

Chapter Seven

Alex

I awake to the sound of voices downstairs and the slamming of a door. A warm bubbly laugh echoes through the cavernous house, and I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's a weird designer rich-person clock, and I can't figure out what it's supposed to be saying, so I pick up my phone instead.

It's seven a.m.

Confused, I get out of bed and start to pull some clothes on. Rafael didn't ask me to do anything last night after he showed me to my room. I asked his chef to make me some mac and cheese, and then I spent the evening going through Rafael's emails. I typed up his important messages and slid the brief under his door.

Raking a hand through my tangled hair, I slip into the hallway and follow the sound of lively chatter down to the enormous kitchen. The voices are speaking in Spanish, I realize, and I wish that I'd retained more from the two years of Spanish I took in high school.

"Eso es demasiado, mija."

"No, Mama. I told you. You always put in a half stick more than the recipe says!"

I poke my head around the corner and see that the immaculate magazine-ready kitchen has been transformed. Grocery bags, Tupperware, and dishes wrapped in foil are scattered across nearly every surface, and the delicious aroma of butter, brown sugar, and pumpkin fills the room.

A plump older Hispanic woman is lecturing a petite twentysomething in Spanish. The younger woman has dark curly hair and Rafael's dark-brown eyes. She must be his sister, the *ballerina*, which means the older woman has to be his mother.

There's also a man with them — a beefy athletic-looking white guy who looks as though he's had his nose broken at least a couple of times. He's dressed in sweatpants and a tight-fitting T-shirt. They all look exceedingly normal to be Rafael's relatives.

I take a deep breath, preparing to introduce myself, but then someone breezes past me into the kitchen.

Rafael.

He's dressed more casually than I've ever seen him in jeans and a thick ivory sweater. The jeans must be some pricey designer brand, but still. The man is wearing jeans!

All three newcomers turn to look at him, and the older woman's eyes light up.

"¡Ah, mi amor!"

"Morning, Mamá. Good to see you."

"Rafael, I can't find anything in your fancy kitchen," sighs the sister, Elena. She holds up a shiny metal sticklike object. "I mean, what is this?"

"Good morning to you, too," says Rafael in a deadpan voice. "And I think that's an immersion blender."

"You're such a know-it-all," Elena says with an eye roll, coming over to hug her brother. Her head barely reaches his chest, and he picks her up and twirls her around. Then he and the guy go in for a bro-hug, and I can't help but stare.

Around these people, Rafael almost seems like a normal person.

"¿Quién es esta?" asks Rafael's mother.

Everyone goes quiet. I realize I've been watching their little reunion from the kitchen entryway. I smile and raise a hand in a wave, cringing inwardly at my own awkwardness.

Growing up, it was always just me and my dad. I'm not used to the whole big-family thing.

"Mamá, this is Alex, my new assistant."

"Ah," says Rafael's mother, smiling warmly at me.

"Alex, this is my mother, Juana."

"It's really nice to meet you," I say, stepping forward so I can shake the woman's hand. But Rafael's mother ignores it completely and pulls me into a warm embrace.

"I'm Elena," says Rafael's sister, edging in once her mother releases me. "And this is my m—" She breaks off, glancing at her brother. "My fiancé, Jake."

The tall athletic-looking guy takes my hand and shakes it. Jake's hand is huge and rough, and he's got this easygoing smile that immediately helps me relax.

Once the introductions are over, Juana bursts into action, ordering Elena and Jake around the kitchen. Jake pulls a giant slippery turkey out of the package, and Juana gives him instructions in rapid-fire Spanish on how to prepare the bird for roasting.

When I offer to help, Juana shoves a huge bag of apples into my arms, and Elena explains that I'm supposed to chop them for the ensalada de manzanas. Pretty soon the two of us are laughing and joking as we work elbow to elbow. I look around to see if I can catch Rafael being normal again, but he's already disappeared.

"Raf is good at a lot of things, but he is hopeless in the kitchen," Elena informs me.

"You're kidding."

"Nope." Elena grins. "A few years ago, he didn't thaw the frozen hash browns for the cheesy potatoes, and the whole casserole was still completely cold when it came out of the oven."

I snort.

"Don't forget the time he forgot to take the plastic bag of giblets out of the turkey before we cooked it," Jake adds.

"Oh, yeah." Elena throws her head back and laughs. "Mamá pretty much banned him from the kitchen after that."

I laugh. For some reason, Rafael's cooking blunders don't fit with the image I have of the uptight CEO who runs a multibillion-dollar company.

"How did you two meet?" I ask Elena, nodding at Jake.

Her eyes light up at my mention of her fiancé, and she ducks her head. "We've known each other our whole lives — literally. Jake is Raf's best friend, and he lived next door to us."

Suddenly, I remember what Rafael told me about growing up a poor kid in La Alma. Now it all makes sense. That's why his family seems so normal.

"Has Rafael always been so . . ." I trail off, not sure how to phrase my question without offending his sister.

"What?" Elena laughs. "Was he born with a stick up his ass, you mean?"

"Elena!" Juana chides.

"I'm sorry, Mamá, but it's true."

"I was going to say intense," I clarify with a nervous glance at Juana.

"Siempre fue un niño serio."

Elena snorts. "That's an understatement. But yes. Raf has always felt as though he had to take care of everyone." She lowers her voice to a whisper. "Control everyone."

“Hey, that’s not fair,” Jake interjects, leaning down to plant a sweet kiss on Elena’s lips. “He didn’t try to stand between us once we got together.”

Elena rolls her eyes. “That’s because we were already —”

Juana clears her throat loudly, and Elena breaks off. “Anyway . . . Raffy can be a bit of a control freak, but he’s a good brother — and a good guy.”

I nod slowly, focusing on my chopping instead of the guilt gnawing at my insides. Jake, Elena, and Juana all seem like nice people, and I feel a little bad that I’m here under false pretenses. It’s going to seem like a slap in the face if they ever learn that I was plotting to write an exposé about Rafael as I was taking part in their Thanksgiving preparations.

Then I realize that they’re probably going to read whatever story I end up writing, and my stomach clenches with shame.

“By the way,” Elena adds, just loud enough for me to hear, “the fact that my brother brought you here says a lot.”

“What?” Her comment takes me by surprise and momentarily breaks my focus. The knife I’m using slips, and I narrowly avoid slicing off a finger.

“Rafael doesn’t bring girls home,” Elena explains. “In fact, I’m not sure he’s ever brought anyone home.”

“Oh, we’re not —”

“I know you’re not, like, officially dating,” she adds with an eye roll.

“No.” I shake my head. “We’re not unofficially dating, either. I’m just Rafael’s assistant.”

“You wouldn’t be here if you were just his assistant,” Jake adds with a chuckle. “Trust me.”

“I-I thought his assistants always came to Aspen with him,” I stammer.

“Not over the holidays,” says Elena in a tone that suggests I’m being ridiculous. “Raf’s nuts about work, but he’s not a monster.”

I blink, confusion and nerves mixing in my stomach.

“No,” Elena continues. “If he brought you here, it’s because he wanted us to meet you.”

“Why?” I ask. “We just met. I only started at MatchAI two days ago.”

Elena waggles her eyebrows. “I’m telling you, I know my brother. When he sees something he wants, he goes for it. But you shouldn’t let him get away with that. I’d make him tell you how he feels.”

“I’m not sure I want to know how he feels,” I mutter, my face heating up.

So far I’ve been a pretty shitty assistant, and Rafael’s given no indication that he has any actual feelings for me. The little incident in his office didn’t mean anything.

Elena seems to realize she’s embarrassed me, because she doesn’t say another word about Rafael for the rest of the morning. We fall into easy conversation discussing her ballet career, crappy TV shows we both enjoy, and her and Jake’s upcoming wedding. I find myself liking Elena more and more, which only makes me feel worse about posing as Rafael’s assistant.

Once the turkey comes out of the oven, Juana flies into a frenzy — pointing at Jake and Elena, barking instructions, and scooping the juices out of the roasting pan to make the gravy. The woman is a force of nature, and the way she commands her troops, I see where Rafael gets it.

There’s a flurry of activity as dishes are passed from the kitchen to the eating area, and soon we’re all seated around the long table in the massive dining room. Juana’s cheeks are flushed from cooking over the hot stove all morning, but she’s changed into a pretty burgundy dress and looks every inch the proud matriarch presiding over her Thanksgiving meal.

“Rafael, ¿quieres dar gracias por los alimentos?”

Rafael nods, does the sign of the cross, and folds his hands in front of him to say grace. “Bendícenos Señor y a estos tus dones, que estamos a punto de recibir, por Cristo nuestro Señor, Amén.”

“Amén,” echoes around the table.

“Amen,” I murmur.

Juana, Elena, and Rafael all close with the sign of the cross, and I awkwardly fold my hands in my lap. I had no idea that Rafael was Catholic. Somehow, I can’t reconcile the image of Rafael praying with the man I think I know. Maybe he only prays when he’s with his family.

Rafael clears his throat and looks around the table. “I want to thank you all for coming this weekend. It means a lot to me. I know I’m not home as much as I should be — as much as I would like to be. I’m going to do better.” Rafael glances at his mother, whose expression softens as she gazes at her son. “I’ve been extremely self-absorbed these last three years, but it’s not how I want to live my life.”

He takes a deep breath, and his penetrating brown eyes land on me. “Family is and always has been the most important thing in my life.”

I squirm a little in my seat, but I don't break his stare. Rafael raises his glass and holds it out for a toast. "Salud por mi familia."

I swallow and raise my glass as the others murmur their assent. I never pictured Rafael as a family man. It just doesn't jibe with the ruthless CEO who apparently shot down his employees' repeated petitions for sixteen weeks of paid family leave.

It's as though Rafael is two different people, but that's ridiculous. People are who they are. Actions speak louder than words, and if Rafael has been more present at his company than with his family, that says everything about where his real priority lies — which is just fine by me.

I can't allow Rafael's brief display of warmth to distract me from my mission. Thinking of him as the cold-hearted billionaire will make it easier to write my story.

As the dishes make their way around the table, I suddenly realize how hungry I am. The meal is a mixture of Thanksgiving foods I recognize, traditional Mexican dishes, and a few items that seem to be a fusion of the two.

I dig into the turkey and cheesy potatoes as if I haven't eaten in days, and when I look up from my plate, I catch Rafael watching me from across the table.

This close, I can see the little flecks of gold that lend depth and warmth to his dark-brown eyes, and I fidget uncomfortably in my seat.

Then Jake tosses a roll at Rafael's head. It bounces off his cheek and lands on his plate, effectively breaking our stare-down. Rafael's gaze slides over to Jake, his eyes narrowing in a glare. A shiver travels down my spine, but then his face crumples in a laugh. He picks up a pea and chucks it across the table, where it lands in Jake's water glass.

Juana mutters what's clearly a reprimand, but she looks overjoyed at having both her children at the table.

For some reason, seeing Rafael do something as childish as lob a pea across the table is almost as baffling as watching him pray.

As he and Jake launch into a spirited argument about MMA and which fighting style is most beneficial, I sink back in my seat and study Rafael. He's stripped down to a navy-blue T-shirt, which sets off his warm copper-tinged skin and makes him look even more irresistible.

Squabbling with the guy he grew up with, he seems totally at ease. He seems . . . normal. And for a moment, I find myself wondering which version of Rafael is the real thing.

