

Chapter Six

Alex

An hour later, I'm back at my apartment packing for a weekend in Aspen. I'm not sure if making me work over Thanksgiving is Rafael's way of punishing me or if this is just what he expects from his assistants, but at least I'll have no trouble painting him as the demanding asshole boss when I write my story.

That knowledge is the only thing getting me through this conversation with my dad. I'd planned on driving home to spend Thanksgiving with him and my stepmother, but thanks to Rafael, that's no longer happening.

"Yes, Dad, I know," I grumble, shoving an extra pair of boots into my suitcase and leaning on the top to try to make it close. "I'm sorry, but this story is important."

"You're a hard worker, Alex, but I've never known you to work Thanksgiving."

"It wasn't my choice," I say tartly, sweating as I try to tug the zipper into place. "This could be the story that saves my career. I really couldn't say no."

"I wasn't aware that your career needed saving," Dad replies. "I thought you were doing well at The Beacon."

"I was, but UltraComm is making cuts, and I don't want to find myself on the chopping block come Christmas."

Dad mutters something that begins with, "back in my day, I never," but I don't catch the punchline of the guilt trip. A text comes through from Rafael's driver, telling me he's here to pick me up.

"I gotta go, Dad," I sigh, finishing my wrestling match with my suitcase and flopping down on the floor. "I'll call you from Aspen."

"Safe travels."

"Love you."

I hang up the phone and stagger to my feet, grabbing my threadbare handbag and yanking my suitcase upright.

No matter what I do, I can't win with my dad. If I say I'm taking a day off, he tells me I'm going to end up jobless and broke, but when I blow off Thanksgiving to work a story, he acts as though I'm being unreasonable.

The driver is idling in front of my apartment building when I come outside. He takes my suitcase and opens my door, and I climb into the back.

The light flurries from earlier have morphed into giant wet flakes, and the roads have a fine dusting of snow on them by the time we merge onto the highway. I already called a much nicer car to take Rafael to his home in Aspen. My driver is supposed to bring me to Aspen to meet him, so I'm confused when he pulls up in front of Match HQ.

"Uh, sorry." I shake my head. "I need to meet Mr. Cabrera Garcia in Aspen. I already called a car to pick him up, and —"

"Oh, no," says my driver, looking at me in the rearview mirror. "Mr. Cabrera Garcia always drives himself when he goes away. He specifically requested that you ride with him."

"What?" I yelp, my stomach clenching when I remember the way he bent me over his desk and took his belt to my still-sore behind. "But —" I break off when I see the valet pull up in Rafael's shiny black SUV.

Rafael strides out of the building a moment later, looking annoyingly handsome in an immaculately tailored wool coat that fits his muscular frame like a glove.

I glance down at my fluffy gray sweater, which suddenly feels frumpy and inappropriate for riding in Rafael's Range Rover. But my driver is already getting my suitcase out of the back, so I climb out of the car and walk over to Rafael's SUV.

"Get in," he barks, not bothering with any pleasantries.

I briefly consider diving into the back, but that seems as though it would be even more awkward, so I obediently climb into the passenger seat.

The inside of Rafael's SUV smells just like him, except that the expensive Italian leather scent is more pronounced. The vehicle is already warm, and I practically groan when I slip into the heated seat.

The spawn of Satan doesn't speak as he pulls away from the building, cutting off another driver as he merges into traffic. Rafael drives the way I would expect the demanding, entitled CEO to drive — as though he's the only one on the road. He accelerates as he zips around a few slower cars, slamming on the brakes to avoid rear-ending a semi and gunning it through a yellow light.

By now, a slick wet snow has accumulated on the road, and the cars in the far-right lane have slowed to a crawl. I tense and grip the handlebar as he merges onto the highway, the engine groaning as he picks up speed just so he can squeeze between two cars and glide into the far-left lane.

“The road looks pretty slick,” I choke. “Maybe you should slow down?”

“No,” he mutters, casting a brief irritated glance in my direction before looking back at the road. “The sooner we get there, the better.”

“We’ll get there a lot sooner if we don’t cause a twelve-car pileup along the way,” I caution.

Rafael’s eyes crinkle as the corner of his mouth lifts in a smirk. “Relax, will you? I just had new all-terrain tires put on this thing. It can handle it.” He turns his head a few degrees to the side. “I’m a very good driver.”

I make a dubious “eh” sound that turns into a panicked squeal, and a strange choking noise fills the SUV.

I look over in time to see Rafael chuckling — actually chuckling. His hand is partially covering his mouth, and it sounds as though he’s out of practice.

“Oh, does it amuse you to put my life in jeopardy?” I snap, suddenly fed up with Rafael’s arrogance. “I would have insisted on driving myself if I knew you were such a reckless asshole!”

Rafael stops laughing at once, and a dark look flashes through his eyes. He whips his head around to stare at me, and in the muted silver daylight, his eyes look more golden than brown.

An involuntary shiver works its way through my body, but I force myself to hold his gaze.

“I would never endanger your life,” he growls, his eyes seeming to lighten even more. “And I wouldn’t be driving like this if it were in anyway reckless.”

A harsh glare follows that little statement, and it’s all I can do not to open the door and roll out of the vehicle Tom Cruise–style.

A crushing silence hangs over us for the rest of the trip, but Rafael does seem to adjust his driving style as we head into the mountains. The snow grows heavier as we ascend, and I can’t help but gape at the views. Towering pine and fir trees line the winding mountain road, practically groaning under the weight of the glittering snow.

I’ve never been to Aspen before, but the town looks as though it was ripped off a Christmas card. Even though it’s only November, the old-timey street lamps are festooned with garland.

Lights and greenery adorn all the store fronts, and the ski slopes are just a snowy blur in the distance as more fresh powder blankets the mountain.

Rafael slows to a crawl in front of the Hermès store, stops in the middle of the road, and puts his hazards on.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he opens his door and starts climbing out of the SUV. “I thought we were going to your place.”

“We are,” he says, looking up and down the street. “I just have to pick something up first.”

I glance around. Traffic is moving slowly due to the weather, but downtown is buzzing with ski traffic and holiday vacationers.

Unwilling to stay in the vehicle and look like the asshole who parked in the middle of the road, I hop out and follow Rafael into the store.

The smell of leather and expensive perfume hits me the second I walk through the door of the boutique, and I self-consciously wipe my scuffed boots on the mat. Soft piano music is playing inside, and I tug my puffy coat more tightly around me to hide my lumpy gray sweater. In his designer coat and immaculately polished shoes, Rafael looks as though he belongs here. I, on the other hand, don't.

At the sight of the famous billionaire, the man behind the counter lights up. He scurries around the counter to greet Rafael, pumping his hand as though they're old friends. “Mr. Cabrera Garcia! So good to see you. Wonderful you could make it in. Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“Business and pleasure, I think,” says Rafael, his gaze flickering over to me in a way that makes liquid heat pool in my belly.

The shop owner casts a curious glance in my direction, but he doesn't bother to ask my name. I'm guessing he took one look at my boots and my goofy-but-practical winter coat and figured I wasn't important.

“What can I help you find?”

“A gift,” says Rafael, turning his attention to the row of leather handbags gleaming under gold-toned lights.

“Excellent choice, sir,” says the shop owner. “A Birkin bag is the perfect gift for any woman. Did you have a specific color in mind?”

“No,” says Rafael, studying the row of bags. His mouth twitches, and he makes a frustrated noise in his throat before turning to look at me. “What do you think?”

“Me?” I stammer, wondering why on earth he’d want my help.

Rafael nods once, those dark-brown eyes roving over me.

“Uh . . .” I gape at the row of gorgeous handbags that probably cost more than I make in a year. “The cream is nice.”

Rafael gives a small shake of his head. “Not for Elena.”

The name hits me like a punch to the gut, and my face burns with embarrassment.

Elena.

Before this moment, I never questioned why he was shopping for a ridiculously expensive handbag or whom it was for. Of course he’s buying a Birkin bag for his girlfriend.

How could I be so stupid? Did I actually think his little indiscretion in his office meant something? What did I think was going to happen this weekend?

Vivian told me I’d be expected to accompany him to Aspen for work, and yet part of me thought he dragged me here for some little weekend tryst.

Maybe he did.

Hell, what do I know? Intimacy means nothing to a man with Rafael’s wealth and status. I’m sure he fucks whomever he likes, whenever he likes.

Maybe he thought he was going to fuck me between now and the time his girlfriend arrives for Thanksgiving. The thought makes me sick to my stomach.

“That one,” says Rafael after some deliberation, pointing at the deep-plum bag at the very end of the row. If it were any other handbag, the plum would look gaudy, but there’s no way for a Birkin bag to appear gaudy.

“Very good, sir,” says the shop owner. “I’ll wrap it up immediately.”

Rafael hands over his credit card without another word and waits for the man to wrap up the gift. Out of some morbid sense of curiosity, I glance down at the tag the shop owner cuts off the bag and nearly choke on my own saliva.

The price is thirty thousand dollars, and Rafael scrawls his signature on the receipt without even glancing at the amount.

My cheeks are still burning as we exit the shop. Rafael holds the door open for me and comes around to my side of the Rover to let me in — a surprisingly chivalrous gesture that takes me by surprise and somehow intensifies the bitter disappointment simmering in my gut.

He climbs in and hands me the giant tangerine gift box, which is set off with a smart black bow. I'm not sure why it stings so much that he dragged me along to buy a gift for his girlfriend. I'm his assistant. I shouldn't expect him to treat me as anything else — even if he did give me a mind-blowing orgasm earlier.

"The bag's for my sister," says Rafael quietly as we merge back into traffic.

My heart gives a tiny flutter, and I whip my head around to look at him.

"She's a professional dancer who just made the New York City Ballet. I wanted to get her something special."

"Oh," I say, my voice coming out half an octave higher than normal.

Rafael is staring straight ahead at the road, but there's a satisfied gleam in his eye that wasn't there before.

His sister. Elena is his sister.

"Will you be seeing her this weekend?" I ask, somehow managing to unstick my throat.

"Yes. She and my mother get in tomorrow morning. You'll meet them then."

I raise my eyebrows, and my stomach does a weird little flip. It shouldn't surprise me that Rafael invited his family to spend the weekend at his house over Thanksgiving, but somehow I never pictured him as a family man. The image is hard to reconcile with the cold CEO who orders his staff around like he's the master of the universe.

What's even stranger is that he'd want me to meet his family. After the stunt I pulled this morning, he can't possibly expect to keep me around as his assistant.

My mind is still spinning as he pulls on to a narrow tree-lined street flanked by towering blue spruces. An iron gate opens automatically when we pull up, and Rafael drives on through.

At the end of a long brick drive is a sprawling stone lodge that seems to be nestled right into the heart of the mountain. Snow-covered trees flank the circle drive, and Rafael gets out first to open my door.

I gape like an idiot as he leads me up to the enormous entryway, where someone has already turned on the lights. A fire roars in a stone alcove just off the entryway, where there's a heated outdoor sitting area overlooking the infinity spa. A gondola is visible just beyond, and I realize that Rafael has his own private lift.

I shake my head and walk inside, gaping at the twelve-foot ceiling.

"Welcome to Ninhursag."

“Your house has a name?”

Rafael shrugs. “All rich people’s houses have a name.”

Even though I can tell he’s watching for my reaction, I roll my eyes hugely.

Rafael leads me through the house, and I can’t help but gawk at the stunning wood-paneled living room with a stone fireplace tall enough for me to stand in or the dining room with a long mahogany table large enough to seat twelve people. A long hallway with a vaulted ceiling bisects the downstairs, revealing polished wooden beams that remind me of a posh viking hall.

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room.”

“I should get —” I hitch a thumb over my shoulder toward the SUV, but Rafael just chuckles.

“Robert will bring up your bag.”

Of course he has a man servant. All evil rich guys have a man servant — and, apparently, a ski lodge with its own name.

“The house is ski in, ski out,” Rafael says as he leads me up the sweeping staircase. “You’ll find everything in your size in the mud room.”

“I-I don’t ski,” I stammer, not sure which surprises me more — that Rafael would be inviting me to ski over this working weekend or that this fancy-schmancy house has something called a “mud room.”

He jerks his head back to look at me, and I raise my eyebrows in a challenge. “Not everyone has a second home in Aspen,” I snap.

My dad worked his ass off my whole life to pay for my college tuition. There was no money left over for lift tickets or expensive ski lessons.

“I know,” says Rafael, a bitter undertone to his voice.

I frown at his back as I follow him up the steps, confused by his reaction. We reach the top of the stairs, and I stare down the long hallway, which boasts eight bedrooms.

“That’s my room,” he says, pointing at the first door we come to. “And this will be yours.”

He leads me to the very next room, and when he throws the door open, my jaw nearly hits the floor. Windows span the wall opposite the door, revealing a huge stone terrace with an unobstructed view of the snow-covered peaks beyond.

An enormous bed draped in white linens dominates the space, though there's a cozy sitting area in front of yet another fireplace. A fire is already crackling merrily in the grate, and I wonder if part of Robert's job description is running around lighting all the fires like the servants in Downton Abbey.

"There's a hot tub and a sauna that you're welcome to use," he says. "Robert is here to attend to your every need, and Selma, my private chef, can cook you anything you like."

I raise my eyebrows. Why does it sound as though I'm here as Rafael's guest rather than his employee?

He backs toward the door as though he means to leave but then stops in the threshold. "Just so you know, I didn't grow up like this, either," he says, glancing around at the lavish furnishings as if part of him still feels uncomfortable with it all. "I grew up a poor kid in La Alma, and my mom worked three jobs to support me and my sister."

My brows inch higher. I'd read that Rafael Cabrera Garcia was a self-made man who came from humble beginnings, but I never really believed it.

"And even though I live like this" — he glances around the room — "my mom still insists on living in the tiny little house she and my father bought when they were first married." He swallows. "That's why I haven't shared many details about my personal life with the press. I want my family to be able to reap the benefits of the life I've built without being thrust into the public eye."

I blink. I can't think of any reason for Rafael to be telling me all this, except that he doesn't want me to think that he's some spoiled rich guy who was brought up with a silver spoon in his mouth.

It shouldn't matter, given that he still behaves like an entitled ass, but for some reason, it does.

"Thank you for telling me that," I say. "I know you're a . . . private person."

He gives a jerky nod of his head and then clears his throat, dragging a hand through his hair. "Anyway . . . I'm sorry if my bringing you here ruined your Thanksgiving plans," he says, looking suddenly angry with himself. "I . . . don't always think about other people's feelings when I . . . when I want something."

I stare at him, taken aback. Did Rafael Cabrera Garcia seriously just apologize?

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask, deciding to throw caution to the wind. "Skiing, meeting your family . . . it sure doesn't sound like a working weekend."

“No,” he says tersely, staring at a spot on the wall with a crease between his brows.

“So,” I prompt. “Why did you?”

If he dragged me here over a holiday weekend for anything outside my job description, I deserve to know the truth.

“I don’t know,” he says, leveling me with a harsh stare that tells me the feelings-sharing portion of the evening is over.

He clears his throat and turns to go, not bothering to offer any further explanation. “I’ll be downstairs in my office. Make yourself at home.”