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# A WONDERFUL NEW YEAR

The Alex and Anna Chronicles, Book Four

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Blushing Books

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## Chapter 1

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There was a knock on Alex's office door; he made a valiant effort to curb his irritation. Taking time off between Christmas and the New Year left him with a lot to do to play catch up. He didn't need interruptions. Tempted to yell, *Go away*, he instead said, "Come in," in a pleasant voice. The girl who walked in looked familiar, but Alex didn't know her. "Yes? What can I do for you?"

"Mr. Fox, I need to apologize to you."

"For what?" he asked curiously, and she looked at him as if he had two heads. "Miss, I am terribly sorry, but I can't place you, and I have no idea why you are apologizing."

It was at that moment his wife walked in, carrying take-out food for lunch. "What are *you* doing here?" Anna asked sharply of the girl, shocking her husband.

"Trying to apologize. I am truly sorry for the way I treated you, Mrs. Fox. I behaved badly and I want you both to know that I appreciate the second chance you granted me. I am living with Mr. and Mrs. Sarver now, and trying to become a better person."

The young woman standing in front of them now did not resemble the girl who had slapped her at the Christmas party. It

was obvious she was trying to make amends, and Anna knew how hard it was to apologize. Valerie was making every effort to right a wrong and Anna decided to be gracious. "I am sure that Matt and Gerta will do their best to help you, Valerie. You look very pretty today," Anna added, smiling.

"I am ashamed of the way I presented myself at the party. The dress was so expensive and Matt said it made me look like a prostitute! I'm so sorry. And I honestly didn't know you were married again, Mr. Fox. Mrs. Fox, I said mean and spiteful things to you; they weren't true. It was my jealousy speaking."

"We understand, Valerie," Alex said with a smile. "I know that I appreciate your apology, and I'm sure Anna does too. I hope you know that Matt and Gerta are wonderful people?"

"They made me welcome at Christmas. I even got gifts, like this outfit. I don't know why they decided to help me, but I am happy they did. Thank you for the second chance. I promise I won't let you down."

"We know that, Valerie. I can see the real you now." Alex was impressed by the change in the young woman.

"What are you doing in here, young lady?" Matt asked sternly as he entered the office.

"She was apologizing to us, Matt." Alex immediately came to her defense. "I know how difficult that is, but she did a fine job of it, and Anna and I are very pleased to see that Valerie is doing well with you and Gerta."

"I would have come with you, Val," Matt said with a smile. "I'm proud of you for doing this on your own without any prodding from me."

"Thank you, Matt. May I go now? I need to have some lunch, and I don't want to be late getting back."

"You go on, and take your full hour. That is an order." Matt took good care of the people under him. Valerie never indulged in long lunches.

“Yes, sir.” Valerie smiled at him, and then hurried from the room.

“It seems to be going well?” Alex asked the older man.

“We’ve had a couple of moments. Cyndi didn’t like it that we took Val into our home. I can’t spank a pregnant daughter, but I sure wanted to. Valerie bit her tongue, and Max jumped into the fray and told Cyndi to go on home if she didn’t like it. Cyndi started crying, and Valerie told Max to stop being so mean, defending Cyndi. Cyndi and Val are fast friends now.” Matt was shaking his head.

Alex laughed. “When there are two sisters, the brother always gets the short end of things, no matter what. They can be fighting like two cats, but just let the brother try to reason with them, and they bond immediately to take him down. I know this from personal experience with my two sisters.”

It was Matt’s turn to laugh and nod in understanding. “I was going to bring Valerie in here before we left today to make her apology. It didn’t occur to me that she would decide to do it on her own. I am proud of her. I know she was afraid to face you both.”

“She needs the guidance you and Gerta can give her,” Anna said. “Thank you for being such wonderful people.”

“I hope we can turn her life around. She’s become special to Gerta and me in a very short time,” Matt admitted. “She helps Gerta and doesn’t complain about doing it either. I still find it hard to believe that innocent little girl could dress up and look like she was for sale. I wanted to spank her right then and there, but Gerta frowned at that. I trusted Gerta to know what was best.”

Once Matt left Alex’s office, Anna told Alex to sit down and enjoy his lunch.

“You didn’t need to do this, honey,” he said with a happy smile. “I would have survived until dinner. That’s what I used to do.”

“You are now a married man, Alex Fox, and I will see to it that my husband is cared for. I love you,” she said, taking small boxes of Chinese take-out from the white bag they were packed in and putting them on his desk for him to choose from. “You pick what you want and I’ll fix your plate while you keep right on working.”

“Don’t be silly. I can serve myself and spend some time with you. It will improve my mood considerably. When Valerie knocked on my door I almost growled at her and told her to go away. That would have been a huge mistake. What do you think of her appearance today?” he asked Anna.

“She looked like a smart lady who has a bright career in front of her. I will admit I was a bit taken aback to find her in here with you, but she was trying to apologize. Did you truly not recognize her?” she asked, amused.

“I did not. I do recall hiring her. She did lie and tell me that she was in a serious relationship, but her work has been exemplary. Matt is happy with her; he told me she was catching on fast. It’s hard to believe she thought that terrible dress would make her irresistible.”

“She is so young. I’m glad we gave her a second chance. I can see why Matt asked it of us.”

“Yes, I can too. Thank you for being gracious to her, honey. You always make me proud. Seeing Valerie today, I know I would have felt like the worst of bullies if I’d refused her a second chance, especially at Christmas. Somehow you knew she was deserving of one.”

“I didn’t know for sure, darling. I just knew that if Matt and Gerta were asking, there had to be a very good reason. I trust them.”

“Good call. You eat now. I’m not going to have you dieting.”

“My stomach is a bit queasy,” she complained. “I am going to make myself a cup of tea and grab some crackers to nibble on.”

“Did you eat something that didn’t sit well on your tummy?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” She didn’t tell Alex that she’d lost her breakfast before leaving the house that morning. He would insist she go home and call the doctor for an appointment. She didn’t feel sick, and she suspected she knew what was going on – it was nerves. She was planning to quit her job with the advertising agency. A part of her was worried that she wouldn’t be able to sell her clothing designs. It was a big step. “Darling, are you positive I should quit my job and focus on my designs?”

“I won’t tell you what to do, honey. I do think that this is the perfect time for you to give yourself a chance. I am sure that Ted would rehire you, if that is what is worrying you?” Alex studied her worried expression thoughtfully. He might need to help her focus if this continued.

“I am going to tell Mr. Marckle to find my replacement. I think that is what has my stomach upset, plain old nerves.”

“Don’t be nervous. Just go after your dream.”

“I will. Excuse me while I go get myself some tea.” She left Alex’s office and was stopped in the hallway by Dan Parker. “Hello, Dan. How are you?”

“Anna, I am doing well. I have been sober for forty-five days now, still going to meetings with my mom, who is staying on my butt all the time. I am never going to drink again, Anna. I promise you that. Do you know how lucky I am that Mr. Fox gave me a second chance? I don’t want to disappoint him, and I especially don’t want to let Matt Sarver down either. He has given me every chance to redeem myself, and I’m trying hard.” He smiled in embarrassment. “How are you? Are you happy with the boss?”

“I am madly in love with that man. I also want to tell you that we have been following your progress, and Matt Sarver is giving us wonderful reports. Keep it up, please.”

“I am. May I tell my folks that? It would mean a lot to them.”

“Of course. I am sure they were very worried about you.”

“It was like reliving a nightmare for the folks, watching me hit bottom. I came into this new year sober, and I am going to remain this way. I am not proud of hurting them.”

“You are doing great. I am proud of you for trying so hard.” They said goodbye so Dan could get back to work and Anna continued on to the break room. Several women were in there eating lunch when she walked in.

“Mrs. Fox, aren’t you worried to have that little tart from the Christmas party working here with the boss?” one woman dared to ask her, and the other three women gaped at her in shock.

“No. I believe in second chances. She made a silly mistake, and she needs our help. I do trust my husband. He loves me.”

“I sure wouldn’t want someone like her around *my* husband!” the first woman continued, and Anna felt her temper flare. Before she could say anything however, Alex appeared in the doorway, and it was obvious he was not happy.

“Mrs. Ward, I find your comments insulting. First of all, Miss Knight was not raised with the advantages that most of us were lucky enough to have. She has apologized to me and to my wife, and she is trying to turn her life around. I will not have any of my employees judging Miss Knight, or gossiping about her. What happened at the Christmas party is over, done, apologized for and forgiven. A second chance, granted by my wife, is just that. It means that we do not hold past grievances against a person. We start over and give them the benefit of the doubt. And, since I heard your comment about not trusting your husband, I will be speaking to him of this matter and discerning if he is trustworthy or not. In the meantime, you ladies all need to get back to your desks while you still have jobs here. I do not tolerate mean-spirited gossip; is that understood?” Alex asked firmly. Anna knew that voice. When directed at her it usually meant a spanking was going to happen. The women at the table were red-faced, and one of them was in tears from the scold.



“I think you are flattered by the attention, Mr. Fox!” Mrs. Ward dared to say. “It is unfair to your wife for you to have that girl working here and vying for your attention all the time.”

“That girl is a child, Mrs. Ward. I am not attracted to her, and I think you are simply trying to find trouble where none exists. My wife knows that she is the only woman I look at in a sexual way, not that this is any of your business.”

“And what goes on behind your closed door stays there? Poor Mrs. Sarver, she wouldn’t stand for this!”

“I have heard enough. You may clean out your desk, Mrs. Ward. You are fired. You are never going to give Miss Knight a second chance; you are going to continue to gossip and say spiteful things about her, and you will eventually upset my wife. Go now.” He took out his telephone and hit a button. “Claude, I have just fired one of your team, Deborah Ward. She is to clean out her desk under your supervision, and you will collect any keys or other items that belong to this company. Her last paycheck and severance papers will be mailed to her. This is not a friendly firing, and I want you to see to it that she doesn’t spread vicious gossip on her way out the door. Thank you. If you need me, just call.”

He turned to his wife. “Anna, I am terribly sorry about that. None of what she said was true. I have no designs on anyone but you, honey.”

“I know that, darling. I am fine. I was on the verge of losing my temper.”

“Mr. Fox, I would like to say something if I may?”

“What is it, Mrs. Williams?” Alex asked patiently. The woman was crying when he scolded Deborah Ward, and he hated tears.

“None of us sitting here believed any of that nonsense. Debbie is always finding fault with everyone and everything. Please don’t think we spend our lunches gossiping; we don’t. We think that Valerie is a very nice girl. Her behavior at the party

was a desperate attempt for love. She isn't the little tart that Debbie called her."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Mrs. Williams. It is a relief to me to know that there are intelligent people working here."

"We won't miss Deborah's gossip. We tried to change our lunch times to escape her, and she started coming too. I need to get back to work, but I just didn't want you to feel bad. We are on your side in this matter."

"Thank you, Mrs. Williams. I appreciate your honesty."

"Mrs. Fox, you don't need to worry about Mr. Fox. He only has eyes for you." With those final words, Millicent Williams went back to her desk and got right to work, the other women following her example with encouragement for Anna.

"High praise, I think."

"Millicent Williams has been here for a long time, and she is next in line for a promotion," Alex stated. "Honey, about your tummy, do you think you should see a doctor?"

"No, darling. I am fine. I tend to get an upset stomach when faced with major decisions. Once I tell Mr. Marckle, I will be fine."

"All right, but if this persists, I will insist."

"Don't be bossy, darling. I am a big girl."

"And I am the big girl's husband, and I will remind you of that if necessary."

"Go and eat your lunch, Mr. Fox." She made a face at him, then squealed and scooted away when he tried to swat her backside. "I need to get back to work. Just because I am quitting is no reason to be lazy."

"No, it isn't. Would you like for me to be with you when you tell Ted?" he asked.

"No, that is my job, husband dear. I need to tell him in my own way and try to help him find a replacement. I would recommend Karen, but she and Chip have decided to go ahead and

have another baby to raise with Mandy. She wants to continue working from home, provided Mr. Marckle will permit it.”

“He will. She’s good at what she does, and she can get a lot done from home, then come in a couple of times a week to do presentations if necessary.”

“Dave is good, but he’s not ready to supervise others in the office or make suggestions for others to carry out. I don’t know if Mr. Marckle will hire from within, but I am thinking I will need to place an ad and do interviews and train someone before I can officially walk out the door. I feel that is fair, and I do love the Marckles and I want to be fair to them.”

“You will do what is right, honey. Ted will appreciate that, but just remember, it is his company and he might want to do the hiring and training himself.”

“If he tells me that, I will simply leave with a smile and be happy I don’t have to do it for him.” She put her hands on her hips. “Go and eat your food, mister!”

“I did eat. It was good too. I came to see what was taking you so long, and I got an earful. I couldn’t believe that woman’s nerve.”

“I was on the verge of losing my temper again,” she admitted. “Thank you for dealing with her so thoroughly, darling. I know how much you hate to fire anyone, but it sounds to me like the other women weren’t too fond of her gossiping.”

“I am glad they told me that. It helped. I really do need to get back to work, honey. Thank you for bringing me some lunch.”

“My pleasure,” she said with a huge smile. She kissed him, and then whispered, “I will see you at home this evening.”

Alex walked her out, then returned to his office. He pulled up his employee files and found what he was looking for. Henry Ward answered his cell phone right away.