

## Chapter Three

### Alex

“Can I get you anything else, sir?”

Vivian’s crisp annoying voice breaks the tension in the room, and I see Rafael’s throat bob with irritation. “That will be all, Vivian.”

“If you like, I could call Mark and have your meeting pushed —”

“That won’t be necessary,” Rafael rumbles. “Leave us.”

His low gravelly voice reverberates in the large office, and I get a little flutter in the pit of my stomach.

I clear my throat and grab some paper towels from the cabinet under the wet bar to mop up his spilled green juice. I feel like such an idiot for spilling his drink all over his desk, but I’ve spent so much time hating Rafael Cabrera Garcia from afar that coming face to face with the man himself is a little . . . disconcerting.

For one thing, I didn’t expect him to be so . . . tall. He towers over me by at least six inches, and his bespoke suit seems to be having a hard time containing the raw power in his huge muscular frame.

His raven-black hair is longer on top than on the sides, contrasting with his caramel skin and accentuating his sharp features.

He’s even better-looking in person, which is just so annoying. How is it that some people are born crazy good-looking with a genius IQ, while the rest of us have to work our asses off just to scrape by?

“So you’re my new assistant,” he says, scrutinizing me with a pair of deep-brown eyes flecked with gold.

“Yes.”

“Vivian getting you settled?” he asks, shrugging out of his jacket.

Holy hell. This guy’s peccs. It’s just not fair that a man with a fuck-you amount of money also has a body like that.

“Uh-huh.” I swallow to wet my parched throat and try not to stare at his chest. “I, uh . . . think I’ve got everything under control.”

“You think?” Rafael’s chin juts out in a scowl as he tosses his jacket at me.

I catch it before it hits the floor, irritation swirling in my gut. So he is as arrogant as the tabloids make him out to be.

Still, he smells incredible — like Italian leather, some expensive spicy cologne, and . . . snow. It’s a surprising combination, and I’m furious with myself when I inhale deeply to get another whiff.

How does this guy smell like snow? It hasn’t snowed in Denver in weeks. Another secret of the rich and famous . . .

But before I have time to ponder that, Rafael goes around his desk and sinks into the leather chair. He doesn’t say anything to signal that my interrogation is over, but his cold silent dismissal is as good an indication as any.

He picks up his daily brief in one hand as he takes a sip of his coffee, and I cringe when he wrinkles his nose. He very ungracefully spits the coffee back into the mug, looking up at me with a mixture of horror and indignation. “What is this?”

“I-it’s your coffee,” I stammer, wondering what the hell I did wrong. I clear my throat. “I mean, your mushroom coffee. Vivian said —”

Rafael squints his eyes and shudders, looking as though he’s trying to banish the taste from his mouth. “Did you add the cashew milk?”

“Yes.”

“Did you steam it?” He’s looking at me like I’m an idiot.

“Yes.”

Rafael narrows his eyes at me, as if he can’t begin to fathom how I screwed this up. “Did you add the espresso?”

“The —” I break off, whipping my head around to stare accusingly at his pricey espresso machine. Vivian left out the jar of mushroom powder on the bar, along with a note indicating where I could find the cashew milk.

No one said anything about espresso.

“I-I thought it was mushroom coffee.”

“It is,” says Rafael. “Half mushroom powder, half espresso.”

“Oh,” I whisper, wishing Vivian was still here so I could strangle her. She could have mentioned that. “I’m sorry, I —”

“Have you ever worked as an executive assistant before?” Rafael snaps, looking at me as though I’m some imbecile his people found wandering around outside the building.

I feel my cheeks flush and bite down on the inside of my cheek to keep from lashing out. “No.”

“No?” He lets out a haughty breath of laughter through his nose and shakes his head. “Have you worked as an administrative assistant or done any secretarial work of any kind?”

“No,” I whisper.

This is it. He’s going to call my bluff and fire me. So much for the story that was going to save my career. I wonder how much TMZ would pay to learn that the billionaire CEO of MatchAI drinks mushroom coffee.

Rafael gives an angry shake of his head. “So what did you do before this? Clearly, you weren’t a barista.”

I bristle at his condescending tone. “I . . . worked for UltraComm,” I say, working to keep my voice steady. It’s technically the truth. “It was mostly a research position.”

Rafael furrows his brow. “And you thought you’d apply to work for me.”

“I’ve been following MatchAI from the start,” I say, forcing myself to look him in the eye. “I thought it would be interesting to work alongside the CEO.”

Rafael makes an aggravated noise in his throat. “You thought it would be interesting.”

My cheeks heat, but I don’t drop my gaze. I may have only applied for the job as research for my story, but it was his stupid algorithm that chose my application. Rafael Cabrera Garcia is not going to make me feel dumb.

“You have no relevant experience, and you thought it would be interesting to work for the fastest-growing generative-AI company in the world,” Rafael continues. His eyes flash, those flecks of gold gleaming, and something about the tight set of his jaw makes me want to take a step back.

He reaches into a stack of papers on his desk and pulls one off the top. “Alexandra Langley. Bachelor’s degree in communications.” His gaze flickers back to me. “Was that the easiest

major you could think of, or did they not offer basket weaving at Hutchings' College of the Arts?"

My jaw drops at the insult, and Rafael goes back to perusing my application.

"IQ is one oh two." He makes an unimpressed humming noise in his throat. "Enneagram type three, which signals a high need to achieve and be praised for your efforts." He shakes his head and tosses down my application. "This is not a youth soccer league, Ms. Langley. I will not praise you for doing your job. I will not praise you for producing excellent work. Excellence is expected here."

I shake my head, throat dry. My face burns with fury and indignation, but I keep my mouth shut.

"I expect nothing short of perfection from my assistants. I oversee six thousand and twenty-seven employees across five countries. My development team is currently rolling out seventeen different iterations of our product, each tailored to a specific sector's needs. We currently have contracts with the US Armed Forces, NASA, and twelve Fortune 500 companies that want to use our AI for talent development. We are in talks to roll out our products in another six. I need an assistant who can be one step ahead of me — who can anticipate my every desire and ensure that each moment of my day is optimized." He narrows his eyes. "I need you to get up to speed quickly."

I swallow at the intensity of his gaze, though my insides are bubbling with rage.

Rafael Cabrera Garcia is even worse than I imagined. Arrogant. Condescending. Cruel.

Who is he to assume that I'm some airhead just because of where I went to school or what his bullshit IQ test says? I was accepted at Northwestern, but I couldn't afford it. I graduated in the top two percent of my class, not because I'm uniquely gifted, but because I worked my ass off.

Rafael doesn't know me, and yet he acts as though he has me all figured out because of some stupid personality test.

All I want to do is throw his pretentious mushroom coffee in his lap and storm out that door, but a niggling realization in the back of my mind keeps me rooted to the spot.

Rafael doesn't think that I belong here, but he won't say so because he doesn't want to admit that his algorithm did a shit job of selecting his assistant.

The move to use AI to hire me was a highly publicized PR stunt. If he dismisses me, it will signal to the entire world that MatchAI's technology is crap. He can't afford that kind of bad

press — particularly not with so many giant corporations showing interest in using the technology.

Rafael can't fire me — no matter what I do.