

Chapter Eight

Rafael

My chest feels full as I watch Alex chat with my family as she gorges herself on cheesy potatoes. She makes a point to include my mother in the conversation, using Elena as a translator for her Spanish replies.

My mother understands English fine; it's just her speaking that isn't so good. Rather than try to bridge the language divide, most people end up leaving her out of the conversation, so it warms my heart to see Alex laughing and joking with her and even trying her hand at some broken Spanish.

Alex has never eaten a tamale before, apparently, and watching her face as she takes her first bite sends all the blood rushing to my cock. I don't know what it is about this woman, but I have this irrational urge to pull her into my lap, feed her forkfuls of tamale, and then kiss her senseless.

I want her at my table for every holiday meal. Hell, I want her by my side every day for the rest of my life.

What has gotten into me?

I've never been this smitten with a woman. I've never brought one home to meet my family, and I've certainly never been this infatuated with someone I've only known for three days.

But my wolf has already decided she's mine, and it's clouding my judgment. It's making me think about things that I would normally never even consider — crazy things such as whether Alex likes the Aspen house. I'm thinking about hiring a private ski instructor and whether it would be better to raise our kids in the city or make our home here. I've never once wondered what the Aspen school system is like, but I'm thinking about it now.

It's official. I've lost my fucking mind. But I can't stop staring at this woman — can't stop imagining a future with her.

Eventually, the dishes are empty, and Elena announces that it's time for pie. She flounces off to retrieve the giant pumpkin and pecan pies that she and my mother make every year, but she stops in the entrance to the dining room and sucks in a gasp.

"Raf, you need to make the snow cream!"

My stomach tightens at her words, and I shoot my sister a look. “There’s regular ice cream in the freezer.”

“Regular ice cream? Are you crazy? It wouldn’t be Thanksgiving without snow cream!” She rolls her eyes as though I’ve said something crazy, and that sick feeling in my gut intensifies.

Snow cream is only a tradition in our family because Elena always asks for it. It means something very different to her than it does to me, but this is the first year that I’ve really cared.

“What’s snow cream?” asks Alex, looking curiously from me to my sister.

“Oh, it’s the best!” Elena gushes. “It’s snow mixed with condensed milk. It’s a Cabrera Garcia staple.”

My face heats at Elena’s bubbly description and Alex’s look of polite curiosity. Shame burns my insides like bile, and suddenly, I’m ten years old again, on free lunch at school.

“It’s disgusting,” I snap, tossing Elena a dirty look that shuts her up immediately. “But Elena always wants it, so I’ll go make some.”

I shove my chair back from the table and storm into the kitchen to grab a bowl. My heart is pounding and my face is hot as I stomp out into the snow. The temperature has dropped to the single digits, but I barely feel the cold. We shifters run hot, and I’m also burning with shame.

Shame about being poor.

Shame for blaming my mother.

Shame for lashing out at my sister.

I know I shouldn’t have snapped at Elena. It isn’t her fault that I still feel this way, and now I feel like an ass.

“Need help?” The soft voice echoes from the doorway, and I whip around to find Alex standing in the snow. She’s wearing a pair of oversized rain boots from the mud room, and she’s got her arms wrapped tightly around her middle. She must be freezing.

“No,” I growl, all my lighthearted warm feelings from earlier gone. I just want this night to be over.

I trudge over to the low stone wall, where a bunch of fresh snow has gathered. I scoop some into the bowl and turn around, half expecting to find Alex gone.

To my surprise, she's still standing there, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What happened back there?" she asks, jerking her head toward the dining room. "It, uh . . . seemed like kind of a strong reaction to your sister refusing ice cream."

"It's not about the ice cream," I grumble, wishing she'd just drop it. But I'm learning that Alex isn't the type of woman to cower and submit. She's the type to dig in and keep pushing me, no matter how viciously I respond.

I sigh. "When I was ten, my dad was . . . murdered."

Alex's eyebrows shoot up. Clearly, that wasn't what she was expecting me to say.

"He was betrayed by his best friend — the one person he trusted most."

"That must have been horrible," Alex whispers. "For all of you."

"It was," I agree. "But it was the worst for my mom. My dad didn't have any life insurance, so after he died, things got really bad." I swallow. "Elena was too young to know what was going on. Mom never talked about money with us kids, but I knew . . ."

For a moment, I hesitate. I've never told anybody this story before. Jake and I grew up together, so he knows about the snow cream, but his family was even worse off than mine was, so it was never a thing.

Telling Alex feels like a big step. It feels as though there's no going back, and for some reason, I'm okay with that.

"The Thanksgiving after he was killed, things were really bad. My mom's hours had been cut, and there wasn't money for a turkey or anything like that. She went by the food bank after work, and when she came home, I could tell she'd been crying. The next day was Thanksgiving — our first one without my dad."

A sympathetic crease cracks Alex's forehead, but she doesn't say a word.

"My mother tried to put on a brave face for us kids, but I could tell it was really hard for her. Elena kept whining that she wanted pumpkin pie and ice cream. I think she just missed my dad. I knew there wasn't going to be pumpkin pie or ice cream, and my mother was having a really hard time. So I went out and scraped some snow off the car. I poured some sweetened condensed milk over the snow and told Elena it was ice cream. That's why she thinks snow cream is a Thanksgiving tradition — because we were too poor for anything else."

It takes me a long time to look Alex in the eye after I finish my story. As an alpha, it's not in my nature to drop my gaze, but part of me can't believe I just bared my soul to this woman.

When I finally look up, I'm stunned to see that Alex isn't staring at me with pity. Her expression is open — her eyes warm. The way she's looking at me sends a shiver down my spine. I don't deserve that look.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I shake my head.

"You're a good brother. And a good son."

I scoff.

"I'm serious," she murmurs, taking a step toward me. "Because of what you did, Elena doesn't remember that Thanksgiving as a sad day. She only has good memories because her big brother made them good."

My throat feels like sandpaper, but I force myself to swallow. Snow is falling softly all around us, clinging to Alex's dark lashes. One heavy flake lands on her cheek, and I reach out to brush it away before I have a chance to stop myself.

Alex quickly sucks in a breath, and I realize I'm standing less than a foot away. Her lips are plump and flushed from the cold, and she smells like chocolate, caramel, and pumpkin.

I long to close the distance between us and see if she tastes as good as she smells. Alex's lips part gently, and I wonder if she knows what I'm thinking.

Keeping my thumb on her cheek, I lean forward and close my eyes. But my sister's voice rings out from the kitchen, and the two of us spring apart like magnets.

"Raf, where's my snow cream?"

I take a deep breath and clear my throat. My hand stings from the loss of Alex's warmth, and I absently scratch the back of my head.

What the hell am I doing? Alex is my assistant and basically a stranger. And yet I just shared one of my most intimate memories with her — and I almost kissed her.

As much as I might want to, I know I can't cross that line. Once I do, there's no going back. I won't be able to stop until I've claimed her.