

Chapter Nine

Alex

By eleven o'clock, the house is quiet. After cleaning up Thanksgiving dinner, Jake, Elena, and I lazed around nursing our food-babies before returning to our rooms. I binged three episodes of House Hunters while contemplating going to sleep, but I'm not at all tired.

Snow is falling lightly outside my window, and I'm starting to get hungry again. That's the problem with eating Thanksgiving at three p.m. It's not really lunch or dinner.

Pulling a light robe on over my nightgown, I slip out of my room with the intention of grabbing a midnight snack. I can hear breathy moans coming from Jake and Elena's room across the hall, and I stifle a snort as I tiptoe down the stairs.

All the lights are off on the first floor, apart from the faint glow emanating from the kitchen. Rounding the corner, I'm surprised to find Rafael leaning against the island with a cereal bowl in hand.

He's wearing jeans but no shirt, and holy hell. If I thought life was unfair before, it's nothing compared to how I feel now.

I'm staring at a literal eight-pack connected to the most gorgeous man-chest I've ever seen. The broad shoulders that filled out a suit so well are now on full display, leading down to a pair of defined biceps and beautiful tan arms. I long to run my hands along the smooth planes of Rafael's chest, across his collarbone, and down the hard ridges of his abs.

I'm so distracted by a shirtless Rafael that it takes me a minute to notice what he's eating. A box of Cocoa Pebbles is open on the counter.

If my jaw wasn't already on the floor, it sure as hell would be now.

"Hey," I say, pulling my robe more securely around me and flushing all the way to my hairline. I didn't think anyone would be down here. My nightgown only goes midway down my thigh, and I'm not wearing a bra.

Rafael's eyes go wide when he sees me, and he makes a strangled choking sound before swallowing his mouthful of cereal. "What are you doing down here?"

"I, uh —"

"Not that you shouldn't be," he adds quickly. "I just mean . . . I thought you were asleep."

“Nope. I was hungry.” I purse my lips and shift my weight from one foot to the other. There’s nothing more awkward than running into your boss in your nightgown, except running into the boss that finger-fucked you on his desk the day before. “What are you doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Rafael mutters. “Not with my sister and Jake . . .” He trails off, and I have to squeeze my lips together to hold back a laugh.

“I guess that would keep you up.” I sidle over to the island and look pointedly at the box of Cocoa Pebbles. “Never pegged you for a chocolate-cereal guy.”

“No?” Rafael scrunches his eyebrows, and I can’t tell whether he’s offended or if he’s just messing with me.

I shake my head. “Nah. I figured you’d go for some protein if you were craving a midnight snack, Mr. I-have-eight-percent-body-fat.”

Rafael rolls his eyes, but a grin is working at the corner of his mouth. The sight steals the air from my lungs. “It’s my stress snack, if you must know. And Cocoa Pebbles is gluten- and dairy-free.”

I sigh. “Vivian could have mentioned that.”

He lets out a short bark of laughter, and I try not to stare at his gorgeous tan pecs. “I’ve just been thinking about the whole HealthyU cancer-patient debacle. This isn’t the last time something like this is going to happen, and I need to respond the right way.”

“You will,” I say, turning to face him and leaning my hip against the counter. “Just . . . be human. Don’t worry about what big clients you could lose or what the backlash might be. She was somebody’s daughter . . . somebody’s sister. Fiancé. Think about what you would want someone to say if she was a member of your family.”

Rafael shakes his head. “It’s not that simple.”

“It can be.”

“You don’t get it.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, here we go . . . Everyone else is incompetent. You have to micromanage everything yourself, or the whole company might implode.”

“I do not micromanage.”

“Eh, you kind of micromanage. That’s why you want everyone to give you a full report every freaking morning.” I shrug. “You don’t trust other people to do their jobs.”

“That’s not true.”

I cross my arms and cock my head to the side, fixing him with a disbelieving look.

“I just . . .” Rafael sighs. “I just want the company to be great.”

“So let it be great. You’ve put together a very capable team. You should get out of the way and let them do their jobs.”

“It’s . . . hard for me to let go.”

“Why?”

“Because this company is too important to me,” he snaps.

The way he says it, it sounds as though this isn’t just about MatchAI. I hold my tongue and wait for him to continue.

Rafael gives a reluctant sigh and drags a hand through his hair, making it stick up along the top. “After my dad was killed, my mom was always working. She worked three jobs to support me and my sister, and it was still never enough. When I got a full ride to Stanford, I told myself I’d never let my mother struggle like that ever again. I worked my ass off to start Dataelectric, and when that company took off, I sold it.”

I already know the rest of the story. Rafael sold his data-mining startup in an eight-figure deal. After that, he went on to found MatchAI, which made him a billionaire at the age of twenty-seven.

“I’ve tried to make my mother’s life as comfortable as possible,” he croaks. “But she doesn’t want a fancy house, a better car, or nicer clothes . . . None of them do. Elena wouldn’t even let me pay her bills when she was in school.”

Rafael’s voice is laced with frustration, and it cracks my heart in two. Here is a man who’s worked his whole life to make things better for his family, and he can’t stand the fact that they don’t want his money.

“They just want you,” I murmur.

Rafael rolls his eyes.

“It’s true!” I cry. “Your family loves you.”

“Yeah, well . . . they certainly love you, and my mother is a hard one to please.”

“About that . . .” My cheeks flush, and I tear my gaze away from Rafael. Elena’s words are ringing in my ears, and I have to ask the question that’s been playing on repeat ever since I woke up this morning. “Why did you really ask me to come here this weekend? We’ve hardly

touched anything work-related, and it's not as though you want my opinion on how to handle the press, so —”

“What makes you think I don't want your opinion?” Rafael cuts in.

I shoot him a cut-the-crap kind of look, and Rafael's expression turns thoughtful.

“Answer my question first. Why did you really apply for this job? And don't tell me it's because you thought it would be interesting.” Another eye roll. “It's no secret you don't really believe in what we do.”

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

This is it — my chance to come clean with Rafael and tell him what I do for a living. Sure, he'll be hurt and angry, but at least I won't have to look his mother in the eye tomorrow and lie right to her face.

As much as I don't want to, I know I need to tell him. This thing with Rafael has gone way beyond any assignment, and he's going to think that I played along in his office merely for the sake of the story.

That's the last thing I want.

“It's not that I don't believe in what you do,” I murmur. “I just think . . .” I take a deep breath, searching for the right words. “There is a cost.”

“Such as?” He looks genuinely curious.

“The human cost.”

“Ah.” Rafael nods and looks up at the ceiling. “You're one of those.”

“One of what?”

“One of the AI-is-taking-human-jobs-and-now-the-sky-is-falling people.”

“AI does take human jobs,” I shoot back, an edge of irritation in my voice. “My dad used to be a sports reporter, and when MatchAI rolled out its generative-AI journalism tool, the paper he worked for decided it would be cheaper to just pay an editor to go over AI-generated copy than to employ him any more.”

Rafael's brows lift, and his expression softens. His gaze flickers to the floor as he sighs, and I can tell I've made him uncomfortable. “I'm . . . sorry about that,” he murmurs. And he sounds genuinely sincere. “You have to believe that wasn't my intention when I started the company.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions,” I retort.

“Any time new technology comes around, there is a tradeoff,” he replies. “When Henry Ford introduced the assembly line —”

“Believe me, I’ve heard it all before,” I cut in. “And it doesn’t change the fact that a lot of these ‘innovations’ destroy people’s livelihoods.”

Rafael nods slowly, taking in my words. He doesn’t try to argue with me. He just stands there and absorbs it. “So why did you apply?” he asks finally.

Again, I hesitate. I don’t want to lie, but I can’t exactly tell him the truth. The second I do, he’s going to look at me differently, and I’m just not ready for him to hate me.

“I was just . . . curious,” I say after a long moment.

Rafael sucks in a breath and takes a step toward me. “About what?”

I shake my head. He’s standing much closer than he was a minute ago — close enough that I can feel the heat coming off him. His spicy leather-and-snow scent is all around me, and it’s making it difficult to think. I should just tell him.

“About . . . what it would be like,” I murmur, looking up into his eyes so I don’t stare at his naked chest.

In this lighting, his eyes aren’t the dark brown I remember. They almost look golden. My gaze flickers down to his lips, which are so full and kissable it should be illegal. “What you would be like . . .”

“And what am I like?” Rafael whispers, so close I can feel his breath on my lips.

I open my mouth without knowing what I’m about to say, but then Rafael leans forward, and his lips come down over mine.