

Chapter Fifteen

Alex

I'm a nervous wreck as I drive up to MatchAI, where a sizable crowd has already gathered. I park in a loading zone and stumble out of my car, realizing that I drove all the way here without bothering to formulate a plan.

The podium in front of the building is empty, which means Rafael must still be inside.

Taking a deep breath, I draw my shoulders back and walk with purpose toward the entrance.

I flash my employee badge at Ralph, the security guard, who nods and starts to wave me through. But then a spark of recognition flares in his eyes, and I know I'm busted.

A crease appears between his brows, and he hurriedly sidesteps to block my path. "I'm sorry, Ms. Larson. I can't let you through."

"Please, Ralph," I beg, dropping all semblance of composure. "I need to speak with him now."

"I'm sorry," he says. "But you're not allowed in the building. I have explicit instructions to notify Mr. Cabrera Garcia and confiscate your employee ID badge."

"Yes!" I stammer. "Please tell him I'm here. And tell him it's important!"

Ralph shakes his head. "No can do, ma'am. The bossman is about to give a press conference. He's probably on his way down right now, and you need to be gone by the time he gets here."

My heart sinks, and I briefly consider holding my ground until Ralph is forced to remove me. It would likely buy me a few minutes, but there have to be reporters from at least thirty different news outlets here. I don't want footage of me being hauled off the premises to make the evening news.

"Would you please just give him this before he gets up there?" I ask, holding out the piece of paper as if I'm handing Ralph my beating heart.

The security guard gives me an admonishing look, as if he knows exactly what I'm up to. "You tryin' to get me fired, Ms. Larson?"

"It's all right, Ralph," comes a clipped voice from just inside the lobby.

My breath catches in my chest as Rafael strides into view, looking devastatingly handsome in a navy suit and white button-up shirt. His cold dark gaze slides over to me, and I feel myself shrink a good four inches.

In all the interactions I ever had with Rafael, I never let myself cower. I always managed to meet him inch for inch, and now I can hardly look him in the eye.

My heart beats faster as Rafael comes closer, and his delicious, spicy leather scent fills my nostrils.

“What do you want?” he growls, just loud enough for me to hear. Even when he’s this angry with me, his voice still has the power to make my legs quiver and send a surge of heat straight to my core.

“To give you this,” I stammer, holding out the piece of paper with trembling hands.

Rafael takes it, and his lip curls in disgust. “What is it?”

“Your speech. Look, I know you probably hate me, and you have every right. You have no reason to trust me after what I did, but . . .” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling like an idiot.

I shouldn’t have come here. Rafael clearly doesn’t want to see me, and there’s an almost zero-percent chance that he’ll deliver my speech.

What did I think this would solve? Did I truly think that rushing over here to hand Rafael the perfect speech would somehow make him forget my betrayal?

“I think this could help,” I finish lamely, all the air whooshing out of my lungs.

I turn and shuffle away as fast as I can, my gut churning with humiliation as I press through the crowd. A bunch of overeager journalists are gathered in front of the podium, and I get a fresh pang of regret.

I don’t wish that I’d written the story; I just wish I still had my job. My career is what kept me anchored all these years. Now I have nothing.

I should get in my car and leave right now, but something makes me hesitate. Rafael slowly takes the podium, and the crowd falls silent as he prepares to speak. He looks so powerful and sexy up there, and my chest hurts thinking about how he was almost mine.

“Good morning,” he says. “Thank you all for coming. Here at MatchAI, we are always pushing further and further to develop new products to serve our customers. Healthcare costs are out of control in this country. Providers are overwhelmed, overbooked, and overworked.

Often the right treatment is the difference between life and death for patients, but doctors simply don't have the time to wade through as much research as they should."

At Rafael's words, my heart beats faster. He's reading my speech.

"Our newest endeavor, HealthyU, is an AI medical diagnostic and protocol tool that analyzes all the latest research, along with the data of millions of patients, to create the treatment plan with the likeliest outcome of success. It allows providers to make informed decisions rapidly, in a field where hours and days matter.

"As you know, we recently became aware that one of HealthyU's patients passed away due to a rare complication that resulted from the use of prescription medication that the AI was unaware of. Rest assured, my team is looking at every possibility to ensure that HealthyU is safe and effective, but today our hearts are with the patient's family."

Rafael takes a deep breath. "McKayla Neilson wasn't just a patient. She was someone's daughter. Someone's sister. Someone's fiancé. When I was deciding how best to respond to this tragedy, I knew I should be thinking about how to reaffirm that HealthyU is safe — how to instill confidence in our product and MatchAI as a whole. However . . . I kept thinking about how I would want this company to respond if this happened to a member of my own family."

Rafael's gaze drifts over the crowd until his eyes lock on mine. I shiver at the intensity of his stare, which seems to root me to the spot.

"To McKayla's family, I want to offer my deepest condolences. Nothing I say will bring her back, but I hope it will give you some comfort to know that her death will have meaning. We will be using her case to inform everything we do moving forward in an effort to make sure that doctors have all the information they need to give patients like McKayla the best fighting chance. My thoughts and prayers are with you this week." Rafael draws his gaze back to the press. "Thank you."

The crowd erupts as Rafael steps away from the podium, and my chest feels as though it might burst.

Part of me can't believe he actually read my speech. The other part can't comprehend how I ever thought of Rafael as some cold unfeeling CEO.

This is a man who feels everything deeply. He's ruthless and exacting because he genuinely wants what's best for his company and his family. Rafael loves fiercely, and I may have lost him forever.

Suddenly, I know I can't walk away. I need to speak to Rafael — to beg for one more chance. If I don't, I know I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

I start shoving my way through the crowd, my desperation mounting with every step. Rafael has already disappeared inside the building. The chief communications officer is frantically trying to field questions from the press, and it's difficult to get by.

Finally, though, I reach the front doors — only to find my path blocked by Vivian.

“Alexandra,” she says, her voice full of an arctic chill that makes my heart sink to my knees.

“Please, Vivian. I need to speak to him. It's important.”

“I'm sure it is,” says Vivian tartly. “But Mr. Cabrera Garcia is on his way to a meeting and has asked not to be disturbed.”

I swallow. I should have known that it was useless to try to get five minutes with the most in-demand CEO in America — especially when he probably has my picture posted behind the security desk.

Vivian lets out a long-suffering sigh, looking me up and down. “However, Mr. Cabrera Garcia has agreed to meet with you.”

At those words, my heart lifts, and I have the sudden urge to throw my arms around Vivian's bony neck and kiss her on the cheek.

The woman gives me an odd look, and I manage to resist. “You can wait for him in his office.”