

## Chapter Fourteen

### Alex

The sky is a muted overcast gray as I pull up in front of my apartment building. I thank my Uber driver and get my stuff, trudging up the snow-covered walkway.

If I wasn't broke before, renting a car in Aspen the day after Thanksgiving certainly did the trick. I charged the Uber I took from the rental place to the paper's account — one final fuck-you to my ex-employer for firing me a month before Christmas.

My apartment is freezing when I walk in, and I can smell the trash I neglected to take out before I left. I open the fridge, but the light doesn't come on. It also doesn't feel cold.

I know the only thing in there is some questionable Chinese takeout, but it still pisses me off. My landlord is a cheap-ass who never replaces anything, and now I'm going to have to wait for some service technician to come and fix my refrigerator.

Slamming the door shut, I wrap my arms around myself and go over to adjust the thermostat. The screen is dead when I go to turn it on, and the overhead lights won't come on.

Swearing, I grab the stack of open bills on my counter and rifle through until I find the one from the electric company.

"Shit," I mutter, tossing it down and running an aggravated hand through my hair.

It's not just that I haven't paid it. I'm honestly not sure that I can. I won't get paid for another three days, and I'm down to my very last cent.

Sinking onto the kitchen floor, I bury my head in my arms and try to understand how I made such a mess of things.

In less than twenty-four hours, I managed to lose my job and the one man I would have given it all up for. Now I can't even bury myself in my work and pretend that it's all okay.

I can't just go out and get a job at another paper. Every news outlet is making cuts, not hiring new reporters. I'll probably never work in journalism again, and that's all I've ever wanted to do.

I was brought up believing there were honest ways to make a living and not-so-honest ways. The harder the work and shittier the pay, the more honest and worthwhile the work.

After my dad was laid off, I threw myself into any story with the potential to expose greed, corruption, and lies. I became a mouthpiece for exploited workers and took on corporations and one-percenters. It was as if I had a vendetta against anyone and everyone who had it too good.

I told myself I was doing the sort of work my dad would be proud of — that I was uncovering the truth and exposing the bad guys.

As it turns out, I was the bad guy this time, and I hurt the one person in this world I could have loved.



By Monday morning, I've thoroughly exhausted all the old pasta and expired canned goods in my apartment. I eat a bowl of stale cereal without the milk and guzzle cold coffee from the dregs of my pot.

My car is on E when I roll into the parking lot outside my building, but at least I'm getting paid today. Everyone's eyes are on me as I walk into the newsroom, and I wish I'd been able to blow-dry my hair.

I pull my shoulders back and try to smile, but the knowledge that everyone knows I was let go makes it hard to hold my head high. I make a beeline for my desk, thinking I can just shovel the contents of my drawers into a garbage bag and make a run for it.

But as soon as I reach the little corner where I work, I stop dead in my tracks. Last Monday's coffee cup is still sitting on my desk — right next to the gorgeous cream Birkin bag that I picked out in Aspen.

All the air whooshes out of my lungs, and suddenly, I can't breathe. I can feel the eyes of all my co-workers boring into the back of my neck, but I couldn't give a shit.

A note is sticking out of the bag, scrawled on Rafael's custom letterhead.

Reaching out with shaking hands, I slide the note out of the bag.

You deserve this.

Three words.

How is it that three simple words can make me feel as though someone just ran me through with a rusty spike?

Hot tears burn in my throat as I stare down at the immaculate penmanship.

It must be Rafael's own handwriting, and I realize that this is the first time I've seen it. I feel as though I should recognize the handwriting of the person I love, and the knowledge that there are hundreds more things I'll never know about Rafael makes a few treacherous tears leak out of my eyes.

"Somebody must like you," comes a voice from behind me. I jerk my head around to find copyeditor Kyle staring at the bag.

"I'm not sure about that," I rasp, discreetly wiping my tears with the pad of my thumb and carefully folding the note.

"Aren't those, like, twenty-thousand-dollar handbags?"

"Thirty thousand," I mutter, clearing my throat and slipping Rafael's missive into the Birkin. "Did you, uh, happen to see who brought it in?"

Kyle gives me a strange look. "Someone drops a thirty-thousand-dollar handbag on your desk, and you don't know who left it?"

I sigh and shake my head dismissively. I don't feel like chatting with copyeditor Kyle — and not because, thanks to me, his job is now secure.

I just wish I could go back in time and do things differently — come clean with Rafael sooner. I'm not sure it would have changed the outcome. Rafael still might have turned his back on me, but at least he wouldn't see me as a liar.

The local news is playing on the TV mounted over the doorway. I clear my throat to say goodbye to Kyle, but a headline scrolling across the news ticker at the bottom of the screen catches my eye.

I fumble for a remote to unmute the TV, and a female reporter's voice fills the newsroom.

Match AI CEO Rafael Cabrera Garcia is expected to give a statement this morning regarding the sudden death of a thirty-two-year-old cancer patient who was enrolled in the company's healthcare app, HealthyU. We'll be bringing that coverage to you live at eleven eastern.

I suck in a breath and glance at the clock. It's eight thirty now. Eleven eastern is nine a.m. mountain time, which means that Rafael will be appearing in front of the press in half an hour.

We never got a chance to decide what he was going to say about the woman's death, but I have a feeling it isn't good. Rafael may be warm and loving and unbelievably kind, but you'd never know it by listening to the few interviews he's given during his tenure as CEO.

Somehow, I just know he's going to get up there and say the wrong thing. He's going to sabotage everything he's worked for.

Ignoring all the eyes on me, I slide into my old desk chair and open my laptop. My fingers fly over the keys as I type out everything I know Rafael would say if he could only speak from the heart.

Kyle is watching me with a mixture of confusion and pity, and I know he thinks I'm still working on some story for The Beacon.

It only takes me ten minutes to finish the draft and hit "print." Grabbing the paper off the printer, I snap up my brand-new Birkin bag and flee the newsroom.

I can hear the murmurs of my co-workers as I fly down the hallway, but I couldn't care less. I might not ever be able to make things right with Rafael, but I can do this one last thing.