

Chapter Thirteen

Rafael

Snow is coming down thick and fast by the time I pull into the parking lot outside The Ponderosa. My head is still spinning from the realization that Alex was using me for a story.

My chest feels tight. My stomach is in knots, and I feel like clawing my way out of my skin.

If I hadn't found her press pass on the floor, how long would she have gone without telling me the truth? Alex said she turned down the assignment, but why should I believe her? She's been lying to me for days, and I had no fucking clue.

While I want to be angry with Alex for deceiving me, I'm furious with myself. I never should have let my guard down so easily. I shouldn't have listened to my wolf.

I don't have it in me to face my family, so I've been driving around for the last three hours. I figure ten a.m. is an acceptable time to start drinking, which is how I ended up here.

My wolf whines as I climb out of the Rover and clomp through the snow toward the old chalet. The building seems to have fallen into disrepair since the last time I was here. The corbels are rotting, and the deck could use staining, but The Ponderosa is still the most exclusive club in Aspen — maybe the most exclusive club in the country.

Being a billionaire is a prerequisite but not a guarantee that one will be invited to join. The club was founded as a retreat for billionaires who require discretion above all else. Most of the other members are shifters.

The scent of furniture polish and old money hits me the moment I walk in. The entryway is lined with dark wood paneling, and Hugo appears at the host station to greet me.

"Mr. Cabrera Garcia," says the old man, offering a polite bow of his head. "Good to see you again."

"The pleasure's all mine, Hugo," I say, returning his greeting with a stiff smile and handing over my coat.

I make a beeline for the lounge, where a fire is roaring under the cherry-wood mantel. Overstuffed leather chairs are spaced around the room, and anemic winter sunlight trickles in through the stained-glass windows.

Garrett Von Horton is the only one here, and, by the looks of it, he's making a valiant effort to be blackout drunk by noon.

"Ho-la," Garrett mutters as I enter the lounge, purposely pronouncing the silent "H" and drawing out the word.

"Morning, Gringo."

Garrett only spares me half an eye roll. If I'm being honest, Garrett Von Horton is the absolute last person I'd choose to have drinks with on any given day, but I suppose beggars can't be choosers when one starts drinking before brunch.

Garrett and his siblings inherited the Von Horton oil fortune, but Garrett has used his considerable wealth to become the most obnoxious douchebag on the planet.

I've honestly never been able to tell if Garrett is simply lazy, clinically depressed, or if he's just a pretentious asshole who wants to see how far he can push people before someone kills him in a violent rage. The only reason that no one's tried to kill him so far is that he's alpha of the Burnt Mountain pack.

"What are you drinking?" I ask, slumping down in one of the chairs closest to the fire as Hugo comes to take my drink order.

Garrett takes a sip of his scotch and gives a satisfied hiss. "Macallan, nineteen twenty-six."

I raise my eyebrows.

I've heard of the Macallan. It went for one point five million at Sotheby's two years ago. I never heard who bought the stuff — likely not Garrett — but the billionaire with a death wish also has a bit of a gambling habit that allows him to hemorrhage money more quickly than if he was merely a drunk.

"May I offer you a drink?" Garrett asks, his good breeding getting the best of him despite his best efforts.

"Uh . . . sure," I say, taken aback by his offer. Who could turn down a glass of hundred-year-old scotch?

Hugo appears at my elbow to pour me a glass, and I sneak a glance at the label. It certainly looks like a scotch from the twenties, with a line drawing of a woman on her knees and handwritten script along the label. A third of the bottle is already gone.

"No point drinking half," Garrett slurs, as though he read my mind. "Reseal it, and a week later, it'll taste like piss."

I find that hard to believe, but who am I to argue? When I made my first eight figures, I indulged in some disgustingly expensive luxuries, but even I've never blown one point five million on a bottle of liquor.

I take a sip, blinking at the smooth taste and the delicious smoky notes of vanilla.

“Unctuous, no?”

I blink and set down the glass. “Very nice.”

“What brings you here on this fine morning?” Garrett asks. “Shouldn't you be celebrating?”

“Celebrating what?”

Garrett gives me a funny look. “Thanksgiving.” He rolls his eyes. “I thought the Cabrera Garcia clan was supposed to be one big happy familia.”

Garrett's purposely terrible Spanish grates on my nerves, but I just shake my head and take another sip of my drink.

The alpha narrows his bloodshot eyes and studies me with an impressive amount of scrutiny for a man who's wasted on hundred-year-old scotch. “I know that look,” he says. “You're having woman troubles.”

I grit my teeth and take another drink, annoyed that someone with so little self-respect is this astute.

Luckily, before I can answer, Hugo goes to open the door. A cold draft breezes down the entryway with a flurry of snow, and in walks Damon Brewer — another wolf shifter.

Damon is with his mate, Chloe, and they're both rosy-cheeked and windswept from the cold. Something wriggles in the woman's arms, and when I crane my neck for a closer look, I see that Damon's mate is carrying a squirming toddler.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Hugo,” Damon booms, shaking the old man's hand.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” Hugo replies with a gracious bow of his head.

“Two Irish coffees and a hot chocolate, please,” says Damon, taking the toddler from his mate and swinging her over his shoulders. The little girl giggles — the joyful, innocent noise so at odds with the miserable cloud hanging over me and Garrett.

Damon enters the lounge and inclines his head. He averts his eyes at just the right moment to indicate he's not looking for trouble, but not so soon that we don't get a sense for the dominant energy pouring off him.

Damon Brewer isn't the alpha of the Gold Creek pack, but he could be. He also happens to be filthy fucking rich, which is the only reason Hugo didn't balk at him bringing a kid in here.

"Fuck 'em," Garrett mutters, killing the rest of his drink and holding up his empty glass to signal Hugo.

"Who?"

"Women." Garrett lets out a loud belch.

"How original. You should put that on a bumper sticker."

Garrett makes a face. "You think I should put a bumper sticker on my Roadster?"

I roll my eyes. Garrett's referring to his Mercedes S Torpedo Roadster — the eight-million-dollar antique rust bucket that he trolls around in for the five months of the year when Aspen isn't blanketed in snow.

"But really." Garrett burps again. "Wolves like us weren't meant to settle down with a mate and breed." He tosses a disgusted look in Damon's direction.

The other shifter is busy pretending to drop the toddler backward but then pulling up so that she giggles hysterically. The kid is a perfect blend of him and his mate, and I can't help but notice that Damon seems like a completely different person than the last time I saw him. He's smiling and laughing at his daughter, and the way he looks at his mate . . .

My stomach clenches. It reminds me of the way I look at Alex.

"Trust me, man. They're more trouble than they're worth," Garrett adds, holding up his glass as Hugo returns to refill it.

Garrett's hot take comes as no surprise. His siblings are a bunch of back-biting vipers who'd sooner screw over their own family than lose out on a couple of bucks. He doesn't know what a family is supposed to be — people who love you no matter what.

That's why losing Alex hurts so much. The mating bond is stronger than pack ties — even stronger than blood.

No matter how I feel about Alex, there's nothing I can do to sever that bond. She will always be a part of me.

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to go about the rest of my life, knowing there's a piece of my heart out there somewhere. I've heard the mating bond can drive a shifter insane if he ignores it long enough.

I can understand why. Watching Damon make a funny face as he licks whipped cream off his daughter's nose, I can't help but think I'd rather lose an arm or a leg than the one person who was meant for me.