, and I press my lips together. What am I supposed to say? I've lied to Rafael enough these last few days. I won't insult him by lying more.

"Yes," I whisper. "But that was before I knew you."

"Before you knew me?" Rafael hisses, his golden wolf's eyes narrowing into slits. "You don't know me, Alex. You were my assistant for three days, and you think that's enough for a story?"

"No!" I shake my head, needing to explain. "I turned it down — the piece I was writing."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

The devastation written all over his face makes me feel as though someone ripped out my heart and put it through a cheese grater. In this moment, I wish he'd get angry. I wish he'd yell at me to leave and never come back. Anything would be better than this.

"If you don't mind my asking, when did you decide not to fuck me over?" he murmurs, his amber eyes flashing in the dimly lit room. "Was it before or after I introduced you to my family?"

"After."

Rafael lets out a breath of humorless laughter. "Was it before or after you fucked me?" He takes a step toward me, that muscle in his jaw working hard. "Before or after I told you that you're my fated mate?"

Hot tears burn in my throat, but I swallow them down. It doesn't matter what I say. What I did was unforgivable.

"I was just doing my job," I whisper, staring at the floor. "I never meant to hurt you, Rafael. And I didn't expect to fall for you."

Rafael doesn't speak, but I can practically taste his disgust. He turns and walks out of the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.