“And how does that make you feel?” The doctor looked at Alex patiently, but expectantly.

It always came back to that question, didn’t it? How do you feel? That single question had been Alex’s biggest hurdle in making therapy serve any purpose. She often didn’t know exactly how she felt, and wasn’t terribly interested in expressing it when she did. That type of navel-gazing wasn’t her strength, but she was learning there was no point in even trying if she weren’t willing to do the work.

“It scares me,” Alex admitted. “I’m afraid of losing, I’m afraid of winning, I’m afraid of running, and afraid of passing up the chance to run. I’m afraid of what it means that I even still think about this type of thing.”
Chapter 1

COLLATERAL DAMAGE, PART 2:

UNFORGIVABLE MEANS

You see what power is--holding someone else's fear
in your hand and showing it to them.

-Amy Tan

Silence is the ultimate weapon of power.

-Charles de Gaulle

-1-

Friday, December 20, 2013

4:37 a.m.

Alex Cabot was awake. Not fully rested, ready-for-the-day awake, but bleary-eyed, thinking-too-much-to-sleep awake. It wasn’t a state that was foreign to her, of course, but she still hated it. She’d drifted off to a sound sleep almost immediately after saying goodnight to Olivia, weary from a long day and great sex. But here she was, less than four hours later, sitting at the kitchen counter with her laptop, banging out notes on a pending case while she tried to simultaneously ignore and rehash her conversation with Colin Samuels.

Promise me you’ll think it over. Talk to Benson, call your uncle. I think they’ll both agree with me that you should do this.

She had promised, and she had, indeed, talked to Benson. It seemed like a fool’s errand at the time--she expected Olivia’s answer to be a firm and uncompromising no, but her wife was surprisingly encouraging. The encouragement was girdered by a saddening sense of resignation, or inevitability, Alex thought, but she’d known Olivia long enough to know that if she had given her blessing,
she’d meant it.

Talk to your uncle, talk to Liz, but in the end, you decide, babe. I'm behind you 100%.

Olivia might be hoping that Bill would be the bad guy who’d dissuade Alex from declaring herself a candidate in the special election for District Attorney, but they both knew Donnelly would push her to take the chance and run. Liz had been a tough boss, and had taught Alex more than a few brutal lessons, but seeing her protege succeed at this level would be an enormous source of pride for her. If Liv was steering Alex in that direction for advice, then she had to be willing to go along with any decision Alex made.

Kate, she thought. If Olivia wanted someone else to play the heavy, she should’ve sent me to Kate. She knew her best friend would be of two minds about the possibility of Alex running for election. She’d smugly point out that all of her recent predictions were now coming to pass, but she would be apoplectic that Alex was actually considering this election.

Considering it. Sure, Alex, that’s what you’re doing. Considering it carefully, weighing the pros and cons, not even remotely sure what you’re going to do, are you? She would have laughed at her own predictability, if she weren’t dreading the discussion with Kate. She’d save that for last--after Bill, and Liz, and any other damn person she could think of to talk to about it.

Olivia was awake, too. Alex’s tossing and turning hadn’t kept her from sleep, but the reason for that restlessness was definitely cause for insomnia. She’d thought about getting up, walking down the cold steps and into the kitchen. She smelled coffee, so she knew Alex was up for the duration. But she knew her wife well, knew that what she needed right now was solitude. She was turning things over in her mind, weighing options in her hands, looking at the situation from every angle. Even if the end result was a foregone conclusion--and it was, as far as Olivia could see--Alex would still go through the process. She didn’t cut corners.

Liv imagined the next few months--if Alex won, the next few years, and beyond--and knew that her life would change irrevocably. The media in this city loved Alex, and they’d cover her campaign enthusiastically. Except for the few who hated her, and they’d be even more thorough and unrelenting. She’d ruffled feathers throughout her career, and her time on CNN the year before hadn’t endeared her to a handful of career journalists who thought she had no business mingling with the Fourth Estate. It was the reason they’d had to hide out like fugitives when IAB was questioning the detective the year before, fallout from Alex’s increasingly high profile. That
wasn’t the sort of thing that would normally elicit more than a passing glance from the city’s media, but anything to do with Alexandra Cabot was a juicy story, it seemed. An election might be damn near unbearable, Olivia thought. And I’m sure we’re about to find out just how much we can take.

Olivia felt lucky to have Alex in her life, in every way—as her wife, her lover, her best friend. But their road had never been smooth, and each of them had worries they’d never share with one another, fears that no matter how hard they both tried, it wouldn’t—couldn't—work, that the forever they both wanted was an unattainable dream. Their respective reasons would have been very different, and not easily defined, or explained, but were nonetheless painfully real. These were the kinds of thoughts that had a way of creeping in during those pre-dawn hours when sleep was an elusive balm, even when the person you loved most was two rooms away. They dealt with things so differently—it was part of what made them a great team. So Liv stayed in bed, pondering and conjuring situations that she knew wouldn’t turn out anything like she imagined. Alex stayed downstairs, tapping at her keyboard, making lists, a dervish of kinetic energy. As the sun rose, Olivia slept in fits and starts, until she heard Alex coming down the hall to the bedroom door. She lay with her eyes closed, expecting to feel a chilled body slide in next to her, but a minute passed and no Alex. She opened her brown eyes and looked toward the door.

Alex was leaning against the doorframe, coffee mug in hand and a tired, sweet smile on her face. “Caught me,” she said shyly.

“Caught you doing what, baby?”

“Looking at you, and wondering what I did to deserve so much happiness.”

“You don’t have to do a thing,” Olivia said. “You’re just perfect. Loving you is what I was meant to do. Now come over here so I can warm you up.” She lifted the blankets and patted the mattress beside her.

“You could sleep a while longer, honey. I don’t want to wake you.”

“News flash, counselor,” Olivia laughed. “I felt you sneak out of bed hours ago, and I’ve been awake ever since. So get under this blanket before all the heat escapes.”

Alex acquiesced, putting her mug on the bedside table and curling up beside her wife. As she settled back against Olivia’s chest, she started to curl her legs up, but stopped.
“Go ahead,” Liv said in a resigned voice. “Put those cold feet on me and get it over with. Remind me again why you won’t you wear slippers or socks?”

“I hate them,” Alex said. “Always have. Not sure why.” It was quiet for a moment. They didn’t really have time to sleep--it was a Friday morning, and there was work to do. Always work to do, Alex thought. She felt herself warming from the inside out, as Olivia held her close and their breathing synched up.

She luxuriated in the peace for a while, but there was a question she was dying to ask.

“Liv…” she began.

“Hmmm?” The soft hum came from somewhere around Alex’s ear, and sent chills down her spine.

“If you’ve been awake all this time, why didn’t you come downstairs?”

The reply was a warm whisper against her neck. “Because, Alex Cabot, I know you. And I know you need your space when you’re making an important decision. I’d never want to intrude on that. As long as you keep me in the loop, I don’t need to hover over you. I trust your judgement, baby.”

“Your faith in me is boundless, Liv. I’m not sure I’ve proven myself worthy of that.”

“You have. Believe me. You always, always do the right thing. And you’ll do the right thing now. I know it.”

Alex sighed. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Olivia turned Alex toward her so they were face to face, and kissed her forehead. “I do,” Olivia said. “You’ll run, and you’ll win. You’ve dreamed of this since you first thought about being an attorney, and you won't be satisfied until you try, Alex. I understand that now. I won't stand in your way. If you want to be told no, you’ll have to find somebody else to do it.”

“I’m not as certain as you are, Liv.”
“You will be. I’ll wait here until you see that I’m right. Just make sure I get the first campaign bumper sticker, and make sure my calls always get through, Madam District Attorney.” She followed her demands with another kiss, decidedly less chaste. “There’s no time to sleep, but there just might be time for my favorite kind of wake-up.”

“I’d love that,” Alex smiled. “But you have to tell me one thing.”

“What’s that?” Olivia asked. Her lips were already traveling along Alex’s jaw, and nipping at the soft, sweet skin of her neck. “Anything for you.”

“Don’t you ever have doubts?” Alex’s voice was serious, even as Liv’s tongue on her collarbone elicited a slight hitch in her breathing.

Olivia did have doubts. Of course she did. About herself, about her work, about the world in general and the future in particular. But never about Alex, or about their love, and she decided that would be enough truth for this exact moment. She leaned back and looked into Alex’s eyes.

“No,” she said firmly. “You told me once that I’d better not have any uncertainties about you. And I don’t. We’re in this together, and it will all be okay. I know that. Now shut up and kiss me. You’ll be making speeches soon enough.”
Alex didn’t get a chance to call Liz Donnelly. The Manhattan legal community was a hotbed of gossip worse than any high school cafeteria, and at 10:30, Ellen was knocking on her doorframe to get her attention. Alex looked up and smiled.

“Hi. What horrible news do you have for me on this otherwise lovely Friday morning?”

“What makes you think I have bad news?” Ellen asked. “Or any news, for that matter? I might just be letting you know the Office Max man delivered my new chair.”

“You’ve never reported on the Office Max man’s activities before, so, unless you have a crush on him or something…” Alex laughed. “Actually, I know that look on your face, Ellen. So spill it.”

“You have a lunch appointment with Judge Donnelly.”

“Well, two hours ago, my day was clear, so I can only imagine how that happened.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Cabot. She came by, looked over my shoulder and saw that you weren’t booked, and said she would be by at noon to pick you up. It wasn’t a question.”

“It never is,” Alex sighed. “Don’t worry, it’s not your fault. She’d have gotten to me sooner or later, anyway. May as well get it over with.”

“Is this about the District Attorney’s imminent departure?”

“My God, word travels fast around this office,” Alex marveled. “Yes, that’s what it’s about. I’m sorry, Ellen, I wanted to talk to you about it today.”

“There’s a lot to talk about,” Ellen said.
“I don’t like the sound of that. Better have a seat.” Alex gestured at the chair Ellen was standing
behind.

Ellen rounded the chair and sat gingerly on the leather seat. This wasn’t a position she was
accustomed to. Despite their years of working together, and all they’d been through, she could
count on one hand the number of times she’d sat in this office and talked with her boss. She ferried
papers and files back and forth all day, often stood beside the desk as they chatted, and called on
the intercom even more frequently.

“I’m not going to want to have this conversation, am I?” Alex asked.

“I don’t think it’s as bad as all that,” Ellen reassured her.

“If you’re retiring and leaving me, then it is as bad as all that.”

“Not immediately,” Ellen clarified. “But yes, the time is approaching.”

“How long do I have?” Alex’s voice was glum. She’d known the day would come, but somehow
she hadn’t wanted to consider it as anything more than an abstraction.

“After the election.”

“Election?”

“Yes,” Ellen replied. “I will stay with you until after the election. When you win, you’ll be making
the move down the hall to the DA’s office, and you’ll need someone else to handle things for you
there.”

“I don’t want anyone else to handle things.” Alex knew she sounded like a petulant child. “Besides,
I haven’t even decided if I’m running for office.” She tossed her glasses on the desk.

“You are, and you’ll win,” Ellen said kindly. “And when you do, you need a fresh start, someone
who can play the political game around here far better than I’ve ever been able to. Being your
gatekeeper is exhausting enough as it is. I can only imagine how hard it will be to keep the crowds
at bay when you’re the District Attorney.”

Alex put her head in her hands, massaging her temples. She finally looked up at Ellen, emotion
written all over her face, but she was determined not to cry. “What if I don’t win?”

“If you don’t win? Well, that’s a big if, but I’ll play along. If you don’t win, I will stay for a few
more months while you look for someone else.”

Alex smiled for the first time since Ellen had sat down. “I can live with that.”

“I can, too. But listen to me, Alexandra Cabot: If you throw this election just to keep me from my
hard-earned retirement, I won’t be pleased.”

Liz arrived at 10 minutes past noon. She despised being kept waiting, but never minded
inconveniencing anyone else with her own late arrivals.

“Always working hard, counselor. Never willing to coast for even a moment.”

Alex looked up to see Liz leaning in the open doorway, the smirk on her face as evident as the one
in her voice.

“Coast?” Alex asked.

“Coast,” Liz repeated. “You must know what that is, Alex. Someone with your brains, your looks,
your connections--your fantastic backstory--surely you could put your feet up once in a while and
just take it as it comes?”

“When the cases stop coming across my desk, maybe I can coast, as you put it,” Alex replied.
“Cases never stop coming across the DA’s desk,” Liz teased.

Alex’s look was one of unadulterated annoyance. “It’s been less than a day since I found out there was even going to be an election, and nearly everyone I know has spent the intervening hours making campaign posters,” she complained. “If you’re planning to do that as well, the least you can do is take me to lunch first.”

“Fine, grab your purse,” Liz said. “I’ll make sure you’ve ordered your usual mesclun salad at Nelson Blue before I start to lay out the strategy that will get you elected.”

Twenty minutes later, and true to her word, Liz was making small talk while Alex pretended she’d order any of a dozen other items on the menu, before finally settling on the one thing they both knew she’d end up getting. When the waitress left the table, Alex braced herself for the inevitable cajoling. It didn’t come.

They sipped their white wine in silence. After a couple of minutes, Donnelly spoke.

“You are relaxing a bit, I’m glad to see,” she said. “Ordering wine at lunch during a workday? The Alex Cabot who worked for me was far too serious for that.”

“Well, it is a Friday,” Alex replied drily. “And I suspect I’m going to need it. So, come on. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Why should I? You don’t seem the least bit excited to hear it.”

“My head is spinning, Liz. Yesterday morning, I was minding my own business, meeting with my ADAs to vet and assign cases, and by dinnertime I was penciled in as a candidate for a job I’m not sure I want.”

Liz looked at her incredulously. “Who are you, and what have you done with Alex?”

Alex laughed, despite her churning stomach and nascent headache. “I’m still here. But things have changed.”
“Of course they have,” Liz agreed. “But I don’t think you’ve changed.”

Alex reacted quickly and vehemently. “Liz, I disagree completely…”

Donnelly resumed control of the conversation with a raised hand, cutting off Alex’s protest instantly. Funny, Alex thought, how someone can keep that upper hand so easily, just because they were once your boss or your mentor...or your enemy.

“Let me finish. You haven’t changed, Alex, not fundamentally at least. You’ve had a set of goals in mind for a very long time. This is the next logical rung on that ladder.”

“I don’t feel like the same person I was 15 years ago. I don’t feel like the same person I was 15 weeks ago, to be honest.”

“I understand that,” Liz said. “But sometimes, the ways in which we do change only serve to highlight the important ways in which we don’t. When you were younger, you were such a crusader for justice. It drove me crazy at first, because I really believed that it wasn’t justice you were interested in—it was power. And there’s nothing wrong with wanting power, if you’re honest about what your goals are.”

“I’m afraid that is what I wanted then. I thought it was for someone else--for the victims, for society, for justice. It was all really for me.”

“I’ve known you a long time, Alex. I’ve known your family even longer. It may shock you to realize that you never wanted power just for the sake of having it. I realized that about you years ago. Masquerading as a power-hungry, vainglorious megalomaniac made it easier for you to keep your distance—from the victims, from the cases, from everyone. But less than a year after you were assigned to SVU, you were all in. If anything changed you, it was that first year in Special Victims. Everything since has been a measure of the person you are, and the person you became working the cases no-one wanted and fighting for detectives who wanted justice as badly as you did.”

“Fighting with them, too,” Alex smiled ruefully.

“That’s passion,” Liz laughed. “You went to Harvard and became a lawyer for your family. You joined the DA’s office instead of some corporate firm because that was the politically expedient career track. You even saw SVU as some sort of merit badge on your sash--Saint Alexandra,
defender of the downtrodden. None of that was done out of passion, though. Working the actual cases in that unit is what made you the attorney you are today. It ignited your passion, and revealed who you truly are.”

“You make me sound far more selfless than I really am, Liz.”

“Well, God knows there have been missteps along the way, but you are a good person, Alex. Even when you do stupid things. You want this for the right reasons. Add to that the fact that you’re a hell of a litigator. Half of Manhattan’s defense attorneys are afraid of you.”

“Just half?” Alex asked jokingly.

“The other half haven’t met you in a courtroom yet.”

Their conversation paused while the waitress delivered their salads and refilled water glasses, only to resume as soon as she was out of earshot.

“What does Olivia say?” Liz asked.

“She says I should do it, that I’ll never be happy unless I try.”

“Told you she was a smart woman,” Liz said. “And you’re married now, so that’ll look good to voters.”

“Liz, I don’t know what I want anymore. That’s not a position I like to be in.”

“I know you want it, Benson knows you want it, and no matter what you say, you know you want it, so cut the bullshit, Alex, and tell me what’s really on your mind.”

“What if I don’t win?” The confession came in a rush, words Alex hadn’t even known she would say until they came out of her mouth. But as soon as she spoke them, she knew they were true, and explained the real reason for her reluctance.
“Then you don’t win,” Liz replied nonchalantly. “It’s not the end of the world. Christ, Alex, it won’t be like getting shot and left for dead on a sidewalk.” She waited a minute, and then smiled.

Alex smiled back at her. “Perspective.”

“Yes, keep it in perspective,” Liz urged. “A lost election is just a lost election, and if nothing else, you’ll at least find out if you have the stomach for it.”

She paused a moment and took a drink of wine.

“You won’t lose though, Alex. You need to be prepared for that, and not treat this as a lark.”

“How can you be sure?”

“You’re the whole package. Smart, fierce ADA, family connections, high profile, hell of a backstory, cops love you—one in particular, which can only help you, in my opinion. Not to mention, you look the part, Cabot. You play well on TV, and that’s an important part of the battle. There’s no one else who’s as well-equipped to make a run at this.”

“It’ll be a short election,” Alex mused.

“Short elections can be brutal,” Liz advised. “But I truly think this is the opportunity of a lifetime, Alex. You’re going to hate running for office, I can promise you that, and it always occurred to me that you might lose your patience before the end of a regular election cycle. But you’d be a damn good District Attorney, and this is the best way for you to get there. If you run again, it’s as an incumbent, and I know you’d find that infinitely more palatable.”

Alex sighed. “I’ll think on it.” Her voice was weary.

“You can’t think too long on this, Alex. I know you’ve probably got a pros-and-cons list a mile long already, but you can’t get so wrapped up in deciding that you miss the chance to do this.”

Alex was reminded of Kate’s words nearly two years ago, when Alex was at loose ends and not finding any traction in an uphill battle to just live her life.
You need to get your shit together, Alex, truly. I’ve known you for 20-some years and I love you, but you can spend so much time thinking about things, you forget to do them, Cab. Time to fish or cut bait.

She tried to push down the sinking feeling that was threatening her tenuous grip on any sense of calm. It arose from the combination of making a rushed decision, and the realization that she hadn’t yet told Kate about any of this, a conversation she was dreading.

You’re dreading it because you’ve decided, Alex. You’re going to do this, and you know she won’t support your decision.

“Earth to Alex.” Liz’s voice cut through the din around them, and the fog between Alex’s ears.

“I’m here,” she said.

“You can’t afford to zone out now, Cabot. Keep your head in the game,” Liz counseled her. “There’s no time to waste.”

“I don’t like to be hurried.”

“Well, tough shit, Alex. Time to put on your big-girl panties and get over yourself. If you want to do this, you have to move now. Yesterday, Colin Samuels told you and your colleagues that he’s stepping down, and no doubt he spoke to a dozen or so other people around Hogan Place. I knew it by 8:30 this morning, and now it’s just a game of telephone. News like this will spread like wildfire to every lawyer, judge and politician from the five boroughs up to Albany before he can schedule that press conference. You don’t have to throw your hat in the ring first, but you do have to be the best prepared when you do. You have a jump-start that you can’t squander. You need to hire a campaign manager, a media person and a finance person—for starters. Do that now while you can get the best. Then you have to start raising money.”

“Oh, no problem. I’ll have all that done by the time I leave today. Maybe I can spend the weekend putting up my own billboards.”

Liz didn’t reply for a moment, handing over her credit card to the server before turning her attention back to her companion. “You can wear the hell out of a suit, Alex, but sarcasm does not look good on you,” Liz admonished.
“I’ll decide by Monday,” Alex granted.

“I hate to tell you, counselor, but you’ve already decided. I can see it in your eyes. If you don’t do this, you’ll always wonder what might have been. Regret isn’t your thing.”

“Olivia said the same thing,” Alex replied. “Please don’t tell me you two are in cahoots.”

“We aren’t--yet--but when the person who knows you better than anyone says you have to do this, doesn’t that tell you something?”

Alex was quiet, staring into her water glass as she swirled the clear liquid. Maybe, if she didn’t prolong this conversation, she could just get out of this restaurant and head home early to think this over. The server returned with the black folio for Liz’s signature, and must have sensed she was intruding, because she didn’t linger. After a moment, when Alex realized Liz was willing to wait her out, she looked up and spoke the words she’d hoped she wouldn’t have to say.

“This would necessitate a very high public profile. Debates, press events, fundraisers. And that’s just for an election,” Alex said. “What if I won? Liz, the idea of putting myself out there like that scares the shit out of me. I thought I was over all that, but what if I’m just not tough enough?”

Liz leaned over, closing the distance between them, and the small table went quickly from cozy to confining. She pointed a finger in Alex’s face, just a few inches from her nose, and spoke in a low voice.

“You’ll never hear this again, so you’d better listen closely. You’re the toughest person I know, Cabot. You’ve been to hell and back, and I admire the way you’ve put your life back together. But before Africa, before Witness Protection, even before SVU, you had an ambition that you’ve never quenched. Win or lose, you have to do this for yourself. You’ll be safe, Alex. Nothing is going to happen to you, but you’ll never regain everything that was taken from you until you give this a go. There will always be unanswered questions. You know it, and I know it.”

“I hate this,” Alex said quietly.

“You hate it when I’m right,” Liz smiled. “You always hated it, and I’m always right.” She signed the credit card slip. “Now, let’s get the hell out of here. You’ve got work to do. And Alex?”
“Yes?”

“I’ll be expecting an invitation to the press conference when you announce your candidacy.” She flashed a wicked grin. “I think the SVU precinct would be a great backdrop, don’t you? So, raise your glass of verdicchio.”

“Why?” Alex asked, even as she reflexively did as she’d been told.

“For a toast, of course.” Liz clinked their glasses together. “To the next District Attorney for New York County.” She winked at Alex as she downed the rest of her wine in a single gulp.

Colin Samuels was wrapping up his Friday as he always did: signing off on one thing after another that his assistant put in front of him, while she walked him through his schedule for the following week. He knew he’d soon have to have a new routine in a new office with a new assistant--Laurie Medlin had been his right hand for years, but she wasn’t willing to relocate to D.C., though not for any lack of trying on his part.

“Busy Monday,” Laurie was saying. “The AG will be down from Albany and wants to meet with you at 9--he said it won’t take more than 45 minutes. Then you have Ted Culbert from Homicide on Monday morning at 10, and Alex Cabot from VCE at 11. After that, you’ll…”

“Actually, can you reverse those two meetings, with the EADAs?” Samuels interrupted. “I’d rather see Alex first.”

“I’ll check with them,” Laurie replied. “It’s the last day before the holiday, so I know neither of them will be in court. If they can’t switch, should I leave it as is?”

“No, definitely not. I need to see Cabot, so you’ll just have to push Ted back if that’s the case. I’m expecting her to let me know if she plans to run for my job, and her answer will dictate the direction of my conversation with him.”
“Why’s that?” she asked.

“They’re the two people in this office I would consider strong candidates, but only one of them should run. They’ll cannibalize one another’s votes if they both run, and it would make it damn near impossible for them to work together after the election. She’ll need him on her staff.”

“Her staff?” Laurie chuckled. “Sounds like you have a preference.”

“You know them both, Laurie. What do you think?”

“Well, Cabot definitely looks like a better candidate,” Medlin offered.

“Because she is. But she’s skittish. She might say no, and if that happens, my meeting with Ted will be an altogether different conversation.”

“You couldn’t blame her for saying no,” Laurie said. “This office has put her through a lot over the years. If I were her, I’d have been in private practice long ago.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “But she’s not you or me. She’s called to do this, I think. I just have to convince her to take the chance. I told her I’d back her, and I have every intention of doing so, but if she decides to pass, I need to know that when I meet with Ted. He can’t think he’s my second choice.”

“I’m not even sure he should be your second choice,” Laurie countered, then immediately lowered her head to the planner in her lap. “Anyway, I’ll arrange that switch.”

“Hold on. You have something else to say about Culbert?”

“No, nothing of any importance,” she demurred.

“We’ve worked together a long time,” Samuels said. “Don’t clam up on me now. You know things about people in this office that I’d never find out in a million years. I count on you to keep me
informed. You have reservations about Ted?”

“It’s just rumor. Probably not a grain of truth to it,” she equivocated. “You know how this office is.”

“Laurie, this is me you’re talking to.”

“I’ve heard that he’s better friends with Johnnie Walker than he ought to be.”

“He’s an alcoholic?” Samuels was incredulous. “How has this never been brought to my attention? How long has this little secret been under my nose?”

“A year or two, maybe. Since his wife left him. But it’s gossip, Colin. I don’t know that anyone has any evidence.”

“Someone does, if that story’s been going around that long.”

“He does his job,” Laurie pointed out. “If it is true, he handles it well. There’s never been any problem.”

“So far,” Colin said. “But this job, and the election that he’d have to go through to get it--that’s a lot more scrutiny and pressure than he’s accustomed to. This kind of crap will be all over the front page of the Post before the first debate is held. If I back him and something like that gets out, it’s a PR nightmare for me.”

“Well, if Cabot decides to run, then it’s irrelevant, right? I’ll reschedule them for Monday, and with any luck, she’ll give you the answer you want.”

“Never mind rescheduling,” Samuels said. “Bring him in first. I’m telling him I won’t back his bid. I’d love to have a horse in this race, but I’m not willing to take a chance like that. I’d just as soon wash my hands of the whole thing and let a few strangers fight it out.”

“What if Cabot says no?” Laurie asked. “She’d certainly have good reason to.”
“Well, that’s occurred to me,” Colin replied. “I’ll just have to put a full-court press on her to make sure that doesn’t happen.
Chapter 3

Monday, December 23, 2013

Alex was in the office by 7 a.m., and didn’t leave her desk for nearly three hours. The DA’s office was a few doors down, after all, so it wouldn’t be a long trip to her 10 o’clock meeting with Colin Samuels. She knew he expected an answer, and she’d told Liz she’d decide by Monday. She’d hardly slept the night before, and was glad she’d be off for two days for Christmas.

She still hadn’t called Kate, but she had talked to Bill the night before, and he was very encouraging.

*You can do this, Ace. You’ve wanted it for ages. Why not take a chance?*

Everyone made it sound so easy. So why was she still feeling like she might not know what she’d tell Samuels until she heard the words come out of her own mouth? Her thoughts were fragmented and she felt scattered as she walked down the hall to the meeting. It was a feeling she didn’t care for.

Nearly an hour later, Samuels was walking her out into the waiting room of the DA’s office suite.

“You’ve made the right decision, Alex,” he said as he shook her hand. “You’ll win it going away. I’ll be behind you 100%.”

“You make it sound like a walk in the park, Colin.”

“For you, it will be,” he laughed. “Just promise me you won’t forget where you came from. And perhaps just as importantly, do me the courtesy of waiting until I’m gone to start redecorating the office, ok?”

She took her leave, running into Ted Culbert as she stepped into the hall and turned toward her own office. She stopped off at Ellen’s desk, and was met with an expectant face.
“Well?”

“God help me, I’m going to do it.”

“Good,” Ellen said. “I know you have your doubts, Ms. Cabot, but I really do think it’s the right decision. You’re the best person for the job.”

“Well, as long as one of us is sure,” Alex said. “But I can do without that I-told-you-so smile, you know.”

Ellen laughed. “I’ll do my best to not point out that I’m right. Meanwhile, Kate Merritt returned your call. I told her you’d call her back when you returned from your meeting with the DA.”

“Damn,” Alex cursed under her breath.

“I’m sorry, I can call her back and tell her your meeting ran long and you’ll return her call after lunch.”

“No, it’s fine, Ellen,” Alex said, patting the older woman’s hand. “The thing is, I didn’t call Kate. I was planning to break the news to her this afternoon, but it sounds like the rumor mill was working overtime.”

“But she said…”

“She’s smarter than the two of us put together, Ellen. That’s her way of trying to get me on the phone.”

“Is something wrong?” Ellen knew Kate was her boss’s oldest friend, and this reluctance to call her was unusual.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Alex said as she walked into her office. She stopped in the doorway and turned around, smiling at her secretary. “Just one more I told you so, is all. This one won’t be as happy to
Dev Patel’s phone rang, and he stepped away from what he was doing to take the call. Before he could say hello, the voice on the other end spoke.

“She’s running.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m in a position to know.”

Patel needed more to go on than that. “Is it a done deal?”

“Definitely. Cabot is in. She’ll announce after the holidays, but she is doing to do it.”

“How did you manage that?” Patel asked.

“It was simple. I said what I needed to say, and did what I needed to do. Just like you, Dev.”

The call ended, and Dev could hardly believe his good fortune. If he celebrated Christmas, this would be a hell of a present. Either way, it was certainly news worth sharing. He pulled up a number he’d programmed in his phone, but had never used. Truth be told, he hesitated to use it now, but he couldn’t sit on information like this for too long.

“Madeline Taylor.”

“It’s me.”
“I can’t imagine why you would ever think you should contact me at this number, Deval.” Her voice was icy, but her anger was palpable between the words. “We speak in the evenings, when we speak at all. You have instructions to call me at one number, and one number only.”

“It couldn’t wait until tonight,” Dev said. “I decided to call you at the office.”

“Let me be very clear with you,” Madeline said. “You don’t decide anything. You don’t make choices, you don’t plan or strategize. And you damn sure don’t ever call me here again. I don’t even know how you got this number, but you can be certain that whoever put your call through will be looking for a new job this afternoon.”

He knew where Madeline worked, obviously. She had never told him anything about herself, but she couldn’t have thought he was disinterested, or docile enough not to learn what he could. But she was surely wondering how he got the number to her private office. Knowing she was an executive at Bernard Worldwide wouldn’t get your average person through to her private office, where he only had to talk his way past two secretaries, rather than the dozen he’d have faced otherwise.

“I didn’t tell your assistant anything of any importance,” he argued. “I don’t think she needs to lose her job over this.”

“There you go again,” Madeline chided. “Thinking is not what…”

“Cabot is running,” he cut her off. “Her press conference will be right after the New Year.”

“How do you know this?”

“We agreed that you didn’t want details,” he replied, an edge to his voice. “The how is none of my concern, you said. You told me to get results, and I am.”

“I didn’t think it would be this easy,” Madeline said.

She seemed almost happy. It wasn’t something he was used to, and that was putting it mildly. “I don’t think the battle’s won,” he said. “Even a short election can be an eternity to those running.”
“Oh, the hard part is over, Deval,” she said. “Someone like Alexandra would have a hundred reasons not to run, and a dozen people cautioning her against it. If she’s made the decision, the rest will fall into place. She’s very...electable.”

“So are other people,” he countered. “And some of them will run. This is too good an opportunity to pass up.”

She was quiet for a moment, perhaps considering the stiff competition Cabot would surely face. She was getting ahead of herself, he thought. Just because Cabot planned to run didn’t mean she’d win, and he would be best served if Madeline had more realistic expectations. Failure was a distinct possibility, and he had no desire to be seen as the cause of that catastrophe.

When she spoke again, he realized she had no intention of losing this game, or whatever it was they were playing.

“Well, then, Deval, it would seem you have work to do. You’re busy making excuses when you should be making things happen,” she said. “And one other thing: don’t ever call me here again. Is that understood?”

“I just…”

“Never,” she said. She didn’t wait for any reply before cutting off the call.

“Fuck you!” Dev roared, throwing his phone. He was careful to throw it onto the bed, though, because he couldn’t afford to replace it just for the sake of making a statement. A statement to whom? he thought. The cockroaches? You’re the invisible man, Patel.

Being reprimanded and jerked around by this bitch sure as hell wasn’t what he’d had in mind when he’d moved here with a JD from Stanford and a job as a prosecutor in Manhattan. Neither was this tiny third-floor walkup, which only met the city’s 400-square-foot minimum size with a little creative measuring. He was living in a glorified walk-in closet, and still he could barely make the rent. His parents had plenty of money, but he’d be damned if he’d ask them for anything. He wasn’t sure what was worse: the idea that he might need their help, or the near certainty that they wouldn’t provide it. His mother was angry and disappointed, but at least she was speaking to him.
What Dev saw as persecution, his father viewed as shame and humiliation.

He was disbarred--he’d never practice law again in New York, or anywhere else for that matter. He was on probation, for God’s sake, forced to report in weekly by phone and to show up in person monthly, like a common criminal.

So he was working as a process server for a midtown firm, and knew he was damn lucky to have that job, as humiliating as it was. He’d gotten a call out of the blue--that seemed to be happening a lot lately--and a man whose voice he didn’t recognize offered him the position, sight unseen.

We have mutual acquaintances, Mr. Patel. I know what you’ve been through, and I think you were hung out to dry by those who could have shielded you. You’ll need to support yourself somehow until you get back on your feet. I have a spot for you. It’s not much money, but perhaps it will help.

He’d been told to show up at Lowe, Gelvin & Lowe the following Monday at 9 a.m. The high-rise on West 34th housed a Cohen’s and a Duane Reade on the ground floor, and the firm occupied the 14th and 15th floors. The receptionist had been expecting him, and by lunchtime he’d been given an employee ID card, a cubicle and a job processing court filings, and retrieving documents, and serving notice to people who most often had no interest in receiving it.

It kept him in the loop--he found out lots of information and made some new contacts while he was performing his duties. And his anonymous benefactor had arranged for an unexpected level of discretion: the attorneys at the firm knew his background, but none of the paralegals or other drudges seemed to have a clue that he was the person who’d been involved in the Mayor’s shenanigans months before. He had noticed that certain conversations regarding the firm’s cases or strategies were suspended when he was within earshot. He knew the partners were protecting their business--though disbarred attorneys were technically permitted to perform certain tasks related to the law, New York County took a particularly dim view of it, so the slightest appearance of impropriety could be a disaster.

He was making a Herculean effort to ignore all of these temporary setbacks and transient indignities. That’s what they were, he was sure. Something significant was just around the corner, and he had to focus on the day that he would be able to step out of the shadows and take what he deserved. Keep your eyes on the prize, Deval. It was his father’s favorite phrase and he had never cared for it. Karma was a bitch, though, and now it seemed to be running through his mind on an infinite loop, background noise to the boring, repetitive shit he had to do to put food in his mouth and a roof over his head. Every once in a while, though, another voice asserted itself, chiding and challenging him.

Eyes on the prize, Dev? You don’t even know what the hell the prize is.
Most of the time, though, he saw himself as a king without a crown, an emperor without a country. He was destined for greatness, and once he returned from exile, he’d have to be prepared to deal with any threat to his power. If this plan--whatever it was--worked, then Cabot would surely be a non-factor. Madeline herself, though, would be a challenge. She had the upper hand, and he’d have to remedy that.

He passed the time learning as much as he could about her, looking for a clue as to where things were headed, and a soft spot where he could bury the knife once they got there.

Knowing where Madeline worked wasn’t the same as knowing what she did. Bernard billed itself as a global management consulting firm, a term so broad as to be nondescriptive. Like its counterparts McKinsey and Bain, Bernard had its hand in so many pies it was nearly impossible to know what any particular division actually did. The company’s website listed Madeline K. Taylor as the Senior Vice President and General Counsel, and Dev had been able to learn more about her career trajectory from a variety of sources.

She was an attorney who had made a name for herself working for a few tech firms; most notably, defending the intellectual property rights of a corporation whose mobile technology was imitated, duplicated and pirated every day in every corner of the world. She’d been well paid for her brilliant and tenacious legal work, but it was the company’s 1995 IPO that had made her a millionaire many times over. She could have done anything at that point: retired, opened her own white-glove firm, or just kept her current position and phoned it in. Inexplicably, she had taken a mid-level legal counsel position in Bernard’s Chicago office, and then parlayed it into her current corner suite in the company’s 52nd Street international headquarters. There had been stints in London and Geneva, but once she had made the move back to New York, her rise had been dizzying.

He’d gleaned all of that information from the Wall Street Journal, the Times, Forbes and a fawning cover story in a fairly recent issue of the Barnard alumnæ magazine. Professionally, she was an open book, with a LinkedIn profile and a fair number of mentions in the media. Personally, though, she was an enigma. One could be forgiven for wondering if she was even human, really. The Barnard story was a puff piece, and the reporter hadn’t even managed to elicit more than a passing mention of family or hobbies (“running” was all she’d been willing to admit to). Yale Law, class of ’88.

Dev figured she was about 50 years old--several years older than Cabot, so they hadn’t gone to school together. Madeline had never worked for the city of New York, in any capacity, hadn’t clerked for Cabot’s uncle, hadn’t spent any time in East Amherst, or Madison, or Baltimore. Their connection had to have been forged in Manhattan, somehow, and he was determined to find out exactly what that connection was, and how deep it went. He knew he was in this mess for the long haul--he couldn’t say why, exactly, but he just knew that he wouldn’t be allowed out unless she either achieved her aims, or decided he was incapable of helping her do so.
It was those aims that worried him. If he could just figure out what had gone on between Taylor and Alex Cabot, maybe he could figure out where this was all headed. That might go a long way to helping him anticipate the next move, and a little bit of foresight might be the only currency he held in this situation. He needed to bank every advantage he could get. He had no intention of remaining invisible forever.
Chapter 4

Wednesday, December 25, 2013

It was 2:30 on Christmas morning when Olivia’s phone buzzed on the nightstand. Alex moaned instantly and covered her head with a pillow, muttering quietly, “Not on Christmas, not on Christmas.”

“Benson,” Olivia barked into the phone. She was quiet for a moment, listening intently. Then she swore. “Shit, he’s back. Motherfucker.” Another brief silence before she signed off with, “I’ll be ready in 20.”

She rolled toward Alex, who peeked out from under the pillow. “I’m going to venture a guess that the motherfucker in question is not, in fact, Santa Claus.”

Olivia leaned over and kissed her forehead, willing herself not to succumb to the combined allure of soft skin and the smell of sleep. “If you keep cussing like a sailor, baby, I don’t think Santa Claus can be counted on to come to this house anytime soon,” she whispered. “Alex, I’m so sorry. It’s him again. I have to go.”

“Go save the world, beautiful. Uncle Bill and I will be here. We won’t open presents until you’re home.”

“Eat dinner without me,” Olivia said.

“The hell we will. It’s not Christmas dinner without you. We were apart last year, and I’m not celebrating any more holidays that way. Besides, with Aunt Jean gone...we need you, Liv. We will have dinner when you’re here with us, whether that’s nine o’clock tonight or 3:30 next Tuesday afternoon.”

“Okay, sweetheart,” Olivia acquiesced. “What will you guys do today?”

“We’ll relax and have breakfast, and I’m guessing you’ll be in for a long day, so if that’s the case,
we may go to the cemetery. Then Bill will overcome his sadness and grief long enough to kick my tail at backgammon a dozen or so times.” Alex smiled at her. “Now, go get ready while I make you some coffee.”

“No, baby, I can’t let you do that. It’s the middle of the night. Stay in bed.”

“Be quiet, Liv,” Alex whispered. “It’s Christmas, and the least I can do is put a cup of coffee in your hand before I send you out in the night.”

Fifteen minutes later, the detective was kissing her wife as she took two travel mugs in hand. “I thank you, honey, and Nick thanks you.”

“Merry Christmas, my love,” Alex said softly. “Be safe, both of you.”

Fourteen floors below, Olivia endured a shock of cold air as she exited the building and walked the 20 or so feet to the waiting car. Nick had the heat on full-blast, and smiled as she handed him a cup of hot coffee. The smile was a tired one, though, and the dark circles under his eyes spoke volumes.

“You look like shit, Amaro.”

“Merry Christmas to you too, Benson.”

“I’m getting too old for this, Nick. These call-outs in the middle of the night are a little harder every time.”

“You’re not old, partner. You just have a beautiful wife at home and you don’t want to leave your warm bed and your Christmas dinner to hang out with me and another dead body.”

“Might be that, too,” Olivia laughed.
Except for a few taxis lurching through the night like desperate drunks at last call, the streets were empty, and they were at the scene in ten minutes. A body had been found in Jefferson Park, just off the FDR, not far from the Ward’s Island Bridge. They parked and walked over to the yellow tape to find Don Cragen already there speaking to the uniformed officer in charge of the scene.

“Fine, Pete, got it. Thanks for the information. I’ll bring my detectives up to speed,” he said, shaking the sergeant’s hand, then turning to them. “Liv, Nick, no offense, but I had really hoped not to spend Christmas with you two.”

Olivia spoke first. “Captain, you didn’t have to roll out for this.”

“Olivia, you know the brass will call me on the carpet the moment they step foot back in their offices tomorrow. I wouldn’t miss this for the world,” he offered wryly. “So, here’s what we know so far. Female, mid- to late-20s, appears to be Hispanic, strangled, indications of sexual assault.”

“Like a fucking broken record,” Nick said.

Cragen nodded, his face red and his eyes tired. *He looks exhausted,* Liv thought. *We all do.*

“We’re waiting for the ME now. Warner wasn’t on call, but she’s coming. Apparently she left instructions with her people to roust her for anything that looked like our guy.”

“And this sure as hell looks like him,” Benson said. “Duty belt?”

“There’s a checkmark in every box, Liv.”

The body wasn’t even well-hidden. He was getting bolder.
“Hide a body too well in this cold weather, it’ll be weeks before it’s found,” Nick mused. “He doesn’t like that, wants to control when it’s found. He wants the glory.”

“That worries me,” Olivia said.

“Maybe we should disseminate some misinformation,” Nick said. “Surprise him by taking some control out of his hands. Imply that we have a suspect on this one, some jealous husband or boyfriend kills his woman, then copycats off our guy. He’d hate the thought of someone riding his coattails.”

“Could force his hand,” Cragen agreed. “Push him into making a mistake.”

Amaro nodded. “Maybe he’ll brag to someone, or contact the media to take the credit.”

“Or maybe we’ll just goad him into upping the ante,” Liv said. “And then the blood of his next victim is on our hands.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it,” Nick spat out. “This hump does what he wants to do, when he wants to do it. We may not be able to stop him, but I’m sure as hell not gonna take responsibility for him. What’s your bright idea, partner?”

Olivia looked at all of the controlled chaos around her: the scene techs and their flurry of activity in the concentric white circles created by the halogen lights on their temporary rigs, uniformed officers securing the perimeter, Melinda and her team caring for another nameless victim, and three detectives with no idea who the fuck they were looking for or how they were going to catch him. Every exhalation formed a silvery could in the frigid air. Noise from a generator filled the night like a low growl.

“I’m afraid I’m all out of bright ideas, partner,” she said. “Merry fuckin’ Christmas, huh?”

Alex was sitting at the table with coffee and a legal pad when Bill wandered downstairs at 8:30.
She’d slept fitfully at best after sending Liv out earlier, and finally gave up a little before 7 and got up. She was deeply absorbed in her thoughts, half of her brain generating scores of pros and cons about running for office, her pen flying across the yellow paper as she struggled to keep up.

The other half of her thoughts were occupied with these cases Olivia and Nick were working. God knows she never thought of herself as a detective, but years of experience had taught her how their minds work, and she couldn’t help but think through all that Liv had told her, hoping to hit on some little detail that might send them down a new road. She hadn’t even heard Bill come in, and looked up in surprise when he kissed her on the head.

“Merry Christmas, Ace. I checked under the tree, and it looks like Santa Claus was here. Is your better half still asleep?”

“Merry Christmas, Uncle Bill,” Alex replied. “No, unfortunately she left hours ago. They got called out on a case.”

“She said last night that she wasn’t catching this holiday,” he recalled, his face conveying concern through the same single line in his forehead that Alex had. He knew there were few reasons an off-duty detective with Olivia’s seniority would be called in on a holiday. “Is it that serial case?”

“Looks like it.” She was happy he didn’t require a lot of explanation. He knew what their lives were like.

“I’m sorry to hear that, honey,” Bill consoled her.

“Thanks. Me, too,” she said, a weary smile doing nothing to make the disappointment and worry she felt. “She said we should have Christmas without her.”

“And I hope you told her we’ll do no such thing,” he said. “We’re a small-enough family as it is. I don’t care if we have to wait until January 25th for all of us to be together. Besides, it’s your first Christmas as newlyweds. It’s bad enough that you have an old man intruding on your celebration.”

“Nonsense. This is exactly where you belong. Now, what shall you and I do today? I thought maybe you’d want to go to the cemetery.”

“No thanks, Ace,” Bill answered. “I went before I came down here. We’re not about to spend the
day on the highway, and your aunt would kill us if she knew we were hanging around a graveyard on Christmas day. So, how about we watch a movie or two, maybe head to Chinatown for lunch. That’s what you do when you aren’t celebrating Christmas, right?”

“Sounds good to me. I feel like I never get to see enough of you.” She was quiet a moment, an idea rolling around in her head that might not be well received. She threw caution to the winds and spoke in a rush. “Why don’t you move back to the city now? I want to have you closer. You can retire, or teach at NYU. They’d fall all over themselves to have you.”

“You think I can’t look after myself now that your Aunt Jean is gone?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

He cocked his head and smiled at her. “I’m teasing you, Alex,” he laughed. “I know you don’t see me as feeble and decrepit quite yet. But what you’re suggesting is a good idea. I’d already considered it myself.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“You and Olivia will feel responsible for me, and that’s not a burden you need,” he said matter-of-factly.

She held his gaze. She knew what he meant—they were, after all, very much alike. She had spent too many years shying away from the types of connections and relationships that she now knew made her life more full, more worthwhile...more real.

“We are family,” she said softly. “Just the three of us, responsible for one another. One of my favorite things is when people ask if I’m Bill Harriman’s niece. You’re another father to me, and I count myself lucky to have you. You’re as stubborn and independent as my mother…”

“And you,” he interrupted.

“And me, yes. We are cut from the same cloth. So, if you don’t feel like making a move back to New York, I understand. I’d never pressure you. But promise me you’ll think it over.”
“Okay,” he said. “I will. I promise.”

“Think it over without worrying about all that, please. I mean, this is a big city. We can still avoid you when you get to be too much to bear, you know?”

He laughed. “You’ve got it. I’ll think it over. I just hope if I do move back, I won’t force you two to change your numbers and alert the doorman that I’m off the list.”

“I don’t foresee that happening,” she said. “Now, let’s get our coffee and waste a couple of hours on the couch watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*. That sounds like a perfect prelude to some dim sum.”

Olivia left the precinct at around five o’clock that afternoon. She had shooed Nick out an hour or so earlier, insisting he go see his kids, while she made notes and tried to decompress a bit from the day before she headed home to Alex and Bill.

"I can't leave you here," Nick protested.

"You can, and you will," she insisted. "A 14-hour day is plenty, Nick. Besides, Christmas is for kids. Yours deserve to see their dad today. Go."

"How are you gonna get home?"

"I'll take an unmarked. It's a skeleton crew around here this week. No one's gonna need it before tomorrow."

It had still taken her another few minutes to get him out the door and headed home. She wanted to go home, too, wanted badly to see Alex and Bill and feel for a few hours like a normal family, but she needed some time alone to make some notes, try to decompress and empty of her mind of this mess for a little while.
She texted Kris Mackey on her way out the door.

*Give me a call tomorrow if you can. New information to discuss.*

She felt like she was at the end of her rope, and truth be told, reaching out to Kris was becoming second nature on these nightmare cases. They were on parallel tracks and having someone to share it with made it feel a little less lonely. Nick had her back, of course, but part of what made them a good team was that they approached things differently. That resulted in good police work, but it sometimes meant there were bumps and misunderstandings and disconnects along the way. And she always had Alex, but she was making a concerted effort to bring less of the horror and cruelty and the endless damn frustration into their home.

She hadn’t expected a wedding to have any impact on her job, but she found that she’d become even more protective of Alex, and the idea of their home and their marriage as a safe place, free of this muck and filth, was now even more appealing to her. There were so many things she couldn’t do: she couldn’t promise Alex that she’d come home safe every time she left, and she couldn’t always control how much of herself she had to sacrifice to her work in order to get the job done, and she damn sure couldn’t shield Alex from the world’s many slings and arrows, both literal and metaphorical. But she could do her best to make sure she didn’t sully their bed—or Alex’s dreams—with horrors neither of them could forget when the lights were out and the house was quiet.

She shook off her thoughts long enough to talk to the desk sergeant about getting an unmarked for the night, and her phone rang before he had handed her the keys to a Crown Vic.

"It's him, huh?" Even without the heads-up provided by caller ID, she’d have known Kris’s voice. It varied from a friendly drawl to an aggressive fusillade, and right now every chamber was loaded.

"I didn't mean for you to call today," Olivia said. "It’ll wait." Despite their shared misery and frustration, she hadn’t meant to ruin Kris’s holiday. *Then you should’ve waited to send that text tomorrow, Benson,* she admonished herself.

"That's not an answer."

Olivia was silent for a few seconds. "Yeah, it's him," she finally replied. "But it’s Christmas. We can talk in the morning."

“Bullshit, Benson, I’m sitting at my desk in the station house. Tell me what’s going on.”
Olivia settled in the car and recounted the day’s activities, her voice full of exhaustion and anger. She’d been up for 15 hours already, and knew she wouldn’t get to bed for a few more hours at least.

“Kris, I just don’t know,” she said. “There’s still so much to do on this one, but I’d be lying if I said I thought we’ll catch him. Based on what I’ve seen so far, there are no more clues here than there have been any other time. This fucker’s just gonna go on, doing whatever he wants.”

“You’re tired, Olivia,” Kris said. “You’ve done all you can for today. Go home and see your wife before you have to get up tomorrow and bang your head against a few more walls.”

“How about you? Sitting in the station house isn’t much of a Christmas. Don’t you have enough seniority to pull some strings there so you can be home?”

“Thought I’d be nice and let some of the guys have the day off for family stuff,” Kris replied. “Banking some good karma, maybe. God knows I could use it.”

“What about your family?” Liv laughed softly. “How do they feel about you making karmic bank deposits on a holiday?”

“You’re assuming there’s anyone who cares, Benson,” Kris said. There was a laugh, but it was hollow. Before Olivia could speak, Kris continued. “Enough. Even a quality therapist like you doesn’t work the holy days. Go home and forget about all of this for the evening.”

“We can talk tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” Mackey replied. “I’m sure this guy will still be on the loose at eight o’clock. Call me and we’ll put our heads together.”

“Alright,” Liv reluctantly agreed. “Merry Christmas, Kris.”

“Just another day, as far as I’m concerned,” Kris said. “But if you hung a sock by your fireplace, I hope there’s something good in it, Olivia. Now get off this phone and go home.”
Chapter 5

Sunday, December 29, 2013

Olivia would have preferred to keep Alex home in bed all day, or maybe even forever. Sunday mornings were usually reserved for the two of them alone, and no matter how they spent the time, it was an opportunity to reconnect and really focus on one another. Work occasionally intruded, nearly always on Olivia's end, but more often than not it was a date they managed to keep.

Today, though, they were meeting Kate for brunch, and Alex was not looking forward to it.

"I don't feel like brunch." She was pouting, and it would have been cute if it weren't so out of character as to be mildly disconcerting.

"You can't avoid her indefinitely, babe," Olivia said. "She's your best friend, and she'll support you. She wants you to be happy."

"You're my best friend," Alex corrected.

"You know what I meant."

"I do," the blonde conceded. She was putting on makeup while she talked to Liv, who was sprawled on her stomach across their bed. "And Kate doesn't necessarily want me to be happy. She wants me to be content, which is not the same thing."

"She's known you for over 20 years and still thinks you could ever be content?" Olivia's laughter stopped when Alex turned to face her, hurt blanketing her features.

"I'm happy, Olivia."

"I know you are, sweetheart. I didn't say you weren't."

"You said I could never be content."

"Alex," Olivia protested. "You just said happy and content aren't the same thing, and you're right. They're not."

The attorney walked over to the bed and climbed onto the mattress, rolling Olivia over onto her back and straddling her hips as she fixed her with a serious stare.

"Parsing my words, Liv?"

"It's a survival instinct, honey. I work hard to keep up with that keen intellect of yours."

"Nonsense," Alex said, leaning over to kiss her on the lips. "You're one of the smartest people I've ever met. Now, look at us here on this big bed. Why do we even need to leave this apartment today?"

"Nice try, beautiful. We are going to see Kate. You've been dreading this for nearly two weeks and
we're getting it over with. You've talked to her on the phone, she knows what's going on, and now you just have to let her say whatever she wants to say." Olivia raised up and put her weight on her elbows. "After brunch, we can come home and do whatever you want."

"You drive a hard bargain, Benson."

"I learned from the very best." Olivia kissed her and smiled. "Let's go, or we're going to be late."

"You'd make a man jog to the gallows, wouldn't you?" Alex laughed.

"You bet your sweet ass I would," Olivia said. "As much as I enjoy seeing you squirm, I believe justice should be swift and sure."

By 11:30, they were tucking into frittatas at Agave, Alex diligently eating as if she found egg whites the most fascinating thing in the world while Kate leaned back in her chair across the table and looked over the rim of her mimosa glass at her best friend. She finally broke the silence.

"This is bullshit, Cab."

Alex looked up. "Drink not strong enough, Kate?"

"You know what I mean. This election. It's bullshit."

"That's what you said on the phone, if I recall correctly," Alex countered. Olivia stayed quiet, marveling as always at the combative and competitive nature of the friendship her two dining companions shared.

"It is," Kate agreed. "But considering how long I've known you, I felt I'd earned the right to say it in person."

"Do you have more to add, or will that stunning eloquence have to suffice?" Alex smirked. It was the same look she got when she knew she had what she needed to nail a witness and win a case. Liv called it her gotcha look, and Kate was the only person she ever used it on outside of a courtroom.

"Go to hell, Alex."

"So that was the end of the eloquence," Alex teased. She waited a minute, the two of them just looking at one another, food and drinks forgotten, with 20 years of friendship and fights filling the empty space between them now. Alex crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, like a tennis player retreating to the baseline to await the next volley.

"Make sure your filing documents say Katherine J. Merritt, not Kate. My license is under Katherine."

Alex dropped her pose immediately. The confusion on her face was obvious, and Kate and Olivia both smiled. They didn't get to see that very often. "What are you talking about?"

"Staff Counsel," Kate answered. "When you file your campaign documents, make sure my name is right, or it could cause trouble for both of us."

"I don't understand," Alex said. "If you've got something to say, just say it, but if it's all the same to you, I'd rather eat my breakfast than figure out your jokes."

"It's not a joke," Kate said. "You're going to do this no matter what I say. No matter what anyone says, really. You're going to need an attorney on staff. I know it kills you to think you might need
to hire someone to do something when you could do it yourself, and do a better job, for free. But I think even you'll be too busy to vet and validate the scores of documents your campaign will generate while you're out kissing hands and shaking babies all day."

"If this is a peace offering, I appreciate it," Alex said. "But I'm sure I can't afford you."

"The price is right, though. I'll do it for free," Kate said. "On one condition."

"I knew there'd be strings attached," Alex sighed.

Olivia finally spoke. "Hear her out, honey. I think it's a deal you can live with."

As she looked at her wife, it dawned on Alex that Olivia hadn't seemed surprised by this unexpected offer. "You're in on this?"

Olivia's only reply was a smile and a slight shrug.

"What is it, Kate? You'll be my pro bono staff counsel if I promise not to run for election? That sounds like just the kind of Hobson's choice your brilliant legal mind would concoct."

"No," Kate responded. "I don't back losers. But I also don't back dithering milquetoasts, either. My condition is very simple. I'll help you if you admit you want this. You have to say it, Alex, and you have to mean it. Stop vacillating and equivocating. Diffidence doesn't win elections, and it's not a very effective tool for governing, either."

"I don't understand." And she didn't, Kate knew that. It wasn't just an empty phrase. She knew Alex well-better, in some ways, than Alex knew herself. "Why would I run if I didn't want to win?"

"So you can say you tried, and you'll have an excuse for not doing what you were meant to do. You're still embarrassed that you want this. You thought you'd outgrown it or outrun it or outsmarted it. I don't know which. But you haven't, and you won't, I don't believe, until you embrace whatever it is inside yourself that you feel is too ridiculous or contemptible to be humored." Kate reached across the table and took Alex's hand in her own for a moment, a reassuring gesture meant to serve as the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down. "You've decided to do this, but you're still looking at it from the outside. It's not an intellectual exercise, Cab. You are passionate about justice for victims and peace of mind for this city. You have to tap into that and own it, or you're going to campaign for two months, and you're going to lose. You'll tell yourself that's ok, and you don't mind, but years from now when it's too late, you'll look back and you'll hate yourself for fucking it up."

"It takes a certain amount of ego to campaign for office," Alex said. "You have to love power."

"You shouldn't have any trouble with that," Kate laughed. "Your ego is healthy enough—you just need to dust it off and you'll be fine. As for power...that's not a bad thing, Alex. It's how you use it. So, what'll it be? Do we have a deal?"

Alex thought for a moment, looking at Liv, then down at her plate, and back up at Kate. She nodded, and pushed her plate forward, leaning her elbows on the table before she spoke.

"I want this," she said. Her voice was quiet, but a weight seemed to lift as the words left her mouth. She spoke again, more firmly. "I want this election. I want to run, and I want to win." The flash in her blue eyes was familiar to both Kate and Liv.

"That's my girl," Kate said, then laughed. "Well, Olivia's girl, but you know what I mean."
"I do," Liv smiled.

"This isn't a full-time thing, Cab," Kate clarified. "I still need to put food on the table, so don't think you'll be bossing me around 70 hours a week or something."

"Thank you," Alex said. "Thank you both. How do you put up with me?"

"Well, legally speaking, Olivia has no choice now," Kate said. "I, on the other hand, do it out of the goodness of my heart. I'm selfless that way. Now hurry up and finish your food. I've had enough heartfelt conversation for one day. Besides, I have matinee tickets to see *The Glass Menagerie* this afternoon with a beautiful woman I hardly know. Since it might be the last free time I have for a while, I plan to enjoy it. I'm sure I'll be under your thumb soon enough."

Less than 30 minutes after they parted company with Kate at the restaurant, Olivia found herself very much under Alex's thumb at home. The attorney's confidence was growing as she made peace with this momentous decision, and she intended to make Olivia keep her promise from earlier that morning.

During the elevator ride up to the 14th floor, Alex had closed the small space between them and lifted Liv's hands to her mouth, kissing her palms in turn. She trailed her lips down to the heel of the left hand, stopping to soak in the delicious smell of Olivia's perfume mixed with the comfortable scent from that well-worn, wide black leather watchband. She made the slightest noise, a mix of desperation and appreciation, and pushed Liv's sleeve back just a little, kissing the tender skin on her inner wrist. As soon as the door of the apartment closed behind them, she had Olivia backed against the wall and was frantically undoing buttons and zippers.

"You said I could do whatever I want," she growled in Liv's ear. "And right now, I want to be inside you."

"A promise is a promise," Olivia whispered in reply. She pushed off the wall and turned around, allowing Alex to walk her backward across the room. She expected to feel the couch against the backs of her legs, but they kept moving, kissing and undressing with every step. They passed the coffee table, and stopped on an expanse of soft, chocolate-covered rug. Alex moved her mouth to Olivia's neck, licking and biting from one ear to the other, covering every inch of her throat with a warm, wet tongue, while Olivia's hands wandered over Alex's back and down to her ass, grabbing hold and pulling their hips together. The resulting moan against her skin sent a shiver down her spine.

Her shirt was already on the floor a few feet away, and Alex now pulled one bra strap down and then the other as she nipped at each collarbone in turn. She ran her fingers along the narrow lace, curving over the swell of skin, dragging them slowly to meet in the middle, where she unhooked the front clasp and freed the full breasts, hungrily cupping the reassuring weight in her hands, thumbs immediately brushing each hardening nipple.

Olivia was eager to help in any way she could—she shrugged the garment to the floor and returned her hands to the back of Alex's head, deepening the contact as Alex latched on forcefully. The combination of teeth and tongue, sucking and biting, was powerful, and Olivia was incredibly wet. They had all day, but she really wasn't in the mood to wait, at least not right now. It was quickly becoming apparent that she wouldn't have to.

Alex slid down her body, kissing her belly, ribs, and hips, tugging Liv's jeans off as she went. The grey-and-black striped boy shorts left hugging her curves were damp with arousal, and Alex slowly licked the black seams, causing her wife's knees to buckle ever so slightly. Olivia took hold of the waistband and pushed the panties down until Alex took over and pulled them the rest of the way
She nuzzled Olivia, dragging the tip of her nose along the line of curls, her tongue dipping down to just brush Olivia's clit. "You smell delicious," she murmured. "And you taste even better." Liv ran her hand through the blonde hair, grabbing a handful and tipping Alex's head back, looking down into clear blue eyes that were bright, shining with desire, the irises a few shades darker than normal, like the color of well-worn denim.

"I can't stand much longer," Olivia said.

"You don't have to, baby." Alex lay back on the rug, holding her hand out for Olivia to join her there. "Come here and let me love you." Olivia obliged her, and they were done talking for a while. They lay face-to-face on the rug, and Olivia lifted her top leg, draping it over Alex's hip.

Alex slipped two fingers quickly into Olivia's wetness, soft and welcoming like warm velvet, her thumb on Liv's clit, making slow circles as they kissed. She fucked her slowly, and deeply, adding a third finger. Olivia loved to be full, and Alex loved to do the filling. As the kisses became more heated, she included that fourth finger, and sped up her movements. It was quick, Liv moving her hips along with Alex's deep thrusts.

Olivia came in just a few minutes, a deep, shuddering orgasm. She loved it when Alex took charge, and they only took a brief break before heading to the bedroom. The rest of the afternoon was spent in bed, and in the bath, and in the shower, enjoying one another, cocooned together like the only two people in the world. It was likely to be their last leisurely day for a while, and by the time they had takeout Chinese in bed at 8:30, they were both exhausted. They made love one more time, slow and gentle, and fell asleep with Olivia curled up behind Alex, breathing deeply, sleeping through the night, relaxing peacefully in the calm before the inevitable storm.
Wellness Associates was located on the Upper West Side. Alex wasn't ashamed of seeing a therapist, but she had determined that she also had no desire to regularly run into people she knew. For that reason alone, she had ruled out any of the options close to home or work. She suspected that a good many people she worked with needed psychological care, but the level of self-awareness in Hogan Place was low enough that she doubted many of them were seeking it. In any case, she felt better having some sort of separation between her therapy and the reasons for it.

Dr. Sharon Jackson had proven to be the right kind of therapist. She'd sought help on a few occasions, both by choice and by mandate, and she'd never really connected with any of the others like she did with Dr. Jackson. It may have been her inherent resistance to the process-she wasn't ready until she was ready-but it didn't matter. Now she'd been working with Dr. Jackson for a few years, and had no doubt that it had been instrumental in successfully re-asserting control over her life. The visits had been less frequent of late, but the psychologist had been happy to keep an open line and to see her patient on an as-needed basis.

Alex had made her decision. She felt certain that this election was what she was meant to do, but she had grown to value the doctor's input. Of course, Sharon would never tell her what to do, but she felt she needed one last chance to talk the whole thing through with someone whose opinion was completely unbiased, so Dr. Jackson had worked her into the schedule. The fact that the appointment was set for the time that Colin Samuels announced his resignation was just a wonderful coincidence.

"How have you been, Alex?" They sat across from one another, settled deep into two mocha-colored chairs with leather that was softer than a rose petal. The room was quiet, dim but never dark, with small windows situated high on the walls, and lined with Indian Rosewood bookcases. It reminded Alex of her father's office, and it had calmed her from the moment she had entered it the first time.

"I'm doing pretty well," Alex answered. "Thank you for seeing me today."

The doctor nodded. "We haven't had many appointments in the last year or so. I know when you do call, it's important." Jackson kept notes nearby, on the side table, but she referred to them sparingly, and jotted down only a few words here and there. Their appointments were conversational, which was surely another reason Alex had become so comfortable with her.

"Important?" Alex mused. "Well, compared to starving children and rogue nuclear states, it's not all that much."

"I thought we decided quite some time ago that we would agree to only categorize the seriousness of any problem in your life as it relates to you, and not to global war, famine and pestilence of Biblical proportions."
Alex laughed. "You're right, we did agree to that. It's a hard habit to break."

"And an easy one to resume, apparently," Dr. Jackson smiled. "If you're going to fall back into that rut, I'll have to insist we see one another more regularly for some sort of maintenance appointments."

"Point taken. So, yes, it is important," Alex said, lifting her right arm and glancing at her watch. "Right now, the District Attorney is announcing his resignation. Monday, the Mayor will set the date for a special election. And Tuesday, I'll be holding a press conference to declare my candidacy."

"Well, that is big news," the doctor said. "Are congratulations in order?"

"Of course. It's not compulsory service," Alex laughed. "I've considered it and I'm going to run."

"Compulsory comes in many guises," Jackson said. "This isn't something we've discussed in quite a while, but to hear you tell it, your political aspirations had waned significantly from your younger years. You seemed relieved, in fact, that the weight of that self-imposed ambition was no longer on your shoulders."

"I was. Once you helped me to realize that it was self-imposed, I was able to slough it off. It was a relief."

"I recall that you once referred to it as a yoke under which you were forced to labor," the doctor recalled.

"Really?" Alex laughed. "I must have been feeling incredibly sorry for myself that day."

"It took you a long time to make peace with the idea that you weren't defined by your professional achievements," Jackson said. "So, I admit that your news surprises me. What's changed?"

"I guess I've made peace with a lot of things: my time in witness protection, my relationship with Olivia...things seem more settled, somehow. Clearer."

"Marriage has that effect on many people. You're also grieving a loss, Alex. That can engender confusion, certainly, but for some it simply casts details in stark relief. Things that once seemed ambiguous are suddenly black-and-white, and priorities can shift dramatically."

"Why do I suspect that it usually involves renouncing goals once held as sacrosanct, and realizing the value of family over career?"

"Do you think that deciding to put your name on a ballot means you don't value your family?" Dr. Jackson asked.

"I knew there had to be a probing question lurking just beneath the surface," Alex smirked.

"That's what you pay me for, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is." Alex was done laughing. In fact, this was what she'd expected. This was her chance to make her case, one last time, to a judge and jury of one: herself. She was counting on Jackson to cut to the chase and ask her the hard questions that she needed to answer.

"Well, Alex, I know you're not seeking my approval," the therapist said. "I'd guess that you want me to challenge you, though, and force you to reframe your decision in a way that makes sense to you."
"That's exactly what I need. Everyone in my life means well, but they all have some vested interest in the outcome. I believe I'm making the right choice, for the right reasons, but…"

"But you are the type of person who wants certainty."

"I am," Alex acknowledged. "It's a huge risk. It will change my career substantially if I lose, and it will change my life even more if I win."

"You do realize that the future can't be known?" Jackson's voice was quiet, but she had a unique way of speaking. Alex always thought of the technique as asking a firm question. She knew the answer, but used the question to make sure you knew it, as well.

"Yes, as much as I want guarantees, I realize there are none."

"And how does that make you feel?" The doctor looked at Alex patiently, but expectantly.

It always came back to that question, didn't it? How do you feel? That single question had been Alex's biggest hurdle in making therapy serve any purpose. She often didn't know exactly how she felt, and wasn't terribly interested in expressing it when she did. That type of navel-gazing wasn't her strength, but she was learning there was no point in even trying if she weren't willing to do the work.

"It scares me," Alex admitted. "I'm afraid of losing, I'm afraid of winning, I'm afraid of running, and afraid of passing up the chance to run. I'm afraid of what it means that I even still think about this type of thing."

"This type of thing?"

"Politics. Power. Being a public figure."

"Let's break that down," Dr. Jackson suggested. "What scares you about politics?"

"Compromise," Alex said quickly. "Not compromising in terms of making the tough decisions, and knowing that you sometimes have to do less to get more. I can handle that. I would tell you now that I don't care about being popular, or making people like me, but running for office has a way of changing that. I don't want to find myself giving in on things that I find important, or compromising my values just to get elected, or re-elected."

"You are a strong person, Alex. You live your values, and you've gone to great lengths, and put yourself in extreme danger in the past, to stand up for what you believe. Is there some reason that you believe you might be blown about by the shifting winds of politics?"

"It's happened before," Alex replied. "Not politics, really, I guess. But there was a period in my life when I was very much adrift, doing things that were completely out of character and without purpose."

"When was this?"

"Just after I came back from Baltimore. I couldn't reintegrate myself back into my life, as odd as that sounds. Other than family, and my friend Kate, I simply didn't associate with anyone from my old life, because I couldn't seem to reconcile who I'd been with who I'd become."

"We've talked about this reintegration," Jackson recalled. "You had a couple of relationships that you now consider mistakes, and pursued some professional opportunities that weren't what you'd have chosen previously."
"That's putting it mildly," Alex laughed. "My relationship with Robert was a mistake only in that I hurt him. I regret that. He was a nice man, and I believed I could be happy with him. It would be easy, I thought. Companionable. We had a lot in common. The relationship that followed was the more disastrous of the two, by far."

"Madeline?" Dr. Jackson said. "Was that her name?"

"It was. Is, I mean. It's not as though she's gone, even though I'd prefer it."

"Do you see her socially, or professionally?"

"No," Alex said. "Olivia and I did bump into her once, and she sent a wedding gift, oddly enough, but I don't see her."

"A wedding gift? How did your wife feel about that?"

"She doesn't have any feelings about it, because she isn't aware of the gift. I returned the item and donated the money to charity. I don't want anything from that woman tainting my home, or my life, or my marriage."

The psychologist jotted a few notes. This was clearly still an issue for her patient, and despite three years of excavating some fairly significant emotional artifacts, she wasn't sure that Alex had truly worked through all of the issues surrounding that relationship. She planned to suggest they work on that during their next visit. For now, though, time was of the essence, so she tied the threads back to the issue at hand.

"You were at a crossroads in your life when you made those atypical decisions, were you not?"

"I was," Alex said. "I think I've put that behind me, but what if I haven't? What if I find that I enjoy the power the position would afford me, and I begin to do whatever I have to do to keep it?"

"That's a very real risk," the doctor acknowledged. "But I would suggest that it's a very real risk for anyone, not just for someone with your history or experience. And that's something that we can continue to work through. Should you win, I know it will become an even more immediate concern for you."

"You think I should begin making more regular appointments?" Alex was snappish.

"I'm not saying that," Jackson clarified. "But if you think it will be helpful, I'm happy to set a regular appointment for you. It's entirely up to you, though, Alex."

"Thank you. I'm sorry, I just feel like I'm being second guessed."

"Are you?"

"Only by myself, if I'm being honest. Everyone else around me is very encouraging, and thinks that whether I win or lose, it's important that I make a run at this."

"You mentioned that you're afraid of becoming a public figure. Some might say that you already are one."

Alex nodded. "I suppose so, but this would be on another level. My track record is a bit spotty when I put myself out there."

"By spotty, do you mean being shot?" Jackson cut to the chase on this issue. Alex had gotten
better about discussing it, but still tended to couch it in vague terms when she was allowed to
prevaricate and demur.

"Yes. That's what I meant."

"I'd like you to think about the way you discuss the shooting, and its aftermath."

Alex looked up and met Jackson's eyes. "In what way?"

"I know you're not obtuse, Alex. Over the time we've worked together, you have made a lot of
progress in your ability to discuss those events, but you still hesitate to speak to it directly. Do you
see that?"

"It's difficult," Alex said.

"I'm sure it is," the doctor replied. "Refusing to put a name to it won't make it any easier. And I
don't think it's unusual that it still affects you. Your life was completely changed in an instant. It's
on your mind even now, and it will certainly come up should you run for office."

"Perhaps." When Alex was upset, she resorted to short answers, a syllable or two at most, further
truncated by a clipped tone.

"If you don't want to revisit that today, we can certainly put it off for another time."

"What do you want from me?" Alex's frustration was apparent in her raised voice.

"The truth is all I ever want from you, Alex, whatever that means to you and whenever you're
prepared to face it."

"I'm scared to death that something will happen to me, or to Olivia. I'm going to call attention to
myself, and that could be a huge mistake. I know that the men who tried to kill me are no longer a
threat, but there may be others who harbor a grudge. I've prosecuted a lot of people."

"And if you're elected, you'll be the one who decides which cases are prosecuted, and which ones
are not."

"Yes," Alex replied. "I've kept a relatively low profile for a very long time. Is it wise to stand in the
spotlight now?"

Dr. Jackson was quiet, allowing Alex to ponder her own question. Their time was winding down,
and she wanted to leave her patient with food for thought, and to be sure it sunk in.

"That's a question only you can answer, Alex. But your profile has not, in fact, been that low. There
have been press conferences and a series of appearances on CNN. I think you're forgetting that
you've already been standing in the spotlight, in a variety of ways. As the District Attorney, I
would suppose that your physical safety would be even more carefully protected than it is now. So,
you have to consider what it is that you're really afraid of, and once you've identified it, you'll have
to decide if you can overcome it, or learn to live with it."

"Is that my homework?" Alex asked.

"We can call it that," the doctor agreed. "But it's probably more akin to cramming for an exam.
Your decision seems to be made, and while there is a window of opportunity to reverse course, it's
closing quickly. It's important that you are at peace with yourself, Alex. No one else can know
what's in your heart."
"I was never an indecisive person," Alex lamented. "I don't like it."

"You're not indecisive, in my opinion. You consider things carefully, and weigh every factor before making a decision. There are more factors to weigh now than there may have been five or ten years ago."

"I just want to be certain that I'm doing the right thing."

"I don't think that's possible," Dr. Jackson said.

"Why? I never had doubts like this before."

"I'm sure that's true, Alex. Everything becomes more complicated when you have so much to lose."
Chapter 7

Friday, January 3, 2014

2:15 p.m.

Olivia had talked to Mackey nearly every day since Christmas. Sometimes Nick was on speaker with her in one of the conference rooms, and sometimes it was just her and Kris. They spent about half the time batting around ideas, and the other half sharing their frustrations.

They weren't making much headway on either end. The NYPD duty belt was the primary clue in both locations—turns out it was required equipment in a number of departments. Uniformed officers in New York, Tampa, San Francisco, Seattle, Tulsa, Dallas and St. Louis all wore that particular model, and that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Olivia's research indicated that there might be a hundred or more smaller municipalities using it, and they knew there were more at least 154 places that sold them, including 28 police-equipment websites. Like many cities, New York required certain pieces of uniform clothing to be purchased from, and tailored by, authorized vendors, whose meticulous records were subject to auditing by NYPD, the FBI, ATF, and Homeland Security. But belts didn't fall into that category. Any paintball enthusiast or gun nut or wannabe cop could buy one, regardless of where they lived. It was a message, they were sure, but they had no idea who the hell was sending it.

"Trail already cold from your latest vic?" Kris asked. They were just doing a quick check-in by phone while Nick was on his way back from taking Zara to a doctor's appointment.

"As cold as standing out by the East River so damn early on Christmas that Santa Claus was still making his rounds," Olivia joked.

"This is getting old," Kris sighed.

"That's the truth. I'm exhausted, Nick and I are snapping at one another, I've got a million things going on and a wife who's about to run for office."

"That's news."

"Well, keep it under your hat. The DA is resigning, and Alex is going to throw her hat into the ring. Not like anyone in Missouri gives a damn, but it's not official yet."

"That's going to be a challenge, isn't it?" Kris asked. "You'd better not screw anything up, Benson, or you'll be serving her up like a lamb for the slaughter. The media will eat her alive if they see any conflict of interest."

"I know. She's got a plan to deal with that, but it may not come into play. Things change."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kris hadn't known Olivia long, but they were alike in many ways, not least of which was their dedication to their work. They'd both paid a higher price for that dedication than either cared to tally up.
"I'm not sure I want to keep doing this," Olivia explained. "The danger and the brutality and the hours are starting to weigh on me. I thought my old partner was crazy when he left and went to join the brass for the Hofstra campus cops, but he seems happy. The pay is good, and the hours are even better. It would definitely make things easier for Alex."

Kris was quiet on the other end of the call. She had no business giving advice here, given the sorry state of her own personal life, but she couldn't imagine Benson sitting behind a desk or strolling some leafy quad, citing kids for underage drinking and stolen street signs.

"Anyway," Olivia continued, "I'm not going anywhere until I find this bastard. Any news of note on your end?"

"Not really," Kris said. "Chael Bauer's still got his software guys working on some program that will use new algorithms on the evidence we've collected. Apparently our guy is easy enough to find, Olivia. We're just not smart enough to do it."

"Think he'll come up with anything?"

"Sure as hell can't hurt, I suppose. No one tells me anything about it directly, of course, but I hear they're making a little progress in getting it to do what they want."

"How will they know?" Olivia asked. "Has your department given them the case files or something?"

"No, but that's only because we have an alderman who's a pain in the mayor's ass. He doesn't care that Bauer's some genius billionaire whose dad was a cop. He's making a big stink and I can't say that I blame him. Otherwise, I'm sure we'd have just handed over everything we've got so they could experiment."

"NYPD is staying out of it," Liv observed.

"Sure, why not? Tech billionaires with a Horatio Alger story are a dime a dozen there in Gotham City, but here in Beererville we're awed and impressed by anything more technologically advanced than a scientific calculator," Kris laughed. "Your department is smart to stand by, see what happens. If it works, we'll find your guy for you, right?"

Olivia laughed along with her. "I didn't have the impression that St. Louis was a complete cowtown."

"Well, I exaggerate, but someone who's risen to such lofty heights from his humble beginnings in South City is still pretty impressive to most people here. To answer your question, though, what I'm told they're doing is reworking solved crimes to see if their software comes up with the same perp. Ted Bundy was an inspired choice, I thought, given the known similarities to our cases. They're feeding in the data compiled by the various departments that worked the Bundy cases- victimology, autopsy results, witness statements, physical evidence-and feeding it in exactly as it was gathered, chronologically. When the software gets to the answer earlier in the investigations than the actual detectives did, they'll call it a win and let us have a go at it."

"We are in the wrong line of work, Kris. If we knew how to make a computer do our jobs instead of doing them ourselves, we'd be heroes."

"Filthy rich heroes," Kris corrected. "I'm gonna go round up my partner-we've got an appointment to interview a vic's mom."

"The hits just keep on coming, don't they?" Olivia said before signing off.
And they did keep coming, for both Nick and Olivia, and for Kris and her partner, Jeff. Benson and Amaro were looking for a serial rapist working the shops and boutiques in SoHo, the Village and Chelsea. The guy looked good for at least three assaults so far, the most recent one only a day earlier.

The perp favored the mid- to late-morning weekday hours, when stores were open but not busy, and as a result were typically understaffed. They were small shops, and so far none of them had had a working surveillance system in place.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" Nick asked as he entered the squadroom and threw his coat over his chair.

"Only if you count futility and frustration as anything," Liv joked. "We know he's scouting the locations, right?"

"Sure, the victims have nothing in common, but the shops are similar-hours, layout, staffing. It's about the opportunity more than the victim."

"Exactly," Liv agreed. "I think that's got to be our focus. He's entering the shop when there's only one employee, and so far he hasn't encountered any customers. The M.O. is the same-goes in undisguised, other than a cap pulled low, but apparently removes it in the store."

"He's not concerned about being ID'd at this point," Nick added. "Why is that? Guy looks around, asks for something that he seems to know they'll have to look for in the back. Locks the front door, follows the employee back, putting a mask on in the process. Binds, beats and rapes the vic, and lets himself out the back, using the employee's keys to disarm the door siren."

"Nothing is taken, and nothing is discovered until another employee comes to work and can't get in, or the UPS guy shows up with a delivery and finds the back door open." Olivia rounded out the details. "The victims have all given us a description, and they're similar, but completely unremarkable-5'9" or 5'10", white, thin face, average looking. Just like a couple million other guys in the five boroughs. The guy's like a cypher."

"He knows the employee isn't likely to pay much attention to his features when he just asks for some shoes in a size 10, or whatever, but he puts the mask on before he rapes them."

"The trauma is either going to make them forget everything, or it's going to make their memories of his face crystal clear, and that's a chance he can't take," Benson said. "Until he puts the mask on, he's just a guy spending money. If another customer walks in, he's out the door, no worries. But once he's locked the door and committed himself, he can't be sure he won't encounter another employee in the back, or won't run into someone in the alley when he leaves."

"Let's head to SoHo," Nick said, slipping his arms back into his coat.

"Think of something?" Olivia asked hopefully.

"Hell, no," he answered. "But maybe we can go see if anyone who does have a working camera has had a skel in lately looking to get some weird size or something that wouldn't be kept out front."

"Good enough for me," Liv replied. "If nothing else, maybe we can convince someone to spend a little money and not have an employee working alone. Might save one person from the hell those three women are going through."
Chapter 8

Tuesday, January 7, 2014
3:00 p.m.

Everything was happening so fast. Too fast, Alex thought. Colin had announced his resignation on Friday, and the law required the mayor to declare a special election within three days, so on Monday afternoon, he had set the date for March 25th, and a mad scramble ensued. Any candidates had two critical filing deadlines to meet within two weeks of the mayor's proclamation-campaign finance declarations were due on January 13th, and ballot petitions were due by the 18th.

Now, just 24 hours after the election date had been proclaimed, Alex was walking toward a temporary platform set up in the lobby of One Hogan Place. The TV lights made it hard to see everyone who had gathered, but she could hear them as she and Olivia followed Colin to the stage.

Alex. Over here, Alex. Ms. Cabot, look this way.

Detective Benson, can you stand closer?

A few minutes later, ushered to the podium by a smattering of applause after Colin's effusive introduction, Alex stood in front of a bank of cameras and microphones. It never ceased to amaze her how many reporters turned out for these events. New York did have a large local media, to be sure, but even assuming everyone in Albany might have interest in the Manhattan DA's race, there were still about twice as many red lights in front of her as there ought to be. It was times like these when every reporter dug up old articles and diligently filled in her backstory with the same tired phrases: Witness protection. Drug cartel. Crusader for justice. Lazarus ADA. They could resurrect any story from the dead, she thought, and Arthur Branch's southern drawl came to her unbidden. That's why they call a newspaper's files a morgue, Alex. Those sons of bitches can't let anything rest in peace.

She knew it would happen. It was, in fact, inevitable. What she hadn't prepared for was the intense anxiety she felt. She'd given press conferences, lectures, seminar presentations, and dinner speeches, and usually had only mild butterflies at most. Why was she such a mess now? Her palms were clammy, and sheer force of will was the only thing keeping her lunch down as she stepped to the podium.

"Before I say anything else, I'd be remiss if I didn't thank the District Attorney for that wonderful introduction. Colin, the US Attorney's office is very lucky to be getting you. I've had the pleasure of working with a number of wonderful DA's during my career in this city: Colin, Jack McCoy, Arthur Branch, Nora Lewin and Adam Schiff, and each of them has been a wonderful example of the good that this office can do. I've enjoyed serving the people of New York for a number of years, and look forward to many more years of working to secure justice for the victims of crime in our city, and to making Manhattan a safer place for all of my fellow-citizens. I'm here today to announce my candidacy for the office of District Attorney for New York County."

Flashes fired and shutters clicked, a brief frenzy of light and sound that served to punctuate the
The declaration was a mere formality, of course. Everyone in the room had known why they were here. A summons from Pam Thomson for a press conference with the EADA could only mean one thing, following as it did on the heels of Colin Samuels' resignation four days earlier. Thomson was the best political PR strategist employed by one of New York's top boutique firms; she had been the first official hire of the campaign.

Once Alex had committed to running-Kate forcing her hand stood out now as the watershed moment where thought coalesced into action, and hesitation into determination-she had moved quickly to surround herself with a team that could get the job done. As she had been reminded lately by more than one person, she could be slow to make decisions. But once she decided, no-one would say she dragged her feet. It was as if she shifted from neutral to fifth gear with no need for the usual acceleration. When she decided to run, she also decided that she'd do whatever she had to do to win. Second-guessing was not a hobby for her.

The press conference was longer than she'd expected, and no doubt shorter than it seemed. Reporters asked the usual questions, though she had to give them credit for finding inventive ways to phrase them. With each query, she grew more comfortable. They weren't hard to answer-she knew what she wanted to accomplish, and how she planned to do it. She deflected questions about the more unusual parts of her history as an ADA, and easily answered the ones about her campaign platform.

Her nervousness dissipated just as it did during a trial, when she found the rhythm of her opening statement and could see the proceedings begin to unfold in a way that made sense to her. Things seemed to slow down a bit, and she could anticipate everything just a split second before it happened: the witness' answer, the defense attorney's objection, the judge's ruling. She wasn't telepathic or prescient. It was more like a cross between a crystal ball and deja vu-operating in a moment that was already feeling like a memory-and it meant things were going her way. Usually she just attributed it to one of those perfect days you have now and again, a sort of lucky break. She wasn't given to this type of narcissistic thinking, but every so often, she saw these moments of happenstance as some cosmic payback for the darker moments she'd come through, and as a sign that maybe-just maybe-she was on the right path.

There was only one deviation from the script. After Pam told the assembled group that the next question would be the last, the reporter from the Post directed his words to someone other than Alex.

"Detective Benson." All eyes turned to the side of the stage, where Liv stood with Liz, Ellen, Kate and Bill, looking on proudly. The sudden attention surprised her.

Even in the confusion of the moment, Alex managed to correct the reporter. "Sergeant Benson," she muttered.

Pam stepped in. "Sergeant Benson is not answering any questions, Jim. Did you have something for Ms. Cabot?"

"It's okay, Pam," Alex said. She wasn't thinking about the campaign, but rather that the reporters would be lucky to hear anything Olivia might want to say. She looked over at her wife. "Liv, do you want to?"

Olivia wasn't a fan of public speaking, but she was a fan of Alex, and she was determined to be an asset to this campaign. She smiled and walked toward the podium. "Sure, babe." She said it quietly, but microphones pick up every sound.

Alex turned back to the reporter. "Jim?"
"Yes, thanks," he said. "Sergeant Benson, I ask you this question as a decorated NYPD officer, rather than as the candidate's wife. Do you think Ms. Cabot is the best person for this job?"

She flashed a brilliant smile in Alex's direction. "Well, Jim, if I weren't the candidate's wife, you wouldn't care what I thought, would you?" Everyone in the room laughed.

"Probably not," the reporter conceded. "But you are, so I do."

"As a police officer in this city, I have no doubt that Alex Cabot is the right choice to be the next District Attorney. I've worked with her, and can tell you unequivocally that she will fight tirelessly and unselfishly for the people of New York, and for the officers of the NYPD, and for the staff of the DA's office," Olivia said. "And as her wife, I can tell you that I am very proud of all she has done, and all that she will do. She will be a wonderful District Attorney." Olivia took Alex's hand, and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. More flashes captured the mutual adoration, and reporters were eager to get the photos transmitted back to their respective offices for immediate posting alongside the coverage of the announcement.

Liz, Ellen and Bill beamed, though not necessarily for the same reasons. Donnelly was pleased to see that Alex had taken her advice to heart: putting Benson front and center in the campaign made perfect sense. Their marriage grounded Alex somehow, made her seem grittier, and even a little more human, maybe. People could identify with that, and the type of people who'd find it somehow offensive weren't in Cabot's camp anyway.

Ellen and Bill, meanwhile, were just happy for Alex. Both of them had known a woman who was driven and consumed with work, and who had been entirely too reluctant to allow herself any personal happiness. Bill knew what Ellen only suspected—that Alex had overcome a variety of fears to get to where she was, both personally and professionally, and he couldn't have asked for a better ending to any story.

When 6:00 rolled around, both Dev Patel and Madeline Taylor were watching their TVs. There had been internet coverage almost immediately after then press conference ended, of course, but no video would be posted until after the evening news.

Their emotions were wildly divergent, too, as they watched. Dev had no TV, and wouldn't normally care to watch one if he didn't need to see something on the local news, so he was viewing the proceedings in a bar. He'd tipped the bartender $20 to turn to the NYN broadcast. He was happy—he had been right about Cabot's candidacy, and so far the parts of the plan he was privy to were all falling into place.

Happy was not a word that described Madeline, who was watching the video in a decidedly more private location. She, too, knew this was an important step in getting what she wanted. But seeing Alexandra and her detective there in full-color sight-and-sound had hit her unexpectedly hard. She had been so consumed with her objectives that she had given only scant consideration to the reality of their marriage. A lesser person might have been overcome, but Madeline quickly gathered herself and assimilated this new perspective into her long view. The cop was clearly both ill-suited for, and socially beneath, Alexandra. But she just might be useful for Madeline's purposes.

All the world's in love with love, she thought. If she helps to get you elected, all the better. I can deal with that later.
Chapter 9

Wednesday, February 5, 2014

Olivia sat back in her chair, angling her body slightly to the right, to face the dais where Alex was about to speak to a crowd of 650 New Yorkers who were both well-dressed and well-to-do. This was the largest event she'd attended so far, and it represented a major coup for her campaign: she was the guest of honor at the annual Champion Awards Dinner for Safe Horizon, a victims' services agency that would be endorsing Alex in the election. They had notified her PR person that the endorsement would be announced the following day during a press conference, but tonight they were dining on osso bucco and risotto Milanese while celebrating the work of the organization's staff, donors and volunteers in providing hope and help to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Olivia knew Alex would get many more endorsements in the coming weeks, and she knew that none would mean as much to either of them as this one did.

Both of Alex's opponents were present. Pam Thomson had been particularly gleeful about that fact. No one who wanted to serve as the city's chief prosecutor could ignore an invitation from the largest agency of its kind in the country, even if the event would be honoring the woman they were both trailing in the polls. It was a close race, but Pam had been insistent that this was the type of endorsement that would put distance between Alex and the two men opposing her. She was probably right, Olivia thought as she looked at the people sitting along the front row of tables. Both David Reilly and Marco Lazzarro were looking annoyed and uncomfortable as the CEO of Safe Horizon welcomed Alex to the podium with phrases like *unwavering advocate* and *stalwart supporter*.

The applause was enthusiastic and sustained, and Liv could tell that her wife was nearly overwhelmed by the moment.

Alex had always been a champion for victims, of course, but she had been especially dedicated to the cause since her return from Baltimore years before. Her support had taken many forms: publicity, money and time. She had found the work very fulfilling, and was deeply gratified by the recognition she was receiving tonight. The organization's CEO had emailed over a draft of the introduction speech on Monday night, and Alex printed it out and took a red pen to it in bed that night.

*This is an event honoring you for your victims' rights work, isn't it?* Liv had asked.

*Yes, it is,* Alex replied, drawing line after line through the text in front of her.

*Then what on earth are you so furiously crossing out?* Liv laughed.

*Listen to this.* Alex had read her part of the excised section. 'Alex Cabot has not only been a tireless champion for New York City's victims, both personally and professionally, but she has been a victim herself. She knows what it is to rebuild your life after you are forever changed by an act of violence.'

Olivia wasn't sure how to respond to the disdain in Alex's voice. *I know you've made a point of not campaigning on something that happened so long ago, honey, but this might be the right time and place to acknowledge that part of your life.*
Absolutely not, Alex said. I won't be thought of as a victim. That's not a card I'll play just to win an election.

I don't think you need to play any cards to win this election, Alex. But there's nothing wrong with being a victim. It's not shameful.

Alex looked at her sideways, anger flashing briefly in her eyes. I realize that, Olivia. But I've dealt with my past, and I'm not looking for a sympathy vote. I'm not a sideshow or a soap opera, putting my life out there for the vultures and the voyeurs.

She had been adamant about the issue from the beginning. She wouldn't respond to reporters' questions about it, and refused to mention it in any of her speeches, her campaign bio, or in any conversations with prospective donors or undecided voters. Even though it illustrated her commitment and tenacity, and was a hell of a story to boot, she wasn't willing to listen to any entreaties to open up about it, no matter how appropriate the venue. So it was that, on an occasion any other politician would have found tailor-made for a soul-baring, vote-getting catharsis, Alex was delivering an address that varied only slightly from her usual stump speech. Olivia never tired of hearing it, in any case. She didn't get to go to many events-NYPD seemed reluctant to give her an extended vacation while she was in the midst of two ongoing cases—but she wouldn't have missed this one.

The election was already taking a toll on Alex, who was tired and stretched thin, on-the-go most days from before sunrise until 11 at night. She was a natural at campaigning, and had taken to it like a duck to water-calm and serene to all appearances, but paddling furiously beneath the surface—and she was managing quite capably to do her job and run her campaign at the same time. Most importantly, her passion was reignited, and Olivia couldn't be more pleased. That familiar spark was in her eyes, and she was running on adrenaline half the time. Listening to her now, knowing that voice as well as she did, Liv could already hear the slightest strain, and she wondered how anyone could campaign for months on end without developing a debilitating case of laryngitis.

"Safe Horizon has provided safety, shelter and support to victims of violence in our city for more than 35 years. Their mission is to help victims of violence rebuild their lives, and it's a mission I believe in. My life has been changed by my work with Safe Horizon, as have the lives of the millions of New Yorkers they have helped. As a volunteer and supporter, I applaud their unflagging efforts.

"Every crime has a victim, and every crime has a perpetrator. As the District Attorney for New York County, I will work just as hard to bring those perpetrators to justice, and to deter and prevent future crimes..."

Olivia knew the rest of the speech, so she scanned the crowd as Alex's voice reverberated around the room. Attendees were in various states of inebriation, and displayed various levels of interest in the proceedings. There were so many people in the room, big round tables of ten, and the lights from the stage only illuminated the first row or two. She could see Colin Samuels and his wife; they'd purchased a table, and were kind enough to invite Laurie Medlin, Colin's secretary, as well as Ellen and a few of the other EADAs.

Liz Donnelly was at another table, with Jack McCoy, Lena Petrovsky and several other familiar faces. Olivia knew all of these people, but wasn't really part of that circle, other than as Alex's wife. Cops worked with prosecutors and judges, but for obvious reasons of both bias and economics, they tended not to socialize. Aside from the Commissioner and a few of his flunkies, Liv was pretty sure she was the only NYPD officer here who wasn't being paid to work the event. Being with Alex—being her wife—hadn't changed Olivia's private life much. Their friends were their
friends, not standing on ceremony or pretense.

Alex's public life was another story, though, and Olivia was working hard to find her way in this unfamiliar landscape. She was fortunate that this wasn't the type of political race where her own life and career were being scrutinized intensely, but she was constantly aware that any incident that was remotely newsworthy would reflect on Alex. Being the wife of the DA wasn't a full time job, thank god, but she was determined to be an asset in any way she could. She wouldn't do anything to stand in Alex's way, or to jeopardize her campaign.

While Olivia was watching the crowd, some in the crowd were watching her. She couldn't see in the dark, of course, but she might have been surprised to see some of the faces lying out of the reach of the lights bathing the front of the room. Dev Patel was standing in the back left corner of the room, listening. He hadn't paid for a table of course, but he was dropping in on Cabot's events whenever he could, paying attention to her opponents, always gathering information.

Table 45 was purchased by Bernard Worldwide, one of their many annual contributions to Safe Horizon. It was neither personal nor political for the company—there was no downside to supporting an agency that helped victims of child abuse and domestic violence. They routinely drafted a few executives, a junior partner or two, and maybe even an intern to fill up the seats they'd paid for.

This year, though, they had an unexpected volunteer. Madeline Taylor was eager to attend on the firm's behalf. She had requested only one ticket, and that surprised no-one. She'd never allowed her professional and personal lives to overlap—never brought a date or partner to any of the firm's parties or events—and she wasn't about to start now. She didn't tell any of her dining companions why she'd suddenly developed such an intense interest in the work of this particular charity, but at least one of them noticed that she made little small talk, and once the guest of honor began speaking, her attention was rapt and undivided.

Dev Patel noticed, too. It was the first time he'd seen Taylor and Cabot in the same place at the same time, and while they were hundreds of feet apart, Madeline's eyes never strayed from the dais. What he couldn't tell was who interested her more—the candidate, or her wife, Sergeant Benson. Out of sight, hiding in a dark corner, he was learning more all the time.
Liv parked the unmarked on Courtlandt Avenue in the South Bronx, squeezing into a spot on the one-way street and cursing the snow for the tenth time that day as she stepped out and was sprayed with slush by a passing delivery van.

"Goddamnit," she yelled, and then quickly looked at Nick, smug and dry on the curb. "What the hell's so funny, partner?"

"Not a thing," he said, knowing better than to mess with Benson when she was pissed, especially near the end of a long, cold day of re-interviewing victims and witnesses all over the city. They were on their last visit for the day-Marisol Ortiz, a Puerto Rican girl who'd been attacked in the most recent of the rapes they were working in Chelsea. She'd been lucky, if you could call it that-someone or something had scared the guy off before he could rape her, so they were hopeful she'd have some more details for them now that a few days had passed.

Olivia had joined Nick under the scaffolding straddling the sidewalk, and looked at her notebook for Ortiz's address. Her ire was quickly redirected from the van that had splashed her to the burly man who ran into her, his arms full of pizzas, knocking her into the blue metal supports.

Nick reached out a hand to steady her, calling after the offender. "Watch where you're going, buddy."

The guy kept moving, never even turned around as he called over his shoulder, "Ver dónde estás parado, pendejos. Sólo hay tanto espacio."

"What was that?" Liv asked.

"Just a friendly New Yorker saying hello to a couple of assholes," Nick laughed. "But if we hope to talk to this girl alone, we should have come sooner. It's dinner time."

"It's 4:30, Nick." They walked on through the scaffolding, emerging into the weak afternoon sunlight in front of a barber shop and deli. Their vic lived upstairs. Olivia noticed there were no kids running around. People were hustling home, some carrying groceries or takeout like the Welcome Wagon representative they'd just encountered.

"This is a working-class neighborhood, Benson. Hotel maids and line cooks, off work in mid-afternoon, or heading out later for a night shift. Her house is gonna be crawling with the same huge family we dealt with at the hospital."

"Damn," Olivia said, cursing her poor planning. She looked at Nick, wondering once again about his upbringing. He didn't say much-like her, he'd grown up with a single mom, but she sensed that his life had been a bit more hardscrabble than her own.

Serena Benson was an intellectual, and she prided herself on providing her daughter a cultured upbringing, at least when she was sober. Their house was often full of colleagues and students,
gathered around the table or the living room for a late dinner and hours of discussion about literature, politics and university gossip, all of it fueled and lubricated by copious amounts of alcohol. She knew that many of the grad students who attended these salons envied her; they might have come from working-class families themselves, and the idea of growing up in a household awash in literature and discourse seemed both foreign and ideal to them. They never got to know her, though, and they had no idea that the alcohol fueled other types of conversations once the guests had left.

She shook off the memories. They came less frequently these days. Time was a great healer, but she also credited Alex for the peace she'd come to know. Security and stability had been two benefits of their marriage that she hadn't even known she needed.

"Let's do this." Nick interrupted her thoughts.

"What's that?" Olivia asked.

"We're here. Day's almost over, and I sure as hell don't wanna trek back out here tomorrow. Let's give it a go. You never know what we might get." He covered the distance to the apartment entrance in two steps, and pushed the door open, pressing the buzzer for 3D. Olivia followed reluctantly, tired of these interviews that led nowhere, and feeling like she had far more excuses than she had results these days.

Alex heard them before she saw them, chancing onto the tail end of a conversation that was clearly about her, but which she had most definitely not been meant to hear. She was approaching her own office, returning from an end-of-day meeting, when she heard a familiar voice and a familiar acronym: WITSEC. She paused a moment before her final turn into the office announced her presence.

"Hey, I know it's compelling. You know it's compelling. Hell, she knows it's compelling. But she won't go for it, Pam. She made that perfectly clear at the outset."

"She's wrong, Joel. She has to be made to see that. If you don't have the balls to tell her..."

Alex had been waiting so near the door that there weren't even two tell-tale clicks of her stilettos on the marble to give them any warning. "Who doesn't have the balls to tell me what?"

Ellen hid a smile. Her office was always full of people waiting to gain access to the inner sanctum, and to EADA Cabot. When they were young attorneys, ink still drying on their JD diplomas, she sympathized with them. Their nervousness was readily apparent as they waited to meet with the bureau chief. Whether it was a job well done or a lesson learned, hubris or humility which that brought them here, they were all anxious as their appointments neared. Ellen tried to put them at ease, but usually had little success. She'd mentioned it once to her boss.

"I don't know what they're like in there, Ms. Cabot, but out here it's all quivering chins and knocking knees."

Alex laughed. "I was like that once, Ellen."

"That surprises me," the secretary replied.

"Why? You can't imagine I was ever a scared young ADA, wet behind the ears and terrified of putting a foot wrong?"

"No," Ellen countered. "That I can see. Anyone as concerned as you are about doing well would
certainly feel that way. What I can't imagine is that you ever showed any outward sign of it."

"Well, I admit, I may have tried to hide it from my bosses. Not sure how successful I was, though."

Now it was Ellen's turn to laugh. " Tried to hide it?" she replied. " I've known you a long time, and I can read you pretty well. But let's put it this way: I'd still never play poker with you, Ms. Cabot."

"Your confidence in me is boundless, but I assure you, while I was all bravado around those detectives, being called on the carpet was another story entirely."

Ellen's brief reverie brought a smile to her face even as her boss prepared to deal with the two unpleasant creatures occupying the leather sofa at this very moment. She greatly preferred an office full of young attorneys and tough detectives to the parade of strategists & sycophants she'd hosted lately, and she didn't attempt to hide her joy now as she saw the flustered campaign staffers react to the candidate's unanticipated entrance.

"Alex, sorry, that was inappropriate," Joel Ingram apologized, concluding with a pointed look at his less-abashed companion.

"What was, Joel? The fact the you don't have the balls to tell me something, or the fact that Pam does have the balls to suggest that I use my time away for political gain? It's all pretty fucking inappropriate, if you ask me, which is presumably what you're here to do."

There was a stunned silence. Crude words from a beautiful woman often had that effect, and ten seconds seemed to take two hours to tick by before Pam spoke.

"Alex, we were just thinking..."

"One moment, Pam," Alex cut her off, and turned to Ellen. "I'll be in my office with these two for a few minutes. Did I have any messages?"

"Detective Benson called, please call her later and let her know what time you're meeting your uncle for dinner," Ellen answered, handing over a white message slip. "And James Bailey called to see if he can get some time with you this afternoon about the Skolnik case."

"Thanks," Alex replied. "I'll call Olivia later, and let James know..." She glanced at her watch. "5:15, I can manage 15 or 20 minutes. Tops."

She turned now, facing Joel and Pam, and gestured to her office door. "After you two."

Once the trio were in the office, and Alex had closed the door behind her, she told them both to take a seat in the chairs facing her desk. But rather than ensconcing herself behind the large wooden barrier, as they were used to, she walked to the front of her desk and leaned back against the edge, crossing her legs at the ankle and her arms over her chest. This was an old tactic, designed either to intimidate or seduce, depending on who was occupying the space in front of her. Today, there would be no seduction.

Joel couldn't have told you right away what she was doing, but he knew it was working. His face was reddening a bit, and his heart rate seemed faster than normal. He felt like a little boy called to the principal's office. He tried to defuse the tension again. "Alex, we were just discussing the fact that..."

She held up her hand, silencing him. "There is no just here. That issue is absolutely not relevant to this election, and I thought I made it quite clear when I hired you both that there was nothing to discuss. This is my not my resume you're discussing. It's my life, and I will not use that in my
campaign, neither the time in witness protection, nor the events that precipitated it."

"Use what?" Pam interrupted. Joel glanced sideways at her, wondering if she had a death wish, or just an unemployment wish. She had to know she was treading on dangerous ground here, but she continued talking as Cabot focused exclusively on her. "Use the fact that you did everything you could to put away some very bad people? Or the fact that you were shot for doing your job? Is that what you won't use, Alex? Maybe it's just the fact that you gave up two years of your life for the people of New York."

"Pam..." Joel said, reaching a hand over and putting it on her arm, trying to rein her in.

"Listen to me, both of you," Alex said. "And listen closely. This is none of your business, and it's damn sure not for public consumption." She expected that would end the matter, but she had clearly underestimated the fearlessness of her Director of Communications.

"You listen to me," Pam responded, her voice steady and calm but her words full of fight. "You did all of that for the public. And you hired me to get you elected. So let me do my job, Alex, and tell your story."

"That's not my story." Alex's eyes were blazing, and her posture now seemed defensive rather than intimidating.

"It sure as hell is," Pam said. "That experience changed you, Alex. I know that, even if you won't talk about it. You lost everything in service to the people of this city, and they should know that. I joined your campaign because I thought you could win. But more importantly, I signed on because I want you to win. You are the best person for this job, for a lot of reasons. I refuse to believe that what you went through hasn't made you who you are today."

Alex regarded her for a moment, absorbing what she'd said. Both women were fired up, and seemed to have forgotten the campaign director sitting to Pam's right. When she spoke, her voice was much quieter, less forceful. "That was a very difficult time for me, Pam. It's not a story I want told."

"But that's the point," Pam replied, her own voice quieter but still insistent. "The story is going to be told, Alex. People are already talking about it, and if you don't tell it yourself, it's like a game of goddamn Telephone. It'll get garbled and mythologized and permutated. You have to control the narrative on this. Trust me."

Alex looked up at her. "Control the narrative?"

"Yes," Pam replied. "Own the story, just like you own the story in court. Your story, Alex. Told your way, from your mouth. It may or may not help you get elected, but either way, don't let someone else write this chapter for you."

Alex pushed up from the desk's edge, and walked around her two guests to the door, opening it for them. "We're done talking," she said. "I'll call you later, Joel." They left, and she closed the door behind them, lost in thought.

After they passed Ellen's desk and entered the hall, Joel looked incredulously at Pam, putting a hand on her arm to stop her progress toward the elevators. "What the hell were you thinking in there?" he asked. "You're going to be out of a job by tomorrow."

Pam, though, didn't look worried. "We'll see," she replied. "But I don't think so. She knows that I'm right. Just give her a little time, Joel."
She walked on toward the elevator, and pressed the down button as he joined her. Both were silent as they waited, and they entered an empty car. As the doors slid shut, Pam gave her colleague a knowing smile.

"When she calls you, Joel, it'll be to tell you she's taking the gloves off," she said confidently. "She's going to let us do our jobs now, and if we unleash the real Alex Cabot, no one else will stand a chance."
Chapter 11

Monday, February 17, 2014

Kris Mackey was back in New York, once again on her own dime. She’d been upstate, visiting a cousin in Peekskill, and had decided to drive down for the day to brainstorm with Benson and Amaro. There were no new cases they hadn’t discussed, but she hoped to get her hands on the files from the Christmas-morning case, and see the location. Electronic records-sharing was a great thing, but for her money, there was no comparison to seeing evidence, walking the crime scene, and just being in the space.

“If you guys are too busy, just point me to the right subway stop and I’ll manage,” Kris said. “You don’t have to babysit me.”

“They want to pick your brains as much as you want to pick theirs, I’m sure,” Cragen said.

Kris had called Olivia the day before--she’d decided on a whim to postpone her flight and make a trip to the city, and would have gone regardless, but she was glad that Benson had invited her to come to the 1-6. She’d caught the 6:19 train to Grand Central and was at the squad in time for their 8:00 am case briefing. I can come later, she’d offered. I know you’ll have other cases to discuss.

No point in that. This damn thing dominates every briefing, anyway, Olivia said. If you can get here in time, we’d appreciate your two cents.

Two cents was about all she had to contribute, but for the low, low price of an extra day of PTO and a $31 round-trip Metro-North ticket, she’d be glad to listen to anything they had to say. Her team in St. Louis was grasping at straws, glad they had no new case to work but spinning their wheels because of it. The FBI obviously didn’t take either department seriously in terms of believing they were looking for the same guy, or they’d have all been relegated to supporting roles faster than they could get mad about it.

After the squad meeting, Rollins and Benson took their visitor on a tour of their most recent crime scene, while Fin and Nick worked a case they’d caught while they were pulling weekend duty. Mackey called her partner a couple of times during the day, asking him to check one thing or another in their files as she gathered more information from the two NYPD detectives. The three
women chased down a few things that had come to mind as they talked, covering a wide swath of Manhattan and a bit of Brooklyn in the process, but nothing solid materialized.

Just more ghosts, Kris thought. Wasted day.

It wasn’t entirely wasted, though, if she really thought about it. She was still working in the boys’ club Olivia had spent so many years in herself. Spending a day with the female detectives was a breath of fresh air. Mackey didn’t think men or women were inherently better detectives, but she did believe that most women approached problems differently from most men, and a variety of perspectives could only help any investigation. But when it came down to it, all the perspective in the world didn’t solve cases. She’d give her right goddamn arm for a solid fucking lead, and that was the truth.

“The Sloane Jansen show?” Alex asked incredulously. “That didn’t turn out well for me last time. Perhaps you weren’t aware of that debacle.”

“I’m more than aware of it,” Pam Thomson said. “That’s why this is exactly what you need to do. We’re controlling the narrative, remember, Alex? You are controlling it, and what better way than to do it on CNN, with a sympathetic figure and an audience predisposed to love you?”

“This is a local election,” Alex protested. “I should just do a local interview.”

“Tell yourself that if you want,” Pam laughed. She was quiet a moment, letting her words sink in. She hadn’t regretted saying what she had said in Cabot’s office the week before, even when the candidate’s silent treatment for a couple of days had convinced her that Joel might be right. She’d thought she might be fired for forcing an issue Alex had been adamant about avoiding, but then Thursday afternoon, Alex had called and acted as if nothing had happened. Their call had been cordial, dealing with campaign business, some speeches Alex had to give, and so on. Before they hung up, Pam had spoken up once again.

So, can I collect on my bet with Joel? she asked.

Which bet is that? Alex replied.

The one in which he said I’d be fired for what I said to you on Tuesday.
Collect your money, Alex said. You’re not fired. And you won’t be. I pay you because you’re the best, and you know what you’re doing.

Pam smiled to herself. Then you’ll do it? she said. Pull back the curtains and let the light in on this story of yours?

I didn’t say that, Alex countered. But I’m thinking about it. That’s all I can say.

That’s enough.

“Not very many things in New York are really local, Alex,” Pam continued. “People know you, at least news show junkies anyway. Christ, Dateline wanted to do an episode on you.”

“That was a lot of years ago,” Alex said. “And I said no.”

“Understandably so. It was all still too raw, I’m sure,” Pam said. She was speaking in soothing tones, being agreeable, knowing she had Alex in the right frame of mind, and just needed to ease her into this. “But you’re running for office now. People are interested again. I’ve talked to Sloane, and I think this is the way to go. She’ll talk about your campaign, other things, and then, when the conversation flows naturally in that direction, she’ll walk you through it. She wants to do two hours, make it a thoughtful interview.”

“Two hours?”

“It’s exactly what we want, Alex. She wants to do it right, not go for the headline-grabbing sensationalism. You couldn’t be in better hands.”

“When will we do this?”

“Tonight,” Pam said. Alex just looked at her incredulously. “Your schedule is open, it’s a slow news day, and the sooner the better. You know that. You need to do this while there’s time for it to make a difference, but more importantly, you need to do this before you change your mind.”
Alex considered the words only briefly, then visibly stiffened her spine and nodded. “Fine, let’s do it.”

“It’s the right thing to do,” Pam said, her voice calm and reassuring even as she pulled her phone out and went to the recent calls to pull up Sloane Jansen’s number. “And just look at it this way. In a few hours, it’ll be over.”

“It won’t end there,” Alex said knowingly.

“No, it won’t. There will be other requests for interviews, and we will decide if and when any of those are granted. It does open it up for discussion, but I’ve looked at it from every angle, and there’s absolutely no way that any of your opponents could use this against you. Any mention of your time in Witness Protection only serves to make you look better,” she said. Jansen must’ve picked up, because Pam hastily finished her thought. “I don’t see a downside.”

Alex saw a downside, but it wasn’t something she could articulate. There was a sense of opening the closet doors and looking under the bed, checking the house because you heard a noise, and you’re the adult now, and who else is going to do it?

She was going to throw the door open on her life, and she could only hope that it let the light in, rather than unleashing the darkness that was still there. Everyone had to face their own demons, and every demon had to be dealt with in its own way. Alex had spent the past few years flipping on every light, checking on every noise, clearing the monsters out of every corner of her life. She was afraid, though. There were some that you couldn’t find that way, couldn’t scare off with a baseball bat or a gun or a simple incantation or charm.

There were ghosts, and those only came out in the dark.

“Tonight?” Liv asked. “You’re going to go on CNN tonight?” It was already 5, and sunset was just a few minutes off as the temperature dropped.

“Apparently so,” Alex replied. “I foolishly agreed to an interview in principle before thinking to ask the when question.”

“That’s not like you,” Olivia laughed. “You never ask a question without knowing the answer…”
“And never answer one question without knowing what the next one will be,” Alex finished. “Yes, Liv? I’m no good at this campaigning stuff. I’m forgetting the basic tenets of my existence.”

“You’re just fine, honey,” Liv reassured her. She and Rollins were headed back to the precinct, having dropped Kris off to do a little shopping before she caught her train back to Peekskill. “Are you sure you want to do this, though? You’re prepared to discuss it all?”

“As prepared as I’ll ever be,” Alex replied. “But…”

“There’s a but,” Olivia said. “That’s my girl.”

“Can you be here for the taping?” Alex rarely asked Olivia for that type of moral support. “I won’t be home first. I have an early dinner thing and then I’m doing the second hour of her show, at 9, so hair-and-makeup at 8.”

“Absolutely, I’ll be there,” Olivia said. “I’ll meet you there by 8...8:30 at the latest. Just make sure Pam leaves my name on the list.”

“Will do,” Alex said, and Olivia heard a smile in her voice for the first time in a while. “Thank you, baby. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

They signed off and Olivia turned her attention to Rollins. “My wife is going to be on the Sloane Jansen show tonight. If you’re very nice to me, I can get you an autograph.”

Amanda laughed. “You’re making jokes, Benson, but it sounds a little more serious than that.”

“She’s going to talk about her time away,” Olivia explained.

“Her time away.” Amanda said the words slowly, like she’d tasted something and couldn’t decide if she liked it or not. “You mean Witness Protection.”

“Yeah,” Olivia said. “She usually calls it away, just like that. When I was away. She’s made a lot of progress, but more often than not, she still falls back on that little euphemism when it comes up
in conversation.”

“How often does it come up?”

“Less often lately,” Olivia allowed. “I think she’s dealing with it. God knows she’s turning over every rock trying.”

“Well, this ought to help,” Amanda said. “Sloane Jansen loves to turn over rocks.”

“That’s the truth,” Olivia laughed ruefully.

Neither of them felt like speculating about what might come crawling out from under rocks that had been undisturbed for so long.

Olivia had been helping Munch chase down some leads by phone for Fin and Nick, while Amanda tried to knock out some DD5’s. Cragen came barreling out of his office at 6:45, looking around the bullpen as he walked, seeing only Munch and the two of them. Olivia hadn’t even realized he was still there so late.

“Detective Benson, where’s your partner?”

“Upper West Side, Captain,” she said. “He and Fin are interviewing witnesses from that rape they caught Sunday.”

“Well, then, it’s Ladies Night. Rollins, you go with Benson on this one. I’ll be right behind you. Munch can round up Fin and Amaro.”

“Everyone?” Amanda asked. She knew, but asked anyway. “What is it?”
“Our guy,” he said. “Or a damn good copycat.”

“Where?” Olivia asked.

“That’s the best part, Detective. The body was found in the same spot as our Christmas victim.”

“We were there early this morning,” Amanda said.

“Exactly, Rollins,” Cragen said. “Either our boy has a sick sense of humor, or…”

“Or he’s watching us,” Olivia finished. She knew as the words came out of her mouth that they were the truth. It didn’t make sense. There was no particular reason for them to have spent that day, of all days, touring the scene of a two-month-old crime. But they had been, and now, less than 12 hours later, they had another body.

She grabbed her coat without another word, and walked out of the precinct with Rollins on her heels. Once they were in the car, she dialed her phone. The call was answered on the first ring.

“What is it?”

“Are you on the train?”

“I am,” Mackey replied. “Just passed Ossining.”

“How appropriate,” Olivia said. “Get off at the next stop and come back. Text me your ETA. I’ll have a uni pick you up at Grand Central. Assuming you want to, that is.”

“Another one?”

“In the exact same fucking spot,” she spat out. “The son of a bitch saw us. He’s playing us, Kris. He’s watching us.”
“I’ll see you there,” Kris said. “You couldn’t keep me away.”
"Sorry, Alex, she's not answering her cell." Pam Thomson delivered the news to her antsy candidate as they waited in the green room for her call to the set.

"She said she'd be here. Something must have come up." Alex's tone was even, betraying neither her current state of nervousness about the looming interview, nor what Pam assumed must be the constant sense of trepidation felt by the spouse of any police officer.

"I know you wanted her here," Pam said. "Perhaps she'll still make it."

"Maybe so." Alex was sad about Olivia's absence, to be sure, but much more concerned that she hadn't received a call.

"Want me to call the precinct for you, Alex, at least find out where she is so you can ease your mind?"

"Thank you, Pam, but it's fine. I'm sure she'll be in touch at the earliest opportunity. It's the price I pay for marrying a hero." Her wan smile did little to sell the weak attempt at a joke.

"I'll keep you phone on hand. If I see anything, I'll let you know at the next commercial break."

The first hour flowed nicely, and fairly easily. They discussed Alex's candidacy, and eased into her history, both as an ADA and with the ICC in Africa, working backward until they arrived at the time Alex had spent in Baltimore, and in Madison. Sloane had a DEA spokeswoman on briefly, talking about drug-related crimes, and also introduced someone from the US Marshals. She tried, valiantly, to let Alex tell her story with a minimum of overdramatization. But it was a dramatic story, one that Alex had never commented on publicly. Even with the other guests, and the related questions about policy, and facts, and figures, the focus was clearly on one person. All the rest was window dressing as Alex talked about her time in the program, and the decisions that had led her to risk her life on more than one occasion.

Alex was doing well-she had settled in to the ebb and flow of the conversation, and was maintaining a solid grip on her emotions, thinking Pam had been right about doing this-but when they entered the last half-hour and it was Alex, the man from the Marshals, and a psychologist, talking about the difficulty of reassimilating after a trauma like that, her facade began to weaken visibly. She said as little as possible, willing the clock to speed up and the remaining minutes to evaporate. Sloane talked to the two experts about PTSD and Stockholm syndrome and a variety of other maladies that were vaguely related to the matter at hand.

"Well, as Thomas Wolfe said, You can't go home again," Sloane said, and turned to face the candidate. "I understand you found that to be true, as well, Alex. Tell us what was the most difficult part of returning from your ordeal."

The reply was a blank look, and Pam was concerned, watching from behind the cameras as the red
light seemed to have hypnotized Alex into silence. A few seconds on live TV can seem like hours. *Come on, Alex*, Pam thought. *Talk.*

Alex's only thought was similar. *Speak, Cabot. You agreed to this. Now do it.*

She recovered, smiling at the camera, and at her host, and then she spoke. "Well, Sloane, I can tell you without a doubt that Mr. Wolfe was correct. I've often wondered if he spent some time in the program, himself."

The laughter that greeted her smoothed over the awkward silence, and she plowed ahead, telling the rest of her tale in public for the first time. *Most of it anyway*, she thought. And that was true.

Some parts she'd never told anyone. Not even Olivia.

"It's like *deja vu*," Nick said after he'd had a chance to survey the scene.

"I hate French shit," Fin chimed in. "Someone tell me in English what the hell's going on."

"Hold on," Cragen said. "Mackey is on the way back from Grand Central. Since she's here, we might as well include her. She's five minutes away, so we'll huddle up when she arrives. Meanwhile, stay warm and stay out of CSU's way."

Fin approached Olivia, their warm breath forming misty clouds around their heads, the bubble of near-daylight cocooned in the winter darkness. It had an ethereal beauty about it, if not for the dead body at the center of the activity. She nodded a greeting at him.

"I'm getting tired of this scene repeating itself," Olivia said. "It's like Gregory Crewdson's photos after he's read too much Patricia Cornwell."

"I ain't got any doubt that means something," Fin said. "But I'm too damn tired to even ask. You were here earlier today, with Rollins and Mackey?"

"Yes," Benson replied. "For over an hour, maybe closer to two."

"This isn't a coincidence," he said. "Or a copycat."

"No. No it isn't."

His last sentence was obscured by the thumping of helicopter blades. They looked up at the same moment, only to be blinded by the spotlight that swung around on the belly of the chopper, lighting up the area and everyone in it, living and dead. As the aircraft turned north to circle around, Olivia could see the TV station logo, and the cameraman harnessed into the side. "Shit," she yelled.

"Goddamn vultures," Cragen said. "I knew it wasn't one of ours." He was on the phone immediately to get the airspace cleared around the scene.

Olivia was on her phone even quicker.

"Who you callin'?" Fin asked.

"Alex," Olivia huffed, waiting for her call to connect, hoping Pam would answer. "She's on CNN right now, and I'm supposed to be there. I didn't have time to call her. Those sons of bitches will cut to this while she's on the air."

"Well, look at it this way, baby," Fin drawled. "At least she'll know you really are working late,
and not out fuckin' around."

She didn't see the humor. Not that he'd expected her to, really.

Pam didn't answer Alex's phone. She was on set, and rushing away to answer a call would be alarming to someone who was on camera, negotiating an emotional minefield. But she texted immediately in reply.

*On set. Alex is on air. What is it?*

A few seconds later the phone lit up in reply. Olivia knew she was communicating with Pam, and knew that she could get her point across with just a few words.


Pam responded quickly.

*Are you OK?*

That was the most important question. They were coming up on a break, so she could sneak over and let Alex know where Olivia was, and that it was big. It was Pam's job to make sure Alex was alright, but Alex's first question would be whether or not the detective was okay. Olivia's reply was immediate, but unenlightening.

*Fine. Don't know when I'll be home. I'll call her ASAP.*

Pam didn't have a chance to talk to Alex, though. Sloane was getting word through her earpiece about the scene unfolding at Jefferson Park, and her producers were letting her know they would cut to footage before the break.

"Breaking news here in Manhattan. Is a serial killer stalking the young women of New York? NYPD has been reluctant to publicly connect the recent spate of murders, but sources tell CNN's New York bureau that they do appear to be the work of one man. Just five miles from our studios, police are on the scene of another murder in Jefferson Park, near the East River. This is the second body to be found in the same location. We'll have more details for you in our 11:00 hour when Garrett Matthews and the NewsNow crew take over. Meanwhile, we'll be back to wrap up our interview with Manhattan DA candidate Alex Cabot, who will no doubt have great interest in that developing story."

As they panned back, the camera caught a brief glimpse of Alex looking off stage at the monitors, showing the same footage the TV audience had just seen on their screens: a working scrime scene, and a bunch of cold, pissed-off looking detectives squinting up into the helicopter's spotlight. One of them was Olivia, standing next to Fin. She was safe, Alex could see that quite clearly. But this case was getting out of control, and she couldn't believe the FBI hadn't stepped in yet. She knew that the 1-6 wouldn't want any help from the feds. But they needed it, she thought.

Her hands were tied, though. Politically, she had to stay far, far away from this, because it involved her wife. It wasn't a position she liked to be in.

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Madeline Taylor was watching the Sloane Jansen show at home. It wasn't at all surprising that the reporter had been pursuing Cabot for an interview, though she had been pleasantly surprised that Alexandra had agreed to it. She'd discussed more-much more-than Madeline had ever thought she would about her past.
Things were going well, and this interview would only help. The discovery of another body, and the concomitant footage, couldn't have been more perfectly timed, she thought, eliciting as it did that expression that perfectly combined professional outrage and personal concern on the candidate's beautiful face. She expected Cabot's poll numbers to climb after she laid herself bare like that on national television.

*Not entirely bare,* she thought. *You won't ever tell the whole story, will you, Alexandra? Some things are too special for*
Alex pressed her thumb to the telephone’s screen to decline an incoming call. It was Dr. Jackson, and Alex had already let two of her calls go to voicemail. She hadn’t listened to the messages--didn’t need to. She knew that the doctor had probably seen or heard about the CNN interview, and was concerned for her.

She had barely even had a chance to talk to Olivia about what had transpired, and had no appetite for rehashing it with the psychologist. She’d get around to it--the can of worms she’d opened would definitely have to be dealt with, but at this point it would probably have to wait until after the election.

“Your numbers are up after that tour-de-force appearance on Sloane’s show, just as we expected,” Joel said. They were sitting in the campaign office on Alex’s lunch hour. She was making a valiant effort to separate the job she was being paid for, from the one she was pursuing, but had no idea if she was having much success.

“As Pam expected,” Alex corrected him. “I didn’t imagine anyone outside this room would give a damn, and you were against the whole thing.”

“I’ll always give credit where credit is due,” he replied. “Pam is a genius for suggesting it, and you were courageous and astute in agreeing to it.”

Pam walked in as he was speaking. “I see I’m not too late for the ass-kissing portion of today’s strategy meeting.”

“What you two call sycophancy, I simply think of as ‘bolstering the candidate’s confidence’, ” Joel laughed. He was a bit of an ass-kisser, truth be told, but he was good-natured and fairly laid-back. Not many people in his line of work could say the same, and that made him a good fit for Alex. She was tightly wound enough, without having her campaign manager constantly ratcheting up her anxiety along with his own. She probably wasn’t the most difficult candidate he’d worked with, but she was surely not the easiest, either.
They spent the better part of an hour discussing details--advertisements, an upcoming debate, and the appearances Alex would be making over the next several days.

Running for office was a mixed bag. There were definitely good days--meeting with interest groups, sharing her vision with various prospective constituencies, even working on her speeches and ads. They were all a part of refining and communicating her platform and, tedium aside, she enjoyed that part of the process.

There were bad days, too, of course: she hated raising money, glad-handing Manhattan's powerful elite, who were more concerned about what she could do for them than what she could do for the city. It was necessary, she knew, but it wasn't second nature to her, despite what many might assume about her background and upbringing. Having wealthy relatives didn't necessarily make one to the manor born. East Amherst wasn't Hell's Kitchen, but it wasn't Park Avenue, either. Buffalo was a long way from Manhattan, and while that was a fact that she hadn't given much thought to for many years, it was frequently on her mind these days as she went from cocktail party to fundraiser to society luncheon, selling herself at every stop.

She wasn't crazy about the nuts and bolts of running a campaign, either, and to that end she had a good team in place to deal with the countless, mind-numbing details. She told them how she wanted to run her campaign, and what she planned to do as DA, and they handled everything else. Her job was to give the speeches, meet the voters, and smile at every opportunity--someone else took care of the rest.

Unfortunately, the rest included every part of her life. Good or bad, one thing all the days had in common was that they were endless and exhausting. She had no downtime now, it seemed, and it was threatening to take its toll. She was fighting a cold and a sore throat, and getting sick was definitely not an option.

Joel and Pam were running the campaign, along with her finance guy, Luke Sheldon. Ellen was running the office, with capable assistance from Kai Franklin, one of the ADAs, as well as the unexpected but invaluable help of Colin’s assistant, Laurie Medlin. Olivia, meanwhile, was doing her best to keep their homelife running with any semblance of normalcy--not an easy task when one member of the family was never home and always preoccupied.

Alex had once read a quote that the royal family must think that the whole world smells of fresh paint. She was beginning to think that the whole world consisted of voters to be won over.

“It does,” Liz had told her. “You are running for citywide office, Alex. Your dry cleaner votes, your doorman votes, the desk sergeant at the 1-6 votes, and the waitress who serves you brunch on
Sunday votes. You have to be on 24/7, all the time.”

“Brunch,” Alex had laughed. “What's brunch?”

“When you're giving a speech on a Sunday and everyone has Hollandaise and salmon on their plates, that's brunch. Sundays, remember?”

“Vaguely,” Alex had sighed. “24/7? Really?”

“Well, Benson's vote is probably in the bag, so assuming you're sleeping at home most nights, she might cut you some slack for those eight hours.”

“Eight? I'm doing this all wrong. I'm lucky to get eight hours in two nights.”

Liz laughed. “I vote too, Cabot, so quit your bitching and get to work, before I start to think you're soft and swing my support over to Lazzaro.”

She was determined not to let anything fall through the cracks at work. Trying to get a new job was no excuse to ignore her current one. And she fully intended to win this race, too. Putting herself through this grind would be stupid if she didn't do everything possible to actually get elected. Alex Cabot the candidate and ADA Cabot were both running at 100%, but the Alex who was Olivia’s wife was pretty scarce these days.

She came home to sleep and change clothes. It was like the old days, before she had a life. Before she had Olivia.

But she had her now, and it made even this madness tolerable. Every morning, no matter how early she left, Olivia was up with coffee and orange juice and a bagel or muffin. She needed the coffee, and that would have been fine with her, but Olivia insisted she wash some food down with the OJ. The conversation repeated itself daily.
"I'm not hungry, Liv," she protested. "It's too early to eat."

"You're up, so it's not too early."

"It's 5:30."

"And you're up," Olivia would counter, and there was usually a brief silence before she gave in and said something like Fine, pass out on the dais, it's not my luncheon you'll ruin.

Finally, one day, she'd had enough, and she didn't give in. "It's too early for breakfast when you leave, and too late for dinner when you get home. You're on the go 18 or more hours, and you give speeches at three meals a day, but you don't eat a bite at any of them. Ellen puts lunch on your desk and says that it's hardly touched. You've lost weight, sweetheart. I can see it. You need caffeine just to keep your eyes open. You need the juice for vitamin C--you can't afford to be sick right now. And you need something in your stomach to absorb all that acid. So, as much as I love the sound of your voice, I'm officially done with this argument. Eat, drink, and be grumpy."

"I love you."

"I know you do, counselor. But I only have you for 20 minutes a day, and if you don't do as I say, we're going to have trouble."

"Yes, ma'am."

There was no more pushback after that. Olivia was right, and Alex was giving her so very little right now. If this is all it took to make her happy, she'd choke that bagel down every single day.

Olivia was doing little more than treading water as the winter dragged on. Work was busy--it was always busy. There is never a shortage of people willing to do harm to one another, never any dearth of reasons, or excuses, or defenses. She worked far too much, saw Alex far too little, and attended campaign events whenever she could, which was far too rarely. Alex might have been
more concerned--might have even minded her absence--if she weren’t so tired and preoccupied herself.

Things were going well, in general. They were closing cases, arresting perps, testifying in court, and meeting Barba at O’Malley’s to toast the system when it worked, when juries voted to convict and judges pronounced sufficiently onerous sentences on the guilty parties.

Liv knew she should feel good--God knows SVU had a history of being a feast-or-famine thing. They had weeks, months even, when it seemed they couldn’t find a perp with a hundred clues, couldn’t get a conviction with a priest, a police officer and the President of the United States as eyewitnesses. Then, once in a while, they’d hit a lucky streak and get calls from the Chief of D’s commending them on their remarkable solve rate.

They were on one of those now, but one man was eluding them. They were only three days out from the most recent victim, and so there were fresh leads and hot tips and new people to talk to. Nonetheless, they weren’t getting anywhere.

It isn’t new people you need to talk to, Benson, she thought. It’s one person, someone you’ve already looked at and didn’t suspect. Or someone you never even found.

She knew there had to be one name that would come up again, that would tie back to an earlier case. That’s how it always happened. Computers and databases were good--she wasn’t a Luddite who eschewed modern investigative tools--but in her heart, she knew this one would come down to police work, asking questions, making connections where none were obvious.

There was an answer out there, a killer out there. He’d killed 9 people now, in two cities, and he was going to be found. She had to believe that. He wasn’t a genius, or a mastermind, or Jack the Ripper, some mystery man who’d kill until something made him stop, never to be identified or arrested. No, this guy would make a mistake. They’d find a connection between two of the victims, and once they found that, they’d know what to look for.

A needle in a haystack isn’t all that hard, Nick had said. You just get a big magnet, and take your time. But their magnets weren’t working. So maybe it wasn’t a needle they were looking for.

Straw in a haystack, Liv thought. Something so similar that we haven’t even realized it’s there. Something we might not notice if we were holding it in our hands. Would they even recognize their guy if they had stood eye to eye with him? The thought exhausted and terrified her.
Dev Patel had never worked on a political campaign before. Though it was a natural place for a young man of his interests and ambitions to be, he’d never before found it an avenue appealing enough to pursue. Technically, he supposed, he wasn’t pursuing it now. After all, it wasn’t Dev Patel who was working for David Reilly’s DA campaign—he was on leave from Lowe, Gelvin & Lowe for a few weeks to attend to the business of his late father in California. It was Shandar Singh who spent every day at Reilly’s headquarters, doing every menial task he could imagine.

This is beneath me, he’d thought. He was nothing more than a lackey, and the worst part was, he was lackeying for the campaign’s PR guy, not even for Reilly himself. He owed this latest indignity to none other than Madeline Taylor, and he had let her know all about it during one of their sporadic phone calls.

This is stupid, he’d protested. I never even see the guy. I don’t know how you expect me to find anything out about him this way.

Deval, don’t be so shortsighted. You don’t need to see someone to learn more about him, do you? she chided.

There has to be a better way. I spend my days making photocopies and taking messages. The most exciting thing I’ve done is to copyedit a press release, and that was only because no-one else was in the office to do it.

I called in a few favors to make this happen, and I assure you it is the best way, she said. The kind of information we need won’t be found in a press release or a stump speech, my dear. It will be found in a file folder, or a letter, or an e-mail, or on a hastily scrawled Post-It note. It will be something you overhear when everyone around you believes you’re so insignificant that they carry on a conversation as if you weren’t even there. You are exactly where you need to be.

He felt sure she was barking up the wrong tree. I’ve read hundreds of emails, combed through
every document I can find...this guy is as pure as the driven snow.

Everyone has secrets, dear boy. Everyone, without exception, is hiding something. Some of those secrets are worse than others. Lives could be ruined.

I’m telling you, there’s nothing here to find.

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line.

If there’s nothing to be found, Deval, then something will have to be made, won’t it? The election is in less than five weeks. Don’t disappoint me.

Her words were intended as a warning, a barely concealed threat. That was how Madeline operated. Little was said, and much was implied.

Implied isn’t very far from implicated, he thought. And you had better not leave even a single loose end, my friend, or she will most certainly implicate you.

She had gone to a lot of trouble to turn Dev Patel into Shand Singh, and to manufacture the right sort of resume and pull the right sort of strings to find a campaign job for him. The youngest son of a boarding-school classmate. That was the story, and Dev had to make it work. It was never far from his mind that he could run into someone he knew, and that idea was both frightening and exhilarating. He almost wanted a chance to see if he’d be recognized. Shandar was younger than Dev’s true age, so he’d shaved his beard, skipped his regular haircut, hung up his conservative suits for more casual clothes with trimmer tailoring. Even his speech patterns were changed. He was sure that no one on the campaign thought he was a day over 25.

It was only 7 years, but it made a world of difference in how people treated him, he’d discovered. They talked above and around him, as if he couldn’t possibly understand. They ignored his presence most of the time, and only noted his absence when it coincided with some petty errand or task they needed him for.

He played dumb. That was the hardest part, but also the most important. He knew he wouldn’t be fired—he was there as a favor to a friend of a friend of a friend, after all. But playing dumb meant they gave him half as much to do and twice as long to do it, and those extra hours were coming in very handy. He’d told Madeline the truth the week before--this guy was squeaky clean. He knew
just from rumors that he’d have had an easier time finding dirt on Lazzarro. But Madeline insisted it had to be Reilly, and his opinion wasn’t welcome.

So, the guileless Shandar Singh spent his days planting seeds, watering the plants that sprouted, and planning for a harvest. Time was short. He appeared to everyone else in the campaign office to be an entitled dolt who moved at a glacial pace. It was hard for a man as smart as Dev Patel to act so stupid, and to seem so slow, when in reality he wasn’t wasting a single second.

David Reilly was polling neck-and-neck with Cabot. He was an ideal candidate: a handsome, self-made man who grew up in Bed-Stuy and got his JD at NYU Law. His work ethic had impressed a number of the city’s power brokers, and his beautiful wife and young daughters smiled happily by his side at every opportunity. In most parts of the country, an openly gay, ball-busting feminist career woman like Cabot wouldn’t stand a chance against him, but in New York she appealed to a huge swath of the electorate.

She had to win. That’s what Madeline had told him. Not a close second, Deval. Not a hard-fought loss or any of that nonsense. Alexandra must be the next District Attorney for New York County. Do you understand?

He did understand. The specifics still weren’t readily apparent to him, but it was obvious that Madeline needed to have Cabot in office, that it would make her somehow more vulnerable to whatever information Madeline had or plans she was concocting. And if Patel were being honest with himself, his own motivations were twofold. He was in league with Taylor now, and he had no doubt that she would ruin him if it would help her in any way. But he hated Alex Cabot, too. He still wanted to see her get her comeuppance. Helping to ruin her career would satisfy his desires. Her complete public humiliation would be a dream come true. He didn’t know how ensuring that she achieved her goals would result in her undoing, but he had to trust Madeline. He had no choice, really.

Exposing the skeletons in a man’s closet in time to force him out of such a short race would be difficult and of itself. Putting skeletons where they didn’t exist was an altogether different challenge. He was up to the task. The election was just three weeks away, but he had his a plan, and the wheels were in motion. Madeline knew little enough to maintain plausible deniability, Shandar Singh would appear blameless, and David Reilly wouldn’t know what hit him.

As for Dev himself? Well, he didn’t even exist as far as Reilly’s campaign was concerned. He was still the invisible man, and maybe that would turn out to be ok, for a while longer anyway.
The Patrolmen’s Benevolent Association had given Alex their endorsement, and they had invited her to be their guest at their annual Finest of the Finest awards luncheon on the last Friday of the month, an unexpectedly sunny and warm day that carried with it tantalizing suggestions of the coming spring.

She wasn’t giving her usual speech--this occasion was about honoring 36 NYPD officers who had shown exceptional heroism and bravery in the line of duty. She was honored to be invited, and would be saying only a few words of thanks for the union’s trust and support, while presenting one of the awards to an officer from the 5th Precinct, who had been shot while returning fire the day Jack Hammond was killed. Hogan Place was in the 5th, and Alex was happy to carry the thanks of everyone at the DA’s office for the dedicated service of the men and women who worked in the oldest precinct house in Manhattan.

Olivia was determined to accompany Alex. It was hard for her to leave her work for too many events, and on her all-too-infrequent days off, Alex wouldn’t always allow her to spend that precious free time at yet another breakfast, or speech, or hand-shaking appearance. This one was important to both of them, though, and Alex had a huge smile on her face when Olivia came downstairs that morning in her dress uniform, cap and gloves in hand.

“Sergeant Benson, do you really think it’s fair for you to upstage three dozen officers who are about to experience their finest hour?”

“Upstage them?” Olivia wasn’t being disingenuous. She felt comfortable with her appearance, and her body. She’d felt like an awkward teenager for several years into her 20s, but she’d grown into her looks, and she’d endured more than enough stares and comments to realize that others found her attractive, as well. Alex found her beautiful--she knew it in her heart, and never doubted it for a moment, and so as far as she was concerned, nothing else mattered. She didn’t spend a lot of time thinking about how she looked, and didn’t expect others to, either.

Alex walked across the room and smoothed the lapels of the dress blouse, a navy blue so dark it looked black. She carefully grabbed hold of the garment and pulled Olivia toward her for a slow, deep kiss before answering.
“Upstage them, Detective. Don’t be coy with me. You look good enough to eat. Who needs a luncheon?”

“Heroes need luncheons, Alex,” Olivia whispered between kisses. “Sullivan, in particular, who may have helped to save your life.”

“Oh, I have no doubt that he did. But you, baby...you make that life worth living.” Alex was practically purring, and Olivia was taken aback. Two exhausting jobs sandwiched around a political campaign had not left them very much time to spend together, and even less energy. Their bond was strong, and their relationship wasn’t suffering because of it, but having Alex this close--this obviously aroused--reminded Olivia how very much she’d missed it.

“I’m flattered, Mrs. Me. We need to find some time to crawl in bed and remember what having a life is like.”

Alex stepped back abruptly. “We have time now, and we don’t need a bed,” she said in a low voice. “Come here and remind me why I married you.”

“How much time do we have?” Olivia asked. By her calculations they should be walking out the door in less than 15 minutes.

“Enough,” Alex said firmly. “I’ve streamlined things. You don’t need to take off a thing, and I’m not wearing any panties.”

“Oh, God,” Olivia groaned, and stepped forward, pressing their bodies together against the nearby counter. Her mouth went immediately to the slender neck that she adored, and her hands dropped down to squeeze Alex’s ass. She whispered as she licked and nipped at the fair skin that smelled of Dries van Noten, a scent at once alluringly exotic and achingly familiar. Now wasn’t the time to leave a mark. “You were expecting me, expecting this.”

“Well, I knew you’d wear this uniform. I knew you’d be ready early--you’re always so punctual.”

“What if I’d said no?” Olivia whispered, working the slim skirt up over Alex’s hips.
“I had a trump card. If you weren’t willing, I’d have simply told you we could wait until later.”

“That’s not as persuasive as I’d have expected, Counselor.” Her knees buckled ever so slightly as the detective’s roaming fingers found her wet folds, but she recovered quickly and spread her legs to allow easier access.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Alex said. “I’d have also told you that while we were waiting until later, I’d be going to that luncheon without my panties. You could never let that happen, Liv.”

“You always have a trick up your sleeve, playing on my chivalrous nature and protective instincts.” She marveled at how wet Alex got for her. She easily slipped two fingers inside, and sighed as she felt the smooth muscles envelop her. Alex’s hand tightened in Liv’s hair, tugging and tangling there.

“Olivia,” Alex gasped as a third finger found its way inside her.

“Yes, baby?” The words were nearly unintelligible, uttered as they were against warm skin between frantic kisses.

Alex used her grip on the short, dark hair to pull Liv’s head back so they were face to face before she spoke. “Your hand feels good. Your mouth will feel even better.”

Olivia needed no further incentive. She sunk to her knees and ran her hands quickly up the back of Alex’s thighs, cupping her ass and dipping her tongue immediately into the warm heat that felt like home.

It had been too long, for both of them. Liv lavished her attention on Alex hungrily, and it was greedily accepted. In just a few minutes, a warm tongue brought Alex to an explosive orgasm, with Liv supporting her as her legs turned to jelly with the tremors that rolled through her body.

After Alex’s heart rate slowed and her breathing returned to normal, Olivia reached in the pocket of her uniform blouse and retrieved a small bundle of silk, handing it over.

“What are these?”
“Panties,” Olivia replied. “You’re not going to this luncheon without them.”

“Why on earth do you have my lingerie in your pocket and a been there, done you look on your face, Benson?”

“You weren’t the only one who was expecting this,” Liv grinned. “I’m a detective, honey. I saw you get dressed. I knew what you wanted. I’m just saving you a trip back upstairs.”

Alex could only smile as she returned the kiss. Later, during her brief remarks in honor of Officer Sullivan, no one but the two of them knew it was the smallest of smiles from the uniformed detective that caused the candidate to blush slightly, and uncharacteristically consult her notes when she briefly lost her place.

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**Tuesday, March 4, 2014**

**10:15 a.m.**

Alex was enjoying a rare uninterrupted hour in her office, doing the work of an ADA and hoping to finish a few things before one or another of her campaign duties demanded her attention again. She was making headway on a case review when her cell phone rang with a call from Olivia.

“Hi there, honey,” Alex answered. “How are you?”

“Better now. Getting you to answer your own phone is a rare event indeed these days. I was half-expecting to talk to Pam or Joel.”

Alex laughed, a deep laugh that only Olivia could elicit. “Well, darling, I could certainly arrange that, if you like. I’m sure one or the other of them will show up before I know it. Shall I have them call you?”
“Absolutely not,” Liv replied. “You’re the only one I want to talk to. I’m pleasantly surprised, emphasis on pleasantly.”

“Well, talk to me before some crisis surfaces here or there to claim our attention.”

As if on cue, Alex’s office door opened and Ellen walked in, heading straight for the closed doors hiding the TV amongst the bookshelves. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Cabot. Ms. Thompson said you need to see this.”

Liv could hear the conversation. “Do you need to go, baby?”

“No, Liv, stay with me. I’m not sure what the news is.”

“Reilly is withdrawing from the race,” Ellen supplied as she tuned the TV to NY1 for a hastily arranged press conference.

“No,” Alex said. “That makes no sense. There’s lots of time--anything could happen. Why?”

“That’s all I know.”

“Liv, Reilly is quitting the race,” Alex relayed. “Let me find out more and I’ll call you back.”

The two of them sat watching as the press conference began. Pam was on the office phone, while Joel was on Alex’s cell phone. She had no idea where they were--she was rarely without one or both of them these days--or why they weren’t conferenced in together on one call.

Reilly took the podium after only a moment or two, and his beautiful family was conspicuously absent. He was visibly upset, but whatever had prompted his unexpected withdrawal was obviously something he wasn’t willing to disclose yet. It was obviously quite serious, though.
“I’ve been informed that I’m being investigated on federal charges that are both undeniably serious and completely unfounded. I am completely innocent of any wrongdoing, and I am confident that a thorough and unbiased investigation will bear that out. However, I feel that I must devote my full attention to clearing my name of these scurrilous accusations, and in order to do that I must withdraw from the race for District Attorney, effective immediately. I apologize to my supporters and staff, and I assure you that I don’t make this decision lightly or unadvisedly. I hope to continue serving the people of this city…”

Alex had tuned out because what Pam was telling her was even more shocking than what Reilly was saying on TV.

“No.” It was all Alex could say. What she was hearing was unimaginably ridiculous.

“Child pornography, Alex. A hard drive full of it at campaign headquarters, on a computer he uses regularly.”

“But Pam, you know how our office is. Anyone could be using that computer, anytime. How often is Reilly even in the office? This makes zero sense. I know this man. I think he’d be in over his head as the DA, but he’s a good guy. This isn’t him.”

“There was also an email account of his that had some of the same images. I guess times and dates of the images being saved matched up to his email. A staffer reported the cache of photos on the computer to NYPD, and then the FBI started digging and found the email account. There may be more. The charges will be announced later today. He withdrew just so he wouldn’t have to answer questions about it in the press conference. Or so he thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Pam continued, “I got my info from a friend at the Post, and they have a reporter there. He’s going to get questions. Nothing this juicy stays a secret for long in this city. He should have known.”

Alex hung up the phone, and didn’t know what to say. This was almost beyond comprehension. She’d known David Reilly for 15 years. Their relationship wasn’t terribly close, but you’d be hard pressed to find anyone to say a bad word about him. She called Olivia back and relayed the news.

“You never know, baby,” Olivia said. “People seem like one thing, and turn out to be another. You
know that. Not all criminals and perverts look like they were ordered up by central casting.”

“Of course,” Alex agreed. “But this...I don’t know, Liv. I can’t say why, but something just seems off about this.”

“I know it's shocking, but you should be happy,” Liv teased. “Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, sweetheart.”

“I suppose so...” Alex trailed off, and then ended the conversation shortly thereafter. She was alone in her office for a while, and though she knew she should use the time to get some more work done, she couldn’t seem to focus. It was an unexpected stroke of luck, having one of her two opponents suddenly on the sidelines. But it seemed too good to be true, and she was having trouble putting the pieces together in any way that formed a complete, realistic picture.
Chapter 16

-16-

Thursday, March 13, 2014

5:20 p.m.

Liz had warned her that short elections could be brutal, and she’d been right. Less than two weeks remained before votes were to be cast, and Alex was exhausted as she sat in yet another meeting with her campaign finance director. They were reviewing donor lists, discussing the funds already committed to advertising and the like, and finalizing additional expenditures as the campaign entered crunch time.

The afternoon was wearing on and, since an event she’d had scheduled was canceled due to an HVAC failure in the venue, she’d harbored secret hopes of an evening at home with Liv and some Chinese takeout. She wasn’t the sort to look over her shoulder on the last lap, but she was polling way ahead of Lazzarro, and Reilly’s recent withdrawal had simplified the picture. Nevertheless, the home stretch of this campaign would be relentless and demanding, and if she won, her free time would soon be severely curtailed. Her impatience was obvious as she looked up over the top of the papers in her hand. “Luke, are we nearly done here?”

The money man laughed. “Funny,” he said.

“What is?” Alex asked. She was getting a bit testy, not just tired and in need of a tiny bit of R-and-R, but utterly exhausted and starting to wonder if she even wanted to be the DA.

“Never pegged you for someone who’d get tired of money,” Luke explained. He was young and energetic—a 32-year-old go-getter who’d worked wonders, and without whom Alex knew she’d never have been elected. She liked him, and would offer him a position on her executive staff if she won. But she was well beyond the reach of his jokes right now as she reached the end of the long list.

“I’m not tired of money,” she sighed. “I am, however, incredibly tired of talking about it.”
“Well, we're almost done,” he allowed. “We've just got to...”

“What the hell is this?” Alex interrupted.

“What?” He waited, but there was no answer as Alex scrutinized the donor summaries in her hand. “What the hell is what, Alex?”

She looked up, eyes blazing. “This,” she hissed as she flipped the document across the table, then stood and jabbed her finger at the third name from the top of the last page. It was quite legible.

“Taylor, Madeline K.,” he said.

“I can read, Luke. What the hell is this name doing on here?”

He eyed her cautiously. The obvious answer—the true answer: that Taylor, Madeline K. was a more-than-generous donor—seemed like the wrong thing to say just now. He'd wait her out, because he didn't know who Taylor was or what had provoked the ire of the soon-to-be DA.

Finally, after removing her hand and walking away from the table, she took a position across the room by the window and spoke again. Her voice was quieter, but no less tense. “I'm sorry. Obviously, Ms. Taylor donated fifty thousand dollars to my campaign.”

“Actually, $48,239.”

“The maximum allowed.”

“Yes,” Luke confirmed. “Precisely the maximum, to the penny.”

“When was this received?”

“Two weeks ago,” he replied, glancing at the report.
“Before or after Reilly withdrew?”

“Three days before.”

The picture was coming into focus very quickly. “Why am I only now finding out about this? Who was glad-handing this woman as a potential donor without my authorization?”

“No one, actually,” Luke insisted. “The contribution came in the mail. I thought Suzanne would have shared that with you.”

“Well, she didn't,” Alex said. “And I don't even have time to engage in a game of finger-pointing with you right now. You are the campaign finance director. Not Suzanne. You.”

“Alex, I had no...”

“I don't want to hear it, Luke. This is a serious problem. That check should have been returned uncashed.” Her words were firm, but her heart wasn't in it. This wasn't the fiery Alex Cabot he'd come to know—her attention was already elsewhere.

“Well, we won't be using it,” he continued. “With Reilly out of the race, we won't run all the ads we'd planned in the last couple of weeks. Those funds will be proportionally returned in donor remittances when we close out the accounts after the election.”

“Not proportionally, Luke. Entirely. Return the entire goddamn forty-eight thousand and change. It has to go back. And even that probably won't make a damn bit of difference.”

“Fine, Alex, I'll make sure it happens. Next month when...”

“In the morning, when the bank opens. First thing,” she ordered. Her volume was waning as her fury grew.

“Oh, sure, but I don't understand what's going on here.” He stared at her like she had three heads. Cabot was a demanding boss, but usually level-headed and remarkably even-tempered. The pacing, angry person in front of him was cryptic and irrational.
She stopped moving long enough to fix him with a withering stare. “You don't get paid to understand this. Just make sure that check is cut and messengered back to Ms. Taylor by lunchtime tomorrow.” She grabbed her bag and left the room without another word.

By the time she'd reached her car, her plans for a quiet evening were well and truly shattered. Her phone showed a missed call from Olivia, and a text that was notable for its brevity:

Caught a case. Don’t wait dinner.

Must be something especially complicated—those messages usually came with at least a perfunctory apology. Alex made every effort to calm herself in the garage. Once she was safely in her car with the doors locked, she took several deep breaths, and texted Olivia back.

Love you. Be safe.

She pulled out in traffic, determined to head home as planned. Maybe a hot bath and a drink while she waited for dinner to be delivered. But she should have known that a Friday rush hour wouldn't be a calming influence. She was spending far more time idling than accelerating, and her tapping on the steering wheel grew faster and louder. Time to think was not what she needed right now. It was, in fact, the very last thing she needed. But here she sat.

And before she knew it, she'd turned off of Lafayette and headed toward Lexington.

Lenox Hill.

Madeline's apartment.
Nearly an hour later, having been granted immediate passage by the liveried doorman, she was disembarking the elevator on the 8th floor of the Upper East Side building she'd remembered all too well. Madeline answered the door before she could knock.

“To what good fortune do I owe the pleasure of a visit from Alexandra Cabot? Or is it Mrs. Benson now?”

“Cut the crap, Madeline. May I come in?”

“Of course you can, darling.” Alex brushed past her without speaking and walked into a beautiful but sterile living room. She felt Madeline enter the room behind her, and turned as she heard the familiar voice, at once irritatively formal and insinuatingly familiar. “I've so very many things to congratulate you on. The new DA, and a newlywed to boot.”

“About that.” Alex was curt. “I got your wedding gift...”

“I got your thank you note,” Madeline interrupted, her voice dripping with insincerity. “It was lovely, but something was missing. I thought it was customary for both brides to sign.”

“That seemed somehow inappropriate.”

“Why? Surely you've fucked other people who gave you a wedding gift.”

“Please don't.” Alex knew the vulgar language, so uncharacteristic of Madeline, was being deployed to unnerve her.
“You always were so very provincial,” Madeline chided. “So, tell me...to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit from the next District Attorney?”

“You know exactly why I'm here, Madeline.”

“Well, I can't say for sure that I do. Is it the generous campaign donation, or the perfectly timed exit of Mr. Reilly from the race?”

“I knew it,” Alex said, shaking her head not in disbelief but in resignation. “Believe it or not, the thought crossed my mind, but I dismissed it, until I saw your name on the donor list this afternoon. Your timing is masterful, as always.”

“Why, Alexandra, I'm hurt. I donated to your campaign because you were clearly the most qualified candidate.”

“Is that why you forced Reilly out of the race, as well?” Alex asked. “How did you do it? What dirt did you have on him?”

“Don't even worry your gorgeous head over that. I saw an obstacle, and I removed it from your path. It's the very least of what I would happily do for you.”

“He wasn't polling anywhere near me. He was not my worry.”

“That's where you're wrong. He was your real concern. I knew you could easily handle Lazzarro, but Reilly was going to be a problem. Oh, he was unlikely to have beaten you, I'll concede that fact. But he knew it, too, and he wasn't going quietly. Word was that he felt he'd have better luck against Lazzarro as an incumbent in the regular election than he would against you, and I'm certain he was correct. He was only remaining in the race to split votes to the benefit of your mutual opponent. I couldn't let that happen, darling.”

“Don't call me darling,” Alex was becoming loud, and she didn't like it. She was recognizing old patterns, just in the way she seized on the last, least important thing Madeline said, rather than the critical words that had come before the unwelcome endearment. She paused, calmed herself, and continued. “With all due respect, Madeline, I didn't want or need your help with...”

Madeline cut her off. “With all due respect, Alexandra, you've never known what you wanted or
what you needed. I do know. And I was uniquely positioned to give it to you. Reilly was the gift. The check was just a tangible vote of confidence. Though I have to admit, I was surprised to see that you'd cashed it. I assumed you'd view it as a symbolic donation, much like the pittance I'm sure your detective contributed, and simply have it framed on your desk.”

“Fuck you, Madeline. You don't know the first thing about it, or about me.” She was about to leave, but what she heard next made her blood run cold.

“I know far more than the first thing about you, darling. I know many things, very interesting things, in fact,” she said. “Speaking of your wife, what does she think about that side of you?”

“What she thinks is none of your business. Don’t even mention her.”

The reply confirmed what Madeline had known would be true. “She doesn’t know.” Her smile was

“She knows everything that matters. You and I are strangers to one another. Our relationship, if one could call it that, was a long time ago, and I wasn’t even myself then.”

“That is one thing we disagree about. I believe that I do know the real you. I may be the only person who does, in fact. In our darkest hour, our true nature is revealed. You needed me then, and I think you need me now.”

“I would never go back to that life, or to you.” Alex was furious.

“Don’t you see, though? You already have come back to me. Granted, I had to create the right conditions to help you find your way home. You would never have returned without a little push, I realize--my Alexandra is far too proud to admit a mistake or acknowledge a need. And I know it will take some time for you to make peace with the fact that this is where you belong. I’ve put all the pieces in place, given you the proper incentive, and I know once you give it a chance, you’ll stop fighting. I’m very patient, my love. I can wait for you.”

“You’ll be waiting forever, Madeline. I can admit my mistakes, but I have no intention of repeating them.”

Madeline laughed, an insidious sound not unlike that of a rattlesnake shedding its skin. “Oh, I’m not your mistake, darling. Leaving me was your mistake.” She walked closer to Alex, who found
herself rooted to the spot she’d occupied since she walked in the door: knees locked, spine rigid, two fingers of her left hand pressing firmly against the top of the enormous circular table that dominated the ornate foyer. She knew without looking that her fingers would leave prints, smudges created by the oil of her skin, and that Madeline would clean them the moment she left. And she wanted badly to leave, but despite a burning desire to run and never look back, she couldn’t seem to force herself to move.

In just a few steps, Madeline had insinuated herself into Alex’s space, and stopped when they were side by side, less than an inch separating Alex’s right shoulder from Madeline’s own. She ran her index finger up Alex’s right hand and along her arm as she stepped around the stock-still form of the ADA. Her hand slithered like a snake, eventually reaching Alex’s shoulder.

Alex fought an almost overwhelming urge to shudder when Madeline leaned over, her chin brushing the fabric of the coat, her breath warm in the younger woman’s ear.

“I forgive you, Alexandra. Maybe you need to hear that. I’m sorry I’ve been remiss in telling you,” she said. Her voice was low and far too familiar. “It took me a while to see what was going on. You left me like a little bird must leave its nest. You had to prove something to yourself--I understand that now. Your headstrong nature is one of the many things I love about you, and that makes it all the more satisfying to bring you to heel. Not just anyone can control you, my beautiful girl. You need someone strong, don’t you?”

She paused, not expecting an answer, but wanting her words to sink in. They were definitely having an effect--that much was apparent.

“Breathe, Alexandra,” she whispered, her lips less than an inch from the diamond studs in the delicate earlobes.

The subsequent sharp intake of breath was audible. Alex hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath, and was even more startled to have responded so palpably to Madeline’s presence, and so readily to her command. She still didn’t move, or turn to look at her aggressor.

“I know what you need, darling, all of those things of which you’re so needlessly ashamed. I know the secrets you keep. The things I do to you aren’t the sort of thing you’d brag about to your friends--that’s something I realized long ago--but you need me. You’ve missed me. I am the only person who understands you. I am your safe place, Alexandra. I am your home.”

“You’re not,” Alex whispered. “You’re none of those things. No.”
“I’m all of those things, and I’m more. Soon, my darling, I’ll be your everything. I’ve made it possible for your to come back to me. You might even say that I’ve made it impossible for you not to. I know too much.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Alex said. She turned now, finding herself just inches from Madeline’s face, and was instantly unnerved.

“Wouldn’t I?”

“No, you won’t,” Alex said again. “Airing my dirty laundry for the world means airing your own, and you won’t do that.”

“Well, you should remember that you and I have very different ideas of what dirty laundry is. I’m not embarrassed by the passion we shared,” Madeline said. She turned abruptly and walked away from Alex, stopping in the entryway to the dining room. “However, you are correct. I won’t do that, though not for the reasons you suspect. I’m no fool, Alexandra. It’s the 21st century. No one at the Times will even return my call to find out more about how the beautiful new DA likes to be tied up, beaten and humiliated. So, no, I won’t use your sexual proclivities or your love of a power exchange to keep you in line at Hogan Place. I’ll accomplish that goal with the story of how David Reilly was forced out of the DA’s race just two weeks before the election.”

“Why were you out to get him? That’s the part I don’t get.”

“Alexandra, I wasn't using you to get to Reilly. I was using him to get to you, to bring you back where you belong. He was just the means, my darling. You are the end.”

“You’ve ruined a man’s career. His whole life. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Well, as things would look now, you ruined his career,” Madeline laughed. “I don’t plan to have to tell that story, but if I do, I suspect you’ll play a much bigger role in the narrative than you might imagine.”

“Bigger role? I had no role at all, and you know it.”
“Of course I do. But evidence to the contrary could come out, and I think you’d be hard-pressed to refute it.”

“I'm not a pawn in your game, Madeline.”

“No, you're absolutely right about that. You're not the pawn. Reilly was a pawn. Others will be put in harm's way, too. But you're the King, darling. Beautiful, integral, but essentially a figurehead now.”

“What do you want?”

“Your silence, I suppose,” Madeline mused. “Your complicity. But most importantly, I want you. I want you to admit that you need me. I can give you something that no one else can, Alexandra. Something that you won’t even acknowledge that you want.”

“I don’t want anything you have.”

“Don’t be so hasty. Think back on our time together. You came to me lost and broken, darling, and I put you back together. Sometimes the medicine works so well, you think you no longer need it. But when the pressure is on and the walls start closing in, I’m always here. You can always come back to me. I needed to remind you of that. And there’s no rush, darling.”

“I won't do this. You've lost your mind. It's like negotiating with a terrorist. No matter what I give—what I agree to—you'll want more. And the moment I displease you, you'll tell every secret you know to every person who will listen. I know you. You'd relish the chance to humiliate me.”

“Unlike you, I don't see anything remotely humiliating in our relationship. Going public about how we might occasionally spend our time isn't in my best interest, or yours.”

Madeline smirked at the relief that was visible on Alex’s fine features.

“Don't misunderstand me, Alexandra. I do intend to keep you in line. But there are far more effective—and more private—ways to do that. Your detective—forgive me, it's Sergeant Benson these days, isn't it?—something tells me that her reaction to our playtime won't be as blasé as that of the average Manhattan voter.”
“That is ancient history, Madeline, an interlude that I’d just as soon forget about,” Alex said. “Olivia won’t have a reaction because there’s nothing to react to, and there won’t be anything.”

She strode quickly to the door, Her long black coat whipped around her legs like a cyclone, flashes of red silk lining against her pale, stocking-clad legs. Her perfume lingered behind her.

Once the elevator began to descend, Alex struggled for air, the composure she’d fought so desperately to maintain having deserted her the moment the mechanical doors closed.

Back in the apartment, Madeline stepped into the space Alex had vacated, a smile playing at her lips as she inhaled the faint scent of bergamot and saffron, laced with fear and anger.

*God, she’d missed that smell.*
Chapter 18

-18-

Tuesday, March 25, 2014

Despite feeling like she was running on fumes, Alex had managed to reach election day outwardly unscathed. She'd finally taken a week of paid leave from her office to concentrate full-time on the campaign in its final days, but she was still exhausted and emotionally strung out. She wasn't sleeping much, and what little she got was restless and plagued by dreams of a shadow with no form, and of endless night.

She and Olivia had left the apartment at 9 am, walking the block or so over to their polling place in a high-rise building populated primarily by NYU students. A few cameras snapped them leaving 250 Mercer, and then again before and after they cast their ballots.

Olivia whispered in her ear as the shutters clicked. “They’d go stand in the little booth with you if they could, all three of them.” The laughter playing at the corner of Alex’s mouth made her smile seem infinitely more radiant for its authenticity.

The handful of photographers were by no means a regular fixture in their normal routine--if one could find any similarities between campaigning and a normal routine--but it had still taken some getting used to. Pam had told them when the candidate and her wife would be leaving the house to vote, and in exchange they’d agreed to leave the pair alone for the remainder of the day, or at least until it was time for a victory speech, or concessionary remarks.

Having finished their last real campaign appearance, they wandered toward home, taking the long way to enjoy the unseasonably warm weather. They had no plans for the day. It had been ages since they'd had a day to themselves, and would probably be even longer until they had one again. They were determined to just relax and spend time together.

When they got back to their building, they stopped in at the coffee shop next door. Alex grabbed a small table by the window, waiting for Olivia to get their drinks from the counter. People hurried by, and she could people-watch for hours. Then, just the slightest glimpse of a woman across the street knotted up her stomach. Her heart raced as she stared at the back of the woman's head, simultaneously willing her to turn around and dreading the moment she did. The same ash-blonde hair. The same tall, slender body. A delivery truck at the corner honked at someone, and the woman abruptly whirled to face the street. Alex finally breathed again when she saw an unfamiliar face.
Much to her relief, there had been no contact since her visit to Madeline's apartment. Had she had any opportunity to think, she might have regarded it as an ominous silence, but the stretch run of the campaign had left no time for worry or conjecture. A moment of downtime and a passing stranger had brought it all rushing in.

Madeline's threats were very real, and Alex knew it. She wasn't the sort of woman who talked just to hear herself. She had a certain economy about her, not wasting a thought, a word or a movement. She would certainly never squander an opportunity to get what she wanted, or what she felt she deserved. She had Alex in her sights, and that meant there would be a day of reckoning at some point.

Alex wasn't sure exactly what Madeline really wanted, or precisely how she would accomplish her goals, but she was certain that something was now started, and the ending wasn't readily apparent to her. She didn't doubt that whatever it was would cost her dearly.

Olivia returned with two coffees, joining her at the table, and Alex smiled at her, grateful for a happy diversion from the unsettling disquiet she felt.

“Thank you, sweetie.” She wrapped her long fingers around the mug, shrugging off the inexplicable chill she felt even as sunlight poured in the window.

“You're welcome. It's not everyday I get to buy the DA a cup of coffee.”

“I'm not the DA yet, Liv.”

“Yet,” Olivia allowed, then looked at her watch. “For another eight hours or so, I guess, you can say that. But I have to be honest with you. At this point, I'm pretty sure it's a done deal, baby. You're going to win whether you like it or not.”

That statement had an unintended ring of truth to it. Alex had made her peace with the decision to run, and was excited about the possibility of winning. Or, she had been, until the moment she had seen Madeline's name on that donor list. Sitting here now, she found herself wishing she would lose, though she had no idea if that would make a difference. You should have just quit the race that day, she thought. You might have at least spared yourself the public humiliation.

“Alex?” Olivia looked concerned. “Are you okay?”
“Yes, I'm sorry, Liv. My thoughts just wandered a minute.”

“Anything wrong?”

“No, of course not. Just thinking about what I should wear tonight,” Alex lied. “I'll have to give a speech either way, I suppose.”

“I know you're not one to count your chickens before they hatch, Cabot, so I'm going to play along here,” Olivia teased. “Yes, you will have to give a speech tonight. Any thoughts as to what you'll say?”

“I haven't really given it a lot of thought. Pam might have some notes.”

“Yeah, Pam might have some notes, and you might win, and the sun might rise in the east tomorrow,” Olivia laughed. “You and I both know that Pam is writing a victory speech right now, and the only way she isn't doing that is if she's already done it. So, what time will she email it over for you to look at it?”

Olivia's smile was so warm, and her laughter so contagious, that Alex couldn't help but join in. Everything else fell away—the exhaustion, the stress, the worry, the creeping sense of dread.

“I'm going to win, aren't I?”

“That's my girl,” Olivia said. “Yes, Alex, you are going to win. What you've wanted for so long is finally happening. How does it feel?”

“If I can forget about all the bullshit, it feels pretty damn good.”

Olivia leaned over, closing the space between them, and whispered to Alex. “Then come home with me now. I'll make you feel even better.”

“I knew you'd think of a perfect way to spend the day.”
They were home in less than five minutes, and the door had barely closed behind them when Olivia pulled Alex close and kissed her, tongues and hands frantically exploring familiar terrain with the eagerness of new love. There was no hesitation, and very little talk, as clothes were pulled off and discarded on the floor.

Alex pulled away from Olivia only long enough to cross the room to the couch, where she sat down and pulled her wife onto her lap. They stared at one another for a moment, not moving or speaking. They communicated very well, Alex thought. It was what kept them moving forward in the most trying of times, and they were dedicated to saying whatever needed to be said. But right now, Alex couldn't say the words that were on her mind. She knew she'd have to tell Olivia some difficult truths that they might not be able to get past, and one day she would. But today was not that day.

The look they exchanged told the only story that mattered in that moment. Olivia's eyes were full of love and desire, and Alex reached up, cupping her cheek tenderly.

“I love you, Liv,” she said, tracing her thumb along an angular cheekbone. “Don't ever forget that.”

“I never will,” Olivia promised. “I love you, too, honey.”

Those words were like oxygen to a flame. Alex put her hand on the back of Olivia's head, and brought their mouths together forcefully. Deep kisses were only occasionally broken by a sigh or moan, until Alex could wait no longer to lay claim to the rest of the body in front of her. She trailed her mouth down Olivia's neck, licking and nipping at the sweet-smelling skin. She loved having her way like this, Liv enjoying the attention as Alex sucked gently at the thin skin along one collarbone, then the other, using her hands to grasp her wife's firm breasts, kneading and pinching. Liv's back arched, giving Alex more, not sure if she was inviting her or begging her to take it. And Alex could feel the moist heat pooling between Olivia's legs.

She didn't want to wait.

With fluid movements, she put her left arm around the detective's lower back, lowering her mouth to devour a hardened nipple and her right hand moved quickly downward. Olivia was wet, swollen
and ready for the three fingers Alex easily slipped inside. The walls of Olivia's pussy clenched around her as she put her thumb firmly against a very sensitive clit. Her pace was quick, and she encountered only enthusiasm in return. They moved together, Alex thrusting in and out as Olivia lifted up ever so slightly on her knees and then sank down greedily onto the hand filling her up.

This is real, Alex told herself. This is your real life. She concentrated on every sensation, hearing Olivia's gentle grunts and heavy breathing. The taste of Olivia's skin in her mouth, the feeling of the smooth muscles gripping her hand, warm and soft. It was only a few minutes before Olivia said her name, barely a whisper.

Alex barely broke contact with the pebbled skin of the stiff nipple she was sucking, muttering a quiet command that couldn't be ignored.

“Come for me, Liv. You're mine. Do this for me.”

Olivia obliged, feeling a need in Alex that went far beyond the desire to elicit a simple physical release. She came hard, pushed over the edge by Alex's teeth on her nipple. The orgasm was deep, and she called out, louder than normal. They were both covered in a light sheen of sweat, almost glistening as the sun fell across their bodies through the tall windows. Alex didn't move her hand, enjoying the small tremors that continued sporadically for a few minutes.

They kissed gently, and without a word, Olivia stood and made Alex lay down on the couch. She curled up in front of her, and covered their spooning bodies with a blanket from the end of the couch. They slept like that into the early afternoon, a chance that probably wouldn't come around again anytime soon.

Olivia's predictions were eerily accurate, even down to the time. Just before 3:00, Pam had faxed over a victory speech so well-written that even Alex had little to add or change. By 6:30 the local news was calling the election for the ADA.

At 8:15, Alex was in a suite at the Grand Hyatt, taking a congratulatory call from her opponent, as he prepared to make a concession speech across town.
“We'll head down to the ballroom in about 35 minutes,” Pam told her. “NY1 will want to lead off their 9 o'clock hour with a live shot from your victory speech, so we'll have Judge Harriman introduce you, and you'll be speaking by 9:03. The other channels may or may not air it live, but they'll have it for their late news either way.”

“Hold on,” Alex said. “Uncle Bill will introduce me? When was this decided?”

“Well…” Pam trailed off. People who made their living managing the art of communication weren't often rendered speechless, and Olivia watched with interest to see how this would unfold. She knew that Alex would love for Bill to introduce her tonight, but hadn't wanted to ask him for fear that he'd feel obligated. Truth be told, Alex probably also thought planning it might jinx things, though she'd never admit that.

“I thought Liz Donnelly would be here to do the intro.”

“Judge Donnelly is due here any minute, and yes, she was scheduled to introduce you tonight, regardless of the outcome. But your uncle called me a few days ago, and said that he wanted to do it.”

“And where is he?” Alex looked around the suite. Bill had just been there a few minutes earlier, but was nowhere in sight now.

“He stepped out to make a call,” Liv offered.

“I'm sorry, Alex,” Pam said. “I believed this would be okay with you.”

“No, Pam, I'm sorry. I sounded upset, but it's more than okay. It's perfect, in fact. I just didn't want to make him feel like he had to do it because I asked.”

Pam's sigh of relief was audible from where Olivia stood, and she bit off a smirk that threatened to appear on her face. Alex put the fear of God into people, even when she didn't mean to. It happened all the time, but it was very surprising that someone as tough and seasoned as Pam would be as scared as anyone else.

Bill came back in a few minutes later, and Liz joined them about 15 minutes til 9:00. They made their way down in the elevator shortly after her arrival, heading to the Empire State ballroom. They entered the service corridor, waiting there for the minutes to tick by. Alex smoothed down the navy skirt, flattened the jacket's flaps and absentmindedly adjusted the vent at the back of the garment.
She was pacing a bit, standing apart from the small group, and appeared to be lost in her own thoughts. Olivia walked over to her.

“Hey there, gorgeous. Come here often?”

Alex looked up and smiled. “Never before,” she said. “Maybe never again.”

“Giving up on politics so soon?” Olivia put her hand lightly on Alex's waist. “You just got elected. I knew you weren't cut out to be a power player, Cabot.”

“This was stressful, Liv.”

“It was. But you did it, baby. You won.” She leaned over and placed a gentle kiss next to Alex's ear, careful not to smudge any lipstick just before cameras got their first look at the new DA. Her whisper gave Alex a slight chill. “Congratulations. I'm very proud of you.”

Liv leaned back, and straightened the lapels of the impeccably cut suit, pulling the tiniest speck of lint of of the one part of the garment that Alex herself hadn't already fussed over.

“Thank you, Liv. I couldn't have done it without you.”

“You probably could've, but if that speech includes a little credit to your adoring wife, I'll smile and wave like I made a difference.”

“You make all the difference to me, every single day.”

This was unexpectedly emotional for both of them, and Olivia needed to make sure she didn't send Alex out there with tears on her cheeks.

“This baby-blue shirt brings out your eyes, honey. You look good.”

“Welkin.”
“I'm sorry, is that a term of endearment, or have you developed some neurological tic?”


Olivia leaned over and kissed her on the lips. Damn the lipstick.

“Shut up, Cabot. I don't even want to hear about welkin blue. Go make your speech so I can take you home.”

Alex's smile was huge, and she looked happy, all her doubts and worries blessedly absent for the moment.

“You've got it, Benson.”

Bill's speech was wonderful, a catalog of Alex's attributes and accomplishments.

“I couldn't be prouder to introduce a peerless prosecutor, a tireless advocate for this city's most vulnerable citizens, and New York County's newest District Attorney, my niece, Alex Cabot.”

She was blushing when she took the stage, gratified by the applause and overwhelmed by every word of Bill's speech. She could tell he'd written it himself, and she thought maybe—just maybe—if a man as good and decent as Bill Harriman could say such nice things about her, then maybe she had a fighting chance after all.

She delivered her own remarks to a ballroom full of reporters, supporters, friends and coworkers. She didn't talk long, but Pam's words were perfect: appreciative, concise and appropriately confident.

They left the stage and exited through the same service hallway, Alex hanging back a bit to walk with Bill.
“Thank you.”

“Oh, Ace, you don't have to thank me.” He put his arm around her as they walked. “I'm happy to see you get what you want. You deserve it.”

“The speech, though,” she began. “It was so...”

“I had to.” He cut her off. “For your mom, and your dad, and your aunt, and even your brother. You didn't just fulfill your own dreams tonight, Alex. You made a lot of people very, very proud. Me, especially.”

“A glowing introduction like that is a lot to live up to.”

“I know you can do it. You're too good to fail, Ace.”

“I just have one question.”

“You always do,” Bill laughed. “You've been saying that to me since you were six years old. What is it?”

“Pam said you called a few days ago. And I know you wrote all of that on your own. So, nothing was definite. What did the other speech say?”

“Other speech?” He looked puzzled.

“The one you'd have made if I lost.”

“Ah, that one,” he said. “Well, to be honest, I didn't even bother to write it. I started working on this one as soon as you told me you were going to run, and I just knew you'd win.”

“But if I hadn't...”
“If, if, if. You always wonder what if. It's not good for you, Alex. But the answer is simple. Other than the few words about you being the next district attorney, the speech was exactly the same. Every last word. I'm always proud of you.”

He kissed her on the head, just as he always had, and just as her father had done. Alex smiled, her heart overflowing, knowing that no words she could come up with would adequately express how very loved she felt.
“Case?” Kris Mackey's laughter filled the phone line. “There's a case of some sort?”

They hadn't talked for a while, and Olivia was checking in to see if there had been any new developments in St. Louis that might shed light on things. “That bad, huh?”

“Bad doesn’t begin to touch it, Benson. Shit’s rolling here, and you know how it rolls.”


“Well, I’m livin’ in a valley, apparently. I’m getting my ass chewed by the head of Major Case for not making a collar so he can get his face on TV and get interviewed by Dateline as the guy whose squad outsmarted a serial killer and the NYPD. Then I’m getting it on the other side from my captain, who thinks we shouldn’t even be looking. Let New York spend their time and money to find this guy. We’ve got civil war going on here.”

“I’ve lived through scenarios like that,” Benson said. “Being pulled in two directions without the time to do either, much less both. What’s going on in St. Louis that I’m unaware of? I’ve been living in a tunnel lately.”

“An election tunnel. Congratulations to your better half, by the way.”

“Thanks, and before you ask, no, there are no perks that I can figure out to having a wife who is the DA.”

“Give it time, Olivia. She’s not even sworn in yet. I’m sure there will be perks aplenty.”

“I’m not counting on it,” Liv laughed. “And right now, I think I’ve had all the election I can take, so tell me which warring factions are claiming your attention?”
“Let’s see,” Kris said. “If you count the department brass and our esteemed mayor, we’ve got five or six nations in this particular game of Risk.”

“Give me the short version. I was never very good at that game.”

“Sure thing. About a year ago, we had a botched robbery that ended up in a murder: two black kids pulled a hold up in a cell phone store, and ended up shooting both clerks. They were brothers in their early 20s, part of the big Bosnian immigrant population in south city. One brother died, and the other identified the shooters. We’ve got two teenagers up on capital murder charges, and tensions are high between the African-American and Bosnian communities. One bad decision, you know, four lives ruined. So there’s an alderman running for mayor who seems determined to incite a riot everywhere he goes, saying that the police aren’t looking everywhere they ought to look for this serial killer because of the Bosnians’ political clout. He says we’re shrugging off our responsibility to solve the murders by dreaming up a multijurisdictional serial offender.”

“God, I hate that kind of crap,” Olivia sympathized.

“Me, too. My captain, meanwhile, has an axe to grind against the mayor, the chief of police and the entire Major Case task force, so he’s putting me on every penny-ante property crime and simple assault rap he can find to keep me from talking to you, Chael Bauer’s software geeks, and the FBI.”

“How’s he doing that?” Liv asked. “Seems like nearly everyone on that list outranks him.”

“Fuck if I know,” Kris sighed. “But it’s working. Until you emailed me last night, I had no idea you’d been trying to reach me.”

“Well, that’s what I get for doing things the right way and going through official channels, calling the precinct. I won’t make that mistake again. Text messages and email from here on out,” Olivia promised. “I can’t find this guy with you, so I’m sure as hell not gonna have any luck without you.”

“You’re a good egg, Benson. Keep me in the loop, even if you have to call me at home to do it. I need to know what’s going on. I’ll work this damn case in my free time if I have to, and I’ll take all the information I can get.”

“You’ve got it, Kris. What’s that saying, drowning in information but starved for knowledge? I’m
up to my ears in information, but I’ll take all the knowledge you’ve got. Let me know what’s happening there, on this case and in general.”

“Will do. Hate to bitch and run, but I’ve got to go spend my day questioning teenagers to find out who keeps punching unsuspecting pedestrians for no reason. There can be fifty people within half a block and, oddly, nobody sees anything.”


“That’s the truth,” Kris agreed. “Everybody’s watching American Gangster and not even seeing a crime happening right under their nose. I don’t even know why I get out of bed some days. Take it easy, Benson, and give my regards to your esteemed colleagues and the lovely District Attorney.”

Olivia hung up. This worried her. She did need Mackey on the case—that part was entirely true, and entirely selfish. But some of the worry was over Kris herself. They’d bonded quickly and Olivia considered her a friend. She seemed to be in a precarious situation, one not entirely unfamiliar to Liv, in fact. Too many competing demands, too little in the way of any real life to balance it out, and burnout a constant companion threatening to overtake you at any moment.

Now that the election was over, and one source of stress was out of her life, she’d make a point of keeping in touch with Kris and making sure she did what she could to mitigate the effects of the political games, and the endless bureaucratic bullshit. She couldn’t say why, exactly, but she felt fairly sure that they were overlooking some vital clue, and that the clue was in St. Louis. It was going to take all the experience they had between then, and an approach they hadn’t even thought of yet, to solve this one.

Ellen had been true to her word, and had stayed with Alex until after the election. Just barely, though. She was planning her last day for the following Friday, April 4th, but she was taking a celebratory cruise with her sister and would be leaving for Miami early the following morning, so her retirement party had to be scheduled a little early. Alex would be sworn in on Friday afternoon, and they'd convene at six o'clock for a small send-off at Macao on Church Street.

“So soon?” Alex had asked. “Maybe just another month?”
“Ms. Cabot, this cruise is booked. I'll be here to see you officially take office, and then I'm off for a ten-day trip around the Caribbean, and not even you can stop me.”

“What am I going to do?” Alex looked bereft. “I haven't tried to work without you for a long time.”

“You'll be fine. Mr. Samuels' secretary has agreed to stay on, hasn't she?”

“Yes, Laurie is staying, but she's not you.”

“Well, that might be a good thing. Word around the building is that she's a little tougher than I am, and you need that. There will be barbarians at the gate on a daily basis, and I'm too old to deal with that. Managing you for all this time has taken it out of me.”

Alex laughed. “You're not the first person to say that, actually. So yes, you've earned your retirement, and I couldn't be happier for you. Promise me that you won't be a stranger, though. We can have lunch occasionally so you can make sure my ego doesn't get too big?”

“Oh heavens, she'll already be at the hotel in Miami working on her sunburn,” Ellen explained. “No, I'm riding with Sergeant Munch.”

“Munch?” Alex's look was a mixture of confusion and surprise, not sure if she'd heard that wrong, or had missed some huge development along the way.
“Yes, John offered to be my date for the evening, and I accepted.”

“John?” Incredulity had replaced the confusion and the surprise.

“Don’t look so shocked, Ms. Cabot. He’s spent a lot of time in that outer office over the years. We’re friendly, nothing more. Don’t add any grist to the Hogan Place rumor mill.”

“Okay,” Alex said. “Well, that sounds lovely. John is a wonderful man.”

Ellen turned to leave. When she reached the door, she said over her shoulder, “Wonderful might be pushing it, but once you get past all the conspiracy stuff, he’s an excellent dinner companion.”

So, you’ve been out with him before, Alex thought. Her smile was huge as she picked up the phone to call Liv. She’d been told not to feed the gossip monsters in her own building, but Ellen hadn’t said a word about telling the 1-6.
Chapter 20

Friday, April 11, 2014

Alex needed to see her therapist. She’d been too busy to even return Dr. Jackson’s concerned calls after the CNN interview, but she was in dire need of an ear, preferably one that was subject to the confidentiality required by professional ethics.

She knew she could defuse Madeline’s threat--at least some of it--if she told Olivia the truth about that relationship, finally and completely. But she couldn’t do it. She’d opened her mouth a few times, when a rare quiet moment presented itself, fully prepared to finally tell her wife a story she'd rather forget herself. Madeline herself had been strangely silent, as well. They hadn't had any contact since their encounter in Madeline's apartment before the election. She should be glad, perhaps, but the lack of communication was unsettling. Alex knew the threat wasn't gone. A predator lying in wait was even worse than one you could face head-on.

Alex had learned, as everyone does, that the world isn't black and white. That had become apparent during her first tenure at SVU, even while her Harvard Law diploma was still in its leatherette maroon portfolio, at least a year from being framed and hung in some rare burst of industrious pride. She had come to see that rules were made to be broken on occasion, and to be bent almost as a matter of course, and that it's sometimes necessary to rob Peter to pay Paul, and to lose the battle to win the war, and--much to her surprise--that two wrongs sometimes do make a right. She wasn't sure what she'd found more disappointing: that justice wasn't as infallible as she'd believed, or that life could be reduced to a series of cliches that would easily stand in for any real thought or discussion about the harder issues.

It had made her a better person, though. She had no doubt about that. From SVU, to her exile in Wisconsin and Baltimore, to her time in Africa, and even her many roles in the DA's office. Seeing shades of grey had made her tougher, but it had also made her more compassionate.

With everyone but yourself. She could hear Aunt Jean's voice in her head. You're so hard on yourself, Alex. You do the best you can.

She could always count on Jean to see the good in her, but Jean didn't know everything about Alex. No one did. No one but Madeline. Learning to see shades of grey didn't extend to their time together. No matter how hard Alex tried, she could only see those long months in stark relief, far more darkness than light.
She had been prepared to fend off any attack in the DA's race, and for people to do anything or say anything—even things lacking in any truth or integrity—to defeat her. She hadn't counted on a person who was willing to break every rule to ensure her victory, or on what that would cost her in the long run.

Her father had told her that integrity was the bedrock of a woman's character, but that her mistakes were its stratigraphy.

Those are the lines in the rock that tell the real story, Alex, he'd told her. Honey, don't ever be afraid to fail. It's how you learn, and it's how you grow, and it's your recovery from your failures that will keep you humble and honest at the same time it makes you great. No one will hold mistakes against you. They'll only remember that you moved onward and upward.

She was a towheaded little girl who had no idea what she wanted to be, but knew that she wanted to make her father proud. She had believed everything her dad told her, thought he was always right.

He had been wrong about this. She knew that now. Every single mistake she'd made had come back to haunt her, and it didn't seem fair. Every bad choice had affected her life, and continued to do so. None, it seemed, more so than Madeline.

Their whole relationship had been a colossal mistake and Alex had gotten out when she'd realized it was never going to be . She'd thought it was behind her, and now she found it front and center at the worst possible time. She needed to talk to someone, and her options were rather limited: Olivia was out, for obvious reasons. It wasn't something she could talk to her uncle about, and even Kate didn’t know the whole story.

Dr. Jackson had gotten her through some very difficult times before. This would be the biggest test yet, Alex thought. Trust the process. Be open to life. It was a hard thing to do. Trusting anything or anyone had long been a challenge for her, and recent events were once again chipping away at her faith, not only in humanity, but also in herself.

“Congratulations, Alex.” The therapist offered her good wishes as her patient sunk into the overstuffed chair she normally chose. “You must be very happy to have won the election.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jackson. I’m actually just as happy to have it all behind me, to be honest.”
They had worked together for several years, and the doctor had asked Alex on numerous occasions to call her Sharon. She wasn’t someone who stood on ceremony--many of her patients called her by her first name, and in this case, she’d thought it might help to deepen their rapport, and break down some of Alex’s natural resistance to the emotional vulnerability that effective therapy would require. It hadn’t worked.

Alex came from a world where titles were far more than empty honorifics--Counselor, Detective, Captain, Your Honor. They all conveyed a respect for the system that was far more significant than the individuals involved. Alex held the therapeutic relationship in the same high regard, and had politely ignored every request.

“Well, I'm glad to see you again,” the doctor said. “I'd tried to reach you after I saw you on CNN a few weeks back. I was surprised that the interview delved so deeply into your time in the witness relocation program. Were you aware the host would be asking those questions?”

“I was,” Alex said. “It was planned.”

“I thought it might have been. That's probably what I found most surprising, I suppose. I didn't imagine you'd ever discuss that publicly.”

“Nor did I,” Alex laughed. “But it seems I'm just full of surprises lately.”

“In what way?”

Alex was normally a little hesitant. She would offer a vague statement, but didn't directly respond to the obvious follow-up questions. She danced around things, and that wasn't uncommon. Therapy was hard work, and most people weren't equipped to meet every hurdle head-on. Sometimes you had to dance around things, intricately choreographed steps that eventually led you where you needed to be.

“I’m not the person everyone thinks I am.”

“Okay,” Dr. Jackson replied.

“Don’t you find that to be a problem?”
“That depends. Do you find it to be a problem?” The psychologist was, as always, noncommittal. She made no judgments, assumed neither causality nor correlation. It was good. Alex knew that. But it could also be infuriating.

“I like to think of myself as straightforward and dependable, an honest person. But if I have this whole side of me that never sees the light of day, can I really be any of those things?”

“Well, Alex, does that outlook work for you, the mystique of having an alter ego? If not, let’s turn the narrative around and say that no one can know everything about another person.”

“That’s not true. Olivia is exactly what she seems.”

The doctor smiled. “I would suggest that the Olivia you know is not the same Olivia that her captain knows, or that her mother knew. You are not the same person with her that you are with Kate, or your uncle.”

“That's definitely true of me,” Alex said. “But I don’t believe that about Olivia. She’s very solid. She isn’t some kind of changeling.”

“And you are?”

“I feel like one, yes. And it’s funny, you know. Because all the while that I was gone, I clung to anything that reminded me that I was still Alex. Somewhere inside Emily or Sarah there was still Alex, waiting. Almost hibernating. But lately I feel like I’m a handful of people and none of them have anything more than a passing acquaintance with the real me.”

“It's cognitive dissonance,” Dr. Jackson offered. “Everyone experiences it from time to time. You've just come through an election in which you found yourself speaking publicly about events and feelings you had determined to keep private. As a result of the election, you find yourself in a new role, and it may take some time to feel like your attitudes and beliefs are back in sync with your actions and behaviors.”

“It's not so much that I talked to Sloane Jansen about witness protection,” Alex insisted. “It's that I did it to get elected. Finding that you're willing to do things you said you wouldn't do—that you're willing to tell stories that are no one else's business, while at the same time keeping secrets because of the damage they would do—it's not something I'm proud of.”
“You mentioned Olivia. Do you really believe she has no secrets?”

“Nothing that matters,” Alex said.

“It may not serve you well to put Olivia on a pedestal. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

“I don’t put her on a pedestal. But she’s a good person,” Alex tried to explain.

“Think about what you just said,” the doctor instructed. “But she’s a good person. As if you aren’t.”

“I’m not sure that I am, to be honest.”

“Alex, look: Putting someone on a pedestal does two things--it takes away that person’s humanity, their right to make mistakes, or be disagreeable, or to fail. And it magnifies your every foible or flaw or transgression, diminishing your own sense of self-worth.”

Alex looked at her interlocutor. This very exchange was proving her point, and she couldn't explain that to her therapist. She finally said, “You have no idea. There is a me that no one knows, and she’s not a good person.”

“Okay, let's say that's true. Let's stipulate that you are not fundamentally the same essential person in every situation. Why is that bad?”

“Because I’m married, and I shouldn't hide things from my wife.” This line of reasoning was convoluted, and Alex knew it. It was an emotional response to a logical question, and if opposing counsel had offered anything that weak, she'd have destroyed it without a second thought. She was thankful they weren't in court, as Jackson's approach was slightly more forgiving.

“When you and Olivia got married, did you commit to sharing every little thought you have, and every detail of your life, past, present and future? Is neither of you allowed to have anything that’s just yours?”
“Of course not,” Alex said. “I don’t need to know everything Olivia thinks or does—I trust her and she deserves her privacy.”

“Then why don’t you deserve the same? Surely Olivia trusts you. The two of you have been through a lot together, and it took you a long time to get to where you are.”

“She does trust me, but she shouldn’t. I’m not trustworthy.”

“I don’t know if you get to decide that,” the doctor said carefully. “People have a funny way of deciding on their own what they believe, and who they trust.”

“Because they’re ill-informed,” Alex said. “They think that what they don’t know, can’t hurt them. But it can. Turns out the Tarasoff ruling is going to save you some time, in my case.”

“How do you figure?” Jackson asked.

“Since it only covers your duty to warn others of threatened bodily harm, you won’t have to make any calls. If it had extended to impending emotional destruction, you’d have to get in touch with my wife. Maybe even the people of New York.”

“What could I possibly have to warn the citizenry about?” Jackson laughed.

“They deserve to know they’ve elected someone who’s cracking up.”
Chapter 21

-21-

Thursday, April 17, 2014

Olivia missed Munch. His retirement was inevitable, but that didn't mean she had to be happy about it. She wasn't opposed to change, but she'd had her fill lately. John's departure meant she was the senior detective in the 1-6 now, and second-in-command to Cragen, who probably wasn't all that far off from retirement himself. Practically speaking, the new role wasn't a huge difference. But the real impact wasn't simply a matter of new responsibilities or more paperwork. The mood in the bullpen was just not the same.

There was no budget for another detective, and that was okay. Most of Liv's career, there had been four of them. If they added anyone now, she'd be the one who found herself chained to a desk more often than not, and she definitely wasn't ready for that. Munch's departure moved her up the line, and reminded her how quickly time was passing, and she didn't like it. The probies in their new uniforms looked like babies to her, like they were on a nursery school field trip, all dressed up like NYPD officers. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

They were still hunting someone the newspapers snidely referred to as the Retail Rapist, and the brass at 1PP were not at all happy about their lack of progress. The trail was growing ever colder on their other guy—nothing new in St. Louis, nothing new in Manhattan, nothing new anywhere. They were still working the case, and working it as often as they could, but none of it made a damn bit of sense. The duty belt had led them to investigate hundreds of guys who had either been turned down from the police academies, or who had washed out during training. It had amounted to exactly nothing, and in another of their marathon sessions of shooting-the-shit, Liv had wondered aloud if it was designed to throw them off the scent.

“I don't think so, partner,” Nick said.

“Why not, Nick? The guy's obviously light-years ahead of us. It's such an obvious clue, and he would know it would lead us down some very obvious roads.”

“Roads we've wasted a hell of a lot of time on,” Fin added.

“Right,” Olivia agreed. “It's a brilliant diversion, really.”
“I think it means something,” Nick replied. “I don't know what. Obviously, it doesn't mean what we thought, but I just feel like there's something to it.”

“Well, my boss doesn't really care what we think,” Cragen said. “Feelings aren't getting the job done, folks. Every time there's a slow news day, some reporter wants to report that there's nothing to report. The Chief of D's is convinced the details will get out and the city will be in a frenzy, assuming there's a cop raping and killing women in his free time.”

“We ain't sure that's wrong,” Fin said.

“Then that's what we need to focus on, for now,” Olivia ventured. “We aren't getting anything new, so let's go back through the old stuff and finish clearing current officers. We've taken care of a bunch of them already—let's see who's still in the grey and move them into one category or the other, cleared or not.”

“That's a tall order,” Amanda said.

“The whole thing's a tall order,” Cragen agreed. “But Liv is right. We can't keep the signature under wraps forever. Let's clear everyone we can clear so we can at least avoid some of the media frenzy that's going to ensue when that information leaks. I've got so many people riding my ass, OSHA's gonna make me install seatbelts and airbags soon. Do what we can do—we can't find the guy, but we can eliminate a few more.” He retreated to his office, leaving the four detectives standing around their desks.

“Eliminate all of the members of the NYPD,” Amanda laughed. “Why not? I wasn't doing anything else this afternoon?”

“You heard the man,” Olivia said. “If we take one piece of hay from the haystack at a time, it'll only be 10 years or so before we find the needle. Let's move, gang.”

Alex picked Olivia up at the precinct at 6:30 that night, later than she'd planned but with just enough time to make their 7:00 dinner reservation. She hoped.
“Hey, babe,” Olivia said as she slid into the passenger seat. She gave Alex a quick kiss and buckled up.

“Sorry I'm running late,” Alex said. “One thing after another. Then one of the ADA's came by right after Laurie left, so there was no one to deflect her. Another heart-to-heart about the meaning of justice. I thought moving to the big office would deter her, but no such luck.”


“Three times a week?” Alex asked. “I have that conversation with her more often than you and I...”

She trailed off. She'd been busy, and hadn't been home nearly enough lately. The weekend was so close she could taste it, and all she really wanted to do was go home and drink a glass of wine and take Olivia to bed. But they'd planned this dinner with Bill two weeks before, and Alex already felt like she never saw him. She wasn't about to cancel now.

And even though Alex hadn't finished the sentence, Olivia knew where she'd been headed. They'd tried to make love two nights before, but Alex was too tired to even keep her eyes open.

It certainly wasn't for lack of desire. There was so much going on lately, like a cacophony in her head, and she hated it. Work was exhausting, and she was filled with dread anytime she paused to take a breath. She needed a connection, needed Olivia to come for her, to remind her what love felt like. She made a split-second decision as they passed Prince Street. She called her uncle just as she whipped a hard left onto Houston. Olivia's surprise was visible, but she didn't say anything as the sound of Bill's booming baritone filled the car.

“Let me guess, Ace,” he chuckled. “One of you is hung up at work and I'm being hung out to dry.”

“No, actually, it's not all that bad. We're just running late. I've got Olivia but we have to make a quick stop by the apartment. Probably going to be about 15 minutes behind. Can you forgive us?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “I'll be enjoying a lovely Scotch on a tab that I will have the restaurant give to you when you arrive.”

“You're worth it,” Alex laughed. “Thanks, and I'm sorry.”
“I'm teasing you, Alex. Be safe and I'll see you soon.”

Olivia looked at her inquiringly as the call disconnected. “What's at the house?”

“You. And me,” Alex said. “Or, we will be. I need you, Liv, and I don't want to wait.”

This turn of events was unusual, but not unwelcome. Alex had been preoccupied and under an enormous amount of stress since the election. Since the campaign began, really, once Olivia thought about it, but everything had seemed to ramp up just before the election. Once Reilly withdrew, Alex’s victory was all but certain, and something in her seemed to change right around that time. Liv didn’t know what it was, and Alex seemed reluctant to analyze it, or even acknowledge that something was weighing on her. It might have been the workload, or the mantle of power and responsibility--it didn’t matter, though. When Alex was stressed, she was distant, and this little detour to the house was a very good sign, indeed.

The elevator ride was filled with anticipation--they maintained their decorum, barely, but only because of the elevators security had installed in the building’s lifts and hallways. There hadn’t been any discussion, but the tacit understanding was that some basic surveillance might be in order now that the 14th floor housed the new District Attorney and her wife.

The two women in question tumbled through their front door and were frantically--and selectively--removing one another’s clothes before the lock clicked behind them. By the time they’d traversed the 25 or so feet to the couch, Alex’s blouse was off and her shoes were kicked across the room. Olivia was kicking off her own pants, which were around her ankles, as she worked to open the front clasp on Alex’s bra, having already slid the straps over her shoulders and onto her upper arms.

The sex was fast, and frenzied. Olivia ended up on her back on the couch, Alex kneeling between her knees, working her clit with a warm tongue while filling her with three fingers. With her hand entwined in Alex’s hair, she came in just a few moments, her orgasm contracting around the hand inside her. She neither wanted nor needed a long recovery period--she was eager to get Alex off, and tried to pull her wife up, thinking only of how wet she must be, and how much she enjoyed their kisses while the taste of her was still on Alex’s tongue.

But something shifted. Alex slipped her fingers free and stood, gently resisting the tug of Olivia’s hand. She leaned over and offered only a quick kiss. Olivia took Alex’s hand and wrapped her own mouth around the three fingers that were still wet and sticky from their skilled explorations. She licked the fingers clean, looking up at Alex with longing. Alex smiled, but as Olivia reached a hand up to pull her closer, she took a half-step back. It was only a few inches, but it was noticeable.
The confusion on Olivia’s face was unmistakable, as well. It was like a switch had gone off, and it was perfectly clear that Alex was not interested in any reciprocation. She tried to cover, tracing Olivia’s jaw and placing one finger under the strong chin before speaking.

“Baby, I’m sorry, we really can’t keep Uncle Bill waiting,” she said. “That was lovely, but I probably should have just waited until after dinner.”

“No, I’m glad you didn’t,” Olivia said. “That was amazing, Alex. But I’d like to…”

Alex cut her off. “Not right now, okay?” she said. “When we get home.” She smiled gamely, but her wife didn’t return the expression.

“Sure, whatever you want.” Olivia’s words were assentive, but there was doubt laced in every syllable. She didn’t know what had just happened, but she knew that Alex was paying lip service to the idea that they’d make love later. It wasn’t going to happen, and she was sure of that, but she didn’t know why. There was something in Alex’s demeanor that was different, and the change was unsettling to say the least.

They gathered up their discarded clothing and dressed in silence, making their way back down to the car and toward the restaurant. Olivia had expected that it would be hard to keep her mind on dinner and conversation with Bill this evening, and she had been right, but her distraction wasn’t for the reasons she’d expected. The evening was filled with small talk and good food, and Olivia didn’t really mind—it took her thoughts away from whatever the hell was going on in Alex’s head. It’s always a lot easier to find reasons to postpone conversations you’d rather not have.
It had been a shitty day. Alex was exhausted, already frustrated by the endless futility of her job. On a good day, she thought it was important work, coordinating the efforts of scores of men and women who were pursuing justice for the public good. But in her darker moments, on a day like today, she felt saw it for exactly what it was: a Sisyphean task, more punishment than reward.

The boulder just kept rolling down the hill every time she stopped to catch her breath. All those times she’d been called on the carpet to see Arthur Branch, or Nora, or Jack or even Colin, they’d sat behind the desk like a Sphinx whose only job was to dispense wisdom. They never seemed busy, and they sure as hell never seemed as overwhelmed as she felt 95% of the time.

It was nearly seven o’clock when Laurie stuck her head in. “Just checking in to see if you need anything, boss.” She smiled as Alex looked up at her and then at the clock on her wall.

“Laurie. I’m so lost in this paperwork that I didn't even realize how late it was. I hope you aren't still here on my account.” Late hours were the norm for the young ADAs, and not unheard of for their new boss, but Alex rarely requested it of Laurie, and never expected it.

“Not to worry. I got absorbed in a few things myself. I may knock off a little early on Friday if that suits you.”

“Of course. That's just fine.” Fridays were quiet, trials wrapping up early for the weekend and only emergency hearings taking place. Alex sighed inwardly when she realized Friday felt like it was weeks away. “Are you heading out now?”

“I am,” Laurie confirmed. “I could stay if you need me to,”--she glanced pointedly at her watch--“you mentioned an 8:00 dinner with Sergeant Benson, and if you don't leave with me, you'll be late.”

“What would I do without you?” It was a sincere question. Alex missed Ellen, would probably always miss her, but Laurie was a godsend. She had no idea how she'd have made it this far if Colin's assistant hadn't agreed to stay on. The job involved even more politics and bullshit than Alex had imagined, and the backbiting among the attorneys threatened to be a major distraction. The EADAs handled most of it, but then they all seemed to take turns being at odds with one another, or at loggerheads with Alex. She wasn't sure she could trust any of them, which made Laurie all the more invaluable. They'd bonded quickly, and most days it seemed the assistant was the only person in the office who had her back.

The two women gathered up their things and walked together to the garage, chatting along the way about a few things on the schedule for tomorrow, and a rumored stretch of good spring weather headed their way for the weekend. They were in the elevator when Alex's phone buzzed. She knew the reason for the call before she answered.
“Running late, Detective?”

“That's Sergeant to you, honey,” Liv replied with a laugh. “But then I guess I'd have to call you Madame District Attorney, and that's a mouthful.”

“Agreed,” Alex said as she she Laurie stepped off the lift onto the garage's fourth floor. “What's up?”

“Well, you are right as usual, but running late is an understatement, I'm afraid. I'm in Albany.”

“Albany is nowhere near Lexington Avenue, Liv.” They had reached Alex's car and Laurie paused there to make sure Alex was alright before heading down the row to her own vehicle.

“No, honey, it isn't. I'm really sorry. There's some concern that our boutique rapist has been spending some time outside the city. I drove up here before lunch with Rollins and we thought we'd be back by now, but it's not gonna happen. We're waiting now for some detectives from Montauk, which is in and of itself a long story, so I'm going to be here overnight. I hate to make you postpone that dinner again.”

These reservations were hard enough to get, and then they'd already had to postpone twice due to work commitments.

“Oh, I'm not postponing it. I'll make a lot of sacrifices for you, but that's just asking too much. I'll go alone if I have to.”

Olivia laughed. “Go on without me, Al. Save yourself. I guess I'll have to be content with a graphic description of the polenta bianca.”

“Done and done. Call me later. I'll fill you in on dinner, and you can tell me what's going on upstate.”

“You've got it, babe. I am sorry.”

“You're fine. Can't be helped.” They signed off, and Alex turned to Laurie. “Well, damn it.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, just inconvenienced by yet another criminal,” Alex said.

“That's a common occurrence in your house.”

“Yes, it is,” Alex laughed. “Don't suppose you want to join me at Sfoglia for dinner?”

“I'd love to, thanks, but I'm supposed to drop by my brother's place to have birthday cake with my niece. I'm sorry.”

“Oh, no worries. I've eaten many a good meal on my own, and I don't mind doing it again. I'm not missing this dinner. I’ll just call on my way and change the reservation.”

“Well have a good evening then. I'd love to hear all about it tomorrow, too. It's supposed to be amazing.”

They parted company, and Alex headed uptown. She didn't need to stop at home since she wasn't
picking up Olivia. There was a wine shop near the restaurant, so she'd browse, maybe pick up a few bottles for the house to kill some time. Once she was in the car and headed north, she tried to round up a dinner companion by phone. Uncle Bill was in New Haven—he was still teaching on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and had gone up early for a faculty meeting. Kate had plans with Marina.

She even thought of calling her Chief ADA, but changed her mind before she pressed the call button on the screen. She didn't want this to be a working dinner—she wanted to relax, enjoy a delicious meal, and just be for a couple of hours. Maybe dinner alone was just what she needed.

The Manhattan detectives grabbed dinner at the Gateway Diner while they cooled their heels and waited for their Long Island counterparts to arrive in Albany.

Amanda pointed across the table, her serious expression somewhat undercut by the two popcorn shrimp speared at the end of her fork. “It's not about you, Liv,” she said. “You know that. I'm always happy to hang out with you, but I did not plan to spend the night in Albany with you tonight. No offense.”

“None taken,” Benson laughed. “The feeling is mutual.”

“I know. I mean, what kind of clusterfuck is this? Call us up here for a lunch meeting that somehow drags into dinnertime, and then you tell us Colombo's on the way up from Montauk?”

“It's ridiculous,” Olivia agreed. “And if it turns out to have nothing to do with anything, I'm going to be even more pissed than I am right now.”

She was pissed, too. They both were, because this seemed like a fool's errand. They'd driven up here to meet with the state police Bureau of Criminal Investigation, who'd found a common thread or two in a couple of other cases upstate that matched the guy they'd been looking for in the city. It smelled like bullshit to begin with, but Cragen had insisted they go.

“What's it gonna hurt?” he'd said. “The state wants to buy you lunch. You drive up there, listen to them spout off a bunch of theories that don't amount to anything, and drive back home. You'll be back here complaining about it by quitting time.”

“It's a waste of time,” Olivia complained.

“Time the NYPD is paying for,” he reminded her. “They pay me, and they pay you, and if they say
you go, then you go. Sign out a car and take Rollins with you.”

It had been a waste of time, and it continued to be a waste of time. Except now someone in the Hamptons had come late to the party with a case that looked to be totally unrelated.

“Any idea why the state guys are even having Montauk drive up here?” Rollins asked. “Their case looks even less relevant than the irrelevant ones we've been discussing all day.”

“No idea,” Liv said. “Someone must know someone somewhere. Maybe one of the guys from Long Island has a girlfriend up here and needs an excuse for an overnight and a free hotel room.”

“You know, that's as good an excuse as any I've come up with. Let's hope she's worth it, then, since he's inconveniencing God and everybody to get some action.”

“Sure, he's looking forward to getting lucky at the Albany Hilton. Meanwhile, I'm missing a dinner that I'll be hearing about for weeks just to sit here with you and eat Yankee pot roast. No offense,” Olivia added with a wink.

Amanda laughed. “None taken, Benson. Besides, it could be worse.”

“How so?”

“Well, one of us coulda been sent up here with Fin.”

Madeline's phone rang. The voice was vaguely familiar, and the conversation was brief.

“Ms. Cabot is dining alone this evening.”
“Well, that's strange for a woman who is so in-demand. Perhaps someone is joining her,” she suggested.

“It wasn't planned. The reservation was for two, but her wife can't make it.”

“Well...” Madeline was noncommittal. She never tipped her hand, no matter how friendly the messenger, or how welcome the message. “That's an unfortunate situation. To whom do I owe my gratitude for this information?”

“It all comes from one source,” her caller said. “Mr. Patel has his ear to the ground, and your best interests at heart.”

Madeline signed off. She wasn't sure if Deval really did have her best interests at heart, or if it was his own well-being that he was most focused on. But that didn't really matter at the moment. Whatever his motivation, she had to admit that—right now, at least—she was especially pleased with the results.
Chapter 23

Monday, May 19, 2014

8:35 p.m.

Alex was tired, and missed Olivia, but she was determined to enjoy this dinner. The small table along the wall allowed her to see most of the dining room, and she nursed a Scotch and watched people come and go. It was the person she didn't see who surprised her-she felt a hand on her shoulder and found herself looking up into Madeline's face. Alex's radar hadn't even pinged at her approach.

You wouldn't describe the woman's movements as unobtrusive, exactly. Her presence was a tangible thing, and once you knew where she was, you weren't likely to lose track of her. But she did have a certain economy of movement, and an almost ephemeral manner that made no noise but left visible footprints. Madeline's timing had always been critical in their relationship, and some things were very unlikely to have changed.

"Alexandra."

"Madeline."

"It's wonderful to see you," Madeline said. Alex didn't respond, determined to say little, offer nothing, but Madeline was undeterred. "You're looking lovely as always."

"What do you want from me, Madeline?"

Alex's reply seemed an affront to Madeline.

"Power doesn't seem to agree with you, darling. Your impeccable manners are suffering. You've been avoiding me, but fate has been kind enough to allow our paths to cross tonight. When one bumps into an old friend unexpectedly, it's polite to offer a drink and some conversation, but you haven't even asked me to sit down."

"And I don't intend to."

"There's no need to be ugly, darling."

"Have a good evening, Madeline." It was meant as a dismissal, but the waiter arrived and asked if he could bring them anything.

"Prosecco, I believe." Madeline answered before Alex could say a word. "I'm going to join my friend here and we have a toast or two to make."

He pulled out the other chair, obsequiousness immediately replacing his earlier indifference. "Of course, ladies. What are we celebrating this evening?"

"Only the fact that this woman was very recently sworn in as Manhattan's newest district attorney," Madeline said.

"Well, that's definitely worth celebrating."
Alex opened her mouth to say no, to say anything that would stop this charade now, and to somehow will herself back in time. But how far? Would five minutes do it, long enough to leave before Madeline saw her? Back a few weeks, maybe, to when she so doggedly pursued this dinner reservation. Or a few months, allowing her to wipe out the entire election and rid herself of any desire to run for office? It didn't matter. She said nothing, knowing her feeble efforts at protest would be trampled upon by the aggressive blitheness of her unwelcome companion.

Madeline kept up a steady stream of small talk to fill the minutes until the waiter returned with the sparkling wine. He showed her the bottle, pouring a bit and waiting for her okay to fill the glasses. When he left, she offered a toast.

"To a race finally run, a victory well deserved and a friendship rekindled," she said, raising her glass to Alex, who responded in kind, almost without realizing it. Alex downed the drink faster than was prudent, but put her glass down quickly, unsure if the bad taste in her mouth was from the prosecco, or the sentiment that had accompanied it. She picked up her nearly-empty glass of Scotch, comforted by the feeling of the heavy glass in her hand as she swirled the remaining amber liquid, creating a curious merry-go-round of whiskey and two ice cubes.

Madeline reached for the bottle to refill Alex's glass, and the waiter materialized at the table, seeing an opportunity to boost his tip. "Allow me, ma'am," he said, topping off Madeline's drink and then moving to Alex's empty flute. She covered it with her hand.

"No, thank you."

"Alexandra," Madeline chided gently. "Don't be such a killjoy. The night is young and we have so much to discuss. Have another, darling."

The younger woman's glare was withering, and the waiter unconsciously took a step back. He'd been a server for quite a while, and his ability to read a table put money in his pocket every shift. But this had just taken an unpleasant turn, for some reason, and he couldn't get a handle on what was going on here. There was a palpable chill, and he'd gladly pass this table off to anyone and pay them to take it, district attorney or not.

He had no idea who was calling the shots here anymore. The late arrival had declined to order any food, and his original guest had fallen virtually mute. He looked to the DA. "Ms. Cabot, your dinner will be out in just a moment. Can I get you anything else to drink while you wait?"

Enjoying the dinner she had ordered seemed unlikely now with the knots in her handed him her glass, and spoke in a low voice. "Another Macallan, neat."

"Yes, ma'am," he excused himself.

A runner brought Alex's meal just as the waiter returned with the drink. There was a brief but lively moment when too many people were in too small a space, but Madeline didn't miss a beat.

"Where is the good detective this evening? It's such a shame to have left you to your own devices."

"None of your business." Her defiant tone seemed to echo in the lingering silence that followed. She ignored her meal and picked up the Scotch, taking a long swallow and relishing the slight, steadying burn in her throat. As she set it down again, she was startled by Madeline's fingers closing over her own.

"Alexandra, things don't have to be this way. I'm here because I'm your friend, and I love you. I only want what's best for you."
Alex laughed. "You've never wanted what's best for me. Not one single day. You only want what's best for you."

"I suppose we'll have to disagree about that for now," Madeline offered. Her tone was considerably softer than usual. "I think that what's best for you isn't the same thing as what you want. And I know that can be hard to hear."

"I'm not a child, Madeline." The words were meant to be combative, but they came across as petulant, making Alex sound very much like a child, in fact; one who was refusing medicine because it didn't taste good. Her edges were wearing down, and she didn't want to admit that it was in response to the spoonful of sugar Madeline was dishing out in the form of quiet words and a gentle touch. Their hands were still enfolded and she wanted to pull away—wanted to run away, truth be told—but she was almost too tired to fight.

She looked up, making eye contact for the first time in several minutes, and she knew instantly that she would regret it. The stare that met her was focused and intense, and shook her to the core. It was like she'd been instantly transported back to that night so many years before when things had first clicked between them. It had felt like surrendering to an irresistible force, like giving up control, or at least the illusion of it. It had felt like being known, like someone had finally seen all the way through her.

It felt like that now.

Alex realized that her earlier thoughts about time travel had been woefully inadequate. A few weeks or even months wouldn't be nearly enough to prevent the disaster she could see unfolding in front of her. No, she'd need to go back several years, at least, back to a time before she'd ever met Madeline. Maybe earlier than that, even, when she still had a chance to stay in Baltimore and live out the rest of her days as Sarah Clarke. She could have ruined Sarah's life so easily, without ever hurting anyone who loved Alex Cabot.

Another missed opportunity.

Another mistake.

Olivia called Alex about 11:30 to let her know that they'd finally finished for the day. She didn't get an answer, and considered hanging up to try again—sometimes repeated calls were the only thing that got Alex's attention when she was absorbed in work, and Olivia thought she might be sitting at her desk at home, poring over briefs or working on a legislative proposal she was developing with two of Manhattan's state senators to close some loopholes in the law affecting cybercrimes.

But, on the off chance that her wife was actually asleep, she didn't want to risk waking her with another phone call or two. She decided to leave a voicemail, knowing it likely wouldn't be heard.

Babe, it's me. Useless trip, useless meetings, wasted day, but I won't even go into it, since you don't listen to voicemails anyway. I'll tell you all about it when I get home. We're heading back to the city sometime tomorrow morning—I'll text or call when I know what the day holds. Hope you're sleeping well, sweetie. I'll talk to you later—I love you.

Back at home, Alex wanted nothing more than a hot shower and 12 hours of oblivion. But it was nearly 1 am, and if she was lucky she had six hours at most to try to sleep away the apprehensive, amorphous feeling that she had lost control of something very important.
She'd ended up back at Madeline's apartment. She had no idea how it had happened, and she sure as hell didn't know why. But that slight opening she'd offered at the restaurant-no more than a few seconds of eye contact-had sent them down a path she already regretted.

Alex turned on the shower, and picked up the highball glass she'd carried into the bathroom, and threw back the bourbon in one shot. She stepped under the spray, wincing as the hot water pelted her skin. She wanted nothing more than to forget the entire evening, but it was playing in her head on a constant loop: leaving the restaurant, planning only to drive Madeline home. Riding up in the elevator, crossing through the foyer where she'd confronted the woman only weeks before. Knowing that with each step she took, she was moving further and further from everything that was important to her, but just kept putting one foot in front of the other, as if in a trance.

They had done nothing more than talk over a couple of drinks-not a single touch, and Alex hadn't so much as removed one article of clothing. But she was overcome with shame, and furious with herself. Given her agitation-and her utter failure at hiding or overcoming it-Olivia's absence tonight was a blessing. She shouldn't have opened the door to Madeline, not even an inch.

"I don't need this anymore. Damn it, I don't even want it." Her voice echoed off the tile.

*What's best for you isn't the same thing as what you want.*

The voice in her head was Madeline's, and Alex wasn't sure if the words made her stomach turn because they were wrong, or because they were right.

The drinks at Sfoglia had been enough to calm Alex's nerves, and then a few more drinks at Madeline's had slowly stripped away all of her verbal and emotional defenses. They'd talked for nearly three hours, dipping their toes in the shallow end before moving into deeper water as the night wore on. So much had changed since she'd ended things between them, but some things were frighteningly unaltered. Her needs took different forms, wore different disguises, but apparently were exactly the same as they'd always been. Her vulnerabilities were still there, easily found by the person who'd charted and mapped them so very carefully.

It was as if Madeline had planted mines that only she could avoid-or detonate-at will. The end of their conversation had the force of a depth charge. She had been leaving-tired and confused as she stood by the front door-when Madeline pressed something shiny into her palm.

"I don't need your key, Madeline," Alex said. "I won't be back." She tried to return it, but Madeline refused to accept.

"Nonsense, of course you will. Keep it. You are welcome here anytime, Alexandra. This is your respite, your escape from the world," she said. "And don't worry about losing the key. I've had electronic locks installed, and I took the liberty of setting up a code for you so you would always have access. Just punch in 4015 and you're home sweet home."

The flicker of recognition wasn't lost on Madeline. Very little ever was.

"Familiar number, darling? You know me, a stickler for details. I did my research so I could be sure to choose something you wouldn't forget."

4015. *Olivia's shield number.*

Even under the hot spray of the shower, Alex felt the tears on her cheeks, and she knew she wasn't likely to get any sleep anytime soon.
Olivia arrived back at the 1-6 just a little after 3 p.m., and called Alex’s office. They had exchanged text messages but hadn’t connected by phone this morning, and Olivia didn’t like that. She’d grown pleasantly--and quickly--accustomed to touching base periodically. Neither of them usually had a lot of free time during the day, but it was rare for them to go so long without sneaking in a quick call at some point.

“She’s tied up in meetings,” Laurie had informed her. “I’m sorry, Sergeant Benson. We’re having quite a week around here.”

“And it’s only Tuesday,” Olivia laughed.

“That’s the worst part. She’ll be sorry she missed your call, though. She told me you were called out of town yesterday. Are you home?”

“If by home, you mean back at work, then yes, I am,” Liv replied. “Is everything okay there?”

“Oh, just the usual. I’ve been in this job long enough, I should be used to it. But having a new DA means that everyone wants a meeting with her. They had gotten tired of Colin, but the whole world wants face time with Ms. Cabot.”

Olivia noted the fact that Laurie called her former boss by his first name, but still said Ms. Cabot and Sergeant Benson. She hoped that Alex was getting along well with her newly designated chief-of-staff. Ellen’s retirement might have been a small thing to anyone else, especially in light of all the major changes going on, but Liv knew that it had been a big adjustment for Alex. She’d had good things to say about Laurie--when they’d had time to discuss work, that is, or to discuss anything--but she knew Ellen had been a stabilizing force in Alex’s work life. The attorney thrived on continuity.

“Well, Alex and I are getting especially good at playing phone tag,” Olivia joked. “I could use
some face time myself. Maybe I should schedule a meeting. Any idea when she’ll be back?”

“I don’t expect her back, actually, Sergeant. She has two meetings this afternoon, back-to-back, and then dinner uptown. It’s the DA’s Association summer conference this week.”

“Oh, how could I forget that? She’s been looking forward to it since the election.”

“That’s sarcasm, right?” Laurie asked.

“Just a little,” Olivia confirmed. “Looks like I’m on my own tonight, then.”

“Shall I have her call you? I’ll be meeting up with her at the dinner.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’ll text her, Laurie. Thanks, though.”

Liv did text Alex, who responded quickly but tersely. She must be between appointments, loath as she was to text during meetings. She knew Alex wasn’t looking forward to the dinner. The DA’s conference was a dry affair, like those of most professional associations--Alex had been to it before, and was full of stories about the pompous DA from Schuyler County. The guy lives in the middle of nowhere and always wants to spend half the meeting telling the DA from Brooklyn how to handle gang activity. Olivia knew the sort--cops from Geneseo were just full of ideas about what they were doing wrong in Manhattan.

Being on her own for dinner wouldn’t normally bother Olivia, but she was feeling a bit lonely. They hadn’t seen one another very much lately, and the fact that Olivia had completely forgotten about the DA summer conference made her feel like shit. She’d been so wrapped up in her own work that she was pretty sure she was neglecting Alex, and their home life. She’d have to rectify that. As tired as she was, she’d be sure to stay up until Alex got home tonight, and maybe they could spend a few minutes catching up, though there wasn’t much to catch up on except work.

There wasn’t much time to think about that, though. The squad room was in its usual state of
frenzy. She and Rollins were due in Cragen’s office at 3:30 to brief him on their trip upstate, and
she used the intervening minutes to touch base with Fin and Amaro. They’d made no progress on
the boutique rapist, but thankfully there hadn’t been any more cases.

Cragen called the two women in at 3:30 on the dot, and Rollins ceded the floor to Olivia.

“We may as well have driven to Coney Island and eaten cotton candy all day, Captain,” she said.

“That big a waste of time?” he asked. “I knew they didn’t have our guy, but I hoped they might
have something that would help.

“No such luck,” Benson said. “The state bureau might be worse than the feds. Can’t find their
asses with two hands and a GPS, and then we ended up waiting for the guys from the Hamptons.”

“What was their story?”

“Hell if I know,” Olivia replied. “They’ve had a couple of rapes.”

“And?”

“And nothing. They had nothing to do with what we’ve got, and we had to wait overnight to tell
them that face-to-face.”

“Rollins?”

“Nothing to add, Captain. It was bullshit that put 300 miles on a motorpool vehicle and an expense
tab on the city’s dime.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, but there was no getting out of it,” he offered. “I’m sure your cohorts
out there have told you that we didn’t make any progress here, either, so at least you didn’t miss
anything.”

“I missed dinner at Sfoglia,” Olivia said with a wry laugh. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to
“Who are you kidding, Benson? Your wife is the DA. You can get in there anytime you like.”

Olivia sighed. “Well, first, I’d have to actually see my wife. And then she’d have to be willing to use her influence for something so mundane and inconsequential as an amazing meal.”

“You know that’s never going to happen,” Cragen laughed. “Alex doesn’t work that way. Don’t worry, Olivia. You’ll get a decent meal eventually. Just catch a boutique rapist and a serial killer, and you can even take a day or two off, if you like.”

“Wow, something to look forward to,” Rollins said. “You should’ve mentioned that before. Maybe now she’ll get serious.”

Olivia just smiled as she and Rollins stood to leave the office.

“Before you two go…”

“Yes, Captain?”

“I did have an interesting call this morning,” Cragen said. “Chael Bauer called.”

“Bauer, or his people?” Olivia asked.

“Bauer himself.”

“What did he want?”

“An update, actually.”

“Just because the guy has more money than God doesn’t mean he gets to sit in on briefings,” Amanda said.
“He didn’t want that kind of detail,” Cragen said. “He just wondered if we were still getting cooperation from St. Louis, and if his computer guys had contacted us or been any help. I told him that St. Louis was fine, but didn’t have anything more than we have. And that I thought you’d talked to his guys a time or two, Benson, but that we were still working the case like we always do.”

“Well, that’s all he needs to know,” Olivia said. “I have talked to his guys a couple of times, just for a minute or two. They had questions that they could have gotten answered on Wikipedia, and acted like they’d seen too many episodes of CSI or something. He thinks his team can do what VICAP and a bunch of other databases haven’t been able to do so far, and I don’t think it’s going to do a damn bit of good. But it’s his money and he can spend it how he wants.”

“He asked about you, Benson.”

“What about me?”

“If you were well, how Alex was doing,” the captain elaborated. “And he asked if it was true that you’d spent some time in the computer crimes division.”

“You’ve got an admirer, Liv,” Rollins teased.

“I doubt that,” Olivia answered sharply. “And I sure as hell don’t need an admirer. I need him to stay the hell out of our way. His guys can play video games all day long if they want, but the only way we’re going to catch this guy is by doing what we do, and I’m not going to be distracted by some guy who thinks he’s a cross between Mark Zuckerberg and Encyclopedia Brown, no matter how nice or how rich he is.”

She left the office, and Rollins followed without another word. They were all frustrated, and it was coming to a slow boil. They needed some progress and had no idea how they’d get it. The danger of someone like Bauer was that if he felt he wasn’t getting what he wanted--results, information or deference--he could easily bend the ear of the mayor or anyone else.

Olivia checked her phone as she walked toward her desk--nothing. No texts. The feeling of loneliness was intensified now, the pressure of work mounting with every step. She had a head of steam that Amaro could see from across the room. As she neared, he spoke to her.
“What’s wrong, Benson?”

She threw her phone on her desk and kept walking.

“Not a thing, Nick,” she said over her shoulder. “Not a goddamn thing.”
“What about the special victims unit?” Jack McCoy said. “You already have a team in place to handle this.”

“Yes and no,” Alex responded. They were sitting at a midtown restaurant sipping drinks while Alex laid out her plan to overhaul the DA’s office, reworking the existing structure to provide her staff a better way to investigate and prosecute the cases the NYPD was handing them. “Special victims is close to my heart, Jack, for a variety of reasons. You know that. But it’s not working like it should anymore. We’re trying to prosecute sex crimes and elder abuse in the same division, with the same attorneys. Human trafficking, domestic violence, and child abuse are all thrown in there too. It’s a hodgepodge and I don’t think it reflects where we should be headed in the next 20 years.”

“So you’d disband special victims? I’m not sure that’s progress, Alex.”

“Not disband. Disperse, in some ways. Take some things away, rework existing bureaus, and narrow the focus of what remains. Atlanta has a very successful Crimes Against Women & Children bureau.”

“And that’s where you want to take your office?” Jack asked. “That’s how you see it shaping up?”

“Not exactly,” Alex answered. “But it’s a good example of different ways to think about what we do and how we do it. I’m thinking of moving sex crimes into its own bureau, with human trafficking. Domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse would move to a new Human Rights bureau, with hate crimes.”

“Vertical prosecution, right?”
“Of course,” Alex confirmed. Vertical prosecution was the practice of having the same team of attorneys take a case from indictment to trial, and while there were jurisdictions that didn’t do that, she couldn’t believe it was a good way to manage cases, or to help victims. “I’m still working on the specifics, but that’s where my thoughts are at the moment.”

“Why not Crimes Against Women & Children?” Jack asked. “I know what Atlanta is doing. I think it works well for them. If you’re modeling on that, why not just mimic it?”

This was why Alex had chosen to share her plan with Jack. Not Nora, or Arthur, or even her own staff. And not Colin—though she had a good relationship with him, she thought he was still too close to the office and might resent her suggestions. Even Liz hadn’t seemed like the right person. She had surprised herself by calling Jack. She’d seen his name on the list of guests for tonight’s dinner at the DA’s conference and had immediately known that he’d be a good place to start. They had clashed a few times in the past, but he was shrewd and thoughtful and she knew she could trust him to evaluate her ideas without sharing them.

“I think there’s a better way.” That was her only answer. It was a gut feeling, more than anything. And she knew she’d need a firm plan and a raft of statistics to back her up, even though ultimately it was her decision and no one else’s.

“There probably is,” Jack conceded. “We’ve tweaked things over the years, but the world has always changed much faster than the New York County DA’s office ever could.”

“That’s not acceptable,” Alex said. “We have to be better than that.” The conversation was invigorating her, and she was glad she’d made plans to talk to Jack before her disastrous encounter with Madeline the night before. It had taken the wind out of her sails, but this was the first time all day she’d almost managed to forget about it.

“Alex, you know I’ve always admired your fire,” Jack said. “Your sense of right and wrong is resolute.”

“I sense a but in there.”

“Always,” he said. “Always a but. Not everyone will agree with you on this. You’ll have pushback from City Hall, from the NYPD, and from your own people. Count on that. Some of them will object just because it’s change; whether it’s good change or not won’t matter.”
“I don’t care,” Alex said. “This is my job, and I have to do what’s best for the office, and for the people we represent.”

“That’s the other thing. It is your job, but that doesn’t mean you don’t answer to anyone, Alex. You are now an elected official, and you could be un-elected, too. You’ve been the DA for less than two months.”

“But I’ve been working at Hogan Place a lot longer than that, and this isn’t something I just dreamed up after I was sworn in,” she argued.

“I know that. You don’t act without thinking.”

Alex let that slide without correcting him. She didn’t often do things without thinking, that was true, but when she did, it was always something she later regretted. That comment from Jack made her instantly tired--she was tired from getting so little sleep the night before, and she was tired in a much deeper sense as well. Had it really been only two months since the election? She was quiet for longer than usual, her gaze resting briefly on a couple arguing on the sidewalk outside the restaurant.

“Are you okay, Alex?”

“Sorry, Jack.” She turned her attention back to him, more than happy to focus on anything but her meandering, unpredictable thoughts. “Yes, I’m fine. Just have a lot on my mind.”

“Your speech at the dinner tonight?”

“Hardly,” she laughed. “I’ve sat through those dinners. No one is listening, and everyone just wants you to shut up so they can eat. I’ll keep it short, sweet and totally shallow.”

“Shallow isn’t really your style, but you are right: no one listens. Don’t waste any great orations on that crowd, at least not at mealtime,” he advised. “But are you really okay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”
“That’s not a yes,” he observed. “Getting a straight answer out of a lawyer is never easy.”

“I’m fine, Jack,” she insisted. “I’m a newlywed with a new job that I’ve always wanted.”

“Exactly. That’s a lot going on. I just wonder how you’re holding up.”

“I can’t complain.”

“You can complain to me, Alex. I’ve been there, you know. I worked in that office for a long time before I was elected. You go from being a prosecutor to being a politician and administrator. It’s a big change, and it can be very isolating. No one in the whole damn building talks to you like a person anymore. No one will stand in front of you and tell you what you need to know. They’re all behind you, because it gives them the opportunity to kiss your ass and stab you in the back, sometimes in the same day.”

Alex laughed, but she knew his words were more true than she cared to acknowledge. She had already noticed that she felt like she was on an island. No peers, and no real boss. It was harder than she’d expected.

“I’m getting along, Jack. That’s all I can say. It isn’t what I imagined. But I have to do what’s right, and not worry about being re-elected.”

“You say that now. But it’s a short term, with the special election and all. You’ll be running again before you know it. You came in with a much higher profile than most DAs, and people love you, but that may not last. It’s amazing what you might do to keep this job once you’ve got it.”

“I’m not a politician,” she said firmly.

“You sure as hell are,” Jack said. “I went into a voting booth and picked you, Alex Cabot. That makes you a politician, like it or not. And politicians need support, not just votes. You’re popular, but you’re not bulletproof.”

She looked up at him, fixing her blue eyes on him for a moment before she spoke. “You don’t need to tell me that,” she answered ruefully, taking a drink of her Old Fashioned. “I am acutely aware of
that fact. There are all kinds of bullets. Some you don’t recover from.”

11:15 pm

Olivia woke up as Alex was quietly undressing in the bathroom.

“Honey,” she called out.

Alex opened the bathroom door, casting a wedge of light across the foot of the bed in the otherwise-dark bedroom. She came out, wearing only a pink bra and the matching panties, and as Olivia’s eyes adjusted she took it all in appreciatively. She knew without looking that the blouse Alex had taken off would have been pink, which means the suit was probably a navy pinstripe with a straight skirt--just long enough to be appropriate--and a slit up the back that served purposes that weren’t strictly practical.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Alex said as she reached behind her to close the bathroom door, throwing the bedroom back into darkness.

“I’m not,” Olivia said. “I’d planned to stay up, but I guess I was a little more tired than I thought.”

“I’ll say so,” Alex agreed. “When I came in, I took the book off of your chest and turned out your lamp before I started to undress.” She was closer to the bed, but not close enough, hovering near her dresser as she slowly took off her jewelry.

“Come here,” Olivia said, holding out her hand.

“Sure, just a minute. I need to finish undressing.”

“There’s not much left,” Olivia said softly. “Take it off here.” Her voice was sleepy and sexy and a
little suggestive, and it cut through Alex like a knife.

“I’d better go wash my face and…”

“Skip it,” Olivia implored. “Just for tonight. Your flawless skin won’t suffer.”

“It’ll just take a minute,” Alex said.

“We don’t have enough minutes anymore,” Olivia said. “Take those clothes off and get in bed with me, baby.”

“Not tonight, Olivia.” Olivia, not Liv. It felt as weird for Alex to say it as it did for Olivia to hear it. In private, in moments like this, she rarely called her Olivia. The three extra syllables felt like a bit of a cushion, putting some space between them when there was already more than enough of that.

“Okay,” Olivia said. She was confused by the reaction, but still hoped to have a few minutes with Alex before they both slept. “Can I still hold you? I miss your skin.”

“Give me a few minutes,” Alex said.

The few minutes in the bathroom turned into fifteen, and Olivia was fighting to stay awake, certain that for some reason Alex was trying to outlast her, hoping she’d fall asleep. Finally, Alex did come to bed. She was naked, and her skin was cool as she slipped between the sheets. Olivia scooted to the middle of the bed, gathering Alex against her warm body, and Alex’s tension melted a little, but it was obvious that something was wrong.

“How was your day?” Olivia whispered. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in a week.”

“It was just yesterday morning,” Alex said, and she wasn’t even sure why the hell she said it. It sounded awful.

“Time drags when you’re not having fun, I guess,” Olivia replied. “How was the dinner tonight?”
“Boring as usual,” Alex said. “Nothing worth talking about.”

“You’re worth talking about. How are you feeling?”

Unworthy, Alex wanted to say. Like I don’t have a right to be in this bed, or this house, or your life. She tried to convince herself that what had happened was nothing. She hadn’t slept with Madeline, hadn’t initiated it, and had no wish to continue it. But she knew a betrayal had occurred on some level and she also knew that Madeline wouldn’t be content until she had whatever it was she wanted. She couldn’t say any of this to Olivia, and nothing else seemed worth saying.

“I’m so tired,” she said. “Can we talk tomorrow? I’d love to just sleep.”

“Sure, honey,” Olivia said. “Whatever you want. I love you.” She kissed Alex’s cheek and pulled her a little closer, eager for as much contact as she could get before the usual vagaries of sleep separated their bodies in the night.

“I love you, too,” Alex said. She’d lie still, hoping Olivia would sleep--hoping she could sleep herself--and try to think about anything but Madeline, but the conversation they’d had the night before played in her head on a loop, and snippets of memories from years ago functioned as a kind of backdrop to the words echoing in her brain. It would be a long night.
Chapter 26

Friday, May 23, 2014

5:00 p.m.

“We’ve never really talked about Robert.”

Dr. Jackson surprised Alex with her choice of topics. From their recent conversations, it seemed obvious that they’d jump right back into some master’s-level thesis on ethics or the narrative self. Alex had to credit the doctor: Even though an abrupt change of course was an old trick in questioning a witness, it was a good trick, because it worked. Usually.

“There’s not much to tell,” Alex said lazily. “He’s a nice man. I hurt him, and I’m not proud of that, but he says he’s forgiven me.”

“He says,” Jackson repeated. “Don’t you believe him?”

“I suppose. He’s gone on with his life, as he should. He has a great job he enjoys, a wife he raves about and adorable two-year-old twins. I see him occasionally and he’s always friendly.”

“You seem to find that remarkable. People break up all the time and go on to have warm relationships. Even divorced couples can remain the best of friends.”

“I didn’t behave well toward him. If he’d chosen to stop speaking to me, he’d have been justified.”

“But he didn’t choose that, apparently,” the doctor pointed out. “You said you see him. What does that mean? Do you bump into one another?”
“It isn’t usually incidental,” Alex clarified. “We have lunch. Two or three times a year we get together and catch up.”

“If he hadn’t forgiven you, do you think he would continue to accept your invitations?”

Alex was quiet for a moment, like witnesses are always quiet when they’ve been backed into a corner. Unlike an attorney, however, the psychiatrist didn’t go in for the kill. Instead, she allowed the lengthening seconds of interminable silence lay to between them, without a single word or gesture to fill the void. Very few people could wait out Alex Cabot, but Sharon Jackson could, and the patient finally relented.

“Actually, I’m not the one making the invitations,” she said. “Robert is the one who makes it a point to stay in touch. He emails every month or two to check in, calls every so often to grab lunch.”

“Why do you think he does that?”

“I couldn’t say,” Alex demurred. Dr. Jackson wasn’t having it.

“Sure you could,” she argued. “This isn’t court. I won’t object if you assume facts not in evidence.”

“I think he does it to make me feel better. To show me he’s okay.”

“Could it be that he is okay? That he realizes your breakup was the right thing for both of you? Could he just like you, and value your friendship?”

“Are you saying I’m a narcissist?”

“No,” the doctor said, her tone measured. “I’m saying you may be assuming responsibility for others’ feelings.”

“I don’t think that one should go through life hurting people with impunity.”
“Nor do I. But it does happen. We are human, and we hurt each other. Sometimes we do so thoughtlessly, or even on purpose, but most of the time it just happens, as we struggle to find our way from point A to point B.”

“Collateral damage,” Alex said.

“You could call it that, thought it sounds rather bellicose and fatal,” Dr. Jackson replied.

“Some people are emotional terrorists.”

“Do you think you are an emotional terrorist?”

“Sometimes,” Alex said. “I’ve hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt.”

“We all have,” Jackson said. “It’s a part of the human condition.”

“I’ve done more than my share,” Alex insisted. “And the people who should be hurt just float through life untouched. No scars, no fears.”

“Who should be hurt?”

“Lots of people. People who manipulate and collect and control others.”

“Anyone in particular?”

Alex was evasive. “I’m sure we could all name some people who inflict pain unnecessarily.”

“Name one,” Dr. Jackson said.

“I’d rather not.”
The silence hung in the room for a moment. The doctor had noticed that Alex was out of sorts when she walked in the room for her appointment, but she wasn’t sure how to penetrate the walls that had been thrown up for protection.

“What about Madeline?”

“What about her?” Alex’s reply was sharp.

“Did she hurt you, or did you hurt her?”

“I’m sure she would say that I did,” Alex said. “But no. She’s not capable of being hurt.”

“That’s an interesting point of view. You don’t believe everyone can be hurt?”

“Not her, no. I don’t.”

“You’re reacting very strongly to her, given that your relationship ended quite some time ago. I’m curious about that. How would you characterize your relationship with Madeline?”

“You mean five years ago?” As soon as Alex had spoken, she knew that Dr. Jackson had intuited something behind that particular choice of words.

“Then, or now,” the doctor allowed. “Whichever you prefer.”

“There is no now,” Alex said angrily. “We don’t have any relationship.”

“Okay, we can start wherever you like. Tell me what things were like between you then.”

“Our relationship was not a traditional one. We explored BDSM.”

“Many couples do.”

“Explored isn’t the right word. Practiced. Engaged in. Exclusively.”
“It was integral to your sexual intimacy?”

“It was integral to all of our intimacy. It was our intimacy. I don't believe Madeline is capable of any other kind.”

“How did your relationship begin?”

“We met at a fundraiser I was attending with a former colleague. She asked me out to dinner, then she had an extra ticket to a play I wanted to see. Then an invitation to her place in the Hamptons. She was smart, witty. Driven. Charming, when she wanted to be.”

“I'm sure she was,” Jackson said. “Those are not necessarily bad things. You had ended your relationship with Robert by this time, correct?”

“Yes, just a few months earlier. I broke off the engagement and went into a shell for a while. I certainly wasn't looking to meet anyone, so it was very surprising,” Alex said. “They were very different. He's a bright man, and he does well for himself, but he's not tough. He's inherently kind.”

“And Madeline isn't?”

“No. She isn't. She wasn't then, and she isn't now, but I couldn't see that.”

The doctor let the words sit there between them. She had treated many patients who blamed everyone else for their problems. Alex, on the other hand, always found a way to blame herself. After a moment, she asked another question.

“What drew you to her? There was wooing, clearly, with the dates and weekends. There must have been some attraction.”

“She is beautiful, in a way.”

“What does that mean, Alex?”
Alex was quiet a moment. She looked first at the walls, then at the floor, as if the answer would be found amongst the unremarkable art and muted textiles. “She is beautiful in a cold, stern way, somehow elegantly patrician and simultaneously terrifying. Honestly, I didn't understand the attraction at the time. She wasn't someone I'd find appealing under normal circumstances.”

“You didn't meet her under normal circumstances, though. You were experiencing a lot of upheaval.”

“In every possible way,” Alex acknowledged. “I'd had to find a new place to live after I left Robert. The friends I'd made were his friends. I was miserable at work. Being the bureau chief in Appeals wasn't all I'd hoped it would be. In fact, I had just been asked to cover some SVU cases while their regular ADA was in Washington. I saw the SVU detectives at a crime scene, and it was a little unsettling.”

“By the SVU detectives, I assume you mean Olivia.”

“Yes. All of them, but especially Olivia. I hadn't seen her in three years, and she called me on that. It was the perfect opportunity to reconnect with her. I was single, I thought I was doing pretty well, getting back to my old self. Then I saw her, and it threw me for a loop. It was all I could do to focus on the case and get my job done. The day I saw them—saw her—again...I met Madeline later that night.”

“That's quite a coincidence.”

“Don't patronize me,” Alex snapped. “My interest in Madeline was obviously an emotional reaction to seeing Olivia. She was a woman, she was interested, and most importantly, she wasn't Olivia. She gave me an excuse not to even try to bridge the gap with Liv.”

“Ah,” Jackson said. “So she's very different from your wife?”

“Completely. Olivia is soft, and giving, and generous. I thought I had been unhappy with Robert because he was a man. I mean, he's a good guy, nice, handsome--what's not to like? I assumed I just couldn't make it work because he wasn't a woman. But I was unhappy because he wasn't Olivia. Then, when I had a chance to talk to her again, I just shut down.”

Alex would be happy to turn this conversation into an endless digression. She'd talk about Olivia, or Robert, or the little-known nuances of the Fifth Amendment if it would end the discussion of
Madeline. Dr. Jackson had never pressed her this hard, but felt that they'd never get back here if she didn't push the point right now.

“Let's get back to Madeline,” the therapist suggested.

“Fine,” Alex said, her brusque tone indicating that this line of conversation was anything but fine. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to understand it, Alex. I think it will be helpful to you to understand it, as well,” she gently explained. “So, you met her, spent some time together, she was intriguing...what happened next?”

“We dated. We had sex. Then one night it got a little rougher than it ever had before. She said she wanted to restrain me.”

“How did you react to that?”

“I was surprised, I'd had no inkling. But I wasn't turned off. I'd engaged in some light bondage here and there—who hasn't? It sounded like fun.”

“And was it?”

“No. Fun isn’t the word, really. I felt liberated somehow. It was sexy, and exhilarating and...”

Jackson waited a moment before prompting. “And...?”

“And it turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg,”

“An iceberg you didn't like?”

“Madeline likes to refer to me as provincial, but I'm really not. What happens between two consenting adults is no-one else’s business. It can be very healthy.”
“Can be?” the doctor asked, sensing words left unspoken.

“Can be,” Alex repeated. “In my case, it wasn't good for me. I wasn't myself, and those needs came from a place I didn't like and couldn't identify. I wasn't forced, of course. I did it willingly, and for a while I really enjoyed it. Then there came a time when I didn't enjoy it anymore. I didn't want it, or I didn't need it, I guess.”

“How did Madeline take that?”

“She was very unhappy. She called me a tourist. Accused me of using her to satisfy an urge to experiment.”

“Is that how you saw it?”

“No, not at all. But it wasn't something that was important to me. It obviously was to her, and it wasn't an option to continue on if that wouldn't be part of our relationship. So I got out. I didn't hold it against her—it was something she needed, and I wasn't the right person to make her happy. Looking back later, it was almost incomprehensible to me. I couldn’t reconcile the choices I made then with the person I appear to be.”

“The person you appear to be?” the doctor asked. “You’ve talked about this before, the idea that you are not who you seem.”

“Variations on a theme.” Alex didn’t seem willing to revisit that topic, though, and Jackson made a decision to move on from it for the moment.

“How long did your relationship with Madeline last?”

“About 18 months.”

“And what did you get out of it, Alex?”

“It was such a rush,” she confessed. “The power was intoxicating.”
“Her power?”

“No. My power. The top controls the action, but the bottom controls the whole scene. I felt I had no control anywhere else in my life, and it felt good. The first time she fastened those cuffs around my wrists...I felt a sense of relief. I still don’t know if she helped me see that I needed that, or if she convinced me that I did.”

“Was your relationship monogamous?”

“Yes,” Alex confirmed. “We never played with anyone else--Madeline was far too possessive for that, even if I’d wanted to consider it--but we went to a couple of private clubs.”

“Sex clubs?”

“Yes, I suppose that’s accurate, though they were very exclusive--invitation-only kind of places. We watched others. Occasionally we would chat with other couples there, but for the most part it was pure voyeurism.”

“Did you socialize with any of these couples?”

“No, never outside of the club. We didn’t need to, though. We were very focused on one another. I liked that, to be honest. It was very intense, with private rituals and a language no one else could speak. I felt like I belonged, and I hadn't belonged anywhere, or to anyone, in a very long time. I had become so used to keeping secrets and telling lies in WitSec that it came naturally to me, and I had a whole life that no-one knew about, not even my best friend.”

“You never shared this with Kate?”

“No. At first, I wanted to keep it all to myself. I didn’t want to share it with anyone. But by the time I wanted to talk--I had grown unhappy and was looking for a way out--I knew it would just make Kate angry.”

“Why?”
“She never liked Madeline. Kate is a much better judge of people than I am, and she knew Madeline wasn’t a good person. Kate would be upset that I had kept it from her, I think, but it would also feed into her dislike of Madeline, and I just didn’t want to hear about it.”

“I told you so?” Jackson ventured.

“Yes, exactly. When I ended up breaking it off with Madeline, I didn’t see any reason to tell Kate all of the details.”

“You said at one point that you and Olivia have bumped into Madeline once. Do you have any other contact with her these days?”

Alex thought about Madeline’s campaign donation, the illegal activities she had undertaken to help get Alex elected, the post-dinner visit to Madeline’s apartment that had left Alex fully clothed but emotionally stripped just a few days before. And all of that boiled down to one answer.

“No.” Alex would have sounded convincing if not for the pause that preceded her assertion.

“And Olivia,” Jackson said. “Does she know about your relationship with Madeline?”

“Not in any detail. I don’t see the point.”

“You haven’t shared with her the fact that BDSM was such an important factor in that relationship? Or why it ended?”

“No,” Alex said. “No, I haven’t. And I’m damn sure not going to.”

“Why? Are you ashamed of it?”

“I’m not ashamed of what I did, but I’m embarrassed that I was controlled and manipulated by someone like Madeline. And that’s in the past. It doesn’t matter now. Olivia doesn’t need to know.”
Alex didn’t believe her own words, but she’d been repeating them in her head lately like a mantra:

*That’s in the past.*

*It doesn’t matter now.*

*Olivia doesn’t need to know.*
Chapter 27

Thursday, July 10, 2014

It never failed. When July rolled around, the heat and humidity settled in and everyone seemed to forget the joy they'd felt as spring had turned to summer. The days were long, and the city's collective temper grew short. More shootings, more gang violence, more idle mischief—the police were even busier than usual, and Olivia was working all the time. They had made a little progress on the boutique rapist, but were still gaining no traction on the serial case. There hadn't been any more deaths, thankfully, but that meant there hadn't been any more clues either.

A five-day heat wave had made Alex feel like she was wilting when she left the house at 7:30 in the morning, and coming out of the office at dusk was no better. Olivia wasn't the only one who was busy: Alex and Kate could manage little more than the occasional flurry of texts back and forth. Uncle Bill had gone to New Haven for the summer, and Alex couldn't seem to find time to go visit. And Madeline was just...there.

She and Alex had not seen one another since the dinner at Sfoglia, but she emailed, and she called Alex's cell phone—she'd made it clear by email that if she didn't get that number, she'd have no choice but to call the office, and did Alex really want that?

*It will begin to seem inappropriate if the District Attorney is taking regular calls from a major donor. And make no mistake. I will be calling as often as I wish.*

*Attempted donor,* Alex had said.

*That won't make any difference if word gets out, Alexandra, and you can't trust anyone around you. No one is looking out for you, darling, except me.*

*Fine.* Alex wasn't sure why she'd said that. Nothing about this was fine.

Alex had given her the number, and Madeline had used it. Not daily—sometimes not even weekly—but often enough to serve as a reminder that she was there, hovering over Alex's shoulder, creating a constant sense of low-level dread and anxiety. Their conversations were brief, usually consisting of little more than an exchange of insincere pleasantries. Madeline wanted to see Alex, and reiterated that desire each time they communicated, but she was always very careful to insist that she was patient. She could wait, and she would.

Alex did what she had always done when things weren't going well—she buried herself in work. It was a habit she developed after her brother's death, on the advice of her dad, and it had served her well ever since. She remembered a conversation they'd had a couple of months after Evan had died.

"*When you're going through hell, Alex, you've got to keep going.*"

"*What do you mean?*"
"Well, honey, Winston Churchill was a smart man," he'd said. "That was something he told the British people during WWII: 'If you're going through hell, keep going.' When things are bad, you can't stand still. All that does is keep you in hell. So you've got to move forward. Dig your heels in and get some traction."

"How?" Alex asked him. She felt lost and she was having trouble picturing the next hour without her brother, much less the next week or month or year. Their house was too quiet, and Evan's bedroom door was shut, but there was no loud music or laughter coming from inside. Alex's mom couldn't bear to clean out his things, but she couldn't bear to see them either. She was devastated—they all were. But her dad was doing his best to find some joy in each day, to keep the whole family from coming apart at the seams, and to remind them all that life had to go on. He made her go to school, when she wanted to just stay home and hide. He got up and went to work, even though his heart was broken.

"You just have to, honey. You have to get up when you don't want to. You have to put one foot in front of the other. Cancer killed Evan. Don't let grief kill you."

"What about mom?" Eleanor was the only one who'd proven to be beyond the reach of his relentless encouragement. She was pale, and had lost a lot of weight. She slept most of the day, and never left the house. "She cries every time she looks at me, and she doesn't seem to want me around, but she gets upset every time I try to go anywhere or do anything."

"Mom..." He trailed off. He was quiet for a moment, finding the right words. "Alex, as sad as we are, mom may be even sadder. For a parent to lose a child...it's unimaginably hard."

"You were Evan's parent, too."

"Yes, sweetie, I was. I am. I will always be Evan's dad, just like you'll always be his sister. It's different for your mom, though. She and Evan were so much alike. You know how your mom and your Uncle Bill always laugh and say that you and I are two peas in a pod? Well, that was your mom and Evan. She loves you both, more than you can imagine, but sometimes two souls are just in sync, and that was the case with them. She sees you and you remind her of him, but she's also terribly afraid that something will happen to you. She wants to protect you. It may take her a while to find a happy medium there."

"I'm worried about her." The feeling had been nagging at Alex for a while, and she felt a little better for finally voicing it.

Her dad sighed. He looked sadder, somehow, and a little bit older than he had just a moment before. "I'm worried about her too, Alex, he said. All we can do is love her and support her. She will find her way out of this. We all will."

"I don't want to forget him," she said. Her voice was very childlike, all of a sudden. Any parent of a teenager knows that dichotomy all too well—someone who seems like a jaded adult one minute can become a bewildered kid the next.

"You won't forget him, honey. Never, ever. But you have to live your life now. We've all been on hold for a while, trying to help him get better, and it may be hard to figure out what our new normal will look like. Sometimes, you just have to put your head down and move forward. It doesn't mean you stop being sad, or forget why you were sad in the first place. But at the end of the day, it's better to be exhausted from working than from crying."

She'd never forgotten that. She felt like there was a lot going on that she couldn't control. She couldn't make Madeline disappear—she felt like she was stacking up sandbags to try to keep a
tsunami at bay. But she'd keep her head down, and work as hard as she could, and pile up as many sandbags as possible. Maybe, just maybe, if she could stall long enough, the storm would turn another direction.

Each time Madeline emailed or called, it knocked Alex sideways a step or two. She became irritable, and then depressed. Worst of all, she couldn't bear to go home and see or talk to or touch Olivia while she felt like Madeline's words were still on her skin and in her hair, or poisoning the air around her. So she stayed at work late, and when she got home—on the nights Olivia was there herself, that is—the time and opportunity for interaction was minimal. Olivia just assumed that she was tired from working so many hours, and didn't press her to engage on any deeper level. She didn't even attempt to initiate physical intimacy when she could tell that Alex was beyond her reach, somehow. When Madeline hadn't been in touch for a few days, life could seem almost normal and Alex and Olivia could exist like a married couple rather than roommates at a boarding house. When she had communicated, though, every question Olivia asked, no matter how benign, felt like an inquisition and every touch felt like an accusation. Alex kept thinking she should just agree to see Madeline, and get it over with, come what may. But if she was so discombobulated by a simple phone call, how on earth would she recover from another face-to-face meeting?

Things were difficult enough without the fear of her marriage, career and life being ruined. After her conversation in May with Jack McCoy, she had moved forward with her plan to restructure the office's trial division, eliminating some units, combining others. She hadn't announced it publicly yet, but she had discussed it with her executive team, and the reaction was decidedly mixed.

Most of the EADAs became immediately defensive: Their fiefdoms were at risk and change made them nervous. A couple of them were on board, eager to offer their input and assistance. Those were the ones who had no need to worry about losing their jobs—their attitudes were as stellar as their work. There wasn't a lot of explicit opposition in the conference room, but Laurie kept her abreast of the grumbling that went on behind her back.

*Is it a full-blown revolt?* Alex had asked.

*Revolt may be a bit strong,* Laurie said. *Let's just say they're not all on board.*

*I'm going to need them to back me,* Alex said. *This won't work if they can't get behind it.*

*I'll keep my ear to the ground,* Ms. Cabot.
Chapter 28

Tuesday, July 22, 2014

5:45 p.m.

It had been an unusually quiet day, and Olivia was the only one still in the squadroom; everyone else had taken off at 5, always eager to get out at a reasonable hour when there was a chance. She was almost through a small stack of DD-5 reports when the call came in about a murder. A patrol sergeant from the 10th precinct was reaching out to the 1-6 for a detective.

“Why call us?” Olivia asked, looking--hoping--for any way out of responding to a scene. If only she’d just left with everyone else, they’d have had to summon the on-call team, and that wouldn’t be her. But she was stuck now.

“It’s Helena Adamson.”

“Should I have any idea what you’re talking about?”

“She runs that law firm, Adamson Charles,” the cop explained.

“Ah, right,” Olivia said. Something called divorce finance was apparently a new way for lawyers to profit off of the suffering of others, and Adamson Charles was leading the way. They had billboards all over the place and had franchised in five states. “So it’s potentially high-profile. But that’s Major Case, not SVU.”

Another try to wriggle free of this case, another roadblock quickly thrown up.

“Looks like there may have been sexual assault, Sergeant Benson.”
“May have been?”

“My guys were responding to an anonymous 911 call. As soon as they saw the body, they cleared and sealed the residence and told me to call you. The body is dressed and posed rather provocatively. I’d bet my paycheck that this is an SVU case.”

“Damn,” Olivia said.

“I know that’s not what you want to hear, and I don’t blame you,” Sergeant Johnston said. “If I could make those showboating bastards in Major Case take this one, I’d do it in a second.”

Olivia laughed. “They are a bunch of prima donnas, aren’t they?”

“They love the newspapers,” he said. “And I don’t think it’s because they like to read. I’ll leave it at that.”

“Alright, I can see I won’t get out of this. Thanks, Bob. I’ll be there in 15.”

She called Nick and gave him the address, telling him she’d fill him in on what little she knew at the scene. And then she made the call she dreaded. Two quick rings stood between her and an angry wife.

“Cabot,” she answered. She couldn’t break the habit; even when she knew Olivia was calling, she still answered like it was a work call about half the time.

“Honey.” It was all Olivia had to say. Alex sighed in response.

“No,” Alex said hopefully. “Just tell me you’re running late. I can deal with late.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. I was catching up on a stack of paperwork and I don’t know why I picked up the phone.”

“Goddamn it.” Alex’s voice was quiet.
“I know. And it won’t be a simple one, I’m afraid. Helena Adamson appears to be our victim. She was found probably raped and definitely murdered in her loft in Chelsea. There are so many famous people in that building there’ll be a circus even before she’s publicly identified.”

“Her firm spawned a cottage industry,” Alex said. “They make it possible for people to get a divorce and take their spouse to the cleaners even if they can’t afford a Divorce for Dummies book. I’m sure she’s pissed off a lot of people, at least professionally. You’ll have no shortage of suspects.”

“Well, that will be a pleasant change from the other cases I’m working, where I have no suspects at all.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Alex cautioned. She was quiet a moment before continuing. “Our quiet evening is officially a bust, then.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. Be careful, Liv. Whenever you make it home, you’d better be in one piece. Let me know what’s going on.”

“Alex.”

“Yes?”

“I really am sorry,” Olivia whispered. “I needed that time with you. I’ll make it up to you very soon.”

“I needed it, too.”

The resignation and disappointment in Alex’s voice cut through Olivia like a winter wind slices between buildings, the kind that comes from nowhere, pushing you sideways—even half a step—just enough to alter your path. She’d expected anger. The sadness she’d gotten instead was harder to take, somehow.
Alex was flying solo tonight, and she didn’t like it. As long as she stayed busy, she didn’t dwell on the intractability of her current situation. But finding herself with any unexpected downtime was a disaster. She found herself constantly torn between going over to Madeline’s apartment, letting herself in and telling Madeline to fuck off, no matter what she knew or would do, or just curling up in a ball and crying until there were no more tears.

Neither option seemed like a good one, so she changed clothes and headed out for a run. She focused on the music playing in her earbuds, measured her steps to the cracks in the sidewalk, counted every taxi she saw—anything to avoid thinking. Work, Madeline, the cracks in her relationship with Olivia—every single thing that crept into her brain was a minefield. With Olivia at work until God-knows-when and a whole evening lying empty like a gaping hole before her, she didn’t need to step on any mines.
“You look as pissed as I feel.” Nick sized Olivia up as he joined her in the lobby of the Chelsea Mercantile building on 7th Avenue.

“I’m kicking myself for not leaving when you did. I took the fucking phone call and now I’ve ruined your night and mine.”

“You’ll never learn,” he said, shaking his head. “Too damn conscientious, trying to dot every I and cross every T. Just wait ‘til you’re a captain. You’ll just have to sleep at the station house.”

“Amaro, do me a favor?”

“Sure, partner. What is it?”

“Kill me if that happens,” she begged. “Make it look accidental, but just kill me and save Alex from a jail term when she tries to do it herself.”

“Trouble in paradise, Benson?”

“I never even get to spend enough time in paradise to be sure, but I think the natives are restless.”

“Better take care of your business, partner. She doesn’t seem like someone I’d want mad at me.”
“She has been mad at you,” Olivia teased. “How did you like it?”

“I didn’t know enough back then to worry too much,” Nick said. “But if the brief taste I got is any indication, it isn’t a good thing.”

“No, it’s not,” Olivia confirmed. “I need to talk to Cragen about some time off.”

“I can’t imagine Alex is home much more than you are.”

“She’s not, you’re right. But when she is home, I’m never there. And with a serial rapist and a serial killer and now this bullshit that’s gonna be all over the news, I may as well just move in to the crib. Then I can call Alex when I am coming home, instead of when I’m not.”

Nick shook his head. He’d been there, and it was stressful as hell. You love the person and you love the job and it’s hard for those two things to coexist. He thought Alex was probably a lot more understanding than most, but that wouldn’t last forever. The job never stopped. There was a murder victim case waiting for them right now, and it would only add to their workload.

“Come on, Liv. We’re here now. Standing in this lobby isn’t doing us any good. May as well do what we get paid for.”

7:20 p.m.

Alex ran for a half-hour, and mostly managed to direct her thoughts to the less-dangerous recesses of her mind. But when she got home, the quiet was unusually oppressive. She showered, put on music, thought about dinner and only got as far as deciding on a glass of Shiraz. She felt at loose ends, left holding two ends of an emotional rope plenty long enough to hang herself.

When she couldn’t stand it another minute, she picked up the phone.
“The beauty of a longstanding friendship is that you can ignore someone for months on end, and then just call out of the blue and act as if you’d only just spoken the day before. Wouldn’t you agree, Cab?” Kate hadn’t even said hello when she’d answered the phone, skipping the niceties to launch into a veiled reprimand.

“We’ve talked.”

“We’ve had face-time about campaign business, Madame District Attorney. We’ve toasted your victory in a crowd of hundreds. That doesn’t count as talking.”

“Either I’m experiencing déjà vu, or we’ve had this conversation before,” Alex said.

“Look at you, using your fancy French terminology to change the subject.”

Alex laughed so hard she nearly spat out the wine she was sipping. “Fancy French…” she began, but was cut off.

“Never mind all that,” Kate said. “What’s going on?”

“Well, I was calling precisely because we haven’t had time to talk lately. I thought maybe you’d want to meet somewhere for dinner or drinks. Just us.”

“Tonight?” Kate’s tone already said that was unlikely to happen.

“Sure, tonight would be good.” It was as close as Alex could come to what she actually wanted to say: Yes, please, tonight. I need to talk to you. She was trying hard to sound casual, and it was working too well, because Kate didn’t hear any urgency in the words or the tone.

“Ah, I wish I could, Alex, but you know your schedule isn’t the only reason we haven’t seen one another much. I’m just as guilty as you are. Work is insane, and…” She trailed off.

“And?”
“And Marina,” Kate finished.

“Marina is insane?” Alex joked.

“No, just the opposite, actually. I’m going to move in with her, Cab.”

Alex’s mind was racing, trying to come up with the right words to say, struggling to remember if there had been any hint that things were so serious between her best friend and the NYU professor.

“Well, say something.”

“I’m surprised, Kate, you’ll have to give me a minute. It’s a lot to absorb.”

“Hard to believe that anyone would want to live with me?”

“No, not at all,” Alex said. “But hard to believe that you’d want to live with anyone, to be honest. You’ve always said that would never happen, and frankly, you’re getting so old I was starting to believe it.”

“Always have to get a dig in, don’t you?”

“No one ever wants a dose of their own medicine,” Alex laughed, then she was quiet for a few seconds. “I’m happy for you both. You know I am, Kate. But it’s a shock to the system. When is all of this happening?”

“Tonight. That’s why I can’t meet you for.”

“Tonight,” Alex repeated. “You don’t waste time, do you?”

“Well, I don’t have moving men coming tonight, but I do have a broker coming over to start the process of getting my place up for lease. We’ve talked about it for a while, and I’m practically living with her as it is. It’s time, Alex. It’s the right thing for me. She’s the right person.”
There was dead air, and it dragged on long enough that Kate wondered if the call had dropped. “Cab, you gonna give me the silent treatment?”

“No, of course not. I'm not used to hearing you talk like this, that's all. Are you in love with her, Kate?”

“Yeah, you know, I am. She's amazing, and I know I've spent a lot of time trying not to be pinned down, but...let's put it this way: I don’t know that she’s the answer. But she certainly raises a lot of interesting questions.”

“She must be amazing, because if I recall correctly, she lives in Brooklyn. The elusive Kate Merritt, Ms. Hard-to-Get herself, is moving to Brooklyn for a woman. Will wonders never cease?”

“Well, you know, Olivia Benson agreed to marry you, and that just proved to me that anything is possible. I mean, if someone can love you...”

“Oh, stop. I'd hate to have to kick your sorry ass just when you've found someone who'll put up with it. I need to congratulate you in person. How about this weekend?”

“That won't work, either. We're going to visit Marina's family—it's her parents' 50th anniversary.”

“She's thoroughly domesticated you. You'll have to give me your address in the outer boroughs so I can be sure you get your subscription of Good Housekeeping.”

“Very funny.” Kate replied in her usual brusque tone, before softening a bit. “I'm sorry, Alex. I do want to get together. Soon, I promise. Things will calm down once I handle the crap with the apartment and everything. And I will email you the address—if you're ever overcome with wanderlust, you can venture across the Brooklyn Bridge and come visit me in Park Slope. You can hold the magazine subscription, though.”

“Alright,” Alex conceded. “No magazine, but I am going to hold you to that promise to get together, though.” It was what you say, when you don't have it in you to tell someone you're struggling. Alex knew she could level with Kate, and tell her that she really needed some time—an early-morning coffee or a late-night drink would do, anywhere Kate could squeeze her in—but she couldn't bring herself to press the issue, not while Kate was so happy, and so busy being happy. “And Kate?”
“Yeah?”

“I guess it could be worse. Park Slope isn’t shabby.”

They ended the call, and Alex felt even more alone than she had before. She had been ready to tell Kate everything, to deal with whatever the reaction was. She needed someone to pull her back from the precipice she was on, but it obviously wasn’t going to be Kate. Olivia was overworked and under pressure, Bill was still out of town, and even her therapist refused to see how truly fucked up she was.

Only one person in her life would hold her accountable. Unfortunately, that one person was what she needed to be held accountable for, an irony that didn’t escape her as she dialed the phone. It was a number she had seen pop up on her phone too many times, but she hadn’t dialed it herself. She hadn’t initiated any contact since the night Madeline had pressed that key into her palm. Until now.
Alex settled into the soft leather seat and crossed her legs, swiveling the chair slightly to face the psychiatrist and fighting a very strong urge to cross her arms, as well. Her years in a courtroom had made her keenly aware of body language and the messages it sends, and a defensive posture could send the whole session down a path she’d prefer not to travel.

“How have you been, Alex?”

“Pretty well,” she replied. “Work is stressful, but that’s nothing unusual.”

“Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” the doctor joked.

“Something like that.”

“How are you getting along? You’ve had a few months to adjust to the new job. I’m sure it’s a change.”

“More than I expected, maybe,” Alex agreed. “As an EADA, you’re supervising a team, but you also have a boss. Maybe more importantly, you have peers, someone who’s dealing with the same challenges and issues.”

“You don’t have that now.”

“Well, unless you want to count the other DAs around the state, no.”
“And do you want to count them?” Jackson asked.

“No,” Alex laughed. “I don’t, actually. I’d rather go it alone, if they’re my only option.”

“Who do you confide in, professionally?”

Alex thought for a moment. “Well, I have my executive team. But I am their boss. When they do agree with me, I suspect they’re being obsequious.”

“What happens when they don’t agree with you?”

“They’re still obsequious,” Alex said. “And then they go back to their offices and slander me to their subordinates while they plan the inevitable insurrection.”

“That sounds rather unsettling,” the therapist observed.

“It’s not doing much for my sense of trust, let’s put it that way. I certainly don’t feel I can rely on what people say, and I’m not always aware of what they do.”

“A conundrum,” Jackson mused. “Do you have anyone you can rely on at the office?”

“Laurie, my right-hand woman,” Alex said. “She was Colin’s assistant and she agreed to stay on temporarily to help with the transition. I created the chief-of-staff position to reward her for the amazing job she does, and luckily it enticed her to stay. I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“She’s removed from all of the office politics?”

“Not removed, really. Attuned to it, perhaps. She tells me what’s going on, and then she tells me what’s really going on. They’re not always the same thing. Most days, she’s the only thing keeping me sane.”
“Are you happy, Alex?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not a trick question. Are you happy?”

“There are many kinds of happiness.” She didn’t mean to equivocate; she just didn’t know how to answer that question.

“Yes, there are. Hedonic and eudaimonic are the types most often cited in research, happiness derived from pleasure or happiness derived from a sense of purpose or well-being.”

“I read The Happiness Myth: a moment of happiness, a good day, a happy life.”

“Three very distinct forms of happiness, and they’re not always compatible with one another. Making a decision that will result in a moment of happiness has a short-term benefit, but could also have long-term repercussions that undermine your ability to have a good day or a happy life.”

“I’m not having very many happy moments or good days lately,” Alex admitted.

“And the happy life?” Jackson asked. “Putting aside the day-to-day troubles, do you feel like you’re where you want to be?”

“it’s hard to be happy when you’re afraid.”

“What’s keeping you from being happy? We talked about your fears and your ambivalence before the election. What are you afraid of, Alex?”

“I’m afraid I can’t be happy. I will find a way to sabotage any good thing that comes to me. Maybe I’m not capable of that deep sense of well-being.”

“When did you last feel truly happy, or at peace?”
Alex didn’t need any time to ponder that question. “When Liv and I got married. It was the happiest
time of my life.”

“So you are capable of it,” Jackson pointed out.

“It was less than a year ago, but it seems like so much longer.”

“Let’s focus on the fact that you know you can be happy, while we continue to work through your
fears and concerns. Knowing that something is possible can make a big difference in how we work
to achieve it.”

“What if it isn’t enough?”

“If what isn’t enough?”

“Everything,” Alex said. “What if every time you fill that hole inside yourself, you manage to dig a
new hole? What if you finally have everything you ever wanted, and it isn’t enough? What then?”

Dr. Jackson looked closely at Alex, knowing they’d ventured into territory that wouldn’t be
quickly or easily conquered. She wished their session weren’t at an end.

“I don’t have an answer for that, Alex. I can help you get there, and I will, but ultimately that’s a
question only you can answer for yourself.”

7:18 p.m.

Not everyone was as patient as Madeline. Dev pulled his phone out of his pocket to see who was
calling. It took him less than a second to reject the call. He didn’t want to have that conversation,
but someone had other ideas. The phone buzzed again, and then again. He finally stepped away from the group to take the call.

“I can’t really talk right now,” he said, but his caller was undeterred.

“You can talk to me. I haven’t heard from you in over a month.”

“No need to call if there’s nothing to say.”

“You’re content to just stand by and wait for something to happen.”

“What choice do I have?” Dev asked. “I’m not calling the shots here. It will all work out. Calm down.”

“You surprise me. You don’t seem like the type to let someone string you along like this. You’ve taken all the risks, you’ve suffered all the consequences. What are you getting out of it? I guess you don’t mind being a file clerk for the rest of your life.”

“Shut up,” Dev snapped. “You don’t know anything about it. It’s a fine job, and every week I find an extra $1,000 in my checking account. I don’t know where it comes from, and I don’t care. I can bide my time for fifty grand a year.”

“I had no idea your price tag was so low. This woman will cut you off as soon as she gets whatever it is that she wants, and if trouble comes, she’ll leave you twisting in the wind. You have to find a way to speed things up somehow.”

“Everything is going to be fine,” he insisted. “I’m not worried.”

“Well, I sure as hell am. We’re in this together now, and I’ll be twisting in the wind with you. I won’t have it. You may be happy to let this meander along, but my happiness and peace of mind costs a hell of a lot more than a thousand bucks a week. Do something, Dev, or I will.”
Chapter 31

-31-

Wednesday, July 30, 2014

1:30 p.m.

The Adamson murder had proven to be every bit the nightmare Olivia had feared. The woman had enemies all over the place, and a handful of friends that Olivia wouldn’t trust as far as she could throw them. The list of suspects included a current lover, a soon-to-be ex-husband, three current or former colleagues and scores of disgruntled people who had gotten more than they bargained for in court due to her firm’s divorce finance loans.

“I didn’t even know what the hell divorce finance was until last week,” Nick said. They were sifting through statements, verifying some alibis and calling others into question. The soon-to-be ex was due in for questioning at two o’clock, and he’d be bringing a lawyer or two himself.

“Don’t you ever see billboards, Amaro?” Fin asked. “That damn place advertises all over the city. You’re lucky your ex didn’t make use of their services when you split.”

“Hell, Fin, are you crazy? They only loan money to people who are gonna get money in a divorce. All she got was the furniture and half the bills,” Nick said.

“What’s the deal with the husband?” Amanda asked.

“Well, he’s looking good for it any way you slice it,” Olivia said. “First, they’re still married, so her death invalidates their prenup, meaning he stands to inherit a lot of money and real estate. He also has the distinction of having been turned down for a loan by her firm.”

“No fuckin’ way,” Fin said. “He applied for a loan from his wife’s firm?”

“He did,” Nick confirmed. “The prenup spelled out most of the financial details, but he was going
to get some money from her, and she was playing hardball with custody. He’s a doctoral student, went back to school after some sort of early midlife crisis--guy doesn’t have a ton of ready cash sitting around to pay retainer fees.”

“And he didn’t want to risk losing custody of his kids by hiring the kind of attorney he could afford. So he applied, figuring he’d go for custody and child support. While you’re paying the lawyers, you may as well get what you can get. She was going to pay him a lump sum of 500 thousand, so he easily cleared the minimum loan amount of 50k.”

“But he was turned down?” Amanda asked.

“Of course he was,” Nick said. “I don’t know if he thought she wouldn’t know he’d applied, or maybe he just thought he’d make it public that she’d turned him down. Either way, when he got the notification that he wasn’t approved, he went into her office, stormed past the lackeys and made a huge scene in her office. Security had to remove him.”

“When was this?” Fin asked.

“A week before she was murdered.”

“Why didn’t she press charges?”

“She didn’t want that kind of publicity, oddly enough,” Olivia said. “She had security camera footage she could use against him, so it didn’t serve her well to do anything else about it. At least that’s what her head of security told us. No arrest, no restraining order, nothing.”

“Well, we all know a restraining order wouldn’t matter if he was determined to kill her,” Amanda pointed out. “No security or cameras at home, though?”

“No one else around, cameras not running, system disarmed.”

“Of course,” Fin said. “Where were the kids?”

“With grandma in Westchester. They go for a week every summer.”
“How could it be anybody but the husband?” Amanda asked. “Who else would have the alarm code, know where the kids were…”

“Lots of people,” Nick interrupted. “This woman…” He shook his head.

“There was a lover who sometimes stayed over. Several employees knew her personal business. There were household employees who could have done it themselves, or passed along information to someone for money. And apparently she was in the habit of having one-night-stands.” Olivia ticked off a litany of reasons the obvious suspect wasn’t such a slam dunk.

“Does this guy have an alibi?”

“He says he does, but he hasn’t shared it with us yet,” Nick explained. “That’s why he’s coming in today.”

“Can’t wait to hear this one,” Tutuola laughed. “Good luck, you two. At least your picture hasn’t been in the Post for a few days.”

The paparazzi had snapped their pictures more than a few times coming in and out of the victim’s building, or her firm’s headquarters. When they got bored with the pictures of the husband or the lover, they’d show Nick or Olivia and mention that they were making no progress.

“Thanks a lot, Fin. Your support is touching.”

“No need to thank me, Liv. You know I’m your number one fan.”

She wadded up a piece of paper and threw it at him; it landed in the aisle between their desks.

“Thank God your detecting skills are better than your arm, Benson, or you’d really be in deep shit,” he laughed as he headed toward Cragen’s office.
Dev had been waiting so long he wasn’t even sure what he was waiting for anymore. He didn’t realize it, really, until his phone played a tune he hadn’t heard in a long while. He only assigned ringtones to certain people whose calls were more important than others. Despite the recent tongue-lashing he’d taken, he still hadn’t called Madeline, and felt now that his patience was paying off. She was calling him, and that had to be good news. He answered with a smile.

“You sound awfully chipper, Deval.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he said. “It’s a beautiful summer day, and a dull afternoon at work was just rescued by a call from one of my favorite people.”

“Your eager friendliness would be charming if it weren’t so obviously insincere. Unctuousness aside, how are you?”

“Fairly well,” he answered. “And you?” They didn’t usually exchanged pleasantries of any sort, so he had no idea what was going on.

“I’ve been better, to be honest,” Madeline said. “When I ask for something to happen, I expect it to be done.”

“Interesting,” he said. “Because when I’m promised something, I expect to receive it.”

“Clearly, we have a difference of opinions as to who owes what to whom.”

“Alex Cabot is the District Attorney,” Dev said. “I delivered that. And I’ve been quiet, waiting patiently for you to reward my efforts.” He didn’t know where this surge of courage was coming from, or how it would be received.

“Her election was part of what I wanted, certainly. But it wasn’t all that I wanted, and you know that,” Madeline replied frostily. “As for your reward, surely you don’t think that extra money in
He’d been fairly sure, of course, that the money was coming from Madeline, somehow. But she’d never acknowledged it before, and he had decided not to give it much thought. He deserved at least that much, so he took it and spent it. It had allowed him to get an apartment that was still less than he’d like, but a damn sight more than he’d had. It paid for a dinner out now and then with coworkers, and though they weren’t people he’d usually choose to be friends with—they couldn’t benefit him in any way, after all—it was what he had right now.

“I’m going to need more than that,” he told her.

“As am I,” she replied enigmatically.

“I don’t even know what it is that you want.” He hated playing these games with her. “How am I supposed to do my job when I don’t even know what success will look like?”

“We’ve discussed this before. I tell you what you need to know; nothing more and nothing less. You have to trust me,” she said. Then her voice softened just a bit. “Do you trust me, Deval?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“No, not really. But it would be nice if you weren’t quite so recalcitrant.”

“I can’t do anything,” he protested. “I’m on probation, you know.”

“I realize that. It’s never far from my mind, in fact. It shouldn’t be far from yours, either. As long as you do as I tell you, you’ll be protected. If you choose to color outside the lines, I will ensure that you are doing so in prison. You’ll be locked up in Queensboro Correctional Facility so fast you won’t have any idea what happened.”

He didn’t answer. No matter what he said, she’d accuse him of being petulant or uncooperative.

“I can see that you need clearer objectives,” she finally offered. “I thought you would be able to handle this alone, but clearly that isn’t the case. The District Attorney is a good administrator and
an even better attorney, but she doesn’t thrive when there is instability in her life, personally or professionally.”

“So you want me to make her life easier now? I have a law degree from Stanford and you now expect me to smooth out the bumps for a woman who ruined my life?”

“That law degree from Stanford isn’t doing you much good now, is it?” Madeline sneered. “Remember, Deval, you got yourself into the mess you’re in. You got involved in something you couldn’t handle, you lost your job, and you made decisions that resulted in the revocation of your license. All I have done is give you the opportunity to improve your situation and, perhaps, gain some measure of revenge in the process.”

“Revenge?” he spluttered. “You’re kidding me. Alex Cabot has everything she wants, and I have nothing.”

“She may have everything she wants, Deval. She does not have everything she needs, nor do I."

“You’re talking in circles. I don’t even understand what’s going on, and I sure as hell don’t know what you want me to do about it.”

“Be patient!” she snapped. “I will tell you what to do, since you are clearly unable to determine that for yourself.”

He had a million things to say, but he swallowed them all. This had to be nearing an end. If he could just hang on, he knew it would be worth his while.

“I don’t want you to smooth out the bumps for Ms. Cabot, Deval. I want to you to create them. She and I have a relationship…”

“She’s married.” He couldn’t help but interject. Was this woman delusional? It would be just his luck to have relied on a mental case as his last hope to get his life back.

“She is, indeed. You are a smart one, aren’t you? Forgive me for my earlier comment about that Stanford education.”
“You are a bitch,” he spat. He couldn’t hold his tongue any longer, but his vitriol had no effect on her.

“Yes, I am. Now, do you want to listen or do you want to continue to act out?” He was silent, so she continued. “As I was saying, Alexandra and I have a relationship of long standing. She has lost her way, in many regards, but I am confident she can be made to realize that she can correct those mistakes and move forward on a more appropriate path. But she needs help. She needs our help, Deval. And we will help her.”

“How?” Dev was seething, but she had him by the balls and he knew it.

“I don’t want you to make her life easier,” Madeline clarified. “I want you to make her life harder. I want her to feel like she hasn’t a friend in the world.”

“Except you.”

“Now, that’s better. I’m glad we’re on the same page. As long as she believes that she’s got everything under control, she will be reluctant to admit that she needs what I can offer her.”

“You want someone who has to be blackmailed or coerced into a relationship with you?”

“Don’t overreach, Deval. I’ve already told you far more than I need to, but you’ve been loyal to me, and I respect your need to understand the objectives in order to achieve them. Beyond that, my relationships are none of your concern.”

She was quiet for a moment, letting that sink in before she went on.

“I don’t expect you will need to do anything illegal. You are far more creative than that. I know that you have connections who are very close to Ms. Cabot, and it’s time for you to leverage those connections. Destabilize her. Divide and conquer, mon garçon. It’s a tried-and-true strategy.”

“What will I get out of all of this?” He’d been wondering that for a while. She’d never explicitly told him what he could expect—she’d lured him in with the carrot of revenge, and after he’d planted the files in Reilly’s computer and email, she had used the stick. If he got out of line, she’d cut him loose and he’d be facing several very unpleasant charges all on his own.
“It’s a shame that you can no longer practice law,” she said.

“There’s nothing you can do about that,” he said. “I’m disbarred.”

“In New York, yes. You are, at the moment, disbarred in New York. But tomorrow is another day, and there are 49 other states besides. Don’t limit your thinking. There are a myriad of possibilities, and I’m confident I can help you. I will reward you financially, as well. You’ve gone out on a limb here, and you deserve to be comfortable.”

“I want this to be over,” he said.

“As do I,” she agreed. “And it will be, soon. Keep your head down and do what needs to be done. We are both very close to achieving our aims. I won’t forget everything you’ve done, Deval. I’m looking forward to seeing the results of your work. I’ll be in touch.”

She signed off without another word. This whole thing was so fucking ridiculous, but he couldn’t see any way out other than to do what she said. It was time to start using his connections, as Madeline had said, but the first call he needed to make couldn’t take place during the workday. It would have to wait until he got home.

She’d damn well better deliver on her promises. I’d better get what I deserve, he thought. Everyone should really get what they deserve.

2:45 p.m.

“I didn’t kill her.” Dan Adamson had been sitting across the table from Nick and Olivia for more than a half-hour and nothing he’d said had veered very far from that denial. Unfortunately for him, nothing had veered anywhere close to an alibi, either, even though that was the ostensible reason for his visit to the station house.
“You keep saying that,” Nick grumbled.

“Because it’s true,” the man whined. He was in his late-30s, and looked every bit the threadbare grad student, with a shabby blue blazer that looked two sizes too big, an Oxford shirt and faded jeans. His tortoise-shell glasses seemed to highlight the gold flecks in his brown eyes, and his dark blond hair was shaggy and wavy, about two months past time for a haircut, Liv guessed.

His attorney laid a hand on the table. “My client is telling you the truth. He can’t tell you anything more than that, but we all know that if you had any evidence against him, you’d be arresting him instead of merely browbeating him. Can I suggest that you accept his averral and find the person who actually killed Mr. Adamson’s wife?”

“Take his word for it, you mean?” Nick’s tone was derisive. “Sure, I don’t see why not. What do you say, partner?”

“Why the hell not? No one ever lies in here, right?” Benson stood and walked around the table, standing behind the suspect and placing one hand on each slumped shoulder. “He looks honest.”

“I am honest,” Adamson protested.

“Then give us something to work with,” Nick said. “If you have an alibi, we need to hear it, Dan. We can’t help you if you don’t help us.”

“Look,” the attorney said. “Mr. Adamson is not a flight risk. He is now the only parent to two young children who are grieving their mother, and their well-being is consuming his every waking moment. I will confiscate his passport, if that makes you happy.”

“It would make me happy,” Olivia said. The attorney smiled and started to stand, when Benson suddenly pulled the cuffs off her belt and reached for Dan Adamson’s wrist. “Arresting this lying son-of-a-bitch would make me feel even better, though.”

“No,” the man cried. “I’ll lose my kids.”

“Hold up, Liv,” Nick said. “Give the guy a minute.”
“I’ve given him 45 minutes, and I haven’t heard one thing that makes me want to let him walk out of here.”

Their good cop/bad cop routine was well-practiced, but Nick never tired of watching how masterfully his partner played the heavy. Something about being threatened by a beautiful woman with handcuffs and a hellish temper made suspects all the more susceptible to Nick’s own feigned empathy. Nick looked at the Olivia, then at Dan Adamson, and at Olivia once again.

“Sarge, how about a second? Let me talk to him alone?”

Olivia seemed to consider the request for a moment, then made a show of snapping her cuffs back into their leather holster before leaving the room. She watched behind the one-way glass with Cragen as good-cop Nick took over. He stood and appeared to turn the knob that would cut the volume to the observation room, but the could still hear him loud and clear as he returned to the table.

“Look, buddy,” he began. “She’s the boss here, you know? I’m trying to help you out, but there’s only so much I can do. You’ve got come up with something.”

“I can’t,” Adamson said. He was on the verge of crying, Nick could tell.

Outside, Olivia murmured to Cragen. “This isn’t our guy. I don’t know what this guy’s story is, but he’s not a killer.”

Nick touched the guy’s arm, a brief but reassuring grasp. “Listen, Dan, I’m divorced myself. Not that long ago, in fact, so I know what you’re going through. We know the story. Your wife was screwing you over, big-time. Maybe you just lost it, went a little too far. There’s something called mitigating circumstances, and your lawyer can work with that. But you’ve gotta tell us what happened.”

“I’ll lose my kids if I tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Where I was,” Adamson explained. His lawyer leaned over and whispered in his ear, but was waved off.
“If you’ve got an alibi, spill it, man. If you don’t, my sergeant is gonna storm back in here and kick both our asses.”

“I’m an escort,” he whispered. “I was with a client when Helena was killed.”

In the observation room, Cragen and Benson were both surprised. This shambling milquetoast didn’t look like a gigolo.

Nick was incredulous, but managed to channel his amazement into a valid question. “Your wife was killed on a Tuesday afternoon. Even if I do buy your story about being an escort--and I’ve gotta tell you, it seems like a stretch--it’ll be a little harder to convince my boss that you were doing any kind of escorting on a weekday at four o’clock. And I’ll bet you can’t say who you were with, meaning I can’t confirm your story.”

Adamson leaned over and spoke briefly to his lawyer, then returned his gaze to Nick. “I’m not proud of this, Detective,” he insisted. “I was trying to make some extra money to pay a divorce lawyer, and a few months ago a friend introduced me to the owner of an escort service. I attend events with rich, older women who are single or divorced; occasionally, someone’s husband is out of town or can’t be bothered to do anything his wife cares about, so I’m introduced as a nephew or godson. I know I’m not a male model, but I’m well-read and polite, and that’s much more important in these circles. Summer is a slow time for an academic, so when I wasn’t with my kids, I worked on my dissertation and took as many bookings as I could. The day Helena was killed, I had accompanied a regular client to a donors’ event at MOMA. It was a noon luncheon, followed by an hour-long lecture.”

“That still leaves you plenty of time to get to Chelsea and kill your wife.”

Another brief conference with the lawyer, and Dan Adamson turned back to Nick, his face reddening slightly.

“I went home with the client. We had sex. It was the first time I’d done that, I swear. It’s not part of the deal. They pay for company and conversation, and that’s where it always ends.”

“Except this time.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “She’s a nice lady, and she’s very lonely. Her husband is out of town on business all the time. You’re never supposed to talk about yourself or your personal problems, but I
was particularly upset that day by a conversation I’d had with Helena, and she asked me what was wrong.”

“What was this conversation with Helena?”

“She had found out about the escort job. She was going to use it to make sure I didn’t even have visitation with my kids.”

“First she screwed you over financially, and then she threatened to blackmail you. I’ve gotta level with you, Dan, this is sounding more like a motive than an alibi.”

“There’s more,” he said “I told her that Helena was threatening me, and that I was afraid of losing my kids. She offered me extra, under the table, if I’d sleep with her. It was against the rules, but I was desperate. I needed the money, and she needed the affection. It was a bad decision.”

“Well, it could turn out to be the best bad decision you ever made, if she’ll corroborate your story.”

“I can’t tell you her name,” Adamson said. “But I can give you the name and number of the escort service’s owner. She can confirm the appointment.”

“That’s a problem,” Nick said, and the suspect’s face fell. “She can confirm the appointment, sure, but you said yourself that you were doing some extracurricular escorting, which I assume was past the time you were booked for the MOMA event. So she can’t confirm your whereabouts in the time-frame of the murder.”

“Can you excuse us a moment?” the attorney inquired.

“Sure, he’s not under arrest,” Nick said. “Yet.”

Suspect and attorney left the room, but they didn’t go far. Out in the hall by the elevators, they stopped and made a call. The lawyer came back a moment later and handed Nick his card, with a name and phone number written on the back. “He spoke to the lady he was with. She’s very sympathetic to the difficult position he’s in, and has agreed to talk to you, but you must promise to call her only at this number and make an appointment to see her. Do not identify yourselves to anyone in her home as police, and do not record her name or identifying information in your case notes, in writing or by electronic means.”
Nick looked at the card, and looked up at the lawyer, surprise evident on his face.

“Yes, it is who you think it is,” the man confirmed. “You can see that discretion is of the utmost importance. Do I have your word?”

“Yes, you do, assuming she backs up his story.”

“She will. Now, are you done with my client? He needs to get home in time to pick up his children from daycamp.”

Nick just nodded, and the attorney rejoined Adamson in the vestibule, where they boarded an elevator to descend to the lobby.

Olivia and Cragen had been watching from across the room, and they walked over to where Nick was standing.

“What do you think, Nick?” Cragen asked. “His story is good?”

“I think it is, but I’ll make sure,” he said, handing the card over to Olivia. “Turns out her husband is out of town a lot. He works in Washington. So we will just call up the Senator’s wife and arrange to meet with her as directed.”

“Holy shit,” Olivia said. “This is perfect. Now I’ve got political intrigue and I’ve lost my main suspect. Another great day at the 1-6.”
Nick and Olivia could see in the shop windows that there was only one customer, and they waited a few moments until she had left before they walked in. The clerk was shuffling merchandise around and had his back to them as they closed the door. When he turned and saw them, he immediately threw the armful of handbags and attempted to run between them to the front door. It felt strangely satisfying to Olivia to stick her leg out and trip the guy, and Nick slammed him down with some force when he tried to get back up.

They cuffed him and read him his rights, and the boutique rapist was now safely in police custody after an unexpected tip had yielded a mound of circumstantial evidence. Olivia was confident that the DNA sample they'd soon acquire would provide the necessary forensic confirmation, as well.

Ethan Redig was a 25-year-old clerk at an upscale accessories store in Chelsea, and he spent so much of his time alone there that it occurred to him the other shops in the area probably ran with the same limited staffing. A robbery or two seemed like easy money—no one would get hurt, and he could pay off some debts and get the hell out of New York and go home to Florida. He'd started out by canvassing some of the stores nearby—he'd chat with whoever was working, complain about how short-staffed his own place was, and how often he worked alone. He knew who worked alone, who had merchandise in the back, and who had real cameras, and where. A surprising number of shop owners were just too damn cheap, and thought a couple of fake cameras were just as good as the real thing.

But then, on one of his canvassing missions, he met Lena Vincent. She was 20, a student at Marymount and working part-time to help pay for her residence hall and meal plan. Redig liked her, and he spent more time talking to her than he did casing the stores he planned to rob.

Lena had quit her job shortly thereafter, but when she was relating the story to a friend about this weird guy who'd been hitting on her at her old job, the friend remarked that it sounded like someone casing the joint. Lena called the NYPD tip line, and Benson and Amaro interviewed her the next day. She didn't know that one of her former coworkers had been the first rape victim, just a few days after Lena had quit. The information she gave them made them think Ethan Redig might be their guy, and within two days they had an arrest warrant. Slamming this asshole's face into the tile floor was just a bonus, as far as Liv was concerned.

Once they had him back in the interview room, he didn't stand much of a chance.

"We know you did this, Ethan," Nick began. "So, do us all a favor and tell us what we need to know. It'll look good for you with the DA that you made a statement."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied.

"You do," Olivia said, pushing a legal pad and pen across the table. "And you're really better off writing it all down. Maybe there's something we don't know, some explanation we haven't thought of."
Nick laughed. "Sure, maybe so. I doubt it, but you might surprise us, Ethan."

He stonewalled a while, and they left him alone in the room for an hour. He fidgeted and paced, finally knocking on the window to summon someone.

"I need to smoke," he said.

"Shoulda thought of that," Fin said.

"Come on, man. Let me smoke and I'll help you out. I'm pretty sure I think I know who did this."

"Alright, I'mma do this for you. I'll help you out, so you can help me out. But it could cost me my job."

Fin escorted the man to the fire escape, and handcuffed his left hand to the railing, leaving his right free to hold a cigarette. Fin lit it, making note of the shaking hands.

"You're in deep, huh?"

"It's bullshit," Redig said. "I didn't do anything."

He finished his cigarette and was about to flick it to the pavement three stories below, when Fin stopped him. "Hold up there, you don't need a littering charge, too."

Redig stubbed out the butt and put it in a bag Fin just happened to have in his pocket. He uncuffed the suspect and they walked back in; Redig was put into the interview room, but this time Fin cuffed him to the table.

"Hey, why you doin' that?" he asked.

"Oh, my bad," Fin replied from the door. "Force of habit. Benson'll be here in just a minute, man. She can uncuff you and then you can tell her who she oughta be lookin' for."

The detective walked out, and turned into the observation room to hand Benson the bagged cigarette butt. "Here's your DNA sample, no paperwork required," he smiled.

"You're a good man, Odafin," she said, and re-entered the observation room, evidence in hand. It was less than five minutes later that he caved. Never asked for a lawyer, and wrote out a detailed statement, filling in what few blanks remained. He'd planned to ask Lena out, but saw her leaving work one day with a guy. They were holding hands, and Redig was crushed. He'd made vague attempts at suggesting they get together sometime, but she'd been oblivious, as pretty girls often are.

For the next several days, he worked himself into a frenzy, and finally went into her place on a day he believed she'd be working to confront her. She wasn't around, and the clerk working told him she'd quit her job without notice. The next day, he went back into the shop and asked a different clerk—the only person in the place—for help with an item. She went to the back to get it, as he'd seen Lena do a dozen times over the weeks he'd known her, and he locked the shop door, pulled on a mask and went into the stockroom, where he raped the clerk. It had been addictive, and his spree had begun. Robbery was no longer his motive, and once he got a taste of the power he had over these women, he escalated.

"Dumb son of a bitch even confessed to an assault we didn't know about," Nick crowed. "So the ADA can add an attempted rape charge just for the hell of it."
It was four o'clock by the time they had Redig booked and transferred to Rikers.

"Good work, you two," Cragen said. "Hopefully the brass'll get off my back for a day or two. Take the weekend. Get the hell out of here now, and I want to see you both Monday morning rested and ready to find a serial killer. Who knows? Maybe we're on a roll."

4:15 p.m.

Olivia wasn't sure what she was more happy about: catching that piece of shit before he could rape any more women, or the fact that she was leaving on time and wouldn't have to call Alex and say she was running late, or-worse-not able to leave the station at all. They were heading up to Branford for the weekend to spend some time with Bill.

He had agreed to move back to the city, at Alex's urging, but he had continued to teach two days a week throughout the spring. When a summer school position opened up, he jumped at the chance despite Alex's lack of enthusiasm.

_I'd just gotten used to having you nearby again. Do you have to be gone all summer?_

_I'm just a couple hours away, Ace,_' he'd said. _Besides, it'll be nice to spend some time in the old house and get out on the water a bit. Eventually, I'll have to sell the place, so I may as well enjoy it while I can._

Alex knew he missed Aunt Jean terribly, and being back in the home they'd shared would probably be comforting. And he was right—eventually it wouldn't be a good idea for him to drive up there regularly, and if he couldn't be at the house then he may as well sell it. She hadn't tried again to dissuade him. She was looking forward to seeing him this weekend, and Olivia would have done anything to avoid disappointing her. They needed some time together, too, away from work. Time away from the house wouldn't hurt, either; the atmosphere there seemed tense and neither of them had been sleeping well.

She got home and was pleased to find Alex there already—bags were packed and they were on the road before 5, which was a miracle in and of itself. The 80-mile trip took nearly 3 hours—no great surprise on a summer weekend—but they chatted a little and enjoyed the feeling of freedom that a much-needed vacation can provide.

When they arrived, Bill had a wonderful dinner ready and a fire in the firepit outside. The evening was cool—like New York, they'd had a high of 79 that day, but as the sun set and the wind off the harbor picked up, making the low of 60 feel much cooler than it would in the city.

They sat outside and caught up with one another. Bill was enjoying teaching. Summer school meant smaller classes and a more intense study of the subject at hand. He never had to teach any first years in the summer, either—most of them were moving from second- to third-year, and that made a world of difference.

The conversation didn't being to flag until about 10, and when Alex finished her drink at 10:15, she excused herself to get ready for bed.

"I'm going to shower. Coming up soon?" she asked Olivia.

"Sure, I'll be right up." She held up her glass, with just a little amber liquid left in the bottom. "Hate to waste your uncle's good bourbon."

Alex smiled, hugged Bill and headed up to their usual room. When she was gone, Bill didn't waste
any time.

"What's wrong, Olivia?"

"What do you mean?" She wasn't being intentionally evasive; she didn't want to worry Bill, though, and wasn't sure she knew what was wrong, anyway.

"Come on, this is me you're talking to. I've known that girl since before she was born. She's been distant when we've talked lately, which isn't often, and even sitting here two feet from me she's distracted and tense. She looks like she's not sleeping—actually, both of you look a little tired, to be honest."

Olivia finished her drink, sighing as she set the glass on the table between them. "I don't know, Bill. This job is getting to her. That's all I can figure out."

"Things aren't good at home?"

"On the rare occasions we're both home, you mean?"

"That bad?"

"I'm afraid so. I've had a heavy caseload and she rarely seems to leave the office before 7 or 7:30. She won't say much about what's going on, and I'm really hoping this weekend will help her relax and open up a bit. She seems so sad, or upset, or something, but nothing I've tried seems to help. It's almost like she doesn't remember how to be happy."

"Or doesn't think she deserves to be," Bill observed.

"Or like that. Yes."

"I worried about this, when she decided to run. She's not like most of us, enjoying the good times when they come. She always seems to be waiting for the other shoe to drop, and when you're doing that, you're never fully happy. I thought she'd conquered that beast, Liv. When you two got married...I've never seen her happier. But she's definitely not the same person she was last fall."

"I'm glad I'm not imagining things." Olivia stood and picked up her glass, preparing to head indoors and upstairs to join Alex.

"You're not," Bill reassured her. "But do me a favor, Olivia?"

"Sure, anything." She meant it, too. Bill had filled a hole in her life she hadn't even known existed.

"Be patient," he advised. "Give her time, give her love, and give her space. It's a fine line, and I'm sure you don't need me to tell you how to support her, but over the years I've learned a little bit about the Cabots. She's just like her dad in many ways, and she will find her way. Hopefully sooner, rather than later."

Saturday was spent on the boat. The fresh air seemed to do both Alex and Olivia a lot of good. The conversation she'd had with Bill the night before had made Olivia more aware than ever of the space between them, and she knew Bill was watching as well. It didn't bother her, which was surprising. In another time or another situation, she would've hated feeling like she was on display. She knew Bill worried over them, though—both of them—and it made her feel a little less alone in the world.
She wasn't blameless, by any means. When Alex withdrew, she tended to do the same, and when Alex lashed out, Olivia retaliated more often than not. They'd both been working way too much, but their jobs weren't as predictable as they might have wished. It wasn't always possible to simply call it a day and go home when it got to be too much. They were under a lot of stress, that wasn't in doubt; something else was going on with Alex, though, and Olivia felt helpless. She didn't know what was wrong or how to help fix it, and if Alex knew, she wasn't saying.

Bill had made dinner reservations for the three of them for Saturday night at Le Petit, his and Alex's favorite place, but at the last minute, he begged off, citing a raging headache that he hadn't so much as hinted at all day. Alex tried to cancel the dinner, offering instead to stay home and cook, but he insisted they go without him.

In the car, Alex was quiet until they pulled up at a stop light at West Main.

"He backed out on purpose," she said.

"I know," Olivia replied.

"There was no headache. I'm his headache," Alex added.

"I don't think he sees it that way. He worries about you."

"He worries about you, too."

"Right now, I think he's worried about us," Liv said quietly. "I am, too."

Alex looked over at her wife. "Are you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Liv. I don't mean to worry you."

Olivia didn't respond. The rest of the drive was short, and they didn't say anything more, each of them wondering how to bridge a gap that was much wider than the physical distance between them, and seemingly growing every day.

Dinner was more pleasant than Olivia might have expected, given the brief conversation they'd had en route. A cocktail and a glass of wine had helped to relax both of them, and the meal was a parade of rich, delicious food. The combination of a full stomach and the warmth of the alcohol softened things up a bit, and they spent more time at dinner talking than they had in a long while. It was mostly about work, because they had little else to discuss, at least in public. Olivia felt like she had to get them back on a subject that really mattered.

"Everyone is concerned about you, Alex," she said as they waited for dessert.

"Everyone," Alex smirked. "You, Bill and Jack McCoy."

"Jack?" Olivia hadn't known that the former DA had expressed his concern, but she didn't blame him. He as much as anyone understood the stress Alex was under. Jack, however, wasn't the type to internalize everything like Alex did.

"When we had drinks a few weeks ago to discuss my restructuring plans, he asked how I was bearing up. He clearly felt I didn't look good, or sound good, or both."

"Honey, I know Jack McCoy, and I can promise you he doesn't think you look bad. You might be
the only woman who ever made her way through that office without sleeping with him, honey, and it wasn't due to a lack of interest on his part."

Alex had to laugh—all the rumors about Jack were true, and early on in her time at Hogan Place, there had been some one-sided flirting. She'd gracefully declined his subtle advances, and that was the end of it. "His reputation is not unearned, that's for sure," she acknowledged.

"Well, I don't really give a damn about Jack McCoy, sorry," Olivia said. She was happy to have any light-hearted conversation with Alex, but not at the expense of the larger issue. "You're not yourself. Bill is worried about you, and so am I. Talk to me, Alex."

"I'm not sure what to say, Liv." It was true. She was under pressures she couldn't possibly tell her wife about, and that left her very little in the way of explanation.

"How about telling me how you feel? That would be a wonderful start."

"This is harder than I ever thought it would be," she admitted. "I wish I had never run for office."

Olivia was taken aback by Alex's disclosure. It was stark and definitive. Not maybe I shouldn't have, or I wonder if this was a good idea. Things were worse than Olivia had realized, but she wanted to tread lightly here.

"Okay," she began. "Want to tell me what's going on? Is it the job, or the people, or something else?"

"Both. Everything. I don't know." Alex took a moment to compose herself when the waiter brought a beautiful crème brûlée to the table, and refilled their coffees. When he excused himself, she continued. "The job...I love the job, really. I am making decisions that can have a positive affect on the people in this city, and that feels really good. But the politics are killing me, Liv. Most days I feel like everyone in that office hates me. Laurie is the only one who's on my side, so I have to remind myself not to kill the messenger when she reports the latest uprising or coup attempt."

"Did this go on when you were an ADA, baby? Some people like to rebel against authority no matter what, but surely it can't be everyone."

"It sure as hell seems like it. And it's never an open rebellion, really. It's all this damn backbiting and infighting. They're constantly at odds with themselves and each other. I can't stand it. When I told them about my plan to restructure, a few of them expressed some reasonable concerns in our meeting. They asked lots of good questions, gave me some food for thought...I thought it was a good conversation. But by the next afternoon, Laurie was telling me that the reality wasn't quite so copacetic."

"Do they come an complain to her?" Olivia asked. "She's your chief of staff. That seems a little stupid."

"No, not usually. She hears it from the administrative assistants, things like that. If she didn't tell me these things I'd be going around with my head in the clouds thinking everything was fine."

"Maybe that would be better," Olivia ventured.

"That's just the thing. Politics. Better the devil you know, and all that. I have to watch my back all the time—it's better if I know who's behind me."

"You don't have to do this, you know."
"I just got elected," Alex snapped. "I can't resign. Besides, you encouraged me."

"You're right, I did. I thought it would make you happy," Liv said. "I still hope it will, but I'm not suggesting you resign. I'm just saying you don't have to run again. Do what you can do while you're there, and if you don't feel like running for another term, you know I'll support you in that. Sometimes, things aren't all they're cracked up to be, Al."

Alex sighed. They'd had a nice evening, and here she was, biting Liv's head off for no reason. She reached across the table, gathering Liv's hand in her own.

"I'm sorry, honey, I really am. I know you're trying to help. Let's not talk about it anymore tonight."

"What would you like to talk about, sweetie?"

"Well, we can't talk about work, and lately we haven't been home enough to have any homelife to speak of. Let's plan a trip."

"I don't know if..."

"Hush, Liv. I don't know if I can go anywhere either. But we can talk about it, right? Remember that trip to Montreal?"

"I won't forget that, Alex. It was perfect."

"Alright, then. Winter in Montreal. Let's pretend that sometime after Christmas we may actually be able to get away for a few days. We can plan all the wonderful things we'll do, and with any luck, maybe we can actually pull it off."

It was the first time Alex had seemed hopeful in a long while, and Olivia liked that way her eyes sparkled when she was looking forward to something. They spent the rest of the meal and all of the drive home talking about vacations; first to Montreal, then they dreamed of Tuscany, and finally an island paradise. They might manage one—someday—but there's no way they'd manage all three until they retired, and that made Olivia a little sad, but she was happy enough to just be talking to Alex—talking with Alex—that she didn't care if they were pipe dreams.

When they got home a little after 11, Bill was in bed. He'd left them a note to be up at 9 the next morning for a homemade brunch. They made their way quietly up the stairs and into their room. It felt like the frost between them was thawing a little, and Olivia was wary of doing anything that might halt that progress. She felt closer to Alex than she had all summer—they had made love several times, but not with the frequency or intimacy they were accustomed to. Alex's reluctance was about more than being tired or preoccupied, and the forms it took were puzzling: They could cuddle and touch easily as long as it remained non-sexual, but if they had sex, then Alex seemed to almost stiffen in Liv's arms afterward. She'd invariably make some excuse to leave the bed, remembering some bit of work she had to do—anything that would keep her up and out of reach until Liv had fallen asleep.

Something was different tonight, though. Alex was affectionate, almost playful—she pulled Olivia toward the bed as soon as they closed the door, undressing her with both hands while covering every inch of newly exposed skin with hot kisses. Easing the blouse down over Liv's shoulders, she was gentle yet eager.

Alex dropped to her knees as she pulled the shirt off of Olivia's arms, and made quick work of belt, button and zipper, grasping the waistband firmly to pull the pants to the floor. She looked up at the body in front of her, the soft, delicate skin and the strong muscles underneath. It was a wonderful
view, all curves and angles, planes and lines broken up by the silky, pewter-colored fabric of an
unadorned bra and matching panties. Olivia lifted one foot, then the other, to step out of her pant
legs; when the second foot was still in the air, Alex leaned forward and put her open mouth over
Liv's clit, tonguing the hardening bud through her panties. Olivia put her hand in Alex's hair and
held on, biting her lip to stifle a moan.

Less than a minute later, the panties were on the floor and Olivia was lying back on the bed, legs
thrown over Alex's shoulders as the beautiful blonde traced her folds from her clit down to her
entrance and back. Her warm, wet tongue only made Olivia wetter, bringing her quickly to the
edge.

"Alex," she whispered. "Please."

Alex didn't answer, continuing her ministrations on Olivia's swollen clit as her hands stroked the
strong thighs. They were being so quiet, but they knew one another's bodies so well that Alex
didn't need words to know what Olivia wanted. The hips moving beneath her mouth, the smell of
Olivia's desire...it was more than enough to guide her. When she sensed that Olivia couldn't wait
any longer, Alex reached one hand up along the bed, grasping Olivia's fingers tightly. The
connection spoke volumes, telling Olivia to let go, letting her know she was safe and loved. She
came hard, never relaxing her grip on Alex's hand. For her part, Alex's tongue never lost contact
with her wife's clit, pushing her over the edge and then slowly easing her down, riding out each
wave, then triggering more shudders and sighs with every flick of her tongue.

They stayed like that for a moment. As Olivia's body relaxed and her skin cooled, she beckoned
Alex to her. Alex stood and helped Olivia into bed before undressing herself. She turned out the
bedside lamp and slid between the sheets, gathering Olivia's body to her own, their combined body
heat creating a cocoon of warmth in the air-conditioned room. Olivia would have loved to return
the favor, but she knew it wasn't necessary. They were both tired, and the release she'd just
experienced hadn't made her sleepy, exactly, but she was cozy and content here in Alex's arms.

"I love you, Alex."

"Oh, Liv, I love you too. No matter what, never doubt that I love you."

"I don't. Nights like this remind me how good we are together, honey."

"No one else has ever loved me the way you do, Olivia. Even when I don't know who I am
anymore, your love is something I look for to find my way back."

Olivia rolled over so they were facing one another, and even in the darkness she could see raw
emotion on Alex's face. She traced the delicate jawline with one finger.

"I always know who you are. You are never too lost for me to find you, baby."

"Sometimes I'm not sure, Liv. I don't recognize the person in the mirror anymore. I've changed, and
I don't like it. Things I thought I'd left behind and things I didn't even know...I hate it. I hate not
knowing myself. I don't want to give up parts of myself."

It was the closest Alex had come to telling Olivia the secret that was eating away at her. Just a few
words—once she got started, the whole story would come pouring out. As Olivia looked at her,
thinking about what to say, the silence beckoned.

*Just talk, Alex. Just say I have to tell you something. You can't take that back. Once you start,
you'll have to finish.*
She opened her mouth...

"But Alex..." Olivia found her words, and Alex lost her nerve. "That's normal. You can't stay the same forever. Back when you were first at SVU, just in the space of a couple of years, you changed so much. If you hadn't, we might have killed you." She laughed lightly, but the seriousness on Alex's face was evident even in the dim light. "Everybody changes, honey. It's okay."

"You don't."

"Don't what...don't change? Of course I do, Al."

"You don't seem to. You're so damn steady. Your basic dimensions are the same, no matter what happens."

"So are yours, baby. In all the ways that really matter, you're still very much you."

"I don't feel that way."

Olivia wasn't sure where this was coming from. Alex had always been introspective, but lately she seemed almost haunted by her own thoughts. Liv put a hand in the small of Alex's back, pulling her closer and dipping her head down so that their lips were only a few inches apart, her voice gentle when she spoke.

"Look, Alex. Life changes people. You've had a bit more of life than a lot of people. But people are changed by every breeze that ripples through. The birth of a child, the death of a parent, making a fortune, losing it all. Failure, success, sickness, joy. The job changes me every day. You have changed me, Alex, in a million wonderful ways." She pressed her lips softly to Alex's.

"I don't know if I can explain it," Alex whispered. "I have this Liv-shaped space in my life, and I can always count on you to fill it perfectly, never too much, and never, ever too little. But I don't feel like I have a grip on the space I'm occupying in the world lately."

Olivia tightened her hold, hugging Alex to her chest and wrapping her arms tight around the warm body. "The space you're occupying right now is perfect, as far as I'm concerned."

It was a sweet thing to say, and it didn't go unappreciated. But Alex couldn't fully relax into the embrace. The tightness in her muscles never seemed to fully dissipate these days, tension stretching her nerves like drawn strings on a flexed bow. It was a dangerous state of being, when she no longer trusted her own aim.
The next morning, Alex was up early. She kissed a still-sleeping Liv, pulled on sweats and a t-shirt and making her way downstairs to the kitchen. Bill was making dough for his famous cinnamon rolls, and a pot of coffee was already brewed.

"Smells wonderful," she said as she walked in, standing on tiptoes to kiss her uncle's cheek.

"You're up early, Ace."

"No rest for the wicked," she joked. She poured herself a mug of coffee, topped off Bill's cup and sat at the island, immediately flipping through the *Times* while Bill kept kneading.

"How was dinner last night?"

"Delicious, thank you. I'm sorry you missed it though. That darn headache, huh?"

He looked up at her and winked.

"I knew it," she crowed.

"And you're not even the detective in the family," Bill teased. "Look, I love spending time with you two, but summer's almost over and I'll be back in New York before you know it. You guys needed the time alone more than I needed to eat at Le Petit."

"We did need it," Alex admitted. "I hadn't realized how much."

"Having a tough time of it, are you?"

"A bit. It'll pass."

"That job you have isn't easy, Ace."

"I didn't think it would be easy." She'd abandoned the newspaper and was grasping her mug in both hands. Bill kept busy, knowing that making eye contact right now could inhibit their conversation. "I don't suppose I thought it would be this hard, either."

"What's the worst part?"

"I'm all alone," she said, the stark truth of it surprising them both.

"What do you mean?" Bill pressed.

"I never thought about what my day-to-day life would be like with no peers, no boss...it's wearing on me. I've been confiding in Jack McCoy, for God's sake." She laughed, but it was hollow and unconvincing.

"You're under the sword of Damocles, Alex," he observed.

"I don't want fame and fortune," she argued. "I just want to do a good job. Is that wrong?"
"It's not wrong, Ace, but not most people won't understand that. Everyone around you is making their bones, making a name for themselves, building a career. You have a job most of them won't ever even get close to holding. They're all striving and climbing, and you're the king of the mountain."

"They don't want this job. Trust me."

"You don't have to convince me, honey. I know I never wanted it, not for one second. Some people just have to find out the hard way."

"Like me."

"Not like you," Bill argued. "I'm not giving up on you yet. You were born for this job, Ace. You've just got to settle in and get your feet under you. Where's that fearless girl who struck terror into the hearts of defense attorneys all over the city?"

"I don't know," she murmured. "She seems to be gone."

Bill reached over and tipped her chin up, like he'd done more times than he could count. When she was looking him in the eye, he continued.

"She's not gone. She's there. You have to find her. You have to kick ass and take names. Run that office, don't let it run you."

She smiled, at least temporarily buoyed by the pep talk.

"And there's one more thing, Alex."

"What's that?"

"You've got cinnamon roll dough on your chin," he laughed. "I can't take you anywhere."

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Tuesday, August 12, 2014

By lunchtime Tuesday, whatever good feelings Olivia had carried home from the weekend were long gone. A leisurely Sunday brunch on Bill's deck, a beautiful drive home and a relaxing evening with Thai takeout and a movie weren't enough to forestall the inevitable stress and tension that seemed to envelop them both as soon as the first alarm had sounded at 5 o'clock Monday morning.

The Adamson case was proving to be as complicated as they'd feared. People with money always seemed to have more enemies, and more people who had keys to their homes, and more reasons people wanted them dead. They'd interviewed two dozen people, checked out at least that many alibis, and all they'd figured out was that a lot of people didn't like Helena Adamson, and that all of them were doing other things at the time of the murder.

Liv and Nick did were in Battery Park City, meeting with a friend of the victim's, Mariela Tarrazo had been away on business, having dinner in Rome when Helena was killed, so she was definitely not a suspect. The two women had been close for years, though, and Nick had felt talking to her on the phone was no substitute for a face-to-face Q&A. As soon as she'd returned to New York, they'd made an appointment with her. They were welcomed in to her spacious apartment, where floor-to-ceiling windows afforded them a fantastic view of the Statue of Liberty while they waited. She swept into the room at precisely the agreed-upon time and shook both of their hands before asking them to be seated.
After introductions, Olivia got down to business.

"Ms. Tarrazo, thank you so much for your time. We're very sorry for your loss," she began. "It was kind of you to talk with us while you were in Italy, but we thought that now that you'd had time to get over the shock of the news you may have some more information for us."

"I don't know that I'll ever get over the shock, Detectives," she said, a lilting Italian accent making her sorrow seem almost lyrical. She had tears in her eyes as she continued. "Hearing that Helena had died was devastating to me. But murdered? It's unfathomable."

"How long had you two been friends?" Nick asked.

She ran a hand through her long, dark hair and then gingerly wiped tears from each cheek. "More than 15 years," she said. "We both attended an executive summer school course at the London School of Economics; the course was full of men who were entirely too besotted with themselves, both aesthetically and intellectually. We happened to be the only two women, and we bonded quickly. Helena had spent much of her youth in London, you know, so she knew her way around. And she was delightful company."

"Were you living in New York then?"

"Yes, I was. I had live in the US for several years by then, but my job has always necessitated a lot of travel to Europe. I'm the North American counsel for Fincantieri, an Italian ship-building corporation."

"And you two remained in touch after the course ended?"

"We did. We became very close friends-Helena wasn't a terribly trusting person and didn't let many people get close to her. I was lucky to get to know her. My family is in Italy, and I hadn't been happy here until I met her. She had such a joy about her, and I grew to love New York by exploring it with her. We were two young, single women, and we had many adventures."

"And then she married."

"Yes, she met Dan and she was very happy. I was happy for her, at first."

"At first?" Nick asked.

"Well...yes. He seemed like a nice man."

"By all accounts, he is," Olivia supplied.

"Of course that's what you've been told," Mariela said. "Helena wasn't one to air her dirty laundry in public."

"Dirty laundry..."Nick said.

Tarrazo sighed heavily. "Helena's family is wealthy, and she'd had success herself. She was wary of men who seemed to like her for her money. Dan was a financial analyst for FG Capital and he made more money than she did. Helena was used to nice things, but she was surprisingly unmaterialistic. He won her over because she felt secure with him; they were on equal footing, you might say."

"And now he's a grad student. What happened?"
"Not just a graduate student," Mariela corrected. "A doctoral student in medieval history."

"That's a big change from being an analyst on Wall Street," Olivia observed.

"Big pay cut, too," Nick added.

"He saw her as a free ride. They'd only been married for a few years when he announced he was quitting his job to go back to school. She was supportive. They had plenty of money and she wanted him to be happy. She was pregnant with their older child at the time, and things must have been alright for a while, because they had another baby two years later, just as he finished his master's thesis and started his doctoral program. He wasn't happy when she left her job to start Adamson Charles."

"Why not? Seems like a pretty lucrative venture."

"He changed after he went back to school. He was living the life of an academic who espoused austerity, though that never stopped him from spending her money like it was water. When she told him about her plans, he berated her, saying the very idea was crass and mercenary."

"We've heard that criticism from other quarters, as well," Olivia said.

"From people who didn't know Helena, perhaps," Mariela allowed. "She started that firm because her own mother spent many years in an abusive marriage that she couldn't afford to leave. Helena's father controlled their sizable financial holdings, and while he gave his family everything they wanted, they had little access to any cash or other accounts. He knew her mother would leave if she could, and he kept her in place for many years with threats: He would take her children, he would leave her with nothing, and no attorney she could possibly afford would ever be able to stop him."

"Financial abuse. It goes on more than people know."

"Exactly. She was determined to make it possible for women in that position to get out without losing everything, including their children. There is no partner named "Charles." That is her mother's last name; she was finally freed when Helena's father died of a heart attack, and she went on to meet and marry a wonderful man. Helena regards him as her father now."

"She took a lot of bad press over the focus of her practice," Nick said. "People said she was the patron saint of gold-diggers."

"None of that bothered her. She knew what she was doing, and why. It was Dan's criticism that really hurt her."

"Is that why they split up?"

"Not exactly," Tarrazo explained. "She put up with it for several years, actually, because she wanted her kids to have their father. She hoped that when he finished his degree and got a full-time teaching position, things would get better between them. His girlfriend was the last straw for her, though."

"Girlfriend?" Olivia was shocked. They'd looked into that possibility and had turned up nothing. No one they interviewed mentioned any infidelity, and they found no unusual phone bills or receipts or hotel bills. Apparently Helena hadn't mentioned it to anyone in her circle, except Mariela.

"Yes," the woman confirmed. "I assumed you'd know that by now. She is a waitress who lives in Queens. When Helena found out, she asked Dan to leave and filed for divorce. They had a
prenuptial agreement that allowed for a one-time payment in the even they divorced and either of them was in financial need. She was prepared to pay it. She was happy to pay it, in fact; she wanted him to be able to afford a nice apartment so the kids could visit him and feel at home."

"Dan says she was threatening him," Nick supplied. "Taking the kinds away…"

Mariela cut him off angrily. "No, that is misleading. She may have said things to him in anger, but she had instructed her own attorneys to handle things as amicably as possible. It was only when he applied for a loan at her firm and then threatened to go public that she realized she’d have to play hardball."

"What is this girlfriend's name?"

"It is a man's name, something with a K." Mariela thought for a moment. "Kyle, that was it. I don't know her last name, but she works in Times Square at the chain restaurant that purports to be Italian."

"Olive Garden?" Olivia laughed.

"That's the one," Mariela nodded. "An affront to Italian cuisine, but the breadsticks and salad aren't bad."
Chapter 34

Wednesday, August 13, 2014

After their meeting with Mariela, Olivia and Nick had been able to put the pieces together quickly. By the time they went looking for the waitress, they had a pretty good idea of what had happened. Finding a woman named Kyle in the Olive Garden wasn't hard. As soon as a coworker pointed her out, though, she saw the two detectives and ran through the kitchen, and attempted to flee out the back door into the building's service hallway. Nick caught up to her and cuffed her, and took her to the 1-6, where she had an interesting story to tell.

She'd met Dan Adamson in a bar she'd worked at, and they'd begun an affair almost immediately. He had garnered sympathy with tales of Helena's cruelty, portraying her as a "heartless, blood-sucking lawyer." Kyle had swallowed it—it certainly jibed with the opinion most people had of lawyers in general, and the view many New Yorkers had of Helena Adamson, in particular. Dan had easily convinced his young paramour that in order to be with her, he'd have to leave his marriage both childless and penniless, and while the young woman wasn't too upset about the former—she didn't want to play stepmom, if she were being honest—she was less than pleased about the latter.

Kyle Cunningham fell for Adamson's stories hook, line and sinker. She didn't know Helena, and didn't want to, based on what she'd been told. She did, however, want Dan to leave his wife, so she convinced him to apply for divorce financing through Helena's own firm; when his application was denied, Dan seemed despondent and wanted to break it off with Kyle while he figured things out.

"But you weren't having it?" Nick asked.

"Hell, no," Kyle barked. "Look, I'm a waitress. I'm gonna be a waitress, you know? I'm not getting my MBA or some bullshit. But Dan...he's nice, and he's gonna be a professor. That's a good life. His wife owed him, and we could have had a nice house and some extra money. So one night in bed I say to him, 'You're crying about money and you have two Rolexes.' They were real, too, but he's like, 'Those were gifts.' Like that meant they weren't worth money."

"Who were the Rolexes from?" Olivia asked.

"One was from the woman who treated him like shit. Their first anniversary, or something. But the other one was from his grandfather, a gift for graduating from Walton."

"Wharton?" Nick was sure the guy had gone to business school at Penn, but Kyle was insulted by his question.

"Walton, Wharton, what-the-fuck-ever. Like I care. All I know is the guy is sitting on like 40 grand in watches and telling me he can't afford to get divorced. Watches tell time, you know? Like 20 bucks. I finally convinced him the one from that bitch wasn't worth holding onto, but…"

"But?"

"He kept saying there was no point. He knew what he'd get for it, and unless he sold both it wouldn't be enough for the kind of lawyer he'd need. He said he couldn't do that, so he'd figure something out."
"Couldn't? Or wouldn't?" Olivia asked pointedly.

"He was stubborn," Kyle argued.

"Or he didn't give a shit about you," Benson jabbed.

"What's that supposed to mean, bitch?"

"It means that you were offering him a solution to his problem and he refused to take it." Olivia leaned down near the woman's ear. "That watch was more valuable to him than you are. You know it's true. I mean, what would you do, Nick? Would you choose a watch over the love of your life?"

"Not me, sarge," Nick answered. "There's a lot of watches."

"Me either," Liv said. "But I guess there's a lot of Kyles, too, huh?"

"Fuck you," the young woman spat, her blonde hair whipping in anger as she twisted her neck to see Olivia. "You don't know. He'd lost everything. That was the only thing he had left that mattered to him."


"Nothing," Kyle said quickly. "He stopped seeing me. He said he had to focus on solving his problem and we'd get back together after his divorce was all worked out."

"Nothing? Bullshit. Something happened. Helena Adamson's dead and you're sitting here. Why are you covering for this douchebag?" Olivia's voice had built in volume and intensity until she finished with a yell, slamming her hand on the table.

Kyle was shocked, and looked bewildered—or tried to.

"He's already flipped on you, Kyle. So fast it made our heads spin."

"You're lying. Maybe I need a lawyer."

"Maybe you do," allowed Nick. "But think carefully. If you are asking for a lawyer, we can't talk to you anymore. Which means you can't tell us your side of the story."

"And if the only side of the story we've got is Dan's, it's not looking too good for you," Olivia explained. "So let me tell you his story, and then let's see if you have anything to add. He said you stole the Rolex Helena gave him, that he didn't realize it was gone until after she was murdered, when you came to his place and told him you'd found a way to solve his problems for the price of one watch, not two."

"Fucking liar," Kyle shouted. "We had a fight. I was pissed that he wouldn't sell the watch, alright, and I said if he had any balls at all he'd figure it out, that he could have her killed for less than he wanted to pay a lawyer. I was just mad, you know, but he got this weird look. He said maybe that wasn't impossible, and did I know anybody."

"And did you?"

"Hell, no. My life's not like that. I'm poor, but I'm not a criminal. I told him he was crazy. But he started talking about this guy I used to work with at the bar, Sergei. 'Maybe Sergei knows someone,' he kept saying. I didn't think he was serious, but the next thing I know, she's dead."

"Kyle, I've got to tell you how this works. When you lie to me about one thing, I think you're lying
to me about everything," Olivia said. "See, Sergei said you did get in touch with him, and he did give you a name."

The woman started crying.

"So here's the deal, Kyle. We've picked up Dan-he's in a holding cell now, but he's pointing the finger at you, and he's sure as hell gonna sell that other Rolex now to get a fancy lawyer and save his own ass. We're about to arrest the man you hired, and he'll sell you out, too. You know that. He'll say he never even laid eyes on Dan, and we'll believe him, because it's the truth. You were the go-between, and only you can tell us what we need to know to arrest Dan. You're going down either way-wouldn't it be better to take him with you?"

Olivia could tell the girl was about to break-she looked much younger all of a sudden, scared and overwhelmed. She hadn't been lying about not being a criminal, and she was in way over her poor-but-law-abiding head now. She just needed a little push.

"Come on," Olivia said quietly. She pushed a pen and paper across the table. "Connect the dots for us. It's that easy. That's all you have to do, Kyle."

"I love him," Kyle whimpered.

"He won't visit you in prison."

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she snatched up the pen and started writing. The detail they needed was a simple one-the Rolexes hadn't been at Dan's apartment, so she couldn't have stolen it. He kept them both in a safety deposit box, only wearing them once in a while. She'd gone with him to a Midtown bank to retrieve the one from Helena; he'd handed it over to her and she'd passed it off to the murderer. She had put it on in the vault before she left the bank-it would be visible on her wrist if they examined the surveillance footage from the lobby. When her statement was complete, she was drained. Olivia almost felt bad for her, until she remembered the grisly scene at Helena Adamson's place, and the two kids who were now effectively orphaned because of pride, or greed, or both, and she couldn't resist a final dig.

"Wanna know the worst part, Kyle?" she asked. "They had a prenup. He didn't want you to know it, but he was due a $500,000 payment from Helena when they divorced. He couldn't just be happy with that, though. And now you'll have at least a few years in prison to think about how happy the two of you could have been with half-a-million dollars."

Later that night, they picked up the killer at a club in the East Village. He was a bouncer-an enormous guy named Vlad who was built like a Mack truck-and they'd had to surprise him by coming in through the service entrance in the alley and coming out the front door, guns raised, to arrest him. It was quick, though, and they too him in without incident. Olivia was waiting by the unmarked to head back to the 1-6, while Nick bundled the handcuffed Hercules in to the backseat, when something caught her eye in a nearby bar. It was Dev Patel-she was sure of it-and he wasn't alone. He didn't see her from his seat by the window, but the implications of the company he was keeping were staggering, and her blood ran hot and fast as rage overtook her. She'd put him out of her mind, but she'd never forget what he'd done to Alex. It wasn't until she realized that Nick was already in the car and knocking on the window that she was able to look away.

She got in the car, her fury still readily apparent to Nick, who knew her moods well.

"What's up, Benson?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just drive."
"Nothing, my ass, partner. Tell me."

"When I figure out what the hell it means, I'll tell you, Nick. Until then…" she trailed off uncertainly.

"Yeah?"

"I don't know," she said. "I have no idea what the hell is going on. Let's just get Mount Muscle back there into a cell and get him booked. I've had enough for one day."

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**Thursday, August 14, 2014**

**4:15 p.m.**

Cragen answered the phone in his office and was surprised to find himself speaking to Sean Cullen, the Special Agent in Charge of the San Francisco division field office. He wanted the supervising detectives in St. Louis, San Francisco and New York to have a case meeting in his office on Golden Gate avenue.

"Well, Sergeant Benson has a few cases going on, but I'm sure we can arrange something," Cragen said. "How about the middle of next week?" He had taken the call in his office with no chance to even summon Liv in to join him.

"No, Captain. Tomorrow morning, 0800."

"Agent Cullen, you've got to be kidding. It's past 1600 hours here in New York right now, and Sergeant Benson is standing 30 feet away from me at her desk, doing the job the NYPD pays her for. She has no bag packed and no plane ticket, and you're six hours away by plane. I didn't major in math, but I'm pretty sure that means she needed to leave five minutes ago."

Cullen wasn't in a joking mood. "I wouldn't call if it weren't urgent," he said. "I've already cleared it with your chain of command, Captain Cragen, so this isn't really a request. If they'd been a little quicker about responding to me, I could have let you know this sooner, but it is what it is. There are still flights out tonight, and she has a ticket on one of them. Have her call me when she gets to town, no matter what time it is." The call ended with a click.

Cragen stuck his head out the door-Liv was on the phone and Nick was nowhere to be seen. "Tell Benson I need to see her when she gets off the phone," he told Fin. "You come with her."

Less than ten minutes later, Olivia was in Cragen's office, an incredulous look on her face.

"San Francisco?" Olivia couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"Yep," Cragen confirmed. "Too many similarities to ignore."

"The duty belt?" Fin asked.

"No, not this time," the captain replied.

"Then it's not our guy," Olivia contended.

"Not so fast. There's other stuff. I'd fill you in, but your flight leaves in 90 minutes, Benson. Leave right now, grab some clothes, and we might manage to get you there on time with lights and sirens all the way," he said. "Tutuola's your ride to LaGuardia, and Mackey's meeting you in San
Francisco."

"Captain…"

"No, Benson. Forget it. Nothing to say-Chief of D's and everyone above him okayed it. You want to complain? Tell Cullen," he said. "He wants you to call him as soon as you land anyway."

They didn't quite need to light 'em up, but the trip to the airport wasn't quick. Olivia didn't mind. They'd stopped by her apartment to pick up her clothes-she'd had enough time to call Alex and leave a scribbled note of apology next to the coffeepot, but now she had a chance to talk to Fin and she planned to use it.

She told him about seeing Dev Patel.

"With who?" Fin asked.

Benson explained the situation.

"Maybe it was a coincidence, Liv," he offered.

"No, trust me, Fin. It wasn't a chance meeting. They were deep in conversation and I need to know why. I need you to see what you can find out. I'm sorry-I know you're off this weekend."

"You know I've got your back, baby. I'll poke around a bit, see what I can find out. No worries."

"I need you to have Alex's back, Fin. Something's not right, and she has no idea. I'm sure of it."

"I got her and I got you, too. Go catch us a serial killer, sarge. I'll take care of this."
Alex was sitting in her usual seat in Dr. Jackson's office, the dim lighting a sharp contrast from the hot summer day outside. She felt more and more like a truculent teenager each time she came here, or someone who'd been sentenced to court-ordered therapy. She'd once told Liv she was willingly— even happily-seek ing the help, but now she felt like every session was a battle. She just wasn't sure if the battle was with the doctor, or herself. It reminded her of running: When she wanted to run, even the longest, hardest route was rewarding, and the feeling of exhaustion afterward was welcome. When she didn't want to, but felt like she should, it was a hard slog even on flat ground.

"Alex, have you ever asked Olivia to consider including any type of BDSM practice into your sex life?"

Today was obviously going to be a hard slog.

"God, no," Alex said immediately.

"That was quick," the therapist observed. "Why do you find that idea so distasteful?"

"Because that's not who Olivia is. She is loving and kind. She'd never hurt me. Her job is to put people in jail for sex crimes, for God's sake."

"But mutually agreed-upon activity between consenting adults…" Dr. Jackson began, but was summarily cut off.

"I would never ask her to do that. I won't."

"Why?"

"Because I don't need it."

The veracity of that statement was doubtful at best, but Jackson chose not to challenge her patient on that point. For now, anyway. She was, however, determined to keep Alex talking, to move her along before she could shut down again.

"What's the real reason?" she asked gently.

"She's said before that she's not interested in it," Alex admitted.

"You've asked her?"

"No, but we've discussed it. Cases come up. She's said she just doesn't understand it, that she could never willingly hurt someone she loved."

"When was this?" the doctor asked.

"Several years ago."
"Things change," Jackson said. "People change. She might be see that differently now, especially if she knows it would make you happy. If you have a heart-to-heart conversation about this, Alex, what's the worst that could happen?"

"She might say yes," Alex blurted out, a frank admission that surprised them both. She looked directly at Dr. Jackson, the words coming to rest in the quiet air between them. Alex's eyes glistened—she rarely cried, even in this emotional cocoon, but tears were pooling now.

"How would that be a bad thing, if she were amenable to accommodating your desires? She might be interested in some exploration herself. I don't need to tell you that people who work in positions of power or authority can find some release or comfort in an intimate power exchange."

"No." Alex was curt. "No, you don't need to tell me that, obviously. But you don't know what Olivia sees every day. She's not in some high-pressure boardroom, needing to let off steam after a hard day of mergers and acquisitions. Every single day, she is up to her neck in the very worst things that human beings do to each other. Home is an escape from all of that. It should be, anyway."

"You want to protect her."

"No one else ever has," Alex replied angrily. She took a breath and modulated her voice before continuing. "Of course I want to take care of her. She's my wife."

"And you are her wife," Jackson countered. "Does she want to take care of you?"

"Always. And she's spent far too much of her time doing that already."

"So, you've used up your allotment, then?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by that."

Alex was defensive, but still engaged, and the therapist pushed on, determined not to cede the opportunity she felt she had right now.

"Well, your line of reasoning would indicate that Olivia has taken care of you enough already. You are no longer allowed to have any needs?"

"She would do anything she could for me," Alex allowed. "Everything. Even things she'd rather not do. That's why I can't ask her. I won't."

"We've talked about this before. You view Olivia as a very noble person, don't you?"

"She is," Alex said. "It's not my opinion. It's a fact."

"Has she ever protected you from something, without consulting you? For example, has she withheld information or a problem from you because she thought it would be easier or better for you?"

"On occasion. I don't like it, though."

"Yet you are willing to keep important things from her. You have very clear ideas about what she needs and what she can and should be able to handle, but that doesn't allow her to speak for herself. It doesn't allow her to surprise you with her own needs or desires, or to rise to the occasion in meeting yours."
"Alex, I have to tell you, I think you're not being fair to Olivia. If she were in a situation like this, struggling mightily with a secret she'd rather not tell you, what would you want her to do?"

The answer to the question was obvious: Of course she would want Liv to confide in her—to trust her, really—but Alex had tried a hundred times to imagine asking for this, and she couldn't do it. She couldn't say the words.

"You don't understand. I'm sorry, but you just don't. Olivia has risen to more occasions in her life than most of us would ever even be faced with. I refuse to be one more problem for her. It's just not an option."

"She's a tough woman," Jackson ventured.

"Tougher than you can imagine," Alex agreed. "She's in San Francisco right now tracking down a serial killer."

"That's a long way from home."

"It is, too damn far. But this person has committed crimes in three cities now, that we know of, and she will be the one to catch him. I know it."

"What is it like for you, the hours she works and the danger she faces?"

"It's Olivia. It's just part and parcel of who she is. It's the only way I've ever known her."

"It doesn't scare you?" Jackson asked.

"It scares the hell out of me. Of course it does. But she's smart and she's good. I'm the one who got shot, remember. Not her."

"She was with you that night."

"That wasn't her fault," Alex snapped. "There's nothing she could do."

"I wasn't saying that, Alex. Not at all. I was merely observing that you've both learned to live with a lot of fear and uncertainty. What would life be like if you both had 'normal' jobs and more regular schedules?"

"I have no idea. I think she'd be bored."

"Okay. How about you? Would you be bored?"

"I could do without the middle-of-the-night call-outs she gets. I can never sleep afterward—I worry until she calls or comes home. This trip to San Francisco—I didn't even see her before she left. I got a call and came home to an empty house, and a note on the kitchen counter."

"Is that difficult for you?"

"She's so damn good at what she does. Everything that makes her a good cop is what made me fall in love with her, even before I knew I was. I can't imagine Liv without the job—I'm not sure she can either. She's been even busier than usual lately, though. I feel guilty for complaining about that when I know that what she does is so important, but it leaves me with a lot of hours to fill. That's not what I need right now."

9:30 pm
Olivia had flown to San Francisco Thursday evening—it wasn't the last flight out, but the nonstops were booked and she'd taken the long way with a layover at DFW that stretched out longer than expected thanks to a thunderstorm in the area. She was exhausted. The plane from Dallas had finally landed at 1 a.m. Pacific time and she hadn't even bothered to go to the hotel, opting instead to take a cab to the Richmond station house on 6th Avenue, introduce herself to the overnight desk sergeant and grab about four hours of sleep in the rack room there. She'd met up with Kris at the SFPD's 6 a.m. briefing, and since then they'd met with Agent Cullen, toured the crime scene, reviewed case notes and tagged along on interviews with Kelly and Park, the detectives working the case.

San Francisco was a beautiful city, but Olivia would have been hard pressed to bear witness to its many virtues. All she had to go on were her memories of a visit 20 years ago, because this trip had been all business. The only sight she'd seen had been the Golden Gate Bridge—it loomed in the background as the detectives walked the crime scene late in the afternoon. She and Kris finally left the precinct a little after 8 o'clock, checked into the hotel and had a delicious dinner at Cafe Bunn Mi.

The day had taken its toll—Olivia didn't know if she'd flown out here hoping that their guy had committed this murder, or that he hadn't, but now she knew it was him, and the implications of that knowledge settled over her mood like the fog on the Bay. Kris wasn't feeling any better, and a couple of drinks back at the hotel bar had them both in a dark mood.

"Middle age is a bitch, Olivia. It just is. If you're living any kind of respectable life, you're not out at all hours drinking and sleeping around. Your kids might be grown, or they're at least off on their own, finding some independence, if you're lucky. If you're not lucky, they're off with their other parent and you never see them. Suddenly you have all this damn time to consider what is, what was, what could have been and what is never, ever going to be. Women like us, in our 40s, we're coming face-to-face with a lot of shit—the doors you opened, the doors you closed, and the price you paid for both. Every decision you've made comes home to roost. It either bites you in the ass or it's okay, you know, but it's never really great, is it?"

"There are great parts," Olivia offered half-heartedly. "Great pieces. But I know what you mean. With no kids, it's just me, Alex and our work, and that's either profoundly intimate or incredibly lonely, depending on what day of the week it is. Doesn't seem to be a middle ground."

"I know I'm a misanthrope. Believe me, you wouldn't be the first to point it out. But I'm looking at things holistically. Women have a fundamental choice to make in life that men simply don't ever face. Will I have children or will I have a career? Obviously there's a third option—to do both—but no one I know feels like that's really having it all."

"Me neither, to be honest," admitted Olivia. "They feel like they're not doing either thing quite as well as they'd like."

"You chose, right? Or the choice was made for you, because that's the other thing: we are on the clock from the time we hit puberty. If we don't have our ducks in a row by a certain point, our options become very limited. You and Alex have obviously made peace with your decisions, but I'll bet it wasn't easy for either of you."

"No, it wasn't," Olivia conceded. "I never knew for sure what I wanted to do, but suddenly it seemed too late. We have careers that we love, and we have each other, and that's enough. But what about you? You have a career and you have kids."

"Kids I never see, Benson. You haven't heard the whole story."
Olivia looked at her, and knew she wanted to talk. Lots of people have that sense, when there's something that needs to be said, something that just needs to be drawn out. Detectives have it in spades, but even the guy half in the bag at the far end of the bar would have known that Kris had a burden she needed to unload. She signaled to the bartender to bring them each one more, and then simply nodded at Kris. *I'm ready.*

"I used to think that every loss was just a loss, the same for everyone, in every situation. That grief was just grief, no matter what," Kris said. "But I realized that some losses are so profound that your whole life is divided very clearly into *before* and *after*. That they'll be indelibly written on your soul, and for the rest of your life, any loss becomes every loss, and every loss becomes that loss, all over again. It's like you're living that moment fresh: what was said, where you were. What clothes you were wearing, for fuck's sake. However many years you have ahead of you, you live them knowing you will suffer that loss over and over. The best you can wish for another person is that they never experience that kind of pain."

"I can't imagine the trauma of losing your brother the way you did," Olivia said. She'd suffered her own pain, and seen plenty more, but imagining her worst moment she knew it wouldn't compare to the murder of a child.

"I was so young," Kris said. "It didn't really impact me as deeply then. My parents worked hard to channel their rage, and to shield me from it. I knew my brother had died, obviously, and that's bad enough. But would it shock you to know that I didn't know the details until I read the case file myself?"

"Not really," Olivia said. "I'll bet your dad never talked about it."

"He never did," Kris agreed. "He knew how much it would scare me as a kid, even to know the most basic framework of what happened to Kent. And by the time I was old enough to understand, he just refused to discuss it. He'd buried it as deeply as he could, and covered it in quicklime."

"Before, and after," Liv mused. "He was never the same."

"No, he wasn't. My brother's murder changed all of our lives. But it wasn't the dividing line in my life."

"No?" Olivia couldn't imagine what grief her friend must have endured that was any worse.

"It was my father's death," Kris answered. "When my dad killed himself, my kids were 1 and 3, just babies really. I hadn't wanted children, Liv. After what happened to my brother, you know, it was really hard for me to think about being responsible for these small, defenseless pieces of my heart. But Lauren really wanted kids, and I wanted her to have everything that she wanted."

"That's a big thing to compromise on."

"Is it, really? If Alex had wanted kids, and you were on the fence, what would you do?"

Olivia hesitated, and Kris misinterpreted her silence as anger.

"I'm sorry, Olivia. I don't know your situation, and I don't know your wife. Forgive me if that's a touchy subject."

"No, it's not. We were in agreement on that. If things had worked out differently for us, if we'd gotten together sooner, maybe…" Olivia explained. "But you're right. If she'd wanted it more than anything, I'd have given in, without a doubt."
"We get so few chances in life to make someone's dreams come true," Kris said. "So we had kids-we used a donor, so the kids are full siblings. And they were beautiful babies, and Lauren was ecstatic. She had been right-she was born to be a mom."

"What about you?"

"I was happy that she was happy. I changed the diapers, sang the lullabies, played peek-a-boo. But I was phoning it in. Don't get me wrong, Liv. I loved them very much, the moment I saw them. Before I saw them, really. But it was almost too intense, and I worked pretty hard to keep some distance. I know that sounds awful."

That was a confession that most parents wouldn't make, but Olivia felt she understood exactly what Kris meant. It was something she'd worried about herself, afraid that if she had kids she'd be either too much or not enough somehow. She waved away Kris's self-flagellation.

"This is me you're talking to, Kris. We are a lot alike." And it was true-they hadn't known one another long, but there was a deep, unspoken understanding between them. "Was Lauren okay with that?"

"She didn't love it," Kris admitted. "But I think she knew I was trying as hard as I could, and she was remarkably patient with me. She's an amazing parent, so she took up a lot of slack."

"What changed?"

"Before, and after," Kris said. "My dad killed himself, and it turned my life upside down. By then I'd read the case files on my brother, but I really hadn't fully grasped how much he had struggled, and how much pain he'd been in every single day since Kent died. Finding out he'd been watching the guy who killed his son, biding his own time until he knew that monster wouldn't hurt another kid-that asshole's death was my dad's release from all that. Pulling the trigger to kill himself was just the last thing he had to do."

"I can't imagine the effect that had on you."

"It was unfathomable," Kris said. "Reading his suicide note, I realized that seeing my son get older just exacerbated my dad's pain. My mom's death didn't seem to be a knockout punch, but I guess it sent him reeling. Grief is like an opportunistic infection, you know? It's just there, waiting until something lays you low, and then it just overruns every cell in your body. When Dad died, it all finally washed over me: my brother, my mom, all the shit I'd seen on the job. I had all of that on my mind, and then I worked a case. Murdered kid, it was just too much. I did a 180 at home. I went from being standoffish, to being obsessive and overprotective. I was convinced the kids would be hurt or killed somehow. I questioned every decision Lauren made, and I could hardly bear to let Milo and Liza out of my sight. I was unhinged and it affected them. They went from being happy-go-lucky kids-adventurous and inquisitive-to being clingy and afraid. My paranoia was ruining their lives. I couldn't bear to let them live in the present, but I couldn't think about the future, either."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing," Kris said. "I self-medicated, but I'm not even very good at that. I refused to see a therapist, alone or with Lauren. I worked like a fiend, and every minute I wasn't working, I was driving everyone in my family crazy. Lauren would just scream at me: Why can't you just let them be kids? I'd tell her, because I've seen what can happen, and that I was living in the real world, not in some art gallery. Finally, she told me to get help or she was leaving."
"When was that?"

"Eighteen months ago," Kris said. "So you can guess how that turned out."

"She left anyway."

"She really didn't have much choice, I guess. I went to therapy, but my heart wasn't in it. I was phoning it in, and she kept her end of the deal at first. She stayed, but something between us was just being choked off. It's an age-old story: She met someone who was more emotionally available. She left me for an artist she was repping at the gallery. Her stuff was shit, so I should've known something was up. Lauren has excellent taste and an eye for talent."

"Doesn't seem like she tried very hard," Olivia said. Kris's silence spoke volumes. "I'm sorry, Kris. I just can't believe she left you for that."

"Lives have been built on less, Olivia, and torn apart for no reason at all."

They were both quiet for a moment, sipping their drinks, before Olivia asked, "Where is she now?"

"They live in Chicago, Lauren's hometown. She always hated St. Louis. I told you she's an art dealer, I think."

"Yeah, you did," Olivia affirmed.

"She does well for herself, way better than I'll ever do on a cop's salary, I'll say that," Kris said. "Now Lauren runs a thriving gallery in Wicker Park and this woman, this piece-of-shit human being who used her art as a ruse to sleep with my wife, is now staying home to raise my children. She gave me the car, the house, and everything in it, lock, stock and barrel."

"But she took your kids," Olivia said evenly. 

"Well, she giveth, and she taketh away." Kris's laugh was acidic. "The new girlfriend-sorry, wife now-is a Scientologist. And I, my friend, am what is known as a merchant of chaos."

"I'm sorry, a what?"

"Exactly. It's her way of saying I'm fucked up, I guess. Lauren's attorney used a different phrase: unfit parent."

"That's ridiculous," Olivia said.

"You'd think so. But money talks and bullshit walks, isn't that what they say, Benson? I had the house, but there was a covenant restriction in the deed that prevented me from selling or mortgaging it for money to fight her. So she put my kids through a bunch of shit in another state-court-ordered psychiatric evaluations and all that crap-and she brought up everything and the kitchen sink. She talked about my job, my unhealthy reaction to my father's death, my so-called obsession with my brother's murder. She even used letters I'd written her to prove that I had failed to properly bond with the kids in infancy."

"Oh, Kris, my god. I'm so sorry."

"Thanks," Kris said. "The long and short of it is, I can see my kids now on supervised visits, once a month. I am there every minute I'm allowed to be, but that's all I've got right now. Six hours on Saturday, four hours on Sunday, the last weekend of every month. I write them letters, but I have no idea if they get them or not. Lauren won't let me Skype or FaceTime them between visits, and
she doesn't have to tell me shit about their lives. I have no decision making power at all."

"Can you fight this?"

"I used what my dad had left me to get a real estate attorney to work on the deed restrictions—that house is the only chance I have to get enough cash to go toe-to-toe with her in court. He thinks he's found a loophole, but even if it works, I have to then decide how much more pain I'm willing to put my kids through. Because she won't roll over. If I get one good attorney, she'll get two or three, and she will drag them into it all over again. They're getting older now, Olivia. My son is almost 7. He's going to know what it means when she has someone read those letters where I said I wasn't sure I was cut out to be a mother."

Olivia shook her head. She didn't know what to say. There was no justice in this, but the system favors those with money. She'd known that all her life. "How do you handle it, Kris?"

"Well, I do go to therapy," she laughed. "Willingly, and often. Other than that, I putter around that giant empty house, and every time I think about losing my kids, I somehow lose my dad, and my mom, and my brother, all over again. I wake up every day knowing that there will be at least one moment when I feel like I've been punched in the gut, and I will want to double over in pain. So I work every minute that I can, and every minute I know it won't be enough. It won't make me happy, and it won't help anybody. But what else am I gonna do?"

**Eats flesh and bone away**

**It eats the brittle bone by night**

**And the soft flesh by day**

**It eats the flesh and bones by turns**

**But it eats the heart away**

-Oscar Wilde

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol*  
1898
So far, Fin hadn't been able to tell Olivia much about Dev Patel...they now knew where he was working, but had no idea what the hell he was up to. When Olivia finally got a chance to call Alex on Saturday morning, she decided there was no point in mentioning it if all she had was a vague sense of unease. Alex had enough going on without being made to feel paranoid as well.

She was in her office working when Liv rang from San Francisco.

"Hey, you," Alex smiled as she answered. "How's it going?"

"I'm beat, honey," Olivia said.

"I'd say so. It's only six o'clock there on a Saturday morning and you sound like you've already had 3 cups of coffee and put in a full day."

"Not quite," Olivia laughed. "Just two cups, but yeah, it feels like a full day already. Not that you have much room to talk, since I know you're in your office and probably have been for hours."

"I plead the Fifth," Alex said. "How many hours have you slept since you left here Thursday?"

"Oh, at least eight," Olivia said. Her four hours in the hotel had been far more restful than the four in the crib the night before, but she and Kris had stayed up talking way too late, and the drinks hadn't seemed like much at the time, but they'd served up an ugly reminder in the form of a brutal headache that woke her just before five. "The good news is, I'm coming home tonight, probably late though."

"What's the bad news?"

"It's him," she said.

"Shit. I'm sorry, baby. I had kept my fingers crossed that this would be a false alarm when you said there was no utility belt."

"Me too, but apparently that's not integral to our boy's sense of fun."

"He's changing things up, Liv. You always tell me that's not good."

"It's not," Olivia agreed. "All I can do now is gather as much information as possible and get my ass home to see if we can use it to make any headway."

"I'm on board with the get my ass home part. I don't like it when you're there and not here." It was a surprising admission, Liv thought. Alex was so stressed that it didn't seem like she cared or even noticed where her wife was.

"You've got it, Cabot. I'll be there to wake up with you tomorrow."
One last meeting with the SFPD had left Liv feeling as confused as ever about the cases. New York, St. Louis, and now San Francisco—they had to be related, but why couldn't they figure this out? Each time they had another victim, and another jurisdiction, and still couldn't seem to come up with a single meaningful piece of evidence, she began to doubt herself. She wasn't sure they could ever catch this guy at the rate they were going. The meeting had been livened up when Chael Bauer stopped by the precinct to give them a progress report on the work his team was doing. He couldn't sit in on any briefings—they were all hoarding information, not sure which piece of seemingly meaningless detail would be the break the needed in the case—but he'd been in touch with the Richmond station house captain and knew the detectives from New York and St. Louis were in town and asked if he could update them.

It was brief—his guys were working with far less detail than the detectives were, and Olivia thought the only reason he was even allowed to pretend he was helping was his connections in St. Louis. Of course, he was a big name in the Bay Area, too, and everyone agreed it couldn't hurt to have some tech guys crunching peripheral data and modeling patterns based on solved cases to see if they could arrive at some new methodology that would help. If not this case, maybe it would offer some help down the road.

When the meeting broke up, the captain offered to call a cab to the airport for Liv and Kris. Chael overheard and waved him off. "I'm heading that way and I've got a car. The least I can do is deliver these two intrepid travelers so they can head back home."

They let Kris out at Terminal 2, to catch her American flight back to St. Louis. As the driver pulled away, ferrying them toward Terminal 1, Bauer surprised her by saying "I think we're on the same flight, Sergeant Benson. I hope I don't drive you crazy before we get back to JFK."

"Gulfstream in the shop?" she asked with a smile.

"No, my trip to New York is personal, and I'm a bit of a stickler about using the company jet for that."

"Even though you own the company?" The quirks of the uber-rich never ceased to amuse her.

"Well, we're planning an IPO and..." he began.

"I might have heard something about that." It had been on the news so often that she couldn't have missed it, actually.

"Of course," he said with a chuckle. "I try not to assume that people with real concerns pay any attention to stuff like that. You're saving lives and helping victims. My little fiefdom pales in comparison."

Their initial meeting had been brief. She'd barely talked to Bauer, and certainly hadn't seen this side of him; his humility was refreshing.

"You don't need the SEC breathing down your neck," she said. "I understand hairsplitting and arcane regulations. I'm a cop."

"I know you do," he allowed. "My dad always hated losing a perp on a technicality. I have to admit, I'm not upset about flying back to New York with you. My software guys have raved about
"That's very kind of you to say," Olivia replied. "I'm just doing my job."

"And doing it with impressive skill and dedication, I'm told. They're eager to pick your brains again."

"My programming skills are nonexistent," she laughed. "I don't know how I could be of any help"

"You'd be surprised. Apprehending violent criminals isn't my bailiwick, either in cyberspace or in the real world, but what we try to do with any program is to make it as user-friendly as possible. Ideally, we'd like to create something will 'think' the same way humans do, but with an amazing capacity to store and compare details, look for patterns, connect the dots. Knowing how you approach your job provides us with insights we can't get anywhere else, though. I can't promise it will turn into anything that will help you, but the better input we have, the more likely we are to deliver a tool that may eventually make your job easier."

"And will it make you a lot of money?" she asked. Sussing out a motive wasn't a skill she could just turn off.

"You're very direct," he smiled.

"Some would say impolitic. I have trouble talking around things."

"I'm glad you asked. The answer is no, actually. Whatever comes out of this project, if it's remotely useful, will be something we provide to law enforcement free of charge. It's the least we can do. Now, I'm no Mother Teresa. Money isn't the only form of currency for a publicly traded business."

"Social responsibility," Liv said knowingly.

"Exactly. That would usually take the form of fair labor practices and carbon footprints, but a little good publicity never hurt anyone either."

"And are you getting good publicity from this? I know it's been mentioned in the news."

"It has been, but my folks haven't put out any press releases or anything. We'd prefer to talk about it once there's an it to talk about, you know?"

"I deal with the media. I understand."

"I do want something to come of this, Sergeant Benson. That's why I was hoping to spend a bit of time with you today. The last time we met, you were understandably preoccupied."

Olivia recalled it vividly-she had been in St. Louis when Alex had been injured in a courthouse shooting in Manhattan. Jack Hammond had been killed in the incident. Bauer had been in St. Louis to offer his team's services and he'd been generous enough to fly her home on his company jet, getting her home hours earlier than a commercial flight would have. She remembered that he'd been exceedingly kind, but it hadn't been a good time for conversation.

"I wasn't in the mood for small talk on that trip," she conceded.

"Nor was I," he said. "I know I'm only a stranger, but your fear and worry were palpable. I was very concerned for you and for Ms. Cabot."

"This is our stop," he said, as the limo pulled up at Terminal One. "I'm hoping we can remedy that
They got out of the car, taking their bags from the driver. Olivia nodded her head almost imperceptibly at his Tanner Krolle carry-on; she didn't live in a fifth-floor walkup, but $2,500 overnight bags were still a bit rich for her blood. "I'm fairly sure we won't be sitting together," she laughed. "The NYPD isn't known for its luxury travel arrangements."

"I thought as much," he said as they walked into the terminal. "That's why I checked for an available first-class seat. Say the word and I'll upgrade you. I've got points coming out my ears." He smiled, waiting.

She could upgrade herself, but didn't usually splurge like that, a fact he'd probably surmised. "I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking," Bauer said. "I'm offering. I'm the son of a cop, Sergeant. I find your job fascinating and I'd love to talk to you about it. Maybe a little insight into what it's like for you and your colleagues these days would help me to help you. Software isn't just good for sharing the inane mumblings of celebrities and teenagers, you know."

She laughed. "That's certainly a more lucrative use of your time, thought." They were standing near the ticket counter, and he had an Amex black card in his hand.

"Come on, Sergeant," he implored. "An upgrade is a small price to pay for an audience with an honest-to-God New York City detective. Besides, I'm a part-time resident of your fine city. It's the least I can do to thank you for keeping the streets safe."

His smile was disarmingly open. "When you put it that way, I guess I can take one for the team," she said. "But only on one condition."

"What's that?"

"A cross-country flight is far too long to stand on ceremony. You have to call me Olivia."

A bargain struck, Bauer handled the upgrade, and they made their way to the Delta SkyClub to grab a preflight drink.

Olivia found him to be unwaveringly friendly and unfailingly interesting. Chael Bauer was the type of person who was a gracious host, even when he wasn't-technically-the host. His sense of humor was sharp, but he saved the most pointed barbs for himself as their conversation ranged meandered to a variety of topics.

"Chael is an unusual name," she remarked as they boarded the plane. Kris had told her the story behind it, but she couldn't recall.

"It's Michael," he explained, flashing his passport before putting it into his bag. "I had big plans for myself, and I didn't think Mike was nearly quirky or distinctive enough to stand out in Silicon Valley. Who knew that, ten years later, I'd be the twit who shows a passport for a domestic flight and goes by a name that sounds more like a trendy leaf vegetable than that of a grown man?"

Olivia laughed harder than she'd laughed in a long time. Despite the hipster nickname, he seemed neither quirky nor rich. He reminded her more of a run-of-the-mill software developer than a tech tycoon. They talked about family, how Olivia became a police officer, Alex, Chael's girlfriend and a host of other subjects.

They talked from gate to gate, and the hours flew by. Bauer asked probing questions, clearly
informed by what he'd known of his father's police work, but also eager to discover what had changed and evolved since the older man had retired. He took notes, sketching out for her some ideas he had on police technology and scribbling even more furiously as she told him what she'd liked-and hated-about her time in the computer crimes division. When he found out she didn't have a car in the lot at JFK, he insisted on having his driver drop her off at home. As she got out, she thanked him.

"That flight was much more enjoyable than I'd expected," she said. "But don't let me down. When you finish running the world, take some of those great ideas of yours and make my job easier."

"I promise," he replied, patting the leather bag where his notebook was. He handed her his card. "As long as you promise to stay in touch, Olivia. When you get tired of detective work, I'd be glad to have you join my team and turn some of those ideas into reality."

"I'm pretty sure I'm not cut out for a tech job," she averred.

"I disagree. Your experience and insight are exactly what will help us to make things happen, and to make them work the way they should."

To her surprise, he was serious. She wasn't sure what to say, and she looked down at his card, her thumb running over the embossed print.

"Keep that," he said. "Our paths will cross when the time is right, Olivia. A desk job wouldn't be all bad if it changed some people's lives, would it?"

10:00 p.m.

She made her way up to the apartment—a text when they'd landed told her that Bill was in town and he and Alex were having a late dinner. The place had that empty feel to it, and Alex's purse wasn't on the hall table, so she hoped they were having a nice time together.

Olivia poured a Scotch and soda—she'd need a nudge into dreamland after the long flight, time change and intriguing conversation. She turned on a lamp and sat on the couch, reaching for the TV remote but changing her mind. She sank back into the cushions, her drink on the arm of the sofa, amber liquid bathed in the warm circle of lamplight. Her mind was racing—the case in San Francisco, and her certainty that it was their killer, despite some differences too pronounced to ignore.

She was thinking about what Kris had told her—they'd met under less-than-ideal circumstances, but had bonded quickly, and Kris's sense of loss and grief were palpable. Olivia knew what it was like to do this job when your whole life was coming apart at the seams, when there was no one at home to talk to and precisely little joy to balance out the darkness they saw every day.

And she kept coming back to her conversations with Chael Bauer. When he'd stepped forward to offer his company's help, she'd viewed him as a misguided do-gooder at best, and a hindrance at worst. But a good detective had to be willing to throw out a theory when it no longer worked, and she'd definitely revised her opinion of him. He was a smart guy who earned to apply that intelligence to a more substantive cause, and he might just be able to do it. She pulled the business card out of her pocket and laid it on the coffee table.

She'd keep it. She couldn't imagine leaving the job to be software consultant, but life was an unpredictable thing. Having a well-placed friend could never hurt.
The warm Scotch had soothed her senses just enough that she was winding down. She sat her empty glass on the table, picked up the card and headed across the room to the stairs, looking forward to a hot bath and a soft bed.
Alex had gotten home and slipped into bed just as Olivia was drifting off around 11:30. They'd only said a few words, but Olivia was comforted by the very nearness of her wife's body, and the soft breathing she heard as Alex fell quickly into a deep sleep. Less than four hours later, an electronic ring shattered the quiet, cozy sounds in the bedroom. Olivia knew it had to be hers-Alex didn't get those calls anymore unless all hell had broken loose.

"Benson," she mumbled as she touched the screen to accept the call.

"Another one," Rollins said. No need to qualify or explain-Olivia knew without asking that their guy had killed again.

"Where?"

"You won't believe it," Amanda said.

"Try me."

She almost didn't believe it. The body was at Vesuvio Playground, less than 10 blocks from the very bed Liv was about to climb out of.

"I'll be there in 15," she promised.

Alex's eyes were closed, but she was awake. "Not again," she said, her words half-question, half-wish. Olivia kissed her, pulling the covers up as she slid out of bed.

"Afraid so, honey. That was Rollins. I'll be back God-knows-when. Go back to sleep and I'll call you as soon as I can."

"You said you'd be here when I woke up," Alex reminded her.

Olivia sighed. "I did. I'm so sorry, Al. I don't have a choice."

She didn't linger, not wanting to prolong a conversation in which the next obvious question was "Where?" This one was a little too close to home, and Olivia preferred to save that little details for the light of day. She dressed, left the building and walked quickly down Mercer toward Spring. The little park was lit up like a landing strip, all the usual actors performing all the usual roles: uniforms securing the perimeter, scene techs setting up equipment and cameras, detectives examining the victim and her surroundings, while reporters chomped at the bit behind the yellow tape.

Rollins and Fin greeted her at the edge of the playground, handing her a welcome cup of coffee before the three of them slipped inside the barrier at Spring and Thompson.

"I didn't expect caffeine to have materialized so quickly," Liv remarked.
"We grabbed it from the 7-11 while Nick questioned the homeless guy who was with the body when it was found."

"Homeless guy?" Olivia asked as Nick rejoined the group. "What do you mean, when it was found? He found it?"

"No," Nick clarified. "A couple of guys and a girl were cutting through the park on their way home from a bar when they heard him wailing and shouting. They found him about five yards from the body. But before you get excited, partner, he's not the guy."

"How can you be sure?"

"This guy...he's not right, you know? But not in any kind of organized way. We can take him in if you like, but I'm telling you he just stumbled on the body and was too traumatized to do anything but rock back and forth. It's an ugly scene."

"Damn," Olivia said. "Did the other three people see anyone else, anyone leaving, anything at all?"

"Nope, and they're totally cooperative. They didn't move—once they realized what was going on, they stayed put and called it in. When the patrol car got here, the girl was trying to talk to our homeless guy to calm him down."

"Well, let's take the guy in," Olivia said. "Be gentle with him, Fin, tell him we'll just put him in a holding cell til tomorrow to see if he remembers anything. At least he'll have one night off the street, maybe a meal or two."

"Will do, Liv," Fin acknowledged, and he and Amanda went to transport the man back to the 1-6. Olivia turned to Amaro.

"How sure are we this is the work of our killer, Nick?" she asked. "If it is him, he's escalating quickly."

"I'm pretty sure. No utility belt, but there wasn't one in San Francisco, either, so he's changing up the script. Everything else looks consistent."

The two detectives did some more work at the scene, conferring with CSU and waiting until the body was picked up to go to the morgue. The sun was coming up when a tech yelled for them.

"Detectives! Gonna need you over here."

They walked quickly to the spot where the victim had lain. Once they'd picked up the woman's body and placed it in a body bag, they'd found a piece of paper that had been pinned beneath her buttocks.

"What is it?" Nick asked. "Maybe it was just there already."

"I don't think so, Nick," Olivia said as the tech held the glossy paper out in gloved hands so she could see it more closely. "Motherfucker."

Nick looked at her questioningly.

"Son of a bitch is somewhere laughing his ass off. It's a goddamn printout from the Meyers Uniforms website. The fucking duty belt. Jesus fucking Christ."
Alex stood on the dais at One Hogan Place, giving yet another press conference. Despite the fact that her office seemed on the brink of a civil war and Jack McCoy had been less than encouraging, she was publicly unveiling her plans to restructure the trial division of the District Attorney's office. Most of her executive team were present, but barely accounted for, their varying levels of buy-in communicated quite clearly through their body language. Laurie was there, too, the only friendly face in a sea of discontented attorneys and snarky journalists.

Questions had run the gamut from interested and on-point-What do you expect to see in terms of prosecution rates and arraignment-to-trial intervals once you implement the changes?-to the usual political baiting: Some sources say that this is not a measure that will be welcomed by many within the DA's office. Is this merely a bid to court the women's vote and win re-election? Joan Fleming from the Times stood expectantly, waiting for an answer. She didn't have to wait long.

Alex's reply was quick. "Days like this make me fairly sure I don't care to be re-elected, Joan, so no, that's not what this is about. This is a move to increase the efficiency of this office, and to reallocate our existing resources to get even better results. While I have to think that's something that any concerned citizen would approve of, the real proof will be in the pudding when we are able to leverage our staff and maximize their ability to put criminals in jail. None of that has to do with re-election. It has to do with doing my job."

The next question came from Tim Couville of the Post, and it was one that Alex wasn't remotely prepared for.

"Ms Cabot, has your wife made any progress in finding and arresting the killer who's terrorizing New York?"

"Tim," she glared.

"Has she? The people of this city deserve to feel safe."

"Indeed they do. And all of the officers of the NYPD are working tirelessly to ensure the safety of every man, woman and child in our city."

He persisted. "You're not answering my question."

"Because it's a ridiculous question. My office has no role in apprehending criminals, and you know it. We stand ready to prosecute the person responsible for these murders, and when the police have a suspect, we will work closely with them to get a speedy trial and a conviction on all counts."

"You're saying the police have no suspect?"

"You're saying it's definitely one individual?" The questions were coming from every direction now. She held up her hand to try to gain control of the free-for-all that had erupted.

"I'm saying nothing of the sort. I'm speaking in generalities and you shouldn't infer any meaning as to the progress of any case from my comments."

Couville spoke again, and when he did, Alex wished she'd simply turned and left after his initial question. "I have a source that indicates the suspect has ties to the police department, and has been using a policeman's duty belt as his signature. Has your wife shared that information with you?"
Alex was stunned, but worked hard not to let it show. This was a huge problem.

"As you're all aware, I'm not free to disclose any information the police may share with my office in the course of an ongoing investigation."

"Your wife is 'the police,' Ms. Cabot. Doesn't she tell you…"

"What my wife and I discuss is none of your business, and has nothing to do with the workings of this office or her unit. Sergeant Benson and I no longer have a direct professional relationship, and any information she has about any case would be shared with the ADA for Special Victims, Victor Argueta, who works closely with SVU and prosecutes their cases under my supervision."

"Is it true that you fired Rafael Barba because your wife didn't agree with his prosecutorial directives?"

"ADA Barba was not fired," she snapped. "He was an excellent prosecutor who chose to pursue other opportunities. His relationship with the NYPD Special Victims Unit was both cooperative and mutually beneficial."

She gathered her notes and turned to leave the podium, ignoring the cacophony of voices and the flashes of the cameras, leaving Laurie to inform the assembled reporters that a comprehensive restructuring plan would be shared with each of them in a press release within 24 hours.

Alex got into an elevator by herself and when the doors swooshed to a close, she felt all the air go out of her. She was rarely alone in the office these days-the constant stream of meetings and briefings and strategy sessions and personnel conferences were far harder than actually prosecuting criminals-and she hated press conferences under the best of circumstances. This had hardly been the best of circumstances. She got out of the elevator one floor up and started to call Olivia as she walked down the hall, but she had no idea what to say. She was testy and damn tired and wasn't sure if she wanted a drink or a nap or both.

She sat down at her desk, her head in her hands, and tried to gather her thoughts so she could speak to Olivia.

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**Monday, August 18, 2014**

**1:10 p.m.**

Olivia and Nick had crashed for a few hours when they got back to the 1-6, but by 10 o'clock they were both out on another call. They were out of the office until a little after 1, and when got out of the elevator to head to their desks, Fin stopped them before they could even get into the bullpen.

"Shit's hittin' the fan."

"What's going on?" Nick asked, looking over Fin's shoulder.

"The Chief of D's is here and he's looking for you two," Fin explained. "Just wanted to give you a heads up and let you know I'll miss working with you-he looks like he's out for blood."

"What the fuck?" Olivia wondered as she walked past Fin to head toward Cragen's office. Before she got halfway across the room, the captain's door opened and Chuck Wallace came barreling out toward her.

"It's about fucking time, Benson."
"Chief, what's the problem?"

"Every goddamn thing. Are you kidding me? Your wife just screwed your case over."

Olivia didn't even know what to say. She had no idea what he was talking about or how Alex could have done anything to affect any case she was working. She looked to Cragen.

"The serial case, Liv," Cragen said. "We have a leak."

"A leak?" she repeated. "I don't know what you're talking about, or what Alex could possibly have to do with it."

"There was a press conference…" Don began. He gave her the highlights while Chief Wallace grew angrier by the second until he finally erupted.

"Stop shooting your mouth off to your wife, Benson. I'd have thought she'd have enough sense to keep your pillow talk private, but obviously I was mistaken."

"Just a goddamn minute," Olivia said. She stepped toward Wallace aggressively and he shifted his weight back-not a lot, just enough that it was noticeable. "Implying that my wife is stupid is so wrong it's not even funny, but saying that she leaked a single word I said to her just makes me think you're the one who's stupid."

"You're out of line, Sergeant."

"Liv," Cragen said, reaching out to grab her arm and pull her back a step. "Watch yourself."

"Captain…" Nick interjected, but was quickly cut off by Fin, who'd followed them over to join the group. "Man, you know there ain't no way in hell Cabot said shit to anybody."

"Stay out of this, Tutuola," Wallace advised.

"Everybody hold up," Cragen demanded. "No one here is the enemy." Olivia shot him a look and he continued, "It's not Cabot either. With all due respect, Chief, that theory won't fly."

"Well we have a fucking leak somewhere," Wallace retorted. "And I honestly don't give a shit who it isn't. I want to know who it is, and I want to know how it happened. Captain Cragen, your squad has been dickin' around on this case for months, you've got three other goddamn agencies in two other states involved, and this was the only real lead you had, and now it's as good as gone. You've got nothing. I've got half a mind to kick this up to Major Case and let you people deal with the easier stuff. You get results on that."

No one spoke. Olivia was enraged-they all were-but she didn't trust herself to say one more word.

"We've got this," Cragen finally said. "No need to reassign it. It's under control."

"It damn well better be," Wallace said to Cragen. He walked a few steps toward the exit and then whirled on his heel to face Olivia. "Find the leak, Benson. Solve this case, or I'll have your shield. If there's one more victim before you find the perp, your ass will be back in uniform and working crowd control at the Macy's Thanksgiving parade. Don't fuck this up any more than you already have."

Olivia headed back to her desk but Cragen stopped her. "Benson, in my office now. In fact, all of you," he said. "That includes you, Rollins."
The four detectives followed him in, Rollins closing the door behind her.

"That's bullshit, Captain, and you know it."

"Shut up, Benson, and listen to me. I know it's bullshit—we all do—and I will defend you and Cabot all day long to that idiot. But we have a major problem here. We do have a leak, and this whole case is about to go up in smoke. I want you and Amaro to stay on this case—you are to do nothing else until it's closed. You hear me? Nothing."

Olivia nodded, Nick mumbled his agreement, and Cragen turned his attention to the other two people in his office.

"Fin, Amanda, you're on the leak. Find it, plug it. I don't care how. If we come up with anything else we absolutely can't afford to have the media find out about it."

"What about Mackey?" Nick said.

"What about her, Amaro?" Cragen was perplexed. "I'm sure she's got her own work to do."

"No," Amaro clarified. "What if Mackey is the leak?"

"Are you crazy?" Olivia looked at her partner in disbelief. "No. There's no way in hell Mackey is the leak."

"How can you be sure?" Nick challenged her. "What do we really know about her?"

Plenty, Olivia thought. She knew in her bones that it wasn't Kris Mackey talking to reporters. She knew it, but couldn't explain it. You don't give up your whole life for the job and then give up the job. She felt as sure of that as she felt about anything. "I know all I need to know," she replied.

Nick wasn't done. "She has an axe to grind. You said it yourself, Olivia—she's having issues in St. Louis. Maybe she's just fed up."

"She wouldn't do that," Olivia argued. She wouldn't do that to me, she thought. But she couldn't say that, couldn't even say how she knew it was true. "You're just gonna have to trust me on this, Nick. It isn't her."

Nick wasn't convinced, and his doubt was contagious. Fin and Amanda seemed to be pondering his accusation. There was no time to dwell on it, though. She and Nick had work to do, and Tutuola and Rollins had a leak to find. If they thought it was Kris, Olivia couldn't do anything about that. They'd have to waste their time figuring it out—and time was something she didn't have to spare.
Chapter 38

-38-

Monday, August 18, 2014

7:30 p.m.

When Alex got home that evening, she knew Olivia was there, but didn't see her in the kitchen or living room. She saw light upstairs, and walked up to find her wife sitting in the reading chair by the bedroom window. There was a file on her lap, but she wasn't reading.

"Honey, I'm home," Alex laughed. "What's for dinner?"

"My goose," Olivia said. "It's thoroughly cooked."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a leak in my case. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

Alex should have known not to come in making jokes, should have called Olivia as soon as the press conference had ended, but she'd walked back to her office and headlong into a shitstorm of calls from the Mayor and the Commissioner wondering how the key piece of evidence they'd been withholding had been shared with Tim Couville from the Post. By the time she'd been able to breathe it was almost time to go home, and Liv had left the precinct. She thought it best to get home and talk there. Now she wished she'd had a different plan, because this one wasn't working.

"The press conference," Alex said. "I meant to call you."

"Oh, why bother?" Olivia asked. "I heard all about it. Heard about it from the Chief of D's, in fact, who made a special trip to the station to personally rip me apart. After he was done with Cragen, of course."

"This has nothing to do with you."

"The hell it doesn't. This is an investigation that's been consuming me for months, and I had exactly one ace in the hole. Until today."

"I understand," Alex said. "I meant that you're not the leak. I don't know where the hell Couville gets his information, but I know it isn't from you. I didn't confirm what he was saying."

"You didn't need to. It's obviously out there. Someone is talking, and I was told in no uncertain terms that I need to stop the leak and solve the case, now."

"What happened today was out of my control, Liv."

"It wasn't," Olivia insisted. "As soon as the questions went in that direction, you should have shut it down. My squad thinks Kris Mackey is the leak, for fuck's sake, and now every woman in the city is afraid of every cop she sees."

"We knew the possibility existed that my position could create some difficulties," Alex reminded her. "I headed it off as quickly as I could, and I'm sorry for any damage it did."
"That's a huge help. Thanks."

Alex was working to maintain her calm, knowing that Olivia was lashing out, frustrated by the case, which had been dealt a serious blow today. "Any ideas who could be talking to reporters?" she asked.

"No. I didn't know anyone was talking to reporters until a few hours ago, so no, I've got no clue. Which is the story of my life, these days, it seems."

"Could it be Mackey?" Alex ventured.

"Absolutely not."

"How do you know?"

"Christ, with the fucking questions, Alex. Stop. How do I know? I just do. And if you gave even one fuck about this case, or me, or my job, you wouldn't have dignified those questions with a response."

"I held a press conference about some internal restructuring. It had nothing to do with anything you're working on. Hell, it didn't even have anything to do with a case at all. I would never, ever jeopardize an investigation, especially yours. But talking to the media is part of my job, Olivia. And once I'm up there, they can ask anything they want. I ended things as quickly as I could, but he obviously has information from somewhere. I will always do my best to keep our lives separate from our jobs, but we knew this could happen. We discussed all the possibilities, and you were okay with it. You encouraged me to run, in fact."

"Did you know what this would be like, Alex? What it would really be like, day-to-day? Because I sure as hell didn't. I knew you'd be busy, and I'm okay with that. You've always worked your ass off, and what you're doing is important—to you and to this city. But even when you're here, you're not. This isn't anything like I imagined. You seem tortured, almost. You're exhausted and more stressed out than I've ever seen you. You look like a ghost. Have you looked in the mirror lately?"

She hadn't, and she didn't care to. She knew she'd see cheekbones that were a little too prominent and eyes with dark circles under them. She didn't care to engage in any kind of self-examination right now, really. "I'm not all that concerned with how I look, Olivia. I'm much more concerned about why you believe I would do anything to sabotage your case."

"Alex, I really can't deal with this right now."

"You mean you can't deal with me right now."

"Yes, you're right. I can't deal with you right now." Olivia stood up, started to toss her file on the bed and then pointedly tucked it under her arm as she walked past Alex to the bedroom door.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know, and you don't have to pretend you care. Maybe back to the precinct to try and save what's left of my case. Or maybe to a bar to just forget about it."

"Stop, Liv," Alex implored. "You can't just walk out like this."

Olivia turned in the doorway to face her. "I can't? Watch me," she replied, then paused a moment before she continued. "You know, If I'd had any clue it would be like this, I never would have..."
"What?" Alex interrupted. "Married me?"

"No, Alex. Don't put words in my mouth. I meant I'd never have said yes to this," she explained. "I'd never have let you run for office."

Alex was hurt, and angry, but she spoke quietly. "I didn't need your permission, Olivia."

"And I don't need yours now."

Olivia walked out of the bedroom, and a few minutes later the front door opened and closed, leaving Alex to wonder where she'd gone and what in hell was happening to them.

"May I come over?" Alex was halfway there already. She hadn't called earlier because she'd been trying to convince herself this wasn't happening, that she wasn't giving in, giving up, so easily. She'd spent enough time lying to herself, though. She had to know she'd be welcomed before she reached her destination.

"Alexandra, you never have to ask. Ma maison est ta maison, you know that. When can I expect you?"

"I'm on the way now," Alex said. "Don't read anything into this, Madeline. I just need to talk to someone."

"Of course, darling. I'm here for you. Anything you need."

Twenty minutes later, Alex let herself in to Madeline's apartment. She used the key, unable to bear punching in the code Madeline had set up for her. The entry hall was empty, and Alex laid her purse and keys on the massive table in the center of the room as she heard a familiar voice from the living room.

"In here, darling," Madeline called out. Alex followed the voice into the dimly lit room, and found Madeline sitting on the couch, a closed laptop and a few file folders on the table in front of her. It was odd that Madeline hadn't been at the door to greet her, she thought.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything," Alex offered, falling back on her unfailing politeness because it was easy. Small talk meant she wasn't saying anything important.

"Oh, Alexandra, I would drop anything for you, and I would do it happily. You know that. May I offer you a drink?"

"Yes, please," Alex said. She couldn't think of much right now that sounded better than a drink, really. Madeline stood up and crossed the room. She didn't ask what Alex wanted-she either knew or didn't care-and returned a moment later with two Scotch & sodas, handing one to Alex, who still stood rooted in the center of the room. Madeline returned to her seat on the couch and looked up at Alex.

"You said you needed to talk. I do hope you'll sit down and relax."

"May I?" Alex asked before she knew she was asking.

"Old habits die hard, don't they, darling?" Madeline's smile was uncharacteristically warm. "Of
course you may." She patted the cushion next to her, but Alex walked instead to one of the chairs opposite the sofa and sat down, crossing her legs and cradling her drink in both hands. So much was coming back to her now: Everything with Madeline was a game, a chess match. A battle of wills. She wanted to control everything, and Alex found herself rebelling in ways that didn't matter. It always worked against her, too. Her refusal to sit next to Madeline now meant she was directly across from her, with little choice but to make eye contact and fully engage.

"To what do I owe my tremendous good fortune in seeing you tonight, Alexandra?" Madeline asked. "Not that I'm complaining, you understand. It's just that your reluctance to communicate was beginning to hurt my feelings."

"I can't go on like this."

"It's good to find some common ground at last. I'm glad you're beginning to come around."

"That's not…" Alex began, but wasn't sure how to finish. To know what it's not would mean she'd know what it is, and that was absolutely not the case. "Madeline, let me try to explain why I'm here."

"I think we both know why you're here."

"Please. Just...please," Alex begged. She hated begging. "Let me say what I need to say."

"Very well, darling. I cede the floor, Madame District Attorney."

Alex could have winced at the reference, a seemingly respectful honorific now deployed as a not-so-subtle reminder of who was sovereign and who was supplicant.

"What do you want from me, Madeline?"

"I don't want anything, darling. I want you."

"That would almost be romantic, if I believed you."

"I've never given you a reason to distrust me, have I, Alexandra?"

"You're really unbelievable, you know that, right?"

Madeline didn't answer. Her expression was unperturbed-almost serene-and she met Alex's anger with a preternatural calm. She knew Alex had just had a fight with Olivia Benson, and was clearly trying to start one here, too. She'd wait her out. She'd done it before-nothing is more infuriating than finding yourself in a one-sided battle. It made you even angrier, and then you just looked crazy, like a deluded madman, tilting at windmills.

Alex recognized the tack for what it was and sought to rein herself in. She took several deep breaths before speaking again, striving for dispassionate words and an even tone.

"I'm trying to understand what's going on here," she began. "Why are you so interested in resuming our relationship? It's been years since we ended things. We've both moved on. Yet here we are, so many years later-you're blackmailing me, and for what? Do you really want me back if I don't want to be back?"

"I think you do want to be back. I don't think you realized it. In fact, I'm fairly sure you don't want to admit it right now, but it's true. You need me, Alexandra, and I'm being as patient as I can, waiting until you come to terms with what I see as both obvious and inevitable."
"I don't need you," Alex insisted. "I didn't come here to make you happy."

"Then why are you here?"

"I came here to ask you to leave me alone. I'm tired of waiting for the other shoe to drop. Whatever it is you've done, you didn't do it for me. I didn't ask you to do anything to get me elected, and don't want to have anything to do with you."

"You could have said all of that on the phone, but you chose to drive over here. You say you want to be left alone, but I think you've been left alone more than enough. You said you needed to talk to someone, but you really needed to talk to me. Olivia just wouldn't do, would she, darling? Or perhaps she isn't at home. Where is she, Alexandra? While you're here with me, where is your lesser half?"

Alex had no answer. She was too angry with Olivia to defend her with a lie, and too stubborn to give Madeline the satisfaction of the truth.

"Is she ridding our fair city of crime? Or drowning her sorrows in a tavern?"

"You have no idea what you're talking about," Alex retorted.

"Actually, I do," Madeline disagreed. "I've done some research on your detective. She has a lot of problems in her background; all of that unfortunate business with her father, and her poor mother's death, which was untimely, not to mention unseemly. She seems ill-equipped to take care of you with so many issues of her own."

"How dare you…"

"I have to look out for you, Alexandra. No one else does that, do they? Everyone in your life has an agenda. Everyone but me. Everyone wants something from you, don't they? Be honest. This is the only place you can be yourself, unburdened by the expectations of others. Let me take care of you. Don't you remember how good it felt to loosen that white-knuckled grip and just be? All you have to do is surrender to me. It's so easy."

"It's not easy, Madeline. I'm not that person anymore. I know you want me to be, but something changed for me. I never wanted to be your enemy-I just couldn't continue that way. I needed something else." Alex had put their breakup out of her mind for so long, that she had trouble recalling specifics now. She did know that her leaving hadn't been an act of aggression, but rather a desperate stab at self-preservation.

"Alexandra, I'll admit, at the time you left me I was very angry with you. It was difficult for me to understand why you would walk away from someone who only wanted to love you."

"That's just it, Madeline. You didn't want to love me. You wanted to control me."

"I strenuously object to that characterization, darling. I didn't want to control you-I don't want to control you now, really. My only desire is to give you what you need. I sensed that need in you, years ago, and while I agree that it had waned over time, it's back now. I can see it. The world is closing in, just as it was then, and no one else offers you any relief, or protection, or escape." She stood and walked over to the chair where Alex was sitting, tracing a single fingertip along Alex's jawline and tipping her head up. "I know you need this, and so do you. You wouldn't be so angry with me now if you weren't at war with yourself over this. I can protect you. I can be your sanctuary, your respite, your oasis in the desert. This isn't a mirage, Alexandra. It's very real. We belong together."
Alex shook her head, reaching up to push Madeline's hand away, wanting to break that physical connection between them. When Madeline drew Alex's long, slender fingers up to her own mouth, though, Alex drew her hand back sharply, as if Madeline's lips were blistering her skin.

"I'm married. I can't do this. I won't."

"If neither of us tells, who will know? And if no one knows, does it matter?"

"I will know, Madeline. And it will matter to me. Olivia matters to me. I wouldn't expect you to understand that. Nothing matters to you. Or perhaps I should say no one."

"You always were so sententious. It would be endearing and quaint if it weren't so damn tiresome," Madeline snapped. She stopped a moment to gather herself before continuing. "But you're wrong. You matter to me. Your happiness matters to me. And I can make you happy. There's nothing wrong with that, Alexandra. You don't need to feel guilty."

"Of course I do. I took a vow…"

"A vow to be unhappy, to have your needs go unmet and your desires unfulfilled? I'm not sure I understand the kind of love that fosters guilt," Madeline said. "What I give you, she cannot offer. What you give me, she does not want. I can see the power she holds over you, darling, but with great power comes great responsibility, and she has abdicated that responsibility. Where, then, is the treason?"

"Infidelity, Madeline…"

"No one will sew a scarlet letter on your Burberry coat, darling. Your secret is safe with me," Madeline promised. "We don't have to have sex. I know you see that as wrong. But you need this release and I can give it to you. It's that simple. We've spent many an hour together fulfilling our needs without engaging in sex. You'll come around. I know it. I can wait."

Alex stood. "I'm leaving now." Madeline followed her to the door, where Alex turned to face the older woman.

"You're always free to go, my love. You know that, just as you know that the door will always be open when you're ready to come home to me." Madeline's finger traced the curve of Alex's jaw.

"This is not my home," Alex said, pushing the hand away. "You are not my home."

"Aren't I?"

Alex never had an answer for Madeline. Instead, she always ended up sounding-and feeling-both querulous and uptight. "You're asking me to betray Olivia."

"As much as it pains me to see the anguish on your beautiful face, I must confess that I don't believe I am the cause of it, Alexandra. Actually, if you're honest with yourself, I think you'll admit that you've already betrayed her. You are betraying her now, just as she has betrayed you."

"What do you mean?"

"I know you, darling. I know that you came to me tonight after you fought with her. Did she walk out? I'm not surprised, given what I know of her. It's in her nature to run from you, isn't it? And it's in your nature to run to me. When you are in crisis, I step toward you. She steps away. That is the worst betrayal of all."
Alex was exhausted and sad, and Madeline's words were resonating. Olivia did pull away when things were difficult. She only wanted Alex if Alex wanted her, and going out on a limb was hard for the detective. She'd done it on a few occasions, but her default position was reticence. Madeline wanted Alex, and made no secret of it. What had she already done to bring Alex to this point? And what would she do to keep her here?

"Why?" Alex asked, her voice soft and tremulous. "Why can't you just let me go?"

"I simply can't, darling. I love you. Letting go isn't an option. I'm here when you're ready. My door is always open to you."
Chapter 39

Wednesday, September 17, 2014
12:30 p.m.

"We have a problem."

The voice on the other end of the phone was tense, and unusually quiet, but Alex recognized it immediately. The NYPD Commissioner didn't call her often, and she'd like to keep it that way.

"What's going on, Dan?"

"I take it you don't have the news on."

"I don't," Alex confirmed. "I've been in a meeting, in fact. What's the problem?" She hated guessing games.

"Officer-involved shooting," he said. "Civilian fatality."

"Please tell me this is one of the precincts testing the body cameras."

"No such luck."

Shit," Alex said. "Give me the details."

The commissioner complied as Alex took notes-and with every word he spoke, her tension increased: African American teenager in Inwood, shot after a stop-and-frisk by a white cop on a hotspot foot patrol. The cop, Joseph Kirkpatrick, was young-25, two years on the job-and the kid had a short rap sheet but wasn't armed. It had been less than 30 minutes since the first bullet was fired-there were five shots in all, and every one had found its target-but there were already four news crews setting up and conflicting witness accounts of what had happened.

Dan Mueller wouldn't normally have been so quick to call Alex. His automatic presumption was that the use of force had been justified, and anyway, it was normally the job of the shooting-team leader to call the DA. But they both knew this wouldn't be any normal situation. The police shooting in Ferguson had been just over a month ago, and police had shot and killed a young black man in Utah just a week prior. Add to that the fact that NYPD officers on Staten Island had killed a black man in an arrest over the summer, and no-one had yet been punished for any of these killings. People across the country were angry and fearful-it was a dangerous combination, and Manhattan certainly wasn't exempt. The whole situation was a powder keg and Alex hoped this wasn't the spark that would blow it all up. News traveled further-and faster-than ever.

"Who's going to run things on your end?"

"Kevin Leary is the captain of the 1-4, and he'll be the shooting-team leader. He'll be in touch shortly."

"Don't take Kirkpatrick's statement, Dan."

"Got it. S.O.P.," he confirmed. "It's a clusterfuck down here, Alex. I won't contact you about it
again, outside of any official briefings. I know you'll be on the hot seat as it is. But I wanted you to hear it from me."

"Hot seat?" Alex asked, her mind racing.

"Hell, yes," Mueller said. "Not only is your wife a cop, but this is her old precinct, if I'm not mistaken."

He wasn't. Inwood was home to the 5-5, where Olivia had started her career as a uniformed rookie. It shouldn't matter. But it would.

She thanked him for the call and hung up, and was just about to buzz Laurie when her chief of staff came through the door. Alex's iPhone buzzed and flashed at the same moment—Olivia obviously wanted to warn Alex as well, and Laurie was turning on the office TV as Alex took the call.

The past few weeks had been tense. Olivia had spent the night in the crib after their fight; Alex had made her way home after her talk with Madeline, and cried herself to sleep. She'd been able to avoid Madeline since, for the most part—just a few calls, each ostensibly so an impatient-sounding Madeline could remind Alex how patient she was actually being—and in the little bit of breathing room that afforded her, she and Olivia had reached a truce of sorts. They were both hurt, and shocked by the toll this was taking on them. They'd talked about it only enough to realize they didn't want to talk about it. They were doing what people do after a fight: being overly polite and licking their wounds. No fight would keep Olivia from worrying about Alex though—at least no fight they'd had so far.

"Liv."

"Alex, there's been…"

"I know," Alex cut her off. "Dan Mueller just called."

"Of course he did." Olivia forgot, sometimes, that her wife was now in a position to get news like that from the brass. Before, Liv would have been more concerned about Alex hearing it through the grapevine and worrying that Olivia might have been involved. Now, though, there were lots of people at the highest levels who had a vested interest in being sure the DA heard it directly from them, complete with whatever spin they might want or need to put on it. Alex had scores of champions and detractors throughout city government, and the commissioner, fortunately, fell into the former category. He knew Alex, and trusted her, and it was important that the DA have a good relationship with the NYPD. Being married to Olivia certainly didn't hurt—from 1 Police Plaza down to the rank-and-file, cops believed she had their best interests at heart.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked as the NY1 reporter appeared on her TV, talking a lot but saying nothing. Alex knew he couldn't possibly have any real details at this point, but that wouldn't stop him from interviewing anyone in a 3-block radius who was willing to talk, though.

"I'm fine," Olivia reassured her. "How about you?"

"Not great. This may not be the last thing I need, but it's damn close."

"Sorry, honey. It's going to be a shitstorm."

"God, I hope it was a clean shoot." She knew, though, that it wouldn't really matter if it was justified or not. Public opinion would be against the officer right now, regardless of what had happened. And it would be a waiting game for Alex and her team, who had to gather facts when all anyone else would care about would be rumors, speculation and sensationalism. "I've got to go,
Liv. I'm glad you're safe."

"Good luck with this, sweetie. Call me later?"

"Absolutely," Alex replied. "And Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"Stay safe out there, please. I have a feeling this will get ugly."

Olivia knew she was right. "I will. I love you, Al."

"I love you, too."

Alex spent the next 45 minutes watching the news, juggling phone calls from the mayor's office, the captain of the 55th precinct, and the head of the PBA. Colin even called with a word of encouragement.

Laurie, meanwhile, called around to assemble the EADAs for a 3:15 meeting, while issuing a firm no comment to every reporter who called. "The District Attorney will comment if or when it is appropriate to do so." She must have said it 20 or 30 times. Alex wondered if some reporters had called twice, just to see if the response would change.

The meeting with her assistants was unexpectedly contentious. She'd planned to spend 15 minutes telling them to ignore the media-both the questions they asked and the stories they printed-and to remind them all that there'd be no rush to judgment or action from their office.

"You have to file charges," Mark Davidson said. He was the EADA in charge of the Hate Crimes unit.

"Given that I just reminded you we won't rush to make a decision, I find that more than a little premature, Mark," Alex chided. "The only thing we have to do is what's right, and we can't possibly know that yet."

"I think it's pretty clear what happened," he replied.

"Based on what? A bunch of reporters cordoned half-a-block away from the scene? Or do you have a psychic medium on call?" Alex hated to be sarcastic, but he was pushing her buttons.

"It doesn't really matter what happened," Samantha Rosen interjected. "You've seen the circus out in Ferguson, Alex. It's not worth it. Get it into court one way or another and let a jury sort it out. You'll be crucified if you don't."

"That's the least of my concerns," Alex responded. She knew people were shaken by what had been going on around the country. She and Olivia had discussed it many times. Detectives were less likely to find themselves in this scenario, but it could happen. Even though Olivia spent more time at a desk these days-more than she ever had, and more than she wanted to-it was still a very real possibility. Alex lived in fear that her wife would be the shooter or the victim, and she bit back that fear every single time Olivia left the house, something she accepted because she had no choice.

What she didn't accept was insubordination. "This conversation is finished," she said. "I've told you what our position is and how we will handle this, and as we have more facts I will update you. Until then, none of you are to speak to the media at all, about this or any other case, and you will not discuss this matter with anyone outside of this room, including others in your offices. Is that
understood?"

All of them nodded, some more convincingly than others, and Alex dismissed them. She knew that some of them would be grumbling to one another before they'd crossed the threshold of the outer office. She'd been in plenty of meetings herself and she knew that not all of the EADAs found it easy to toe the party line.

It was already four o'clock and the police had scheduled a press conference for 5:30. That would be the first public information released, but Alex expected to get all the information they had in a confidential 4:30 briefing with the IAB and Leary, the shooting-team leader.

"Do you need anything before your 4:30 call?" Laurie asked.

"A stiff drink and a week's vacation."

"I'm pretty sure you're only joking about the drink, but you know I could make that happen by opening that cabinet door over there. Time travel, though, is above my pay grade."

Alex laughed. "I'm only half-joking," she clarified. "The vacation won't happen and though the drink is a possibility, something tells me I'd better have all of my wits about me."

"The assistants were pretty riled up," Laurie observed.

"This is a hot-button issue right now," Alex said. "Not that I need to tell you that. You watch the news. I'd expected they'd have their own opinions, but they surprised me with their knee-jerk reactions today."

"You can say that again. I'm pretty sure that Davidson was tying a hangman's noose down at the far end of the table."

Alex laughed again—Laurie was adept at defusing tension, and that alone was worth what she was paid.

"They'll be fine," Alex said, but her words were full of more hope than certainty. "I don't need dissension in the ranks, and I'll make that more than clear to them if necessary."

Laurie was gathering up her things, but she stopped at the door, turning to see that her boss's gaze was already fixed on some point outside the north windows.

"Ms. Cabot?"

"Yes, Laurie?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," Alex sighed. "I was being honest about that. I am going to figure out what the right thing is."

"No matter what you decide, someone is not going to be happy."

"Apparently that includes my staff, too. I really won't tolerate the infighting."

"I'll keep my tabs on things, make sure they don't get out of hand."

"Thank you, Laurie. I'm going to need that."
4:30 p.m.

The conference call with the shooting-team leader and IAB hadn't shed a lot more light on the matter. Obviously, the investigation was just beginning. Alex advised, as any DA should, that the officer not be interviewed, and Kevin Leary didn't argue. He knew that any statement the officer gave could affect the integrity of any potential grand jury proceedings.

The IAB lieutenant, Valerie Irvine, was less willing to follow Alex's directions.

"I need the officer's statement," she insisted.

"You'll have his Firearms Discharge/Assault Report," Alex assured her. "Right, Captain Leary?"

"Kirkpatrick is already completing the FDAR. The first officers to respond are also writing reports. Should we interview them?"

"Yes, anyone who can tell you what Officer Kirkpatrick did after the shooting is fair game."

"Take his weapon," Irvine said. Alex knew why cops hated IAB: They simply couldn't keep themselves from telling everyone else how to do their jobs.

"Done and done," Leary confirmed. "He was actually scheduled to be off for the next two days, so we'll decide what to do with him before his next scheduled shift on Saturday. Desk duty is standard, but…"

"I'd feel better if he were suspended with pay," Alex suggested.

"Me, too," Irvine agreed.

"Well, finally," Leary said. "We're all on the same page about something. I don't want him on the job right now. He poses a danger to any officer around him, on the street or in the station house. This is a bad situation, in light of everything else going on."

"You're not kidding," Alex said. "I need everything on lockdown, no leaks, as little media contact as possible."

"I can't stop the so-called witnesses from talking, Ms. Cabot."

"None of us can," she said. "Control what we can control. And let's hope Officer Kirkpatrick's PBA rep or lawyer gives him the good advice to lay low and say nothing. That part is definitely not in our control, unfortunately."

8:40 p.m.

Alex called Olivia as she was leaving the office.

"Finally heading out. Sorry it's so damn late, Liv."

"You okay?"

"I've been better."

"I'm sure," Olivia replied. "Did you eat anything?"

"You mean ever?" Alex laughed. "You know me. I'm sure I did at some point."
"Always with the technicalities. I do know you, Alex Cabot, and I know with the day you've had, you probably haven't had anything but coffee since breakfast. Am I right?"

"Guilty as charged."

"Alright," Olivia said. "There's nothing at home, including me. I'm just leaving work myself. Meet me at Mamoun's. We'll have dinner and talk."

"Oh, Liv…" Alex demurred. "I don't know if I should go out for dinner. Just my luck it'll end up on CNN: HEARTLESS D.A. FORGOES JUSTICE FOR A PITA."

"You're friends with Sloane Jansen. She'll call off the dogs," Olivia argued. "Besides, honey, it's Mamoun's. No one on an expense account would be caught dead in there anyway."

Alex relented, and met Olivia at their favorite place. It was close to the house and it was, as promised, a quiet meal undisturbed by news cameras. It was just what Alex needed, even if she did have to ignore the seven phone calls and texts she got-six reporters and one Madeline. They didn't talk much about the case-it was too risky, even if they did feel comfortable there-but as soon as they got home, Olivia ran a bath and they sank into hot water scented with bath oil.

"Is the lavender supposed to relax me?" Alex joked.

"No, it just makes the bathroom smell good," Olivia said. "The gin and tonic is supposed to relax you."

"You're a bad influence, Benson."

"The hell I am. Besides, there's juniper in gin, so it's just more aromatherapy. Drink up," she ordered, lifting her glass.

Alex returned the gesture. "What are we toasting?"

"The calm before the storm, counselor. This may be the last peaceful evening we have for a while."

That was truer than either of them cared to acknowledge. They talked a while, adding hot water a few times, and Alex shared what she knew. Olivia listened, asking a few questions but mostly just letting Alex talk. It helped her to organize her thoughts, Liv knew, and that soothed Alex more than just about anything.

When they were getting ready for bed, Alex seemed calmer. It wouldn't last-she'd probably be up at three o'clock making notes and pacing the floor of her home office-but a few hours of sleep would be better than nothing.

"How was your day, Olivia? I haven't even asked."

"That's okay. Uneventful, relatively. Looks like I'm heading out to San Francisco, though."

"Oh, God, not another one?"

"No, no. Thankfully not. Bauer's guys are wanting to walk through some questions they have. Mackey's flying out there too. Not like either of us is coming up with anything where we are, and NYPD was fine with it because it's on Bauer's dime."

"I'm not fine with it."

"What?"
"Do you have to go, Liv? Right now, of all times?"

"I'm afraid so, Al. I've got nothing and I need to solve this damn case. The brass are breathing down my neck, and Cragen's, and I can't exactly turn down an offer of help when I've got nothing better."

"When do you leave?"

"Soon, but don't worry, it won't be long-just an out and back, two days, three tops. You'll be okay."

"Sure," Alex said. She was anything but fine, but her wife seemed oblivious to that fact.

They got into bed and lay there a few moments. Olivia talked about the serial case and the stress it was putting everyone under. Alex was quieter than normal, not quite tuned in completely, but that didn't ping Liv's radar, until the conversation circled back to the events of the day.

"Things could get pretty bad when you announce that you're not seeing an indictment against that cop, Alex. Are you prepared for that?"

Alex turned to her, fully engaged now. "Who says I'm not going to seek an indictment?"

"You're kidding. The guy was doing his job."

"I don't know what he was doing, and neither do you, Liv. I haven't heard one shred of evidence yet. I'll do whatever I need to do, once I have all the facts."

It was Olivia's turn to be quiet now.

"You didn't think I would give him a free pass just because he's a cop, did you, Liv? I can't do that. You know not all cops do the right thing all the time."

"I think it's pretty apparent from what I've seen that he's in the clear here."

"And what have you seen? Sensationalistic journalism?"

"Alex..."

"No, not Alex. I can't believe you're saying this to me. You know I have to look at the evidence and make a decision. I can't do what I want to do, just because you're a cop."

"That could be me, Alex."

"Don't think that wasn't my first thought. My very first thought. I worry about you 24/7, 365. Every minute you're away from me. If I could pass a million laws and put away anyone who could ever hurt you, I would. I can't, thought. Don't ask me to shirk my duty."

"You just asked me to shirk mine," Olivia said hotly. "You asked me not to take this trip, like my job doesn't matter."

"I asked you that because I need you here, Liv. I'm falling apart, and I need your help."

"Honey," Olivia said. Her tone was a bit softer. She was chagrined-Alex so rarely asked for anything. "Let me see what I can do."

"Never fucking mind," Alex said. "Go, do whatever you have to do. I'll manage." She rolled over, her back to Olivia, and turned out the light. The space between them in bed was a no-man's land,
and Olivia knew she wasn't welcome in that demilitarized zone. Neither of them slept much, and when Olivia woke up, Alex was already gone to the office. There was no note on the counter, no text on her phone, only a blanket on the couch as evidence that the truce was broken.
Chapter 40

Friday, September 19, 2014

4:12 p.m.

Fridays at 4, Alex could often be found questioning herself in Sharon Jackson's office, but today she was enduring the scrutiny of an equally critical horde of normal circumstances, she would have simply asked her press office to issue a release, but these were not normal circumstances, and the rapacious press had tripled in size with the addition of national and international media, caught up in the frenzy of yet another police shooting. Shutters clicked and Alex was thankful for the lights of the TV cameras, because it kept her from seeing exactly how many people were here for her statement. She had nothing new to say, which meant nothing in a 24-hour news cycle.

"As you know, Officer Kirkpatrick was not arrested, so my office must exercise due diligence in determining the correct course of action. That can take some time, and while we realize that the people of New York are very interested in the adjudication of this matter, we cannot rush the process simply to satisfy public opinion. A grand jury is currently seated and their term does not expire until mid-November, so there is no incentive for us to act rashly or imprudently."

Voices began chattering in the crowd, hurling questions toward the lectern.

"Ms. Cabot, there are people marching in the streets and violent protests occurring around the city and across the country. Isn't that incentive to act?"

Alex's press assistant stepped up and to her right, reminding the reporters that the District Attorney wouldn't be taking any questions. It did little to quiet the rabble. Alex leaned over and whispered to his ear, and then turned her attention to the reporter who had asked the question, a woman she recognized from the Times.

"Justice is not a rock concert or a popularity contest. The will of the people should not be confused with the whims of a crowd. We will do what is legally just and appropriate, and we will do so as soon as possible. I can't put a deadline on that. I would urge everyone to remain calm. This has been a difficult time for communities across the country, but I don't make my decisions by reading the newspaper. I look at evidence, and I cannot make any decision until I've examined and weighed all of the evidence available to me right now."

"Ms. Cabot." Another voice, this one unfamiliar, somehow rose above all of the others.

"Yes?"

"Nanako Ota, Washington Post," the woman identified herself. "In fifteen years, New York has seen 179 officer-involved deaths, and yet the DA's office has secured only three indictments. Only one of those resulted in a conviction, and that officer did not serve any jail time. How do you explain that?"

"I don't explain that," Alex replied, her voice steady and calm. "Each and every one of those cases was unique. My job is not to be a statistician. It is to determine which cases will be prosecuted in New York County, and how we will prosecute them. Of course I'm familiar with the numbers you're referencing, and I'm willing to acknowledge that it's time for a systemic review of police
prosecutions, but that's an issue for another day. Today, the focus of my office is on this incident, and whether it is just and appropriate to seek an indictment against Officer Kirkpatrick for the death of Erick Meadows. Regardless of what that decision is, the Meadows family is grieving the death of their son, and our thoughts are with them, as well as with all of the men and women of the NYPD who put their own lives on the line each and every day to protect us."

"Do you plan to appoint a special prosecutor?" A reporter from the NBC affiliate had pushed to the front of the crowd, and was thrusting his microphone in her direction, despite the bank of them six inches from her face. She worked hard to control her irritation.

"No, Zach, I don't. I was elected by the people of this city to serve as the District Attorney. My duties are quite clear, and I took an oath to uphold them. I won't shirk my responsibility by appointing a special prosecutor to do my job when a tough decision must be made."

He persisted. "Sources at City Hall tell me that the mayor has reached out to you and asked you to recuse yourself due to your obvious and insurmountable bias in this case. Is that true?"

"Is which part true?" Alex demanded. "I have spoken with the mayor. I speak with him regularly, and the content of those conversations is not always made public. I do not have a bias in this case. I am very clear on my obligations to my office, to the people, and to the law. Nothing will interfere with that."

"Your wife is a cop. You can't possibly expect people to believe that you can be impartial."

"Believe it," Alex said. "I will do what is right, and my personal relationships will have no bearing on that. I guarantee it."

4:45 p.m.

The office door was open a crack, and when Alex heard footsteps outside she assumed it was Laurie returning from the press conference. But her door was pushed open without a knock and she looked up to see Mark Davidson making his way in.

"Can I help you, Mark?" She was furious at this intrusion, every bit as disrespectful as it was inconvenient.

"We need to talk."

"Then you need to make an appointment," she said. "This is not an open house."

"This can't wait, Alex. I'm here to help you. You need to listen to me."

Alex wondered whether he was, in fact, trying to help her, or whether he merely wanted a front-row seat to her hanging. Despite the fact that he was a brilliant prosecutor and a very shrewd man, Laurie had advised her that he wasn't a team player, and Alex believed he might be the main instigator of all the unrest in the office. But he was standing in front of her desk and not taking no for an answer.

"What is it?"

"That press conference..." he began. "The reporters are right. You need to recuse yourself."

"The reporters need a story, Mark. They need me to react to what they're saying, they need me to believe what they claim someone else said, and then they need me to say something they can spin
"into someone else's denial or rebuttal or counter-attack."

"Your wife..."

"Is a decorated NYPD officer who, to the best of my knowledge, is not named Kirkpatrick and who has not recently shot and killed a teenager in Inwood. She does not know Officer Kirkpatrick or Mr. Meadows, and she has nothing to do with this."

"You're committing political suicide."

"I don't care about that," she said. "I care about doing my job, not keeping my job, Mark."

"This is a no-win situation. You know that, right? If you do indict, you've angered the cops, and any DA needs the cops on her side to get re-elected. If you don't go to the grand jury, or you fail to get a true bill, you've pissed off thousands of protesters. People are making a living at this now, traveling from city to city on the dime of some organization or other, holding signs, shutting down local governments with sit-ins, occupying public transport. Shit, Alex, some of those people actually live here and vote. Put this off on someone else. Let a special prosecutor decide. It keeps your hands clean and you live to fight another day."

"I can't do that, Mark. I'm paid to do a job, and if you don't like the way I'm doing it, then maybe we should be having a different kind of conversation."

He looked at her thoughtfully from his seat across the desk, carefully choosing his words before he spoke.

"If I wanted to tell you how to do your job, Alex, I'd be sitting here telling you that you have to file charges against this cop. This is a hate crime, pure and simple. I don't see anything else here, no self-defense, no misunderstanding. I see a cop whose Facebook page was filled with racist jokes and rants, who asked for a new partner when he found out he'd be riding with an African American, and who shot and killed an unarmed black kid," he said. "But that's not what I'm doing here, is it? I'm trying to help you, Alex, because I've known you a long time and I think you're damn good at what you do. I voted for you, for God's sake. I think you're doing great things with this office, and while I feel that our professional relationship has suffered lately for reasons that aren't clear to me, I enjoy working for you and would like to be on your team. So, what I am doing is throwing you a lifeline. Save yourself, Alex. This case is going to cause you nothing but trouble, and it's not necessary. Let someone else have this, please. Don't fall on your sword over this."

He stood up and crossed the room. Alex was still processing his words when he stopped before opening the door and turned to her.

"I respect the hell out of you, but you're either a liar or you're delusional. I don't believe that you don't care about your approval ratings, or whatever the hell it's called. You're an elected official. That doesn't happen by accident. This isn't really about you, though," he said. "There are a lot of good people working for you, and I don't believe you're treating them the way you should. That's your choice, of course, but don't forget that the rest of us are appointed to our jobs. If you go, we may well go with you, along with all the change you promised. We signed up because you told us we could do great things together. Don't disappoint us. Justice Cardozo said, 'The prophet and the martyr do not see the hooting throng. Their eyes are fixed on the eternities.' Forget eternity, Alex. We've got work to do now, and the hooting throng is out for blood."

He left the office, either not expecting a reply or not wanting to hear one, which was just as well. She didn't have one anyway.
Monday, September 22, 2014

3:00 p.m.

Alex's phone buzzed as she sat in the conference room with her EADAs. She tried not to answer texts or calls during meetings—she kept the phone with her to look at her schedule, even though Laurie sat one seat to her right and managed her every waking moment more than capably. Laurie managed everything more than capably, in fact. It had pained her to lose Ellen, but she had to concede that Ellen had been right: As tough as the retired woman could be, even she wasn't cut out to man the battlements in the DA's office. Laurie seemed to simultaneously have her ear to the ground and her foot on the necks of the most troublesome attorneys. Of course, the sheer amount of skill and dedication Laurie brought to the table made it even more ridiculous that Alex clung to even the appearance of keeping track of her own appointments.

Turning the phone over now to still the vibrating alert, she wished she had left it in her office. Even though there was no name saved for this particular number, Alex knew it by heart. Looking at the screen, she wished—not for the first time—that mobile phones and text messages didn't exist. It was easier to avoid someone when a landline was involved. Outside of airplane mode, it seemed like anyone who had your number could intrude on your thoughts anytime they wanted. You could refuse a call, and they'd send a text. Of course, you could keep your number private, but even that hadn't worked in this case. Alex had never given Madeline her cell number, but wasn't surprised that she'd gotten it anyway. What Madeline lacked in scruples, she made up for with money, and there were a hundred ways she could've gotten any information she wanted. A private phone number was small potatoes to her, and ever since she'd had it, she'd never hesitated to use it, sporadically but strategically, every message a well-timed tactical strike. This one was no exception.

It's been too long, Alexandra.

She texted back, tapping furiously:

That's a matter of opinion.

The reply was immediate.

My opinion is the only one with which I'm concerned.

If Alex's attention hadn't already wandered from the meeting, she was surely distracted now. Dalisay Gamboa, the ADA for cybercrimes, was bringing the group up to speed on some personnel changes in her unit, but her boss's mind was elsewhere, and she was disappointed in herself—if any of her staff had been texting in a meeting, she'd have called them out with the tut-tut of a schoolmarm. She was already on edge—her fight with Olivia about the police shooting was weighing heavily on her. They hadn't discussed it again, letting it bubble and simmer beneath the surface until Olivia had left for San Francisco on Sunday morning, and they hadn't talked by phone since, though Alex wasn't sure if that was a matter of opportunity or desire.

She was angry with Olivia—as angry as she'd ever been, maybe. Alex didn't have much right now that she was sure of, but she knew how to do her job, and Olivia's blithe assumptions were an insult to what little integrity she had left. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on her. Her anger made her feel helpless and out of control, and that was fertile soil for the seeds Madeline had been planting. She had to stoke that fire, though, because when she relaxed even a little she was overwhelmed by the trouble she was in. She wanted to tell Madeline to go to hell and take her chances with whatever might happen next. It was one of these brief flashes of courage that led her to send her next message to Madeline.
She expected another alert to pop up. It didn't come. She looked at Dalisay, trying to follow along with what the attorney was saying, but kept one hand on the phone while her stomach churned with anticipation and fear. The EADA was nearing the end of her presentation, she was sure, but she had no idea what he was saying. She already knew she'd have to glean the salient points later from Laurie.

Mark Davidson spoke next, and she forced herself to remain focused. Still no buzz from the phone. Alex was startled by a light touch on her arm, and she flinched-irrationally, inexplicably but undeniably expecting to see Madeline sitting beside her, having materialized like a ghost. Instead, she was relieved to see Laurie's kind face, mouthing words of concern: *Are you okay?*

Alex nodded, forcing a smile, and patted Laurie's hand before returning her gaze to Mark as he wrapped up. She wasn't okay-hadn't been okay for a good long while, of course-but she was becoming so good at lying lately that she could almost fool herself. Almost. Olivia, on the other hand, could see right through her. *If she were around, that is,* Alex thought to herself. *Good thing she's out of town then, isn't it, counselor?*

Contrary to the accepted cultural narrative about lawyers, she'd never been a particularly good liar, one fact among many that had made it clear she'd be a failure as a defense attorney. These days, though, she lied to everyone she knew in a thousand little ways. Not least of all, Olivia. It had been said that the cruelest lies are told in silence, and there was far too much silence between them these days.

The meeting wound down, Alex speaking periodically as they moved through the last few agenda items. Her hand never left her phone and the knot never left her stomach. When they adjourned, she stood to make her way next door to her office. The phone vibrated in her grasp and she looked at the message.

*You can do this. You will do this. You ARE doing this.*

She was still staring at it when another alert replaced the first.

*I've tried to be patient, Alexandra. You're testing me. Be here by 7.*

---

4:30 p.m.

Alex was signing a few letters and going over some scheduling with Laurie in her office. They finished up the few items on their end-of-day to-do list, and Laurie gathered up the documents to leave. "Anything else?"

"Actually, there is. Can you get Mark Davidson to stop by my office before he leaves?" Alex began making notes, her mind already elsewhere, and it took her a moment to realize that Laurie was still standing there, a concerned look on her face."Did I forget to sign something?" she asked.

"No, it's not that. I wondered...is everything okay, Ms. Cabot?"

"Of course. Why?"

"You don't seem yourself. During the meeting..."

"I'm sorry, Laurie. You're right," Alex said. "I was distracted."
"No need to apologize. You've got a lot on your mind, I know."

"More than you can imagine," Alex sighed.

"Anything I can do to help?"

"If I can get through this case, that will help, thank you. In fact, that's what I wanted to talk to Mark about, if you can catch him before he leaves for the day."

"Certainly," Laurie said. "I'll get him. It's just...are you sure?"

"About what?" Alex was puzzled. She wasn't sure of much, that was true, but she had no idea what Laurie meant.

"Mark Davidson. Are you sure you want to talk with him? I know I told you I'd keep an ear out around the office here, and I haven't wanted to run to you with every whine and whisper. I'm sure it's nothing, but..."

"But?"

"He's not what I would call a team player," Laurie said. "I don't know if he wants your job someday or what, but I don't trust him. He seems to disagree with lots of your decisions and I don't think he's...never mind. I'm sorry, I'm sure I'm out of line here."

"No, you're fine, thank you," Alex said. "I value your opinion. I'll keep that in mind. I do need to speak with him, though."

"Absolutely." She excused herself, and less than 15 minutes later, she called in to let Alex know that Mark Davidson was waiting in the outer office.

"Send him in," Alex requested. Davidson entered her office and made his way to the chair he'd occupied only a few days before. She was trying hard to reconcile the mixed messages she was getting about Mark. He'd seemed sincere when they'd talked on Friday, and his words had given Alex a lot to think about, but they'd had plenty of disagreements, too, and hearing what Laurie had to say had given her pause.

"Thanks for coming by, Mark."

"Of course. Is anything wrong?"

"Other than the obvious?" she joked.

"Other than that, right."

"Mark, I wanted to tell you before I announce anything: I've decided to go to the grand jury. I've had a few days to review the evidence and I think there's enough to get an indictment against Officer Kirkpatrick. I'm not going to recuse myself, though. I heard what you said, and I did consider it, but I still feel strongly that to do so would be shirking my duty. Ultimately, I have to do what I believe is right."

Davidson was surprised. Their conversation the other day hadn't given him any clue which way she was leaning, and they hadn't discussed it at all in their Monday staff meeting.

"I'm very gratified to hear that. But why tell me instead of the whole executive team?"

"I felt I owed it to you to have this conversation one-on-one. You stuck your neck out when you
came to me the other day. I know we don't see eye to eye on a lot of issues, but I appreciate your passion and your honesty."

"We see eye to eye on more than you think. I'm not your enemy, Alex. You seem to think everyone in this office is out to get you, and it's simply not true. You're right, I don't always agree with you, but from what I've heard you know what it's like to be on the other end of those disagreements."

"My reputation as a discontented ADA is still intact, then?"

"Like you said, it's passion. We do important work. Even good people will have different ideas about how we should go about it."

Alex nodded in assent before continuing. "I plan to email the executive team before I leave today. Just after I do that, the office will release a statement to the press announcing our intention to seek the indictment."

"Things will get rough pretty quickly. The police and the union will come down on you like a ton of bricks. Are you sure you won't reconsider recusal? Even if you hand it off to me or one of the other ADAs instead of a special prosecutor, it will be better for you than being out in front on this."

"I understand what you're saying, but I still feel strongly that I can't pass this off. I may not be the one presenting the case to the grand jury, but I should be the face of this office, and I will."

"It's going to cost you. It's hard to get elected, or re-elected, without the support of the PBA. I don't mind taking the reins."

She was surprised at what he was offering. He knew this could end badly, and if the police union turned on her there'd be no chance of re-election, whether she wanted it or not. Mark Davidson was a great prosecutor, though, and he could be sitting in her chair one day if he played his cards right. He was saying he would, in effect, fold his hand to try to preserve her political viability, at the expense of his own elective aspirations.

Thank you, Mark, but no thank you. I will handle this."

"Have you ever pissed off fifty-one thousand cops before?"

"I'm only worried about two cops right now," Alex said. "The one who shot an unarmed teenager, and the one who lives in my house." Alex looked at her watch. "Speaking of which, I'd better call her before the statement is released."

"Good luck with that." Davidson stood to leave, and Alex stood to shake his hand."

"Thanks. I'll need it."

"People here have your back, Alex, despite what you seem to think. The barbarians are outside the gates, not inside. Don't forget that."

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4:55 p.m.

As much as Alex may have wanted to parse Davidson's words, she had other things to do that were more pressing. She hit SEND on an email to her ADAs letting them know of her decision to pursue an indictment, and then she dialed Olivia's number. She was dreading the call that had to be made before she authorized the public release of any statement.
Olivia had taken off for San Francisco on Sunday afternoon, planning to work all day Monday with Bauer's development team, spend another hour or two with them Tuesday, and then she and Kris would swing by the Richmond precinct to check in with the detectives there. She'd be home Tuesday night, but Alex couldn't wait until then to have this discussion. It was only 1:55 on the West Coast and she hoped they could connect in the middle of what was undoubtedly a busy day for the detective.

"Benson."

"It's me."

"Hey, you. What's going on?" Olivia's voice was warm but her words noncommittal. Things weren't right between them and this wasn't going to help.

"I'm releasing a statement this afternoon and I needed to call you first so you'd know what was going on," Alex said, and then before Olivia could interject she plowed ahead, eager to get it over with. "I'm going to the grand jury to seek an indictment against Kirkpatrick, Liv. I didn't want you to hear it on the news."

"Alex."

"You haven't seen the evidence, Olivia. If you had, you'd arrest the guy yourself. I have to do this."

"You're right, I haven't seen the evidence, but I know what happened. People talk," she explained. "Cops talk to one another because no-one else wants to listen. It feels like it's open season on us. We can't be afraid to pull our weapons and defend ourselves, Alex. When you're out on the street, taking a minute to think about the theoretical and practical definitions of excessive force will get you killed. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Of course I do. I've known you for a long time, Olivia, and I know you've looked down the barrel of a gun. I get it."

"I'm not sure you do. This isn't an intellectual exercise. It's life or death. If I were Kirkpatrick, I might have done the same thing. I have to assume everyone is armed, especially if they resist arrest. If I'm not willing and able to pull that trigger when the time comes, you might be standing at my funeral while Amaro or somebody in dress blues hands you a green-and-white flag from the coffin."

"This isn't about you, Liv. I know it doesn't feel that way to you, but you have to believe me. If someone hurt you, I'd kill them with my bare hands. But I have to do my job, just like you have to do yours."

"This is a bad decision," Olivia said. Her voice was even, but that didn't hide the anger from someone used to looking for it. "I expected more from you, Alex. As a cop who works in this city and a voter who put you in office, I expected a lot more. As your wife, I think I deserve more."

"Maybe you expected too much," Alex replied sadly.

"As a cop or as your wife?"

"I don't know. Probably both."

Olivia hung up without another word.

Alex kept her emotions under control just long enough to call the press office and authorize the
release of the statement, and then to get out of the office. By the time she was driving out of the parking garage, though, she was alternately wiping tears from her eyes or pounding the steering wheel in anger, the tinted windows of the Mercedes shielding her from the stares of her fellow motorists.

She had less than two hours to comply with Madeline's demand that she call, and she had no idea what would happen if she didn't. If she did, though, she knew her state of mind might lead her to cross a line she'd tried very hard to avoid.

7:15 p.m.

Madeline's phone rang just as she was pouring herself a drink. Her greeting was short and to the point.

"You're late."

"Madeline, please," Alex said.

"That's more like it."

"It wasn't an apology."

"No?" Madeline asked. "Then I can see we have some work to do. I want to see you tonight."

"Well, I don't want to see you. This is ridiculous. You are laboring under the fantasy that we have a relationship. We have nothing of the sort. This isn't love, or even desire. It's coercion."

"Alexandra, what am I going to do with you?" Madeline sighed, as if unsure how to handle a spoiled, ungrateful child.

"Do with me?" Alex repeated.

"Yes. I've given you all the time in the world, but you're even more stubborn than I remembered. You're really not leaving me any choice."

"Stop. Just stop."

"No!" Madeline raised her voice, the edge sharp enough to cut glass. "I won't stop. Where are you?"

"What do you care?"

"I told you to be here by 7, and if you won't come to me, I will come to you. I know your wife is out of town, so I'm coming over. We will discuss this in person."

"How do you know that?"

"That's really none of your concern, darling. I'll see you shortly." She hung up, not giving Alex any room to protest.

It took Madeline less than a half hour to make her way from the Upper East Side to Alex's building on Mercer. Alex's skin was crawling as she opened the door to admit her unwanted guest, and the cool, appraising eye Madeline was casting over her surroundings turned Alex's stomach. This home-a home she'd made with Olivia-was now forever tainted by Madeline's mere presence, and Alex knew that whatever happened here tonight, whether it be conversation or something else,
would play in her mind every time she walked in the door. Why had she been so stupid? She should have just gone to Madeline's and gotten it over with. Now she'd let the wolf in her door and she was as angry with herself as she'd ever been.

Alex's emotional distress wasn't lost on Madeline. To the contrary, it was something she'd been counting on.

When they had met, Madeline was attracted to the strength and fire she could see in Alex. Whip-smart, confident and incredibly beautiful—that was her initial impression of the prosecutor. Madeline saw a challenge, and suddenly nothing else-no one else-seemed remotely interesting. She had pursued Alex with an ardor she hadn't felt for many years. By their second date, Alex had begun to reveal herself to Madeline; slowly, at first, and without even realizing it.

Madeline Taylor knew people—she knew them very well, and could read their moods and motives like others might read a dinner menu. It had helped her to make a fortune in business and to manipulate relationships to her own advantage. What she saw when she looked at Alex was a person who was ferocious and determined in her job but inherently uncertain and hesitant in life. She had been damaged—damn near broken, in fact—by all that life had thrown at her, and she was in need of care, of someone who could bring order to the chaos she was feeling.

Madeline was up to the challenge. Like a drill instructor breaks recruits down only to re-mold them, she banished any vestiges of confidence and courage remaining in Alex, then used that vulnerability to make Alex dependent on her. No one who knew Alex's public persona—strong and decisive—would ever imagine the degree to which she submitted to Madeline, and that dichotomy was very attractive. To bring someone so strong and so capable to her knees, both literally and figuratively, had been an incredible high.

Yet somehow, almost imperceptibly, Alex had regained her strength—her fire, really—and then she had begun to chafe under the control, deciding that the relationship no longer worked for her. Madeline had let her go, not seeing any alternative. Over time, though, she realized she couldn't replace Alex—everyone else was too weak, or too inadequate, and there was no satisfaction in an easy conquest.

Now, though, she had a second chance, and she was determined to make the most of it. She knew that in the long-term, things would have to be different between them. It was too unrealistic to think that Alex would ever again be, and remain, so submissive; She had to realize, though, that she couldn't be happy without Madeline—that the happiness she believed she'd found was merely an illusion. Then they could begin to create a relationship they could both live with.

Madeline continued to take everything in—Alex, the apartment, the furniture. No detail escaped her notice.

"Make us a drink, darling. It will relax you."

Alex responded to the commands as she always had. She'd been trained to do as she was told without thinking, and right now that was the only thing keeping her from falling apart. As she poured the Scotch, Madeline walked around the room; when she turned to give her the glass, she was surprised to find the woman right behind her, holding a framed photo of Alex and Olivia on their wedding day.

"Darling, it looks like a lovely party. I'm so hurt that you didn't invite me." She took the glass Alex was offering in her left hand while examining the picture in her right.

"Don't," Alex said, reaching for the photo. Madeline pulled it back from her grasp.
"Excuse me?"

"Please put it down."

"I'm not done yet, Alexandra. I've only met your wife once, and that was rather rushed, wouldn't you agree? All that I know of her is word of mouth, so to speak. She is a striking woman, though she doesn't seem your type."

"You don't know what my type is, Madeline."

"I know that better than you do, sweetheart. That butch cop of yours isn't quite butch enough when you really need her to be, is she, Alexandra? Just a little too tender, a bit too solicitous. She lets you get away with murder, because she has no idea that what you need is to be taken firmly in hand."

Madeline put the picture down, and set her drink next to it. She crossed the room and reached into her purse, carefully withdrawing two leather wrist cuffs, connected to one another by a small chain. She also pulled out a black flogger and tucked it under her arm. In the silence, she may have heard the intake of breath from across the room.

She walked back to Alex, who stood rooted to the spot, incapable of moving.

"I told you I was patient, darling, and I am, regardless of what you may think. I'm not here to force you into anything more than you can handle. But I think you'll realize that I know what you can handle, better than anyone. I know what you need. I needed to remind you how good this feels. Some weeks back, I asked you to think about that, but I know you've been busy. So much pressure and so many decisions, and no one to help ease your burden," Madeline said. She set Alex's drink down, then took the slender wrist in hand and lifted it to her lips, feeling the pulse racing beneath the skin. She took one cuff and wrapped it gently but snugly around Alex's arm. "Take me to your bedroom," she commanded.

"No." It was all Alex could say.

"Yes, darling. I'm not here to negotiate. You're in need of reminding, and I've been far too indulgent with you," she said. "If you won't lead the way, I will."

Alex was slipping further into a trance. She turned and walked to the stairs, one cuff dangling at the end of the short chain. At the top of the steps she turned and went into the guest room, Madeline a few steps behind. 

"Alexandra."

"What?"

"Your bedroom, darling," she said. "I'm not stupid, and neither are you. The medium is the message, so to speak, and I need to deliver this message in a setting that will resonate with you."

"Go to hell."

"Oh, my love, you never could just admit you want this. You have to push my buttons, goad me into disciplining you, as if that somehow absolves you of responsibility for your own desire."

Alex was mute, unable to determine how much of that statement was true. She simply turned and went down the hall and into the master bedroom, crossing the threshold with the significance of crossing the Rubicon. She faced Madeline, and it was obvious that all the fight was gone now.
"Do what you came here to do," Alex whispered.

"Strip."

Alex complied without feeling. Nothing mattered now—she'd passed the point of no return.
Madeline remained outwardly calm, but her eyes were sparkling. The sight of Alex's naked body
was like seeing land after too many years at sea. She looked over Alex's shoulder to the bed, and
what she saw more than met her approval. The steel bed frame with its widely spaced headboard
spindles would more than suffice for her purposes tonight.

"On the bed," she commanded. "Face down." Alex lay on her stomach, her arms extended above
her head. Madeline quickly wrapped the chain around the spindles and fastened the other cuff to
Alex's wrist. She flipped on the bedside lamp, and in the circle of light it case, the black leather
contrasted strongly against Alex's fair skin. Madeline pushed her arousal down, stifling it for now.
This wasn't about her.

"You remember your safe word, don't you darling?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Perfect. This won't take long. Just a taste."

The first blow smacked against Alex's ass, skin warming from the impact. Then Madeline turned
her attention to Alex's upper back, unleashing firm, repetitive strokes. The braided leather tails of
the flogger snapped and stung, and the strokes grew a bit heavier, and a bit harder. Through it all,
Alex didn't say a thing. She did remember the safe word, and she knew she could use it—it would
stop the scene, physically at least. It wouldn't end this nightmare, though—there would be
ramifications Alex didn't even want to consider. She didn't even know what she wanted anymore.
Maybe Madeline was right—maybe this was the only way she'd ever find peace.

The whole thing lasted less than ten minutes, but Alex was surprised by how quickly she was able
to slip into subspace, the endorphins flooding her system to the point that the sting no longer felt
painful or even uncomfortable. For those few minutes, she didn't think about work, or politics, or
even Olivia. The shame could wait until later—she had forgotten how transcendent this could feel. It
was like meditation, an escape, and she didn't have to do anything. Just lie still, and trust Madeline.
In this context, that was much easier than she'd have guessed.

When Madeline was done, she traced her hand gently over the welts she'd raised on Alex's tender
skin. She had been careful not to draw blood, but the marks wouldn't fade immediately. She leaned
over and began unbuckling Alex's wrists, then planted a kiss on Alex's cheek after the removed
both cuffs. She sat on the bed next to Alex, tucking the blond hair behind Alex's ear.

"I have to say, Alexandra, I'm surprised you're not crying," Madeline said softly. "I hope that wasn't
as traumatic for you as you feared it would be. I'm not here to hurt you, darling. I'm here to love
you, and tonight I needed to prove to you that you need this, that you need me. There's nothing to
be ashamed of. I know how good it felt. Your body responded to me as it always has."

Alex couldn't argue. It had felt good, better than she had imagined. But she was coming down off
her high now, and it was almost as if she could see herself lying there. She didn't like what she saw:
a weak, selfish creature who was apparently willing to risk everything that mattered for a few
minutes of pleasure or release. The ease with which Madeline had taken control was shocking to
her.

"I don't want this," she mumbled into the pillow, the bed sheet now clenched tightly in her fist.
"I don't think that matters, Alexandra," Madeline said. "That may change eventually, I don't know. Either you will or you won't, I suppose. You need it though, and I think you can admit that now."

She leaned over once again, placing a kiss on Alex's temple. It stung far more than any blow she'd landed with the leather.

"Relax, darling. I know this has been an emotional night for you. I'll see myself out."

Alex was too exhausted, mentally and physically, to argue. Madeline didn't linger. Her footsteps on the stairs were followed very shortly by the sound of the door opening and closing. Alex didn't move. She didn't cry, didn't put any clothes on, didn't even try to get up and wash the residue of shame from her body. It would hurt, she knew, and it wouldn't do any good anyway. She turned out the light and slept, a hard sleep untouched by dreams or memories or even fears.

"It is not only what we do, but also what we do not do, for which we are accountable."

— Moliere
"How are you Alex?"

"I'm alright," Alex replied. There was no conviction behind her words.

"I'm glad to hear that," Dr. Jackson said. "Especially given recent events."

"What do you mean?" Alex said. She'd long felt like the therapist could read her mind. She'd spent the week hiding the fading marks on her skin from Olivia, and now she felt that the doctor had seen right through her.

"I watch the news. Most of my patients don't appear on there regularly, but when one does, I tend to take notice. You're managing a very volatile situation right now."

Alex had announced her intention to seek charges against Officer Kirkpatrick on Tuesday morning, and all hell had broken loose since then. The Patrolman's Benevolent Association had issued a strongly worded statement opposing her decision, the phone at the office had been ringing off the hook with reporters seeking interviews and constituents making their views known on both sides of the issue. Sloane Jansen wanted Alex to appear on her show, and had called twice a day every day, insisting she wouldn't accept Alex's refusal.

There had been other calls, too, and letters. Good old-fashioned hate mail, actually—people who wanted you dead were either Luddites or traditionalists, it seemed.

"Volatile is a good word for it," Alex said. "It's been a difficult week."

"I can only imagine. How are you holding up?"

"I'm keeping my head down. I've got to prepare for the grand jury. The only thing worse for me than deciding to seek an indictment will be failing to secure one."

"How so?"

"As I'm sure you know, prosecutors and police are notoriously cozy with one another. Over the years the DA's office has sought scores of indictments and only managed to get three. Perceptions are reality. If I don't get a true bill, everyone will assume it was rigged from the beginning, just a dog-and-pony show for the cameras. That way, I get to have my cake and eat it, too. Blame the grand jurors, you know. 'I tried.' People are too savvy for that."

"That sounds like an incredible amount of stress. You're under a lot of scrutiny right now."

Alex didn't tell her how very true that was. The scrutiny extended to a security detail, an investigator from the DA's office who followed her around every moment she was out of the house. She hadn't even told Olivia about that, and she didn't plan to.

"People are not happy," Alex acknowledged. "The entire NYPD is angry with me. Let's just hope I
don't have to call 911 anytime soon. Something tells me they'll take their time."

"Surely there are officers who don't agree with the union. If this guy is a bad cop, they can't want to protect him. It gives them all a bad name."

"The so-called 'blue code' is a very powerful thing. The pressure an individual cop is under not to sell out a brother officer is overwhelming. I've seen it way too many times. Olivia's dealt with it, from both sides. There have been so many threats against me, I haven't even bothered to report them all. Nothing will be done, anyway."

"Threats? Of what sort?"

"Oh, they run the gamut," Alex said. "Some fairly general, and some rather frighteningly specific."

"What does Olivia think about that? She must have a unique perspective on all of this."

"I haven't told her. She's been traveling, and since she got home it's been a bit hectic for both of us."

"This seems like something that you might want to make time for, Alex."

"We're barely speaking."

"Why?"

"Things were tense before. Then she made the assumption that I wouldn't be seeking charges against that cop, telling me I had no idea what it was like to be on the job and that it could have been her. I felt manipulated, and I shut down. I don't know, I just can't seem to be who she needs me to be right now. And since I made the decision about the grand jury, she's been very angry with me."

"So, she's back in town now and you go home at night and...what? Do you converse at all? Are you engaging in any physical intimacy?"

"No."

"No what?"

"We exchange words about mundane things. We don't touch, really. We don't discuss anything important."

Jackson knew she wasn't getting the whole story, and decided to address the matter.

"You're not telling me everything, Alex. That's your prerogative, of course, but my ability to help you is directly proportional to my understanding of the situation and your feelings about it," she said. "The pressure you're under can't be easy to handle. It might be helpful if you share your feelings with someone who has no dog in the fight. Remember, this is your safe space. There are no expectations. There's nothing you can say here that will be wrong or bad."

Alex hadn't intended to divulge anything, but something in Dr. Jackson's words reminded her of what Madeline had told her several weeks back.

Everyone wants something from you, don't they? Be honest. This is the only place you can be yourself, unburdened by the expectations of others.

"I've allowed something to happen that will ruin my life," Alex said slowly.
"Your personal life, or your professional life?" Dr. Jackson asked. She was calm and unperturbed, as always. Even in her current state of mind, Alex could appreciate the remarkable way this woman handled her extreme declarations. Anyone else would ask her what had happened, or rush to minimize or console. The doctor took her words at face value, accepting the truth as Alex asserted it, seeking only to clarify the extent of the ruination rather than to brush it away.

"My whole life."

"Okay, your whole life," Jackson repeated. "You say this is something you've allowed to happen. Were you a victim, or an accomplice?"

"Neither," Alex replied testily. "Or maybe both. I'm not sure. Are those the only two options?"

"You tell me, Alex. This is your area of expertise. Just off the top of my head, there's also innocent bystander, or accessory after the fact, but something tells me it's neither of those."

"I'm not a victim, so I guess I'm an accomplice." She'd started this line of conversation, and she'd play it out, even though she knew she'd end up holding just enough rope to hang herself.

"Alright. I'll rephrase my question. This mistake...is it personal or professional in nature?"

"Personal." Alex's tone was a strange mixture of anger and resignation. "Very personal."

"Do you want to tell me what's happened, or will we just deal with the aftermath?"

"As I usually do, you mean."

"Those are your words, Alex, not mine."

"We've been at this long enough. I recognize my own patterns."

"A casual observer would wonder whether I'm even needed here," the therapist remarked wryly. Her patient looked chagrined, and opened her mouth to apologize, but was stopped by a wave of the hand. "It's alright, Alex. Therapy means never having to say you're sorry, remember?"

They both laughed, the humor serving to lighten the air in the room. Alex's posture relaxed, slightly but visibly, and she released a long sigh as she recrossed her legs. Her hand moved instinctively to smooth her grey wool skirt, flattening the edge of the fabric against her off-black hose. The gesture was so practiced as to be unconscious. Jackson had seen it hundreds of times, but this time, she noticed the long fingers were trembling.

"What is it, Alex?"

"Madeline is back."

"I see," Jackson said. Her tone was measured. "Back in what way?"


The doctor had a poker face to rival Alex's own, but this surprised her, and her mask of professionalism slipped for just a second. The momentary lapse went unnoticed. Alex had crumbled as the words left her mouth, hot tears pushing determinedly down her cheeks even as she pressed her eyelids closed, the pressure so fierce it looked painful, tissue-thin skin turning white under the pads of her fingers.

Despite her continuing efforts, Dr. Jackson hadn't succeeded in getting Alex to delve any deeper
into the relationship with Madeline, nor the time period immediately surrounding it. It was, she had suspected, the final frontier in helping her patient to fully resolve her feelings about her shooting, the time in witness protection, and her ensuing attempts to re-assimilate. If they could finally get all of the threads of Alex's life laid out in front of them, she thought, they might be able to work toward weaving them into some pattern the attorney could live with.

But after their conversation in May, Alex hadn't been willing to return to the topic. It was especially notable because it was the only subject she refused to address, resorting to means both passive and aggressive in deflecting a question about her former lover, or diverting a conversation that ventured too close to the forbidden territory. Someone as self-aware as Alex didn't consistently skirt that one topic by accident. It took an impressive level of vigilance to stonewall at every turn.

Now, the door was open at last. The psychiatrist had to tread carefully if she wanted to keep it that way.

"Your bed." She simply repeated the last words she'd heard, without judgment or elaboration.

"Yes." Alex's voice was barely audible, and she was only took her a moment or two to gather herself emotionally. The walls she kept around herself—around this topic, in particular—were rarely breached and always quickly rebuilt after any incursion. Dr. Jackson knew, though, that she had to press forward. She'd allowed her patient to retreat many times in the past, but all the work they'd done was going to be for naught if they couldn't work through this part of Alex's past, all the feelings it brought up, and what it meant for her future.

"What happened?"

"She came over when Olivia was out of town."

"Just showed up?"

"No, we were speaking on the phone. She became angry with me. She believes that I'm avoiding her."

"And...are you?" Jackson asked.

"Yes. I am. She's convinced that I want to resume our relationship, that only she can make me happy."

"Do you believe that to be true?"

"No. She doesn't make me happy. She..." Alex fumbled for the words she needed. It was very uncharacteristic of her, and as she struggled to express herself, Jackson saw someone who suddenly seemed very young and raw, exposed in a way that didn't jibe with what she knew of the normally self-controlled Alex Cabot.

"What does she do, Alex?" It was important that she put words to what was going on.

"She makes everything go away," Alex finally said. "When I'm with her, I can't do anything but focus on her. It's awful and scary and exhilarating and exhausting."

"It's a release."

"Yes, that's it. When she restrains me and I'm at her mercy, I don't have to do anything. All I have to do is remember one single word, if things go too far. Other than that, I just have to be."
"I assume you're referring to a safe word," Jackson said, and Alex nodded. "Have you ever used that word?"

"No. Never. When it's just her and me, in a scene, I trust her implicitly. I can't even explain that. In any other situation I wouldn't trust her for a second-I don't, in fact."

"That must be an intense connection."

Alex sighed. "It's unlike anything else I've ever experienced. That's why I stayed with her so long. Even when I knew that the relationship itself wasn't good for me, I was reluctant to give that up, and I couldn't understand it. It wasn't like me—or like the me that I thought I knew, anyway—but it was the only thing that made me feel real at the time, if that makes any sense. I felt detached from everyone, I'd fucked everything up, and the only thing I had in my life was work. Before I even realized it, she was the only connection I had, and I was okay with that for a while."

"Until you weren't."

"Exactly. Something was different after a while…"

"What changed?"

"It's odd," Alex said. "I don't recall all the details—perhaps I'm exercising selective recall or something—I'm not sure what changed, specifically. All I know is that one day it was just over for me, so over that I couldn't even recall how it had begun. I mean, It's not a decision I'd make today…" She trailed off when she realized what she'd said.

"Except you have," the doctor said.

"I have. Yes. And it wasn't even sexual, what went on."

"It may not be sex, Alex, but that doesn't mean it's not sexual. Humans have many needs that can be satisfied sexually without engaging in acts we'd typically think of as the dictionary definition of sex."

Alex fell silent, her face clouding over as the doctor challenged her assertion that it wasn't sexual. That thought had been her lone, ridiculous consolation in reconciling her love for Olivia with her own perfidy. She remembered how Madeline had thrown it out to her like a lifeline, and she'd grabbed it as if she were drowning.

"Infidelity, Madeline…"

"No one will sew a scarlet letter on your Burberry coat, darling. Your secret is safe with me," Madeline promised. "We don't have to have sex. I know you see that as wrong. But you need this release and I can give it to you. It's that simple. We've spent many an hour together fulfilling our needs without engaging in sex. You'll come around. I know it. I can wait."

It was a ruse, Alex knew, and it didn't stand up to logic or reason, and certainly not to any notions she might have held of her own integrity.

"I don't even want to want this," she told Dr. Jackson quietly.

"You can't legislate desire. You can't control what you want."

"I can control what I do," Alex said. "And I should. But it's not that easy."
"What do you mean?"

"All of this, every problem I have is because I'm proud, because I don't want to admit to Olivia that I'm not who she thinks I am."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No," Alex admitted. "It's also because I don't want to lose this job I didn't even think I wanted. We talked about what happens when you finally get everything you wanted, and what if it isn't enough."

"We did," Jackson said. "You were wrestling with that question. Have you reached any conclusions?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Maybe nothing will ever be enough for me, because I've seemingly set about destroying everything I've worked for. I have the woman I always wanted, and I love her more than I thought possible, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to give myself to someone who doesn't give a shit about me. I have the job I wanted forever, but it can't give me back my parents, or my brother, or my aunt. It can't help me understand anyone else, and doesn't bring me a damn bit closer to understanding myself. It can't restore the time I lost, or the time I wasted. It can't make me feel invincible again—in fact, it makes me feel more vulnerable than I have in years. But damn it, I've got it, and now it seems I'll do anything to keep it."

She stood up, putting her raincoat over her arm and picking up her purse. The doctor stood with her, clearly hoping to detain her for just a moment, to try to assess her state of mind before letting her walk out the door, seven days stretching between them and another appointment. But Alex wasn't in the mood to tie a bow on anything. She spoke as she reached the office door.

"That's what happens, I'm afraid. It turns you into someone you don't even know, and wouldn't like if you did."

"Her words were like tinfoil; they shone and they covered things up."

— Helen Cross
"I feel like I haven't seen your uncle in forever," Olivia said. Bill was coming over for dinner and she realized that she hadn't seen him since their visit to Branford in August. She was busying her self with a salad while Alex made dinner. They had spent the whole day together, and hadn't argued once. Most of their interactions lately were polite, but without depth or consequence. After Olivia's trip to San Francisco to meet with Bauer's software team, there had been a distance between them that they couldn't seem to bridge completely. Alex had felt abandoned by Olivia and things had been up-and-down ever since.

Sometimes, it was almost normal-they could talk about work, if they didn't touch on the Kirkpatrick case. They had managed to see a couple of movies, have dinner out with friends one night, but there was a definite chill in the air. Alex was affectionate one day and aloof the next. For her part, Olivia knew she was stressed and angry-work was awful and she was getting nowhere with anything. Bauer's offer to come work for him was looking more and more appealing all the time.

They'd had sex once in the three weeks since she'd flown out West. They'd been watching TV when Alex got up from her chair and leaned over Olivia, who was lying on the couch. She'd initiated a passionate kiss and then, without any words, undressed Olivia and brought her to a phenomenal orgasm, her tongue and fingers moving in rhythm as if there were nothing wrong. She'd allowed Olivia to reciprocate, and ended up coming hard as she straddled Olivia's seated body, with three fingers plunged deep inside her and Olivia's thumb circling her clit. Their mouths were open and together as Alex cried out in pleasure, biting down on Olivia's lip as the contractions rolled through her body. Their frantic kisses slowed to a more languid pace as Alex rode out the dissipating waves.

I love you, she'd whispered. Olivia responded in kind, her voice full of hope. Maybe they'd managed to close the space between them-sometimes all it took was being reminded how it could be. I love you, Alex. So much.

But when Olivia tried to move them upstairs to the bedroom, eager to continue what they'd so ably begun, Alex refused, pulling her clothes back on and chattering about some work she had to do. It can wait, Olivia had pleaded. I need to make love to you. We need this, Al. Alex was unswayed, leaving Olivia to wonder what had happened. They hadn't been close to achieving that kind of connection since.

"He's happy to be back home," Alex said. Her voice jolted Olivia back into the moment.

"Does he think of this as home now?" Olivia wondered. "I hadn't realized how hard it must be for him to leave the house he shared with your aunt until we saw him there."

"It's a process, I think, but yeah, I think home for him is where we are now." Alex knew Bill loved them both like they were his own, and the three of them were really the only family they had. He would be devastated if he knew how bad things had gotten between them, and she was determined not to give him any opportunity to figure it out.
When he arrived for dinner, she and Olivia seemed as happy and affectionate as always. It was so easy to slip back into their usual patterns of affectionate banter and easy touches; she wondered why she was making this so hard. Why couldn't she let down her guard? She could tell Olivia what was going on, and beg her forgiveness. Or maybe she could just compartmentalize. She was good at that. Do what she had to do to keep Madeline happy, and be grateful for every moment she could continue to live her happy life with Olivia. Too much water under the bridge, she thought. It was like they were strangers in some ways-angry strangers, at that.

Bill regaled them as usual with tales of his law students. Fall semester always made for better stories; first-year students, 1Ls, were still adjusting to a situation in which more was expected of them than ever before, and everyone around them was just as exceptional as they were. Ego and nerves clashed with unpredictable results.

After dinner, Olivia offered to clean up. "You two go catch up," she said.

"We can't leave you here working while we sit on our behinds," Bill laughed.

"Sure you can," she said. "Alex did all the work for dinner, so I'm happy to close the place down. Get a drink and go up to the roof-it's a beautiful night. I'll join you up there in a few minutes."

"Sounds good to me," Bill said. "Ace?"

"You don't have to tell me twice," Alex replied. She gave her wife a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, honey. We'll see you soon."

"Absolutely."

Alex and Bill were the only people enjoying the rooftop deck, despite the gorgeous fall weather. They sipped a spiced bourbon Bill had brought and leaned on the north railing, looking at the Empire State Building as lights began twinkling in the dusk.

"I love fall," Bill said. "I love the warm glow of a house with the lights on when the rest of the world is starting to get dark."

Alex looked over at him. "That's very poetic."

"There's not enough poetry in the world, Ace," he said. "In the half-light of dusk after the day has prepared hard surfaces for inspection, before the night has plunged things back into themselves."

"Are you writing poetry now?" she asked.

"Heavens no," he laughed. "That's a Scottish poet whose name escapes me, Clark I think. I've always loved it. Some people find renewal in the spring, but for me there's something about fall. It's peaceful."

Alex didn't reply. She looked out over the city, her thoughts a million places.

"To peace," Bill said, and she turned to see his glass raised. She joined him in a toast.

"To peace," she repeated.

"Are you finding peace, Alex?"

"I'm doing okay," she said.

"Bullshit."
She looked over at him, the blue light of the evening faintly illuminating his face. She could see
the concern etched there, and she hated it, hated to worry him ever, for any reason.

"Two months ago you were having a hard time, and I'd hoped that tonight I'd find the old Alex, but
she's long gone, I'm afraid."

"Is it that obvious?"

"To me, it is," he said. "I've known you all your life, little girl. I held you for the first time when
you were two days old, and you looked worried then. You have the same look on your face now.
You've just got more hair."

She laughed—even in her worst moment, Bill could make her laugh. She loved him for it.

"Tell me what's wrong."

"It's just work," she equivocated. "Let's not ruin this beautiful evening."

"It's not just work, Alex. I'm not blind. Something is wrong between you and Olivia. Work may be
causing it, I don't know, but it's not just work, is it?"

"Yes and no," she said. "No. It's all wrapped up in work but it's not just work, you're right."

"Still struggling at the office?"

"I'm still feeling isolated, yes. I'm trying but I just don't know who I can trust. The things Laurie
tells me that go on behind my back..."

"Take that with a grain of salt," he advised. "I'm sure it's disconcerting, but you're not Caesar, Alex.
The senators aren't conspiring to kill you."

"It certainly feels that way," she said.

"Maybe it's not as bad as Laurie is making it out to be." He didn't want to undermine Alex's trust in
the one person she felt she could rely on in her office, but he'd done some poking around, talking to
acquaintances, and he was beginning to wonder if that trust was misplaced to some degree.

"I don't know," she said.

"And how about here? What's going on here? You've both seemed a little on edge this evening, and
when I asked what you'd be doing to celebrate your first anniversary, I could tell that neither of you
had even realized it was coming up."

"I'm trying to indict a cop," Alex said. "She strongly disagrees with my decision. When she's here
to disagree, that is."

"When she's here?"

"She's having a hell of a time with this serial case—they've been out to San Francisco twice and still
no luck. The brass are all over her, threatening to bust her down to patrol duty if there's another
victim before the case is solved."

"Would they do that?"

"Hell if I know. If they do, they'll have a grievance on their hands. Though with this case I'm
pursuing, I have no idea how hard the union would fight for her. I'm sure I'm not their favorite
person right now."

"You said they. Who's going out to San Francisco with her?"

"Kris Mackey, the detective from St. Louis. They've met out there a couple of times to work with the SFPD and the FBI."

"Do you think..."

Alex put a hand on his arm to silence him. She could see Olivia coming to join them from the stairs. She didn't know what he was planning to ask, and she wasn't sure she wanted to know, but she was certain she didn't want Olivia to hear it.

They passed the next hour chatting and watching the city light up all around them. Bill headed home around 8:30, and Alex was sorry to see him go. The show they'd been putting on for him felt good, certainly better than the strained conversations and awkward silences they'd been enduring the past couple of months. She wanted to talk to Bill more, but he was busy, she was busy...everyone was busy. Alex went to bed early, slightly buzzed from the spiced bourbon that had been stronger than its fruity taste had indicated. It had warmed her from the inside out, a small fire radiating from her stomach out through her limbs, finally reaching her fingers and toes. Her brain was fuzzy and tired, and as she drifted off to sleep, it occurred to her that she'd been feeling cold for a long time. She just hadn't realized it.

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**Wednesday, October 29, 2014**

4:25 p.m.

Olivia was knee-deep in new cases, and spending every spare moment working the serial case. She'd been tracking down every purchase of duty belts that she could, eliminating those transactions that involved police officers, working now on the premise that they were dealing with a frustrated wanna-be cop, or someone who had an ax to grind with the department, and with cops in general. It was busy work, she knew that. First, they still weren't 100% sure that the suspect wasn't a cop, but the fact that they now had victims in three cities was making that seem less likely than ever. Cops didn't usually have the time and money to fly coast-to-coast and commit murders. Second, and more difficult to overcome, not every duty belt was sold through an authorized vendor. They were supposed to be, but like everything else, there was a secondary market where officers sold their used equipment. It was against departmental regs, but that didn't stop them. There was also a black market, and there were no regulations in the world that would stop that.

She was entirely focused on the New York cases. They had no doubt that the same man had killed in at least three cities, but she couldn't do anything about those cases right now. She had to work these like they were the only ones. The Chief of D's was still breathing down her neck, and she didn't blame him. She was just holding her breath, working her ass off and hoping he didn't take it from her and kick it up to Major Case.

After weeks of nothing but scut work, she thought she'd caught a break. At 4:30 on a Wednesday afternoon, a tip came in. Someone had called the precinct and spoken to the desk sergeant; he tried to get Benson or Amaro on the phone, but the caller had threatened to hang up. Thank God, he'd taken down as much information and asked as many questions as he could before the caller hung up.

"It was a woman?" Benson asked, looking over the notes he'd taken.
"Yes," he confirmed. "Sounded young, 20's maybe, Caucasian, not from here."

"Accent?"

"Yeah, but not foreign," the sergeant clarified. "American, but flat. She talked a little slower than most people around here." He returned to his work, telling the detectives to let him know if they needed anything.

"A suspect!" Fin called out after him. "We need a suspect."

"Well, if I see one, I'll send him your way, Fin," the man replied over his shoulder.

"Is it anything worth the paper he used to write it on, Liv?" Nick was discouraged-they all were.

"Believe it or not, I think so," Olivia said. "The woman said she knew two of the victims, and that she was almost positive that they knew each other, as well."

"Not possible," Amanda said. "We dug deeper in those girls' backgrounds than the Senate digs into a Supreme Court nominee."

"Maybe we missed something."

"Well, I'd sure as hell rather track down a lead than look at one more spreadsheet of duty-belt purchases for the tri-state area," Fin said.

"Me, too," Olivia said.

Nick reached for the paper. "You're off tonight, partner. Give it to me. Fin and I will follow up, let you know if it turns into anything."

"No," Olivia said. "No offense, but you don't have 1PP riding your ass, Amaro. I'm taking care of this."

"You had plans," Amanda said.

"And now I don't," Olivia replied. "You two go on and enjoy your evening. Fin's on tonight anyway. He and I will start working this and bring you up to speed tomorrow."

They knew there was no point in arguing; there wasn't a chance Benson would walk out and leave the first real lead they'd had.

"Mackey's gonna be sorry she's not here yet," Rollins predicted. Kris was due in town on Thursday afternoon-officially, she was on PTO and visiting her cousin Peekskill again. Unofficially, she'd planned to spend a couple of days with the SVU team, brainstorming and bouncing ideas off of one another.

"She will," Olivia agreed.

"Should we call her?"

"Nah," Olivia said. "If we called her about every stupid call we get, we'd never get off the phone. On the off chance it turns out to be anything, we can fill her in tomorrow. No sense wasting her time now."

Amaro and Rollins left at 5, with Fin and Olivia preparing to head out as soon as Fin was finished with paperwork on an arrest he'd just made. While she waited on him, she called Alex's cell phone
with the news that she'd be pulling another late night.

She was prepared to get it with both barrels; the reality of the conversation was more disconcerting.

*Fine,* Alex had said. *Good luck.*

*I'm sorry about this.*

*Of course. You always are.*

*Alex...*

*Go, Olivia. Do your job. Be safe.*

The phone had gone silent.

"You okay, Liv?" Fin asked, standing to grab his jacket.

"Sure," she replied. "Never better."

Alex wasn't upset that Olivia wasn't coming home. When she wasn't there, Alex could pretend things were okay, but when she was there it was painfully obvious that the problem wasn't going away. In fact, it was getting worse. The distance between them tore her apart, but rather than trying to find her way back, she ran to Madeline. That only made matters worse, and the fissure that had existed was turning into a gaping chasm.

It had been a little over a month since Madeline had cuffed Alex to her own bed and marked her skin. Since then, they'd seen one another four or five times, never varying far from the script they'd written, with one rather large exception: If Madeline called, Alex went to her. If she had to make an excuse, she did, but she wasn't taking any chance that Madeline would ever again show up on her doorstep.

Their scenes had grown slightly more involved, and slightly more intense, but Alex was still compartmentalizing as if her life depended on it. Maybe it did. They didn't have sex-Alex wouldn't even kiss Madeline-but for now the status quo seemed to be acceptable not only to Madeline, but also to Alex. Their encounters were only release Alex got, and lord knows she needed one now. She would start presenting evidence to the grand jury the next day. Olivia's absence meant Alex could disappear or a couple of hours without explaining herself.

Madeline was always available to her. Anytime she needed to visit, she was welcomed with open arms. The connection she felt during their scenes almost made up for the crushing loneliness that overwhelmed her afterward.

She drove to Madeline's and let herself in. She wanted to take her clothes off just inside the door; her skin was already tingling with anticipation, but she had to wait until she was told. The anticipation was arousing, and her nerve endings were especially sensitive. The encounter was relatively brief, and much the same as the others had been, but when Alex stood up from the bed and put her clothes back on, she was overcome with a profound sense of despair. Madeline offered her a drink, but she declined, leaving the apartment and driving back home.

Olivia was still gone when Alex arrived at home. A text indicated that it would be a late night. She showered, trying to pretend this evening had never happened, that she hadn't been so weak as to run
to Madeline yet again. The sting as the hot water hit the welts on her back was very real, though, and she couldn't wish it away.

She got out of the shower, dried off, and put on jeans and a t-shirt. It was her US Marshals shirt—Olivia loved that shirt—and Alex was a sobbing mess in less than ten seconds. She couldn't stay in this apartment alone, so she walked out of the building and down the street, nothing more than her keys and ID, her phone, some money and a credit card in her jacket pockets. She walked into the first bar she saw. It was a dark, no-nonsense place about two blocks from home, and it suited her just fine. She was prepared for some no-nonsense drinking.

She had two drinks there, but a lively crowd had gathered to watch the Rangers game and several times their conviviality had spilled over into Alex's personal space. She wasn't in the mood for fun, so she left. Heading out the front door, she started to turn back toward the apartment, but then decided to head north. Walking up Broadway, she had no destination in mind. There was a chill in the air, and the evening hubbub of the city, which usually made her so happy, was having the opposite effect tonight. She was lonely and hopeless, angry and aimless. She passed through Union Square almost without realizing it, and before she knew it she was on 26th, more than a mile from home. She turned left and just a few doors down, she saw a restaurant and whiskey bar. The place seemed to glow in the gloomy October night—semicircles of amber warmth pooled on the sidewalk below the front windows, and Alex remembered Bill talking about the draw of light in autumn. She went in and took a seat at the bar—the place wasn't particularly homey, but the small crowd and dim lights combined to relax her almost immediately.

She ordered a drink, and about halfway through it she was hit with an overwhelming urge to see Kate. She was prepared to finish her drink and catch a cab—but then realized she had never gotten Kate's new address, which filled her with an overwhelming sadness. How had it come to this? She was running from her own house, because she hadn't been able to get past the images of Madeline walking around her living room, touching the mementos of her life, touching her. She was running from Olivia, and the possibility of being there in this state of emotional disarray when Liv got home. She was running from a life that was so busy and so stressful that she didn't even know where her best friend lived, exactly.

She called Kate, wanting nothing more than to cry, but forcing herself to sound upbeat as the call was answered.

"Cab."

Hearing Kate's voice was all it took to completely unravel her cheerful facade. Instead of the expected hello, Kate heard what sounded like a sob.

"Alex, what's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you." Alex forced the words out as she stood up from her seat at the bar and made her way to the hallway by the ladies room. She didn't want to fall apart in front of everyone in the place, no matter how small the crowd was.

"Are you okay?"

"No," Alex said. "No, I'm not. I've ruined everything, and I wanted to talk to you, and I don't even know where you live."

"Where are you?"

"At a bar. If you can give me your address, I can come to your place."
"No," Kate said. "Absolutely not."

Alex was crushed. "Kate, please…"

"No, I'm coming to you. Where are you exactly?"

"On 26th, just west of Broadway. A place called Maysville."

"I know where it is," Kate said. "Stay put, Cab. Don't go anywhere. I'll be there in a half-hour, tops."

"Thank you." She went into the ladies' room to gather herself, and splash a little cold water on her face, before returning to the bar. The bartender noticed her, his face registering concern. Alex hoped he didn't recognize her—it wouldn't be a good thing for the DA to be found drunk and out of sorts at a bar any time, and most especially on the night before she was to appear in front of the grand jury on a controversial case.

"Anything wrong, ma'am?" he asked. There didn't seem to be any recognition on his face, but Alex realized she might have been too drunk to know.

"No," she lied. "Just a tough day, thanks." She swirled what little was left of her drink.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I'll have another one of these," she said. "A double."

He delivered the strong drink just a moment later, and while Alex had her wits about her enough to realize she should pace herself, she was still halfway through the drink when Kate walked in 25 minutes later and sat next to her at the bar.

"I'm here."

Alex turned her head slowly, and Kate took in her bloodshot, swollen eyes and sunken cheeks. It took her breath away for a second.

"Jesus, Alex," she said. "You look horrible."

"Is it okay if we don't plan a makeover right now?" Alex asked quietly.

"Sure," Kate replied, chagrined and worried. "It's just…"

She reached over and took the drink from Alex's hand, pushing it away down the bar.

"I wasn't done with that."

"You sure as hell are. By the looks of it, you should've been done about three or four drinks ago," she said, throwing two 20's down on the bar. "Let's get out of here."

Kate left no room for argument, taking her arm and walking her quickly out of the restaurant.

"I'm okay," Alex insisted as they got outside, pulling her elbow free of Kate's grasp and starting to walk back toward Broadway. Kate took two strides to catch up and grabbed Alex's shoulder, spinning her so they were face-to-face.

"Bullshit, Cabot. You're drinking your way around Manhattan alone on a Wednesday night, then you call me in tears. You're absolutely not okay. Tell me what's going on."
"Not here."

"Fine, we'll go to your place. Where's your car?"

"I don't have it," Alex replied. "I walked."

"You what?" Kate was incredulous. "My god, Alex, you're a mess."

"There's nothing wrong with walking." Alex was defiant, like drunk people can be.

"Well, that's a good thing, because I don't have a car either," Kate laughed. "I thought you sounded too far gone to be driving home, so I had Marina drop me off. We'll take a cab."

"I don't want to go home," Alex said.

Kate looked her over, finally locking eyes with her friend for a moment before speaking. "Fine," she said. "I don't know what's going on with you, but if you don't want to go home, we won't. There's a diner about a block away, and you look like you could use a pot of coffee and a few meals, so that's where we're going."

Within five minutes they were seated in a back booth at a nondescript 24-hour breakfast-and-burgers joint she'd never even noticed before.

"How did you know this was here?" she asked Kate after the waitress took their orders and left them with a carafe of surprisingly delicious hot coffee and two chipped white mugs.

"I notice things," Kate said. "Like, right now I am noticing that you are a huge fucking disaster. I want you to drink coffee and tell me what is going on in that head of yours."

"Madeline."

"Madeline." Kate repeated the single word, hoping against hope that it didn't mean what she thought it might, or that Alex was talking about some other Madeline, any other Madeline.

"Madeline Taylor."

"Shit, Cab. What?"

"She's back."

"Back? What does that mean-back from the war, back from outer space? Because I know you can't possibly be telling me she's back in your life."

"Part of my life," Alex said. She was having trouble making eye contact with Kate, and she realized in that moment why she hadn't been communicating with Olivia, and why she'd hardly seen Bill, either: When someone knows you inside out, every conversation, no matter how innocuous, is a threat to expose any secrets you're keeping.

"Stop dancing around. It's 11:00 and I'm not a kid anymore. Are you sleeping with her?"

"Not exactly."

"I don't even know what that means, Alex. Jesus, what the hell have you done?"

Alex sighed. Sharing her failures and vulnerabilities in therapy was hard enough, and that was in a dim, quiet room with a professional who honestly didn't give a shit who Alex hurt. Here, in this
bright-white restaurant, sobering up by the minute, she could barely force the words out; she knew how disappointed Kate would be.

"I never told you about that relationship."

"I know all I need to know. She's a manipulative bitch and leaving her was one of the smartest things you've ever done. So what I want to know now is why on earth you'd ever even have coffee with her, much less an affair."

"It's not sex. Not in the sense that you'd probably think of it, anyway," Alex said. She paused, searching for words. She was torn between a desire to tell Kate everything, and an equally intense urge to stop talking right now, before her best friend found out what a fucking disaster she really was. Kate didn't rush to fill the space, though; she waited, eyes locked on Alex. "Madeline restrains me and disciplines me, but we don't have sex. It's not an affair."

"BDSM. I'm not an idiot, Alex, or a prude," Kate said. She was angry, and probably for a few reasons. "I know you don't have to have sex to play with a domme, but I also know you don't have to have sex for it to be an affair."

Alex was chagrined. She'd already attempted this obfuscation with Dr. Jackson, and it hadn't worked then either.

"How long?"

"A few weeks."

"A few weeks? Stop dancing around. This is me you're talking to. How long?"

"Five weeks. Several times. Earlier tonight."

"How could you, Alex? She'll never forgive you. What the fuck have you done?"

Kate almost felt bad for saying it. Alex was clearly distraught and offered no defense.

"This isn't new," Kate said.

"What do you mean?"

"This isn't something you just decided to do last month. I'm bored. I think I'll call up the worst person I know and ask her to strap me to the bed.' Was this always part of your relationship with her?"

"Yes," Alex admitted. "Or, almost always. Fairly soon after we began seeing each other originally. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I guess I was embarrassed or ashamed."

"You know, Alex, if you were doing it because you wanted to…" She trailed off. Now she was the one who didn't know how to say what was on her mind. "It's nothing to be ashamed of. But you really changed when you were with her. I hardly ever saw you, and when I did, I wasn't sure I liked the person you'd become. I chalked it up to the time you were away, and all the bullshit you went through when you came back."

"That was it," Alex said. "Really, that's exactly what it was. I was grasping for something-anything. She came along. I don't know, I really can't explain it. I never told you because I didn't know how you'd take it."
"Oh, for fuck's sake, Cab. You've always been like this—you hide things that you don't think people will like. Do you really think you're any more messed up than anyone else?"

"I am," Alex said. "I've ruined everything good I've ever had."

"You sabotage yourself because you keep secrets. You won't let people love you for you. You hide the real Alex. What kind of life is that? There's nothing on earth you can't tell me. I love you, you idiot. That doesn't mean I have to approve of everything you do. Hell, I really don't even have to know what you do, but it was more than that. You withdrew completely, and you didn't come around until you realized what a bitch she was. From the outside, it looked like you finally woke up from a nightmare."

"I did. What we were doing, Madeline and I—our activities weren't really the problem. The whole relationship was fucked up. I didn't understand that until I wanted to change the dynamic between us."

"She wasn't having it."

"No, she wasn't. She wanted to dictate every facet of our lives, and eventually I couldn't take it any more. I had needed that from her at first, I guess, but…"

"But it gets old quick if it's not a mutually desirable situation," Kate said. She wasn't speculating, Alex thought. It sounded like she was speaking from experience.

"Have you…?"

"Alex, I've been in all kinds of relationships. You don't sleep around as long as I did without tasting all 31 of the Baskin-Robbins flavors, you know?"

Alex laughed. It was the first time she'd felt happy, for even a moment, in weeks.

"Look, I've had my ass bruised, and I've inflicted a few bruises myself," Kate said. "Been there, done that. You're not the only uptight lawyer who's ever taken a walk on the wild side. What I'm talking about, though, doesn't have anything to do with BDSM. It's control, and manipulation. It's letting someone treat you badly because you don't think you deserve better. It doesn't matter if she's tying you up or taking you out to dinner—she's not a good person. I've been to that hellhole so many times I bought a second home there."

"I had no idea."

"Of course you didn't. Isn't that the point? If I'd told you, even once, that someone was treating me like shit, you'd have done what best friends do: told me I was better than that, and not to take that from anyone. And that's what I'd have told you. In fact, that's what I'm going to tell you now. When you're in a bad situation, sometimes everyone sees it but you."

"That's exactly it. Once I realized it was bad and wouldn't ever get better, I left her, and by then I just felt too used and hurt to tell anyone."

"Alex," Kate said. "You know all this. So what in the fuck are you doing? I can't see you in all of this. Where is Alex Cabot?"

Alex was brought back to the present—back to the Formica table and the plate of food that the waitress had delivered and the coffee cooling in her mug—and it was a rude awakening. To hear Kate tell her that she wasn't alone in making bad choices had been comforting. Unfortunately, there was no getting away from the fact that she was making bad choices now, and the current situation
was far more likely to have a disastrous outcome.

"I don't know," she said quietly. "Things have been so hard. I feel like everything in my life is out of control. Madeline got in touch with me. It was so strange. She was reminding me about how things had been between us, and it was making my fucking skin crawl, Kate. I felt sick to my stomach."

"But…"

"But I also remembered how good it had felt then to let her do whatever she wanted. She made all the decisions. I didn't have to have opinions, I didn't have to be responsible for her. I just had to do what I was told."

"That's fine in bed, Alex. More than fine, really," she laughed. "It can be pretty damn hot."

Alex laughed too. As awful as she felt, she was glad she'd called Kate. Unconditional love was a pretty amazing thing, and a person who can make you laugh when the whole world is caving in is rare.

"You know what I mean," Kate continued. "You left her because that's not who you are in life, and you know it. Maybe that was a vacation from being you or something, but you are not a person who wants to be that passive. That, for you, can't possibly have been a full relationship. You have a real partnership with Olivia, and I see how happy that makes you. What the hell happened?"

The mention of Olivia had made Alex wince.

"I assume Olivia doesn't know," Kate ventured.

"Of course not," Alex said. "She'll never forgive me. You said so yourself."

"I did," Kate acknowledged. "Maybe I shouldn't have. I don't know what she'll do—she's a better person than I am. She might forgive you, she might not, but that's a chance you have to take. You have to tell her, Cab."

"I can't."

"Is this what you want, this thing with Madeline? Does it make you feel happy and secure and loved?"

"No, absolutely not. The opposite of all that, in fact."

"Do you want Olivia? Do you want to try and save your marriage? That's what it comes down to."

"I do," Alex said. "That's all I want, really."

"Then you can and you will tell Olivia," Kate insisted. "Look, if you were telling me you'd had a one-night stand, I'd tell you to never fucking do it again and keep your mouth shut. This ain't that, Alex. I think this says something way deeper, about you, or about your marriage, or about God knows what. I'm no psychiatrist, but when the shit started piling up, you went back to a person and a situation that you'd normally have no interest in. You could stop seeing Madeline, but I don't think that solves the problem. Does it?"

"No."

"Stop seeing her anyway. End this before it goes any further. I'm not your guardian angel and you
know I don't have some Pollyanna, happily-ever-after view of the world, but you know this isn't the right thing for you. Maybe some people can have affairs and that works for them. You're not that person, Alex. Olivia is the best thing that ever happened to you. I know it, and you know it. You need to tell her what's going on. Madeline's just a symptom. Find the cause, and fix it."

"I wish it were that easy," Alex said sadly. She knew Kate was right, in many ways, but Kate didn't know the whole story, and Alex couldn't tell her. She couldn't say that Madeline was threatening her, and threatening Olivia. She wasn't even sure she understood it herself-what Madeline had, or knew, or might do.

"It is that easy," Kate said. "The truth shall set you free, my friend. You can't live like this. Look at you, for God's sake."

"My whole life is a mess, Kate. There was something fishy bout Reilly's withdrawal from the race. I have a security detail because I've been threatened for seeking an indictment against a cop. My wife is…"

"Hold on," Kate said, her hand up to stop Alex from going further. "A security detail?" She looked around the bar.

"Not here," Alex said. "No one's with me now."

"That's not much of a security detail."

"I told them I was in for the night, so they're off duty."

"Olivia must love it when you get yourself into these absurd situations. What are you, some kind of spy or something, Alex?"

Alex didn't answer.

"She doesn't know?"

"No, she doesn't. It'll only worry her. I don't feel like I'm in danger, Kate. Honestly, I've got bigger problems than worrying about all that."

"Bigger trouble than death threats?"

"I have a date with the grand jury in about nine hours."

"Oh, my god. That's right. Get up. I'm taking your ass home. Tonight, you're going to take some Advil, drink about three glasses of water and go to bed. Deal with the grand jury tomorrow, and then deal with Olivia."

"I'm scared, Kate. I'm going to lose her."

"You have to have faith in her, Alex. She loves you. It won't be pretty, but you can't go on like you are, and you won't be able to live with the guilt when you stop, either."

"I'm sorry to drag you out this late."

"I'm the one who's sorry, Alex. I've been too busy and too wrapped up in stuff. I knew you were reaching out, and I had my head up my ass. That stops now. I'm here for you."

"You're a good person, Kate."
"So are you, Cab. You're still a fucked-up mess right now, but you'll be okay. I'm sure of that."
Chapter 43

Thursday, October 30, 2014

8:00 p.m.

The apartment door opened just as Grey's Anatomy came on. Alex had turned the TV on as soon as she walked in the house-it wasn't her habit, but she wanted a little background noise. The news had come and gone, and still no Olivia and no word from her, either. Normally, if Alex had a big day planned, Olivia would do her best to be home by 6 so they could have dinner and decompress together. This particular big day, though, had been a touchy subject. Alex had spent her day with the grand jury seeking an indictment against a police officer, and Olivia had continued to be very vocal with her disagreement over Alex's decision. Alex had simply stopped discussing it.

It had been a long, difficult day, though-she felt she was doing the right thing, but that didn't mean it was easy. She was conscious every second of the day that she was presenting evidence against a cop, and that if the wrong thing happened on the wrong day, that cop could have been Olivia.

They wouldn't talk about it, like they would have with any other case, but she had looked forward to an evening at home discussing anything else they could think about. There had hardly been a free moment to think about her come-to-Jesus talk with Kate the night before-Alex might have wondered if it had even happened if she hadn't woken up to a raging headache and guilt sitting like a rock in the pit of her stomach. She'd only exchanged a few words with Olivia, who had come in just after Alex had slipped into bed, freshly showered and still drunk, and Liv was asleep when she'd left for the office this morning. She hadn't communicated with Madeline, either; running to that refuge had quickly become second nature, and it pained her to realize it. She knew Kate was right-she had to tell Olivia. But not today. There was just too much in her head right now. They weren't exactly at peace, she and Olivia, but she felt a desperate need to preserve this detente as long as possible. Telling Olivia about Madeline might be the last real conversation they would have.

By the time Olivia walked in, though, nearly two hours after Alex had hoped to see her, the stress of the day-and the whole damn week-had taken a firm hold. It manifested itself as nagging the moment she saw Olivia's face.

"Finally."

"I'm sorry, Alex. It was a busy day."

"I had a busy day, too," she replied, careful not to open a can of worms by mentioning what had occupied her day. She didn't need to go in to detail, really-she just needed Olivia's attention tonight, a little shelter and a little respite.

It apparently wasn't going to happen.

"Your day was busy by choice," Olivia snapped.

"Let's not discuss it," Alex said, trying to salvage something here before it went too far off track. "I hoped we could have dinner."
"We can, if you haven't already eaten. I stopped by to see if you wanted to join us…"

"Us?" Alex interrupted. Olivia hadn't mentioned any plans.

"Kris Mackey got in town today," Olivia explained. "We were trying to run down a link between a couple of our victims. We were going to grab sushi and try to either solve this or pretend it doesn't exist."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Alex said. "You might discuss NYPD business and I'd hate to hear anything I might be tempted to share with the media." She hadn't really gotten over the drama that ensued after her disastrous press conference in August, though she didn't know which was worse-the Chief of D's insinuating to Don and Olivia that she might be the leak, or the fight she'd had with Olivia that night.

"Alex."

"Olivia."

"Don't. That's over and done with. Everyone was stressed out and pissed off."

"I don't feel like going out to dinner," Alex said. "I wanted to spend an evening at home with you."

"I've already told Kris we'd have dinner. She'd love it if you'd join us. She's starting to wonder if you're a mythical creature, since she's heard about you so much but never seen you in person."

"I'm very real," Alex said. "You can tell her that. I'm sure she'll take your word for it." Jealousy had reared its head, and she didn't have any idea why. Up until this very moment her only thoughts about Kris Mackey had been positive ones, but even they had been few and far between.

"What's the problem here, Alex? Kris is a colleague, and a friend. You'll like her. Come out with us."

"I want you to stay home," Alex said. "I had one more horrible day in a horrible week, and I wanted to be with you-not Kris Mackey or anyone else. You got home after midnight, Liv. It feels like I haven't seen you in days."

"Well, I've made plans and I'm not breaking them," Olivia maintained. "You are invited but if you don't want to go, that's your decision. Just like it was your decision to prosecute a cop who was doing his job. Your week wouldn't have been so shitty otherwise, you know. So no, I'm not staying home tonight. I'm going out for dinner and I'll be back in a few hours."

Alex just looked at her, unsure what to say. This was how things were between them lately-temper frayed and resentments lying just under the surface, quick to ignite with little or no fuel. It only took a little spark to start a fire.

"That's not fair," Alex finally said.

"I don't even know what fair means anymore, Alex. I'm going now. I don't know if I'll come back tonight."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I think I'll just go to the station house after dinner and bunk down there. The idea of sleeping back to back with you tonight is more than I can handle. Whatever is going on with you is lying there between us, like a third person in the bed. And I'm fucking sick of it. Stay here and work on your
grand jury case, Alex. I know how important it is."

"Stop running away from me," Alex yelled. She didn't usually raise her voice—neither of them did—but she was scared and furious. "You always run."

"You never give me a reason to stay," Olivia said. She hadn't even put her keys down or taken off her coat. She left the apartment without another word.

10:30 p.m.

Olivia finished dinner with Kris a little after 10, and she had calmed down a little, but she still wasn't about to go home. She had been serious when she told Alex that she didn't want to sleep there tonight, so she went to the 1-6, planning to do a little work and crash for the night. She'd go home when she'd cooled off. Walking in to the bullpen, though, she was surprised to find that she wasn't the only one there. Fin was at his desk, and gave her a quizzical look when he heard her footsteps.

"Hey, Liv. What're you doin' here so late?"

"I was gonna ask you the same thing. At least I left for a while. I'm guessing you've been here the whole time."

"Sort of," Fin explained. "Amanda and I caught a case. Nothing too complicated, so I sent her on home while I do the paperwork."

"And they say chivalry is dead," Benson laughed.

"You know I've always got ulterior motives, Liv. She owes me one now, and I figure that's a good thing to have. I'll call in my favor on something more complicated."

"Always thinking, Fin."

"You didn't answer my question. Why are you back?"

"I had dinner with Mackey and we were talking about the case, got me thinking a little. Wanted to come in here and check through my notes and look up a couple of things."

"That could've waited 'til morning."

"You know how it is when something's bugging you."

"I do," Fin said. "Sometimes the thing that's bugging you ain't your job, though. What's going on?"

His perceptiveness never failed to amaze her. They'd known each other for 15 years—as long as she'd known Alex—and both of them could read her like a book. She'd been looking forward to a fun dinner with Alex and Kris. Instead, she'd ended up fighting with her wife, and then found herself talking about the case with Mackey because she didn't feel like venturing into more personal territory. The relaxing evening she'd hoped she and Alex could share with a new friend turned into just two more hours of work and yet another meeting about this fucking guy she couldn't find.

She needed time to think, though. She hadn't wanted to talk to Kris, and she wasn't ready to talk to Fin, either, so she tried to deflect his questions.

"I'm fine, Fin. Just at the end of my rope with this bullshit. This guy is out there and we can't seem
to get anywhere."

He wouldn't be deterred. "You can't fool me, Benson, so don't even try. I know you too well. Maybe everybody else buys your act, but I don't. What's up?"

"Things aren't good at home, Fin. It's Alex. It's like she's...I don't even know."

"What?"

"She's changed."

"We all change, baby. You ain't nothin' like you were 15 years ago. Hell, you're nothing like you were five years ago."

"You know what, Fin? I've got enough people on my back, thanks." She sat down heavily in her chair and turned away from him.

He was quiet for a minute. "I didn't stay here this late on the off chance you'd come by so I could bust your chops, Benson. I'm trying to help."

She sighed and turned in her seat to face him again. "I know that," she said. "I'm sorry. I can't explain it. I just know that the woman in my house is not the same woman I married a year ago. We're hanging on by a thread, and I have no idea what to do about it."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You sleepin' here tonight?"

"Yeah. I don't have it in me to go home and fight tonight."

"I hear you," he said. "But don't stay away too long, Liv. The further you run, the harder it is to find your way home."

"I'm not running," she said defiantly. "Alex said that. She's wrong, Fin."

"Is she?"

"There has to be something there to run away from."

"Listen to me, Benson. You're both under a hell of a lot of stress. Things will get better. You've just gotta hang on. You waited how many damn years to end up together?"

"Twelve years, maybe. Thirteen?"

"Doesn't matter, it was too long," he said. "Point is, you can wait this out. Keep your head down and your mouth shut a while. She'll come back around."

"What if she doesn't?"

"Well, if she doesn't," Fin mused, "I'm gonna want that wedding present back."

"Fuck you," she laughed, grateful to him for making her smile when she had no business being happy. "As far as blenders go, that one's the gold standard. You're never getting it back."

The pause dragged on a moment before he spoke again.

"Alex is hard work, no doubt about it. You gotta want it, and I know you do. Don't forget that," he urged. "No matter what happens, though, I'm here for you."
She stood up and walked over to his desk; she leaned over to hug him.

"I'm going upstairs to enjoy the five-star accommodations. You're a good man for putting up with me, Odafin Tutuola."

She walked toward the stairs.

"I'm your brother from another mother," he called out behind her, laughing. "Sleep, Liv. Tomorrow is another day."

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**Friday, October 31, 2014**

**12:20 p.m.**

Alex walked into the noodle place and saw that it was as crowded as always. All of the courts on Centre Street tended to break for lunch around the same time, unleashing floods of jurors and attorneys into the streets of Chinatown. The food carts around the courthouse offered a quicker alternative, but Alex had 90 minutes and wanted to sit down and collect her thoughts. She was being accompanied by an armed investigator from her office, who hated for her to go anywhere unless it was absolutely necessary, but she made it clear that she didn't care.

"Follow me, or don't," she told him. "I'm going out for lunch." She snuck out a side door of the courthouse and walked a couple of blocks, turning into the first place she saw on Baxter just past Columbus Park. The investigator skulked along after her, and waited just outside the door of the restaurant when she refused to allow him to stand over her, wielding a gun while she ate Pad Thai.

The tables were all occupied, but there was one seat left at the counter, and she made her way over. She realized as she set her bag on the rail beneath the bar that the person to her left was Mark Davidson, her ADA who was working with her on the grand jury testimony. She wasn't sure that her presence would be welcome—she still didn't think that her staff wanted to put up with her any more than they had to.

She tapped him on the shoulder and he turned on the stool to face her.

"Alex, sit down."

"Sure you don't mind?" she asked. "I understand if you'd prefer to eat alone."

"No, absolutely not. Please join me."

"Thanks, Mark." In the office, she didn't care if they liked her—that's not what they got paid for. But outside of work, in the precious little free time the job afforded them, she was very reluctant to impose herself on them.

They sat companionably for nearly an hour. Mark's noodles came before Alex's own, but he insisted on waiting until she was served before he'd tuck in to his food. Their conversation was casual and friendly—other than a general exchange of thoughts on how things were going for them in the grand jury room, they couldn't discuss anything specific in a public place. Instead, they talked about family, and law school. Mark had attended Yale, and had taken classes with Bill—he hadn't realized that Professor Harriman was Alex's uncle, and Alex was unreasonably happy about that, for some reason. She recalled her first days as an ADA, when she was furious at the perception that she was benefitting from nepotism—but not so furious that she wouldn't use her connections to save a case.
As they were waiting for the checks to come, Mark looked at Alex, turning suddenly serious.

"Are you okay, Alex?"

"Of course I am. Why do you ask?"

"This is a big deal, this case. It's a contentious issue, not just here but around the country. With your wife being a cop, I'd imagine this is exponentially more difficult for you."

"It isn't easy, you're right," she acknowledged. "It's what I signed up for, though. I wanted to make the tough calls, and God knows I'm getting to make them now." She laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood.

"People are worried, that's all."

"People?"

"The other EADAs. They know how stressful this must be for you."

"Am I being an even bigger bitch than normal?"

"What?" he asked, looking genuinely surprised and confused. "Not at all. It's just that...we're used to you playing things pretty close to the vest, so that's not unusual, but none of us want to be in your shoes right now."

"That's not what I hear," she said, thinking back to the gossip Laurie had conveyed to her over the past several months—it was a case study in palace intrigue, and Laurie dutifully relayed the various machinations of the EADAs as they questioned Alex's authority while simultaneously currying favor with her and jockeying for position to succeed her.

"I'm not sure where you're getting your information, Alex, but I have to say I don't believe it's accurate. Who's bending your ear?"

"It doesn't really matter. I know that everyone doesn't agree with everything I do, and that some of your colleagues would be more than happy to supplant me at the earliest opportunity. You've not always agreed with me, Mark, and you've been vocal about it."

"I do disagree with you sometimes, and I express that because I'm passionate about the work we do, just like you are. I also express it because I know that you respect me as much as I respect you, and that you want us to be great. If I didn't care so much—hell, if you didn't care so much—I wouldn't bother. That's when I'd start to think about wanting to sit in your chair. Right now, though, you're definitely the best person for the job. I feel confident in saying that everyone on the executive team feels the same way, Alex."

He'd told her this before, insisting that the enemy was outside the gates, rather than inside. She wasn't sure about that, but hearing what he was telling her now, she was starting to wonder about who the enemy really was. Who was feeding her this information? Truth be told, it wasn't anything she'd observed for herself. The attorneys did disagree with her, and they did sometimes make that known—but was that anything different than what she herself had done when she was in their shoes? She could see herself in them, more often than not, young and energetic and full of fire. She couldn't afford to be like that anymore—politics governed her every move, no matter how adamantly she had told Mark that they didn't.

"Maybe I'm not getting the whole picture," she admitted. "I don't spend as much time with all of you as I might like. I feel like I'm pulled in a million different directions, and it's become second
nature to me to question everyone's motives."
"Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown?"
"Something like that," Alex said.
"Don't just rely on your ears, Alex. They can be filled with whispers and lies. Look around you, get out of your office…" He trailed off.
"Go on."
"No, I've said too much. I'm speaking out of turn. I just want you to realize that as long as you're isolated from everyone, you'll only hear what people want you to hear. That's all."
"All of this," Alex began, "is more taxing than I thought it would be."
"Be careful who you show your weaknesses to. Some people are just waiting to use them against you," he said.
"That's a lot to think about."
"Just be yourself. That's the most important thing. The voters elected you. The team wanted to work for you. Keep that in mind and you'll be fine." He looked at his watch. "Unless we're late for the grand jury, in which case neither of us will be fine."
"Duty calls," she said. "Let's head back, then." They gathered their bags and headed out to the sidewalk.
"Mark?" she said.
"Yeah?"
"Thank you."
"No problem, Alex. One of my dad's favorite quotes was Goethe, something like 'As soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to live.' All of the answers are inside you, and I, for one, can't wait to see how great you'll be."

Friday, October 31, 2014
4:10 p.m.
"Kate knows."
"About Madeline?"
"Yes. I had a fight with Olivia. It's all we do anymore, really. I went to Madeline's."
"Did that provide any comfort or relief?"
"For a minute, and then I was so disgusted with myself that I had to get out of there. I got drunk and showed up on Kate's doorstep. I wanted to tell her that my marriage is falling apart, but she sees right through me. It all just came spilling out."
"How did she take it?"
"Shock, disappointment. Nothing I didn't expect. She says I have to tell Olivia."

"I see. Do you feel like you have to tell Olivia?"

"She is my wife. I should be honest with her."

"Are those Kate's words, or your own?"

"Does it matter?"

"I think it does, but you didn't exactly answer my question, Alex."

"I don't understand." And she didn't. The look on her face was one of genuine confusion.

"Do you think that *honesty* means nothing short of full disclosure?"

"In this situation, or in every situation?" Alex asked. Even on a therapist's couch, a lawyer is always a lawyer, searching for loopholes to be exploited, or to be closed off.

"I'm not trying to trip you up here. I'm merely saying that *honesty* doesn't have to be limited to my definition, or anyone else's. In every situation, you have to be the one and only arbiter of your own truth, and what parts of that truth you will share with others."

"Withholding evidence," Alex mused. "In my business, we call that a Brady violation. You can be disbarred for it."

"But this isn't your business. It's your life."

"Right. The stakes are higher."

"They are," Dr. Jackson agreed. "But there are also more options. You can't be disbarred, and you don't need a license to live your life."

"I don't feel like I have any options."

"That kind of thinking could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It can paralyze you, and prevent you from doing or even seeing what is possible." Jackson was being gentle. This kind of thinking would be foreign to someone like Alex Cabot, and the doctor expected resistance.

Alex was quiet for a moment. "What are you suggesting?" she finally asked.

"I'm not suggesting any particular course of action. That's not my role. I'm here to help you figure things out, and I feel I can be of the most help to you by removing any self-imposed limits on your perspective. That's all."

"Not from where I'm sitting. From here, it seems like you're telling me to keep this a secret from Olivia. To lie to my wife."

A patient with Alex's intelligence and facility for language presented a challenge, even to a therapist as experienced as Sharon Jackson. Whether she realized it or not, Alex was always arguing her case, using rhetoric to make a point, backing her opposition into a corner. You could see it in the way she had responded to Jackson's line of inquiry, using Olivia's name, then upping the ante with that last loaded phrase: *To lie to my wife.*

Jackson hoped she never had to face Alex in court. She could see, though, that she needed to try a different approach, because this one wasn't working.
"Let's talk about truth." It was an open statement, there for Alex to interpret any way she chose. The doctor was counting on her to regard it as an intellectual exercise, and to retreat to the high ground and relative safety of thought over feeling.

"Okay," Alex said. "I've taken a philosophy class or two. Where shall we start…LaTour? Derrida? Foucault?"

"Foucault and his regimes of truth," Jackson supplied. "He who makes the rules determines what is true. Is that the theory you subscribe to?"

"In the context of criminal justice, it makes the most sense," Alex replied. "It's why people don't believe that white privilege exists, or that it could disproportionately affect something as serious as the application of the death penalty. Fighting the power structure is much harder than people think. Those who are good at it command a premium. It's why defense attorneys drive much nicer cars than prosecutors."

"The best lawyer wins by establishing a truth favorable to his client."

"The best lawyer, the best liar…" Alex laughed. "Something like that."

"One could argue that the state has the power to dictate truth, that the representative of the people is already imbued with the power ascribed to government, and that despite the presumption of innocence, any defendant is starting out at a disadvantage. Jurors assume that if an arrest was made, and charges were filed, someone is guilty."

"Where there's smoke, there's fire. I suppose so. I'm not sure it matters, though. People don't see themselves as being enslaved to those notions of power. A jury believes it's operating freely, without regard for the power amassed by either party."

"Consensus truth theory?" Jackson asked.

"Not exactly. They believe they are capable of discovering objective truth. They don't even realize what may sway their thinking. If I do my job right, anyway, I condition them to go in that room and find the truth, without considering a high-profile defendant or a flashy attorney. And especially without considering that most of them already think the defendant must be guilty of something or we wouldn't even be there to begin with."

"That's a cynical view for someone who's devoted her career to the very system we rely on to determine truth."

"Justice," Alex corrected. "It's the justice system, not the truth system. Believe me. And yes, it's cynical. What can I say? I'm fresh out of wide-eyed optimism and idealistic naivete. That bled out of me on a sidewalk years ago." She stopped, but didn't seem finished.

"There's an unspoken but there," Jackson prompted.

"But I expect more from myself."

"You always do. What do you expect?"

"I should have a bit more objectivity about myself," Alex said. "I should be able to see my own situation for what it is. There shouldn't be multiple truths in my own life."

"Kierkegaard," Jackson said, but didn't elaborate.
"What about him?" Alex asked warily.

"He said the objective approach couldn't shed any light on matters of personal truth," Jackson said. "Objectively, you are alive—that is a fact. But how you live must be entirely subjective."

"He wasn't a fan of extreme subjectivism, to be sure. So much existential angst."

"What you're dealing with now is right up his alley, isn't it?"

"Unfortunately, no." Alex's reply was firm. "My situation has no room for subjectivity. Foucault was right. Madeline has the power, and she determines the truth. My only choice is to conceal it, or reveal it."

"My point exactly," Jackson agreed. "You choose your truth by choosing what you tell, and when, and to whom. If you don't tell Olivia, will she find out? If not, does her life change in any real way because your truth with her doesn't fully incorporate your truth with Madeline? It's worth considering."

Alex just shook her head. "It feels duplicitous. And when she finds out-weeks or months or years from now—the damage will be irreparable."

"If," Dr. Jackson insisted. "If she finds out. Madeline needs your cooperation. She stands to gain nothing by telling Olivia. As long as you still benefit from any relationship you share with her, and allow it to continue, everyone's happy."

"No, that's the problem. Madeline is never happy. No matter what I do, whether I please her or displease her, she will eventually find some reason to betray me."

"You ended a relationship with her before, and she didn't come after you," Jackson pointed out gently. "Maybe she'll tire of you, and things will run their course. She can move on to something else and let you live your life in peace."

"There is no peace, and there won't be. I can't really explain it, but something is different this time. Her eyes are full of malice and desperation. As long as she knows something she can use against me, I can never relax. She could tire of me, yes, but that's even worse. She's like a lion."

"In what way?"

Alex looked up and locked eyes with the therapist before answering matter-of-factly. "She plays with her food before she kills it."

The doctor let those words hang in the air for a moment before she continued.

"You know, Alex, this reminds me of a conversation we had some time ago about the dangers of placing anyone on a pedestal. I know you believe Olivia would do anything for you, yet you're not willing to ask her to meet this particular need. Why do you think that is?"

Alex was quiet, and seemed to be giving serious consideration to the question. That alone was a breakthrough in Dr. Jackson's mind. Alex's refusal to even contemplate Olivia relative to this issue had been both adamant and steadfast.

The silence persisted and Jackson was content to give her the space and time she needed. When Alex did speak, her voice was low but firm.

"It's not a need."
"Pardon me?"

"I said, it's not a need," Alex repeated. "I won't ask Olivia to meet this need because it's not a need."

"Then what is it? A desire?"

"No," Alex said. "It's a lot of things: a mistake, a weakness. A regret. But it's not a need, and it's damn sure not a desire."

"Okay," the therapist assented. "You told me that you didn't want to want this."

"I don't. Don't twist my words. Whatever this is, it's not something I want. And if I needed it, then how did I go for so many years without it?"

Jackson didn't respond.

"You don't believe me," Alex snapped.

"I don't disbelieve you," Jackson parried. "It's not my job to decided what your truth is. It's to help you decide what your truth is."

Alex rolled her eyes. It was a juvenile and obnoxious habit she'd struggled to shed back at Exeter, but it still appeared unbidden every so often. The contemptuous nature of the gesture wasn't lost on the doctor.

"You don't see it that way?" Jackson challenged the passive-aggressive body language.

"Who am I to say what your job is?" Alex countered.

"You're the customer," Jackson laughed. "And the customer is always right." Neither of them would seriously reduce the doctor-patient relationship-especially one that plumbed the depths of one's psyche-to such transactional terms, but the remark served to reduce the tension ever so slightly.

"The customer isn't always right," Alex said ruefully. "This customer doesn't even know if she's in the same ZIP code as right."

"Alex, this is your life, not an exam. There is no such thing as right. There's only what's right for you, right now."

"You should cross-stitch that onto a pillow."

Passive-aggressive had now just become aggressive, but the therapist was used to that. Her office saw a steady stream of people who couldn't fully express themselves anywhere but here, and Alex Cabot was more self-contained than most. She didn't take the bait.

"You sit here and talk about my truth, and what's right for me, as if there are no rules and nothing is black and white. That's not real life."

"Oh, there are most definitely things that are wrong, or untrue, but in this room you and I aren't concerned with the amorality of child molesters or the irritability of gravity. We are here to discuss you-your life-and nothing else matters to me. Your job, your friends, your relationships-none of that is important to me outside of its importance to you, Alex."

"That's a lovely thought," Alex said. "But I don't live in this room. I don't exist in a vacuum. I have to walk out of here into a world that is painfully real, where I'm betraying the woman I love for
reasons I don't even understand."

"Alright then. We've had a number of intriguing discussions about the nature of truth or the merits of situational ethics. However, if you prefer we focus our work on more practical concerns, I'm happy to do so."

"Thank you." Alex seemed relieved, as if the doctor would soon be giving her all the answers. Her relief would be short-lived.

"Practically speaking, you have four choices, as I see it: One, end your marriage and pursue any other relationships you like. You're free to do so without explaining yourself at all, to anyone. Two and three, tell Olivia about your relationship with Madeline, both past and present, and either ask her to engage with you in the activities you engage in with Madeline, or ask her to open up your relationship to allow you to pursue that aspect of your sexuality without her. Or, four, you could end things with Madeline and say nothing to your wife, either about the affair or about the sexual fulfillment you got from it."

"I'm not sure the fourth option is viable. Madeline has made it clear that she won't permit me to walk away without repercussions."

"Okay, so option 4A would be to end things with Madeline, coming clean with Olivia in the process, asking her forgiveness and hoping you can weather the storm that may come. But it occurs to me that you will be under an enormous amount of stress, without the release that Madeline provides. How will those needs be met, Alex?"

"There are no needs," she said disgustedly. "I don't need that. It's just…" She trailed off. Jackson wasn't sure if she didn't know how to finish that sentence, or knew and couldn't bear to say the words.

"I'm not judging you, you know. It doesn't matter to me if you need that or want it, not a bit. What I want you to realize is that there are ways to fulfill those desires that might be safer for you in every way."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Madeline has ulterior motives, despite what she may tell you. I know that you don't trust her, and I also know that she has expectations beyond whatever physical activities you engage in together. There are professionals who will give you what you need without making demands or threats. They would be discreet."

Alex pondered this for a moment, surprising the therapist, who'd been prepared for an angry reaction. "Even if that's what I wanted," Alex began, "even if I needed that, Madeline won't let it happen. She'll destroy everything that matters to me, starting with Olivia."

"Extortion depends on the cooperation of the victim, and the keeping of a secret. If you have no secrets, her power to control you vanishes."

"You underestimate Madeline Taylor."

"I think you overestimate her, Alex, unless she's holding something over you that you don't want to share with me." Jackson was quiet for a moment, carefully pondering her words, knowing she was about to say something she wouldn't normally say to a patient, but that she felt was necessary in this case. "Perhaps you're using these threats as an excuse to continue your relationship with her."

It was a shot across the bow, and Alex was furious. "That's ridiculous," she said, her voice raised
but still just below a shout. "I made a mistake, years ago, in choosing the wrong person with whom to explore an aspect of my sexuality that proved to be no more than a passing fancy. Now she sees a chance to use that against me. She hates that I don't need that, because it means I don't need her."

"Just think about this then, Alex. If you don't need the particular sexual relationship Madeline provides…"

"I don't," Alex interjected adamantly.

"Then maybe what you need, what you desire, is Madeline herself."

Their time was up, but it didn't matter. Alex would have left anyway. She stood and took her purse, leaving the office without another word. Dr. Jackson only had ten minutes between clients to take notes, so she opened her notebook and dutifully recorded the session in her usual shorthand, not sure it would even matter. Under "next visit," she'd already recorded their next scheduled appointment. Now she just put a question mark beside it, unsure if or when she'd see Alex Cabot again.
Alex had presented the last of the evidence to the grand jury. All she could do now was wait for their decision, but given the fact that she'd taken several days and presented several witnesses, she wasn't expecting a result. They'd been seated since August, a new system in which they served a longer term, but only heard evidence two days a week. The old four-week terms had been an all-day, everyday commitment and while things moved more quickly that way for the DA's office, it was hard on the jurors.

She decided not to linger in the courthouse. The clerk would call her when a decision was reached, so she and Mark Davidson headed back to the office, her ever-present security detail tagging closely behind. Suddenly she heard someone call out her name: "Cabot!" The voice came from behind them, and everything happened quickly. Acting on instinct, Davidson turned and stepped in front of her, while the bodyguard whirled and drew his weapon. She couldn't see what was going on-Davidson had blocked her view—but then she heard a familiar voice say, "Hold up, I'm a cop."

She emerged from behind her colleague to see Nick Amaro, hands up and shield on display.

"It's okay," she told the men with her. "Just give me a moment."

She walked toward Nick, hoping they were far enough from Davidson that he couldn't hear their conversation.

"Nick, sorry. How are you?"

"Sorry?" He was incredulous. "What the fuck was that, Alex?"

"Long story." She tried to dismiss his concern. "Why are you here?"

"I'm testifying, but forget about that. Someone just drew a weapon on me when I spoke to you in a courthouse, Alex. What the hell is going on?"

"The Kirkpatrick case," she said.

"You've been threatened."

"It's nothing."

"Nothing, my ass," he argued. "You have a security detail, for God's sake. Olivia didn't mention this." He wouldn't normally pry, but Olivia's behavior had been unpredictable lately and he was starting to see why.

"She doesn't know," Alex said. "I didn't want to worry her."

"Holy shit. You've got to be kidding," he said. When a long pause yielded no answer, he continued. "Tell me you're kidding, Cabot."

"I'm not. She's got enough on her mind. This is under control. Where is she, by the way?" Alex was glad, really, that her wife wasn't here to see this, and that Nick wouldn't see the scene that would
have ensued if she had.

"She's off the street, Alex. Please tell me you knew that she was working a desk."

Her face told him that she'd had no idea.

"Jesus, what's wrong with you two?"

"Why is she working a desk, Nick? What's wrong?"

"Come on, Alex. The Kirkpatrick case, like you just said. Her wife is prosecuting a cop for a shooting on the job. It's not safe for her to be out on the streets."

"But she's not doing the prosecuting. She's adamantly against it, by the way."

"You and I know that, but apparently there are some Neanderthals in the NYPD who think she's sleeping with the enemy. There've been a few threats, the last couple of weeks. Captain pulled her and parked her in the station house where he can keep an eye on her."

"Oh, my god."

"I can't believe you didn't know this. Christ, Alex, what is going on?"

"I don't know, Nick. I really don't," she said. "Do me a favor. Don't tell her about any of this."

"Alex…"

"I will tell her," she promised. "But it has to come from me. You can't."

"I won't," he agreed, "but only because she's doing the same thing to you."

"Fine. You cover me, and I'll cover you," Alex said. "I won't tell her I know about the threats she's gotten. I'll figure this out, Nick. Just give me some time."

Alex left with the two men who were waiting for her down the hall, and didn't look back. If she had, she'd have seen Nick standing there for several minutes, shield still in hand, with a look of confusion and concern on his face.

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**Monday, November 10, 2014**

**1:30 p.m.**

"Ms. Cabot, the grand jury is returning from lunch at two o'clock. They expect to have a decision for you shortly thereafter."

Alex looked up to see Laurie standing in the doorway between their offices.

"Thank you, Laurie," Alex replied. "Can you get Mark to meet me over there? I want to go and wait for them."

"Mark Davidson?" Laurie asked.

Alex looked at her uncomprehendingly—of course, Mark Davidson, she thought. He'd helped her with the case—had, in fact, been its champion when she herself was initially unsure what they might do with this powderkeg they'd been handed.
"Is there a problem? Is Mark not available?"

"No," Laurie said. "I mean, I don't know if he is. I assume he is. I'll get him to meet you there, if that's what you want."

"It is. I'm confused, Laurie. Is there some kind of issue?"

"You seem to have taken him into your confidence of late, especially regarding this case."

"Well, he was assisting me with the grand jury testimony. And he is an EADA in charge of a key component of this office's prosecutorial strategy. If I had some reason not to take him into my confidence, I suppose I'd need to tell him to find another job, wouldn't I?"

"I'm not questioning your decisions, Ms. Cabot."

"With all due respect, it sounds to me like that's exactly what you're doing," Alex said.

"I'm not sure he has your best interests at heart. That's all."

Alex was quiet for a moment, considering this. She thought back on her conversations with Mark, who certainly seemed to be completely supportive. She recalled what Bill had said, too, advising her to take this kind of advice with a grain of salt. Since her most recent talk with Mark, she'd made efforts to spend what little time she had in the office talking to her assistants, engaging them and checking up with them in their own offices, and in the hallways of Hogan Place. When she approached these encounters with an open mind, she believed what Davidson had told her. His advice seemed sound. *Don't just rely on your ears, Alex.* She'd been in this job for about six months now, and in that time she'd lost all faith in the staff she'd hand-picked, and she was growing more and more sure that her lack of trust wasn't incidental. It felt planned-orchestrated, even.

"Laurie, you've mentioned this before. You said Mark wasn't a team player, if I recall correctly."

"I believe that to be true," Laurie offered. There wasn't much conviction in her words, though.

"I appreciate your concern," Alex said. "But my perspective is different from yours, I suppose. Mark has been nothing but helpful with this case, and with everything else I've asked him to do. Do you have some personal issue with him?"

"No, not at all, Ms. Cabot. I'm sorry if I gave that impression. I assure you, I was only trying to help, but perhaps you'd prefer that I not pass along that type of information in the future."

The chief of staff's response was cold. She seemed hurt, and for a moment Alex's resolve weakened. Was she cutting herself off from a source of information she needed? Casting her lot with those who might wish to destroy her? Bill had pointed out to her that she wasn't Caesar—he always had a way of taking her down a peg in the gentlest possible way. Had she been willing to cast her staff in the role of Brutus, when there was no Brutus to be found? Or had she simply been looking for treason in the wrong places?

"You know, Laurie, you may be right," Alex agreed. "I've been caught up in the politics of this job, and that stops now. It's keeping me from doing my work effectively, and if I have to live in constant fear of everyone who works for me, then there's no point in sitting behind this desk. I hired them, and I need to trust them. If they're plotting an uprising in the conference room, I suppose I'll just have to take my chances. So, yes, I think I'll ask you to refrain from sharing that gossip with me. I've appreciated all that you've done to help me navigate the first few difficult months around here, but I don't think that type of information will be necessary any longer."
"Fine," Laurie said. "I apologize for any problems I've caused."

"I don't want this to create a problem between us. I've been very pleased with your work," Alex said. She was attempting to ease the sting Laurie obviously felt. "Look at it this way: You might actually have a moment in your day to breathe or get a cup of coffee, if you're not having to constantly keep track of the muttering malcontents around the office."

"Yes, of course. Thank you. I'll have Mark meet you at the courthouse."

"Thank you," Alex said, the words glancing off of Laurie's back as she quickly left the office. She thought about offering some conciliatory words—Laurie was obviously offended. Truth be told, though, she didn't want to hear it anymore. The constant reports of discontent had seemed helpful, but in retrospect she realized they'd been exhausting, making her question everyone around her every day. She decided she'd leave it at that—Laurie could be mad if she wanted to, Alex couldn't control that, but the way they'd been doing things was doing more harm than good. She was sure of that.

2:10 p.m.

Alex was standing in the hallway outside the grand jury room with a jubilant Mark Davidson. They'd just been handed a true bill and their prosecution of Officer Kirkpatrick had the grand jurors' seal of approval. They could have proceeded without it, of course, but in a case with a high public profile like this one, the indictment was more important than Alex had even wanted to admit to herself.

"Congratulations, Alex," Mark said, offering a handshake.

"Thanks, Mark. I appreciate all of your hard work on this. I know how important it was to you."

"I think it's important to the city, Alex. I really do. This can't be swept under the rug. The evidence needs to be aired in public, in court, and Kirkpatrick deserves to mount a defense."

"You believe he's guilty," Alex said.

"Actually, I don't know if I do. I do believe the only way we'll come close to being sure of that is a trial. People have to see that cops aren't given a free pass. We can't assume they only kill when they have to."

"This is going to be a fucking circus," she said. "Worse than it has been."

"Looks like your friendly shadow will be around a while," he replied, nodding his head toward the security detail standing a few yards down the hall. "Did you ever tell your wife about that?"

"How do you know she didn't know?"

"Oh, the day your bodyguard pulled a gun on that cop last week. I gathered pretty quickly who he was and figured if she'd known, he would have known, too. That squad's got your back, you know."

"They are the only one, I think. And as soon as this indictment is announced, things will get a lot worse. You know I can't have you prosecute this case, right, Mark?"

"Oh, I guessed that would be the case. Taking a cop to trial with the Hate Crimes prosecutor might be a bit too provocative."
"Exactly," she said. "I'm crazy, but I'm not stupid. Speaking of which, I need to call Olivia before this gets out."

"I'll leave you to it, then," Mark said. "I'm going to head back to the office."

"Thanks, Mark."

"Alex?" She looked up. "You did the right thing," Mark said. "I'm glad I voted for you."

She just smiled, gratified by his words but already trying to figure out how she would frame this triumph when she called her wife, who was sure to view it as anything but good news.

Thankfully, Olivia answered after just one ring-desk duty certainly made her easier to reach, even though Alex couldn't let on that she knew about that. She'd kept her word to Nick, and was sure he'd kept his promise to her. If Olivia had known about death threats that Alex was keeping from her, she certainly wouldn't have kept quiet about it.

"Benson."

"Benson, it's me."

"Hey, Al. What's going on?" This was how they greeted one another these days, like friendly coworkers or chummy neighbors. Alex decided not to beat around the bush—Liv's reaction wouldn't change if the news aged like a fine wine.

"The grand jury issued a true bill."

"Congratulations, counselor."

"Liv…"

"It's okay, Alex. I'm happy for you. Really, I am."

"That makes one of us."

"What do you mean?" Olivia asked. "This is the result you wanted, isn't it?"

"It's the result I had to get," Alex clarified. "I'm not happy about it. I'm not happy that a kid is dead and I'm not happy I have to take a cop to trial. I'm not happy that we may never know what really happened, and I'm especially not happy that it's affecting you." She wondered if Olivia would admit the impact this was having on her job.

"I'm fine, Alex. I'm always fine."

"Good," Alex said. "What are your plans tonight?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing. I was planning to leave here by 6 tonight. Can we spend the evening together? We need some time."

"I'm all yours," Alex said. "I'd love that. Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we get past this?"
"We have to, Alex. I still don't agree with your decision, and I don't think I ever will, but you have a job to do and I have to separate that from the life we live together."

Alex knew that was true. She also knew there were some things that she needed to say that they probably wouldn't get past, and that Olivia wouldn't be able to separate from their marriage. But tonight was not the night for that, Alex decided. They clicked off the call a minute later and, for the first time in a long time, Alex was looking forward to something.

7:55 p.m.

It was nearly 8 when Olivia unlocked the apartment door. She had Indian takeout in hand, a peace offering for her late arrival. It wasn't unusual for her to leave the precinct well into the evening, of course, but she'd pulled a lot of late nights over the past few weeks, struggling to make any progress on the serial case while keeping her head above water on everything else. It didn't help that she was still confined to her desk, for the most part, and that made everything that she could do take even longer than usual. She hated it: hated that some victims got less than 100% of her effort, hated that she'd been stumbling to the shower even ahead of her early-to-rise wife, their conversations limited to a few mumbled words in the pre-dawn comfort of a warm bed, and a few more scattered between texts and the occasional phone call. Alex was just as busy, and looked tired and drawn. When Olivia had a chance to really look at her, that is.

Knowing she'd promised to leave work by 6, she entered the apartment with trepidation. They'd ended the call with the sweetest words they'd exchanged in a long while. "We'll go out for dinner, come home, take a bath, relax..." The rest was unspoken, but just as needed as the downtime itself. She missed her wife, missed that warm, soft skin and that feeling she got when they were spent, wrapped around each other and covered up. She needed that connection even more than she needed the release, and she'd had every intention of a wonderful night so they could re-establish that tight bond that nourished them both.

Yet here she was, nearly two hours late. She'd taken a call from Kris at 5:30, and they'd for an hour-and-a-half comparing notes, which had led to Olivia making a few calls of her own. When she looked at the clock she knew Alex wouldn't be happy. The air in the apartment was charged, and as soon as she walked into the kitchen and saw Alex there, leaning against the counter with a drink, she could tell the blonde was poised for a fight.

"I'm sorry, Alex."

Her overture was met with stony silence and a slightly drunken glare.

"I brought takeout," she offered, smiling as she lifted the bag in her hand.

"I can see that," Alex said. "Our quiet, relaxing evening all neatly packed into a greasy bag. Aren't I a lucky girl?"

Olivia met the angry stare, but said nothing. She wasn't sure where this was coming from. They had late dinner all the time-when they could even manage dinner at all, that is. And she worked late more often than not. Hell, they both did. She'd neglected to call, sure, but that wasn't usually an issue. Tonight, she suspected, everything would be an issue.

The tension in the room was unmistakable, and Liv tried again to dial it down.

"I really am sorry, honey. I just..."
"Where the hell have you been, Olivia?"

"At work, Alex." Her tone was even, her words imperturbable. But none of that was helping.

"Of course. At work. At your precious fucking job."

"You're drunk." It was all she could say, stating the obvious as dispassionately as possible, given the specter of her mother that seemed to be looming over Alex's shoulder. This was a side of her wife she'd never seen, and didn't care for.

"You're damn right I am. And you're late. I had two fucking hours to do nothing but drink and wait for you. I left work early, and for what?"

"Apparently, for about two drinks too many," Olivia jibed. She couldn't help it. Seeing a tightly controlled person so unraveled was disconcerting. She'd always thought of herself as Alex's safe place, her home, where she could let her walls come down. In all these years, though, they'd never had a conversation like this. She didn't know what had precipitated this rage. The ugly fight they'd had a few days ago hadn't been their first, and it wouldn't be their last, but it was borne of stress and exhaustion, and they had since been engaged in the delicate dance that usually brought them back together. It was a minuet, slow and controlled, made up of a well-practiced series of small steps and well-worn formalities. But the music had apparently stopped mid-movement, leaving two stiff-postured people, barely touching, too far apart to embrace but too close to feign disinterest.

"Alex." She was trying to reset this whole thing, but Alex wasn't having it.

"What emergency kept you late tonight, Saint Olivia?"

"I'm going to ignore that."

"Like you ignore everything else," Alex laughed. She picked up her glass and walked over to the counter where Olivia had set the food. She grabbed the bag and dropped it into the trash as she pushed past Olivia, bumping shoulders roughly as she walked toward the living room. Olivia followed.

"What is that supposed to mean, Alex?"

Alex turned toward her, the look on her face a strange mixture of fury and fear. "When the going gets tough, the tough stay at the office. You can solve the world's problems but you don't give a fuck about what's going on in your own house."

"Know why?" Olivia asked. "Because nothing is going on in my house. You're never here, and when your body is in residence, your mind is always somewhere else. I have no reason to come home."

"It's all my fault, as usual. You've been married to your job for as long as I've known you, but now it's on me."

"I'm married to you. The job is the job. It isn't as important as you are, not by a long shot, but…"

"But," Alex interrupted. "There shouldn't be a but in that sentence, Olivia."

"You're right. There shouldn't be. There shouldn't be some psychotic asshole roaming the streets killing women, either, but there is." Olivia's mind was racing. She hadn't told Alex about how often Elliot tried to convince her to turn in her badge and get into a safe line of work. Hadn't told her about Chael Bauer's job offer, or how very seriously she'd been considering it. But there was no
point in having any kind of serious conversation when Alex was drunk and well beyond pissed.

"If you want to discuss my career plans, Alex, I'd be happy to do that sometime. But I couldn't walk away from my job right now, even if I wanted to, and you know that. I took an oath, just like you did. And I have a duty—to my job, and to my squad, and to these dead women. I have to solve this case. There's no choice."

Alex seemed to sober up in an instant. "Liv, don't play the victims as some sort of get-out-of-jail-free card. You have a duty to this relationship. To me." Her anger was simmering, no longer at a full boil, and Olivia took the opportunity to re-focus the conversation.

"Alex, can we just back up a little?"

"Sure, why not? We're good at taking backward steps. How far do you want to go-to that cannonblast of honesty you unloaded about how you shouldn't have let me run for office? Or maybe back to the day we got married. Is that far enough?"

"It seems pretty far right now," Liv answered. "But no. Maybe just back to six o'clock, when I knew I'd be late and I didn't take the time to call you. I'd like a do-over on that, for starters."

Alex sighed. She was used to fire being met with fire, her volleys being deftly returned. Surrender always took her by surprise. Her voice softened, just a little. "It's not that simple."

"Sure it is, Al. Our house, our rules. Say the word and I'll walk out and come back and start all over. I'll even go back to work and call you, let you know what's going on, promise to leave soon." Olivia smiled, chin tucked and eyes up, a look Alex couldn't resist, and she stepped toward her wife, eager to close the space like a fatigued boxer tying up her opponent in a clinch.

"Or we could forget all that, and you could just forgive me so I can feed you and love you."

She reached out, a hand on Alex's waist, but was shocked to feel slender fingers push her away, gently but unmistakably.

"I can't do that," Alex said.

Liv stood, hand now hanging pointlessly in the air between them. "Alex, I'm sorry. I was thoughtless, but I just don't understand…"

"I can't forgive you because you haven't done anything wrong," she said, an audible tremor in her voice. "You're perfect, and you never do anything wrong, and all I do is hurt you and disappoint you." Alex was close to breaking, her fiery anger completely extinguished by the tears now pooling in her bloodshot eyes.

"That's not true," Olivia said, risking rejection again by taking another half-step into Alex's orbit. Alex was backed against the windowsill, Olivia's body blocking her path, so she turned and faced the glass. She felt Olivia's warm body behind her, less than a foot away, and her mind filled with memories of all the times Olivia had come up behind her, pressed against her, nuzzled her neck and whispered a greeting either sweet or lascivious. She didn't think she could bear that right now, and was certain she didn't deserve it.

"I've betrayed you." She blurted out the words—now how or what she'd planned to say, but spoken nonetheless. There was quiet behind her, an expectant silence, and she continued before she lost her nerve. "I've been seeing Madeline." She felt Olivia pull back.

"What?"
She turned to face her. "You heard me," Alex said quietly.

"I couldn't have," Olivia insisted. "Because it sounded like you said you've been seeing Madeline, and that can't be right."

"It is," Alex confirmed.

"What the fuck does that mean, Alex? What are you telling me? Have you had a cup of coffee, or are you fucking her?"

The numbness and sense of invincibility the alcohol had afforded her were gone now, and in the face of Olivia's pain and anger she had every urge to backtrack, equivocate, or minimize. She was dying to say, yes, it was coffee. I was tempted. It was nothing. But Dr. Jackson's words were in her head.

*It may not be sex, Alex, but that doesn't mean it's not sexual.*

And she knew that any explanation she might offer would only serve to make things worse. She didn't feel she had any right to make excuses anyway.

"I'm sorry, Olivia."

"You're sorry." Olivia was incredulous, still not quite processing any of this. She turned and walked out of the room, toward the kitchen. Alex waited a moment before following her.

"Olivia…"

"Get out, Alex."

"Let me explain," Alex began. Her earlier resolve to present her transgressions without any attempt at justification was gone in an instant when Olivia ordered her to leave.

"I don't need any explanation. You've said more than enough." She wouldn't turn, wouldn't look at Alex.

"It wasn't sex," Alex said, speaking to Olivia's back. She couldn't bear to tell her wife that she had responded to Madeline during their last encounter. She couldn't bear to admit it to her self.

Now Olivia whirled, her face flush, her jaw set in anger, making her features hard and even more beautiful, a contradiction that Alex couldn't afford to pause and consider, not while everything that mattered to her was unraveling.

"So, it was coffee?" Olivia taunted.

"No."

"What is this bullshit, Alex? You're having an affair and you tell me it wasn't sex? And I'm supposed to buy that."

Her disbelief was no surprise. Alex had said so little about her time with Madeline-Olivia didn't know the details, nor did Kate. Only Dr. Jackson was privy to the whole story, and she wasn't the person standing in front of Alex now, as hurt as she was furious. This was the worst way, Alex thought, to tell that tale. But she had to try.

"She dominates me," Alex said. It was all she could come up with as she desperately groped for words.
"I can't even process what you're telling me, Alex." Olivia stared at her for what felt like hours, but was probably less than a minute.

The silence was deafening, and she rushed to fill the void. "Discipline, S&M. I'm not proud of this, Olivia. I'm so sorry. You have to believe me."

"I know what S&M is, goddamn it. What I can't process is… I don't even fucking know."

"I don't either," Alex admitted. "I don't know why." She wasn't being entirely honest, of course; Madeline's threats had played an important role in her own acquiescence, but after her talks with Dr. Jackson, she'd had to admit to herself that coercion wasn't the only reason she'd given in.

"How long?"

"A couple of months."

"The woman you were with for almost two years has been tying you up for a couple of months and you are going to sit here and tell me there was no sex. Unbelievable."

"It's true," Alex said softly. "I'm not lying to you."

"You mean you're not lying to me now," Olivia snapped. "Not right this minute. Or so you say."

"I haven't lied to you, actually," Alex said, a note of defiance creeping into her voice.

"The hell you haven't."

"I haven't told you, I admit that, but in order to lie to you, I'd have to have a conversation with you. You've have had to give a damn. You haven't cared about anything I have to say, lie or truth."

The best defense is a good offense, but even as Alex said the words, she knew they were both unnecessarily cruel and undeniably self-serving.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Alex? It's like I don't know you anymore."

"Maybe you never did. Maybe we both just wanted it enough to pretend."

"What are you saying?"

"I love you," Alex said. "I know you don't believe me right now, but I do. Everything I've done has been because I love you." It was as close as Alex would come to admitting that Madeline had backed her into a corner and she couldn't find a way out without ruining Olivia's life.

"Go to hell, Alex!" Olivia shouted. "Love doesn't make you do something like this. Love is not an excuse for hurting me and destroying everything we had."

Had, Alex thought. Not have. The distinction loomed large in Alex's mind as she frantically tried to grasp onto anything concrete in the midst of this maelstrom she'd created.

"It's the only excuse I've got," she offered weakly. "Loving you is all I've got."

"You've got a pretty fucked-up way of showing it," Olivia said. "You know what? I'm done with this. I want you to leave."

Alex looked at her, and she could see that there was no point in saying another word. Nothing she
could offer here would make this better. She'd already gone too far, and she just nodded.

"I'm going out," Olivia said. "I'm going to get a drink or something. I'll be back in an hour. Don't be here."

Alex nodded again, stepping out of the way as Olivia headed to the front door. Once the door clicked shut, she went upstairs and started packing. She had no idea where she'd go, but she knew she owed Olivia the respect of being gone when she returned. She cried as she threw clothes into a bag.

She let Kate's earlier words wash over her again, knowing they were true. Knowing she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.

*How could you, Alex? She'll never forgive you. What the fuck have you done?*
Laurie Medlin knew something was different in her boss's demeanor, but she wasn't sure what, exactly, had changed. Alex looked haggard and tense-she was spending even more hours than usual at the office, working her ass off, but she seemed practically disengaged from what was going on around her. Laurie knew her well enough to know that wasn't typical. Laurie would never ask what was wrong, and Alex would never volunteer it, but the reason became obvious late on Thursday morning, a spilled cup of coffee provoked a reaction that was entirely out of proportion.

"Goddamn it," Alex yelled. Laurie heard the shout from her desk in the outer office and immediately glanced at the phone to see if her boss was on a call. No lines were lit up, and no one else was in the office, so she went to investigate, gently pushing the half-open door. What she saw was a cardboard coffee cup thrown against the wall, and a stain on the paint that matched the stain on Alex's blouse.

"Are you okay, Ms. Cabot?"

"No," Alex huffed. "Do I look okay?"

Laurie had learned not to respond to rhetorical questions, especially when the person doing the asking was clearly pissed off. "How can I help?"

"You can't help," Alex said. "No one can help." She was furiously wiping at her blouse with a paper napkin, and doing nothing so much as making the stain worse. "I'll clean it up. Don't worry about it."

"Nonsense," Laurie offered. "It's almost noon. When you go out to grab lunch, I'll have housekeeping come in and take care of it. Let me get a spare suit." She headed to the closet in Alex's office, where there always hung a navy suit, a black suit and white blouse, at the ready for just such an emergency. Before Alex could stop her, she opened the door to find an empty rack, nothing in the closet but an umbrella and a pair of shoes. She turned to Alex, noticing only then that the DA was, in fact, wearing the navy suit and white blouse that Laurie had been seeking.

"I didn't pack well when I left the house," Alex said. "There wasn't a lot of time." It was all she offered-no further explanation was forthcoming-but suddenly things began to fit together. The unusually long hours, the snappish demeanor, the awful mood.

"I'll be happy to run your things to the cleaners," Laurie said. She wasn't going to pry-she probably already had the answers to a lot of questions-her own, and someone else's. There was trouble in paradise and Alex Cabot had been kicked out of her own house.

"No, thank you, Laurie. I'll handle it. I'm sorry to have disturbed you. You can get back to what
you were doing."

Laurie simply nodded at the dismissal, and walked back through the suite's outer office, speaking to her own assistant on her way by. "Just running to the ladies room, Melissa. If Ms. Cabot needs me, I'll be right back."

She was on her way to the ladies room, but the one near her own office wouldn't do. Instead, she used the accessible restroom one floor above—a single room without stalls meant no-one could enter unexpectedly and overhear her conversation. Safely locked in, she punched a button on her favorites menu to dial a familiar number. Caller ID rendered a greeting superfluous once the call was picked up.

"Have you heard from Madeline?"

"About what?" Dev asked, and his tone reminded Laurie of nothing so much as a recalcitrant teenager being asked if his chores were done.

"About anything," she snapped. "Any contact at all since she cast you to the winds?"

There was silence—he wasn't going to answer her, and she knew it. "Never mind," she continued. "There's been an interesting development."

"What?" He sounded skeptical, and she almost hung up instead of telling him the news. He infuriated Laurie, to be honest. If he weren't her sister's kid, she'd wash her hands of the whole thing. Of course, if he weren't her sister's kid, he wouldn't ever have had a job in the Manhattan DA's office in the first place. Truth be told, she felt responsible for him now.

Kathy and her husband, Dinesh, had been ecstatic when Dev had gotten the job as an ADA. In the way of all parents, they thought of their precious son as a prince of the realm, smarter and more qualified than anyone else. And Dev was smart, with good grades, law review and excellent summer work experience. But everyone who applied to work at Hogan Place was smart, and accomplished. And most of them were also connected, something her nephew was not. Laurie's sister and her husband were successful, but a tech executive and a neurosurgeon from California didn't have a lot of clout in East Coast legal circles, where three out of every four law school graduates seemed to have a Supreme Court clerkship, an Ivy League JD and a judge or two on the family tree. Berkeley and Stanford didn't carry the same weight in New York that they would most other places, and that had been a harsh reality for Dev and his parents to face.

*Can't you do anything?* Kathy had asked Laurie. *God knows why, when private practice would be so much more lucrative, but Dev has his heart set on working as a prosecutor in Manhattan.* *Bend your boss's ear for me, Laurie. He has no chance without you.*

That had done the trick.

...*for me, Laurie.*

It had been many years since Kathy'd had much use for her younger sister. They hadn't been close growing up—Kathy was eleven years older and had always been incredibly driven and rather tightly wound. She'd left New York to go to Stanford when Laurie was only seven, and she'd never looked back, leaving Laurie and her brother to form an impenetrable unit of two. She hadn't needed them, and was more like a cousin to Laurie than a sister.

Their adult relationship was amiable rather than intimate. Kathy had made no bones about her disdain for Laurie's choices—her career, in particular, was a source of perplexing disappointment.
Why be the DA's secretary instead of being the DA? It was pointless to try to explain that she enjoyed her work, and had no desire to be a lawyer.

Suddenly, though, when Deval had decided that New York was where he needed to be, Laurie seemed much more useful. And she knew that's what it was-her sister's increasingly frequent calls and emails, the invitations to visit and the “How's my favorite sister?” texts weren't motivated by love, to be sure-but damn if she hadn't found herself drawn in. Kathy was a skilled manipulator with a very utilitarian view of the people in her life, and her brother had cautioned her: She has never given a shit about you, Laur. But now that you're in a position to help her...

The funny thing was, she wasn't really in a position to help at all. Colin Samuels had been a good boss who valued her work and respected her contributions. He knew that she was privy to gossip that might help him better manage office politics, but he'd no more ask her for hiring advice than he'd consult a Magic 8 Ball for legal strategy. She could put in a word for Dev, but it wouldn't make a difference, a fact that she was loath to admit to her sister and brother-in-law. She dragged her feet-did nothing, said nothing-until Kathy had pulled out the do it for me line. It was a line-but it worked. She wouldn't have stuck her neck out for Dev, who'd barely even seemed to register her existence, much less treat her as an aunt. But she was unexpectedly pleased with the idea that she was in a position to do something her sister couldn't.

She never did talk to Colin-he didn't muck around in the process of hiring wet-behind-the-ears ADAs, after all-but she sensed this was an opportunity she couldn't pass up, and in the end her silence worked in her favor. She did what she'd done all her life-she figured something out. A few conversations with a guy in IT, inquiries made on the premise that the DA was considering revising the hiring process...it was easy. She flirted a bit, and the guy was more than happy to walk her through the program they used for vetting applicants, scheduling interviews and collecting the necessary transcripts, recommendations, exam scores and the like. The system also held the rankings and notes made interviewers made. Mike was a nice guy, clearly flattered by her effusive praise and gratitude, and he showed Laurie all of the screens. She made notes-just enough to give the impression that she'd be passing an overview along to Colin-but the most important thing wasn't in her notes: the password Mike had used to log in. That part she committed to memory.

It was easy, later, to sit down at someone else's computer and pull up Dev's file. She made a few small changes-nothing that would be easily quantified or corroborated like a GPA-but it was easy to tweak references, interview ratings, hiring recommendations. Candidate rankings. Mike had told her those hard copies weren't kept-information was entered into the system and the documents were promptly shredded.

It was eye-opening, to say the least. While her nephew did have good grades and an exceptional score on the NY State Bar exam, his people skills weren't quite up to par. Two of his references had marked him as Recommended, with reservations, and had gone on to detail their concerns: no propensity for teamwork, egotism so pronounced it was a detriment, and a willingness to skirt the line of ethical obligation. One might question his choice of references, but the people in the DA's office who had interviewed him noted some of the same issues.

Laurie had, in fact, hesitated a moment before she took the necessary steps. Was it worth it, risking her job and compromising her integrity, just to impress her sister? In the end, cursor hovering over the LOGIN button, she decided it was. Moving Dev up in the rankings, moving some other people down, changing a few notes here and there in a few files-it wouldn't hurt anyone. The person who ended up not getting the job was clearly very qualified, after all, and would land another offer with no trouble. And she'd covered her own ass, too, using someone else's computer and Mike's sign-on. It was a victimless crime, she'd told herself.
And Dev got the job, of course. Kathy and Dinesh were exceedingly grateful to Laurie, who reveled in the newfound closeness with her sister. They invited her to join them on St. Maarten for Christmas, sent her a lavish birthday gift. And there was no problem at the office-Dev kept his distance, which wasn't much of a sacrifice for him since he had no interest in his aunt, anyway. It had all worked out very well.

Until Dev had royally fucked up, that is. She'd had no idea what was going on until Colin and Cabot had been discussing it in front of her. She tried to warn him, but it was pointless. He did what he did, and ended up out of a job and in the legal system in ways he'd never intended. He'd never practice law again, and that should have been the end of it for Laurie. She'd risked her neck to get him the job, but the reservations she'd expunged from his file were obviously rather prescient. His problems were his own.

But something had sort of clicked-or snapped-inside her. She felt like her fate was tied to that of this taciturn, selfish little asshole now. In for a penny, in for a pound. And here she was, sneaking out of her office to call someone whose voice was so hostile she could see the snarl that must be on his face.

"The DA is not living at home any longer. And she's looking quite a bit worse for wear, too."

"I fail to see what that has to do with me," Dev retorted. "Alex Cabot's place of residence is nicer than the place I'm living in, no matter where she's staying."

God, he was intractable, and surprisingly obtuse. He could name every tree but had no idea he was standing in a forest.

"Jesus, Dev," she hissed, worried that even this private bathroom wasn't as private as she'd like. "This isn't about real estate. It's about Benson kicking her wife out of the house. Doesn't that suggest to you that your work is done?"

"Hell if I know." He hated to be told things that should have been obvious.

"Well, I know. Madeline's gotten what she wanted, and she has no further use for you. It's exactly what I knew would happen. Has she called you to thank you for a job well done?"

"Oh, you knew, did you?" Dev asked. "You know Madeline Taylor so well…"

"Shut up." She cut him off. It was something she rarely did, to anyone, but he had a talent for pushing people past their limits. "I don't have all day to listen to your bullshit, Dev. You asked me to help you, and I have. I've done everything I could to put her on the ropes, and now I've left my office to tell you something I thought you should know. Take it for what it's worth. I don't think I give a damn anymore."

"Wait." His voice was quiet but firm.

"Why?" Laurie was determined to make him work for it.

"Because you're right." It pained him to say the words, but it was true. He hadn't heard from Madeline in two months, and he had no idea what to do about it. Contacting her was an option that hadn't worked well for him in the past, and pissing her off didn't seem to make any sense. He was at a loss, and he was alienating the only person who was still on his side. It was time to eat a little crow.

"She hasn't called me," he admitted. "She said she'd be in touch, but it's been weeks since I've heard from her. She's basically forbidden me to contact her, and I'm not sure I'd get through even if
"I tried. I don't know what to do."

"I don't either," Laurie said. "But we need to figure something out, fast."

2:00 p.m.

Olivia was seething. She had been seething for days, and it was obvious to everyone around her that something was wrong. She was still on desk duty, with no idea when she would be cleared to get back to doing her job, but her mood was dark and it clearly went beyond work. Nick bit his tongue until he couldn't stand it anymore. When she snapped at him across the desk about some perceived error he'd made, he called her out.

"I need to speak to you," he said.

"So speak." Her tone was combative and mean, and it got the attention of everyone in the room.

"Not here," he said. "In private."

"Fine, your wish is my command." She stood and led the way to an empty interview room. When he came in behind her and closed the door, he didn't waste any time.

"What the hell crawled up your ass and died, Benson?"

"Your incompetence, maybe. I'm not sure."

"I didn't do anything wrong and you know it."

"No, Nick, what I know is that you went out to interview a witness who may have information we need to catch a serial killer, and you come back with nothing. What I know is that I'd have done it right."

"Yeah? Well, partner, you weren't there, were you?"

"No, I wasn't there, because I'm tied to a goddamn desk in the goddamn station house and I rely on you to do your job so I can keep doing mine. Your failure will probably end up getting someone else killed."

"You're out of line." They'd been standing across the table from one another, but he approached now, so that they were standing toe to toe.

"The hell I am."

"It's not my fault you're on desk duty, Benson. It's your wife's fault. Your crusading wife needed to curry public favor and sock away some votes at the expense of the NYPD, and now you can't even go out on the street. When you go home tonight, ask her if she's happy that she turned you into a pencil-pusher. Maybe you should take some time off and just make a vacation out of it, since you're not doing anyone any good around here these days."

"I can't."

"Can't what? You've got months of PTO piled up. Use it and spare all of us your shitty mood, why don't you?"
"I can't ask Alex anything when I go home, because she's not there."

"Don't tell me her security detail has turned into witness protection again." As soon as he said it, he knew he shouldn't have.

"Security detail?"

"Never mind, Olivia. Just get yourself right. None of us can handle you the way you're acting." He headed toward the door, eager to end this conversation. She stepped in front of him.

"What the fuck are you talking about, Nick?" The reason they'd come into this room in the first place was long since forgotten in her mind, he could tell.

"It's nothing. I ran into Alex at the courthouse last week and she had a security detail. She's had some threats. Believe me, judging from the guy who pulled a gun on me, she's being more than adequately protected."

"Threats? What kind of threats?"

"I don't know, Liv. I didn't fucking ask her. My heart was pounding in my ears from nearly being shot, you know?"

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I told her I wouldn't. She said she'd tell you herself. Obviously she didn't."

"No, she didn't. I kicked her out of the house."

"Over this case?"

"Over a lot of things," she said vaguely. "That doesn't matter. You didn't tell her I was on desk duty, did you?"

He didn't answer.

"Jesus, Nick. She didn't need to know that."

"I think she did," he argued. "I think she oughta know that her decisions affect people, including you."

She didn't say anything, but he could see her wheels turning. All of this was unexpected, to be sure, and it certainly explained her mood. He was still pissed off, though, and hadn't forgotten what she'd said to him.

"Take the time off, Benson, or don't. Either way, get your head straight. I don't know what the hell is going on at your house, but it's got no business in here. If you ever call me incompetent again, you'll be looking for a new partner before the last syllable is out of your mouth, you understand me?"

He left the room and slammed the door behind him. She should apologize—and she would, later—but right now there were way too many scenarios firing in her brain. She had no idea where Alex was, and if she really was in any danger, that was a bad situation. No matter how mad she was, it still brought back too many memories. She'd failed to protect Alex once, and she didn't know if she could live with herself if it happened again.
8:00 p.m.

Laurie met Dev near her house in Prospect Heights. He had wanted to meet near Hogan Place, and there was no way in hell she'd agree to that. No matter how deep she was in this mess, she still needed her job. She wasn't about to lose her paycheck—or her access to the DA. He'd then suggested some hellhole near his apartment.

"Look, Dev, I'm doing you a favor, so you can come to me. I have no interest in Korean barbecue with a questionable heath department rating."

So he spent an hour on a bus and then the Q line, making his way to Prospect Heights, and by 7:30 he was walking into Sunshine Co on Washington Avenue. Laurie was waiting at a table near the front—the place was moderately crowded, full of hipsters and retirees. He wasn't happy about having to trek out here, and he was even less thrilled about one more woman gaining the upper hand on him.

He waved off the hostess and quickly covered the few steps to the table, but before he even pulled out his chair, it was clear that Laurie wasn't any happier than he was about their little get-together.

"I've had it with your attitude," she said.

He sat down before speaking.

"Good evening to you, too, Aunt Laurie."

She had to hand it to him—his smug arrogance transcended even his current dismal circumstances. Her sister was a striver, having come from relatively humble circumstances in less-than-tony Flatbush, but she'd fully imbued her son with a healthy sense of entitlement.

"Knock it off, Dev. You're on the outside looking in, and all I'm trying to do is help you. God only knows why."

"Because you have to," he said. "Because you're in this, too, and helping me out of it is your only hope of emerging unscathed." He was right, and she couldn't argue the point. But that wasn't the whole story.

"It works both ways," she finally said. "I'm in it, you're correct about that. But I seem to be your only ally these days, and my situation isn't quite as dire as your own. We're stuck with each other. So stop treating me like shit, okay?"

They looked across the table, taking the measure of one another. It was them against the world, and on the face of it, their odds didn't look good. But they did have a few aces yet to be played, Dev thought. They had information—he wasn't sure how they could use it, but he'd figure that out. They had Laurie's position at Hogan Place, which they couldn't risk. And they had two seemingly conflicting but surprisingly complementary perspectives: Laurie had nothing to gain, and Dev had nothing to lose. There was no alternative, really, than to trust her. He didn't know how in hell the DA's marital problems could help him, but he also knew had no choice but to listen to Laurie's plan. Any idea was better than no idea, after all.

He looked at her, a gaze full of curiosity rather than the usual contempt. It was as if the air warmed noticeably between them as armistice was silently declared.
"What do you have in mind?"

She began to lay it all out for him, now that she finally had his attention. They were so deep in conversation they didn't notice anyone or anything around them.

Someone noticed them, though. Kate was leaving the restaurant at 8:45 with Marina when she saw two familiar faces. She was grateful they were occupied, and didn't notice her staring. She turned to help Marina put her coat on, and whispered in her girlfriend's ear.

"We need to get out of here, quickly," she said.

"That's very cloak-and-dagger," Marina laughed, but when she turned and saw the look on Kate's face, the smile died on her lips. "Alright, let's go. You can explain outside."

They were half a block away before Kate stopped and pulled out her phone, but Marina stopped her before she could place a call.

"Hold on. Tell me what's going on first, if you don't mind."

"It's Alex," Kate said.

Marina looked reflexively back toward the restaurant, unsure why they would have walked out without speaking to Kate's best friend.

"No, not in there. Alex is in trouble, and I need to talk to Olivia."

"You said something was wrong, but that's not a lot to go on, Kate."

"I didn't want to violate Alex's privacy, and quite frankly, what's going on is a lot to digest."

"What is it, Kate?"

"Something is going on and I may have given her some bad advice. I told her that she had to go to Olivia and be honest, but now Olivia has kicked her out of the house. She texted to tell me that on Tuesday morning, and I haven't talked to her since."

"I'm lost. What's that got to do with the restaurant?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. I'm sorry I can't say more, honey. I need to talk to Alex and then I'll fill you in as soon as possible. Promise."

Alex didn't answer her phone, though. Kate tried every five minutes for over an hour, but got no response to any of the calls, or any of the dozen or so text messages she sent, either. Finally she gave up and started calling a different number, but she didn't get a response there, either.

"I'm going out," she told Marina at 10:15.

"Where?"

"Alex's."

"I thought you said she wasn't at home," Marina said. "Did she finally answer you?"

"No, and that worries me. A lot."

"What are you planning, Nancy Drew? If you think she's in danger, shouldn't you call the police?"
"I have been, but Olivia's not answering, either. She's so mad at Alex that I'm sure she doesn't want to talk to me. So I'm going to show up at their place, count on the nice doorman recognizing me and letting me up, and then I'll bang on her door until she lets me in."
"What the hell are you doing here, Kate?" Olivia was furious.

"I called four times. You didn't answer, or call back. I need to talk to you."

"If Alex sent you to talk plead her case, I'm not in the mood."

"She didn't, and I don't blame you," was Kate's reply. "Can I come in?"

Olivia stood aside, opening the door to let Kate through. She knew it wasn't Kate she was furious with, and this wasn't the way to take out her anger. Or is it? a voice asked. Maybe she knew-maybe she's always known. She's Alex's oldest friend. Maybe she knows more now than you do, Benson.

Liv knew she hadn't spoken the words out loud-she wasn't that far gone yet-but as she followed Kate into the apartment, she may as well have given voice to those doubts.

"Now that the awful truth is out, are you here for a post-mortem, or to recommend a divorce attorney?"

"I'm so sorry about all of this Olivia."

"So she told you all of it, huh?"

"She told me enough. What she said surprised me. I hadn't known anything about her relationship with Madeline, then or now, until she called me two weeks ago, drunk and crying at some bar."

Olivia sank into the leather chair with a heavy sigh, gesturing to the couch for Kate to sit down. "Two weeks ago?" Her tone was defeated, and devoid of hope, her words coming out somewhere between question and accusation.

"Yes," Kate confirmed.

"I guess I shouldn't wonder what took you so long. Your allegiance is to Alex, after all."

"My allegiance..." Kate began, but trailed off. She stood and crossed the room to the liquor cabinet. She didn't visit as often as she'd like, but she knew her way around the place, and she quickly poured each of them two fingers of Woodford Reserve Single Barrel, neat. The drink was in Olivia's hand and Kate was back on the couch in less than 90 seconds, but the silence seemed to have taken on a life of its own, because Kate sipped the bourbon several times before she spoke again. When she did, her voice was quiet, but her eyes were fixed on Olivia's.

"My allegiance is to both of you, Olivia. I have always wanted what's best for her, and you are what's best for her. When I found out what was going on, I was furious. I told her she had to tell you, and I was prepared to threaten her with a deadline, but that wasn't necessary. She didn't need persuading. In fact, she seemed relieved, and almost eager to unburden herself. She texted me Tuesday to let me know she'd come clean with you, and that it hadn't gone well."
"If she expected it to go well, then she's delusional. I almost wish she hadn't said anything," Olivia said. "If she only told me in order to absolve herself of some guilt, it was a pretty shitty thing to do. Now I'm left to imagine a million scenarios I'd have preferred never to consider." She finished her drink and got up to retrieve the bottle, pouring each of them another. The slight burn of the whiskey felt a lot like betrayal as it eased down her throat, but she didn't mind that. Sometimes you needed something tangible to keep you in the moment, like a pinch to be sure you're not dreaming.

"I don't blame you, Olivia. She deserved to have her shit handed to her. I told her as much."

"The bottom line is, if she's ending it with Madeline, I'd rather not have known. And if she's going to continue, then she can just tell it to the divorce attorney."

"Maybe it's not that easy," Kate said.

"Sure it is," Olivia argued. "She has a decision to make, and she'll do what's best for her. She decided to do this, and she'll decide whether or not to end it. If I'm not enough for her, she should go."

"That's my worry, Olivia. I don't think she did this because you're not enough. You're everything she ever wanted."

"With one rather glaring exception," Olivia spat out angrily.

Kate chose to ignore the comment, for now, and focus on the more pressing issue. "I think she was forced into this somehow, Liv. And I don't know that she has a way to get out of it."

"You're trying to convince me that she never wanted that? She's not under some sort of spell, Kate." Olivia didn't even know what to call it. Affair? Relationship? Alex had been insistent that there was no sex, but what she had described seemed even more intimate somehow. Describing it as that would have to suffice for now.

"Not never," Kate equivocated. "No, I wouldn't go that far. I suspect their initial relationship was something Alex needed, maybe even wanted."

"You suspect?" Olivia was puzzled by Kate's phrasing.

"Yeah, suspicions are all I have to go on. You know Alex, Liv. She keeps her own secrets quite well. I knew virtually nothing then, and I don't know much more now."

"You know Madeline," Olivia countered.

"Not really," Kate said. "It was very odd, to be honest. She never wanted me to meet Madeline. I did-eventually-but rarely and never for very long. All I know is that I know just enough to hate her. Not that it took much."

"Why? If she was in a relationship with this woman, why wouldn't she want her best friend to know?"

"Because I've known Cab a long time, Liv, and she knew I'd see Madeline for what she really is. It's the same reason she was so eager for you and I to spend time together, at least once she admitted to herself that she was crazy about you. She knows you're good, a good person and good for her. And she wanted to show you off. She was hiding Madeline, probably for a lot of reasons. That speaks volumes, don't you think?"

"None of that excuses what she's done, Kate. I have every right to be angry."
"Absolutely. I'm angry, too, but I'm sure there's something Alex isn't saying-can't say, maybe-and I think you know it, too."

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't. But either way, why should I give a damn?"

"Because you love her." As usual, Kate cut to the heart of the matter. "Because no matter what mistakes she's made, you love her. And because I think there's more to the story."

"Like what?" Olivia's eyes were downcast, looking into her empty glass as she contemplated the wisdom or foolishness of another refill.

"I don't know yet," Kate said. "But earlier tonight, I saw Dev Patel at a restaurant in Brooklyn."

"Well, unfortunately, his probation probably doesn't prohibit dining in the outer boroughs."

"He wasn't alone, Liv. He was with Laurie Medlin."

"What?" Olivia was instantly in cop mode, ignoring her own emotions to focus on getting information. She struggled to rein in her reaction, but her brain was going a million different directions, and none of them were good.

"Dev Patel, with Alex's assistant. I have no idea why they'd be together, but there were. I'm sure of it, Liv."

"Maybe it's a coincidence," Olivia said, playing devil's advocate, even though she knew Kate wasn't wrong. It's what she'd told herself when she'd seen Dev and Laurie together, but when Fin hadn't managed to turn up any connection, she'd almost convinced herself she had imagined the whole thing. Now she knew she hadn't, and this wasn't good. As pissed as she was at Alex, she'd never wish her harm, but she couldn't think of any plausible reason that her wife's chief of staff would be socializing with a man who'd do anything to bring her down. That could result in nothing else but harm. Significant harm.

"They were sharing a table in a little restaurant in Prospect Heights, Olivia. They didn't just bump into each other. The two of them were absorbed in conversation," Kate explained. "I wouldn't have noticed if I didn't have Alex on my mind, but I saw Laurie's face as we were leaving dinner. I thought about going over to speak, but then I realized who she was with."

"Fuck," Olivia shouted. "Kate, I saw them together, too, a few months ago. I ended up heading to San Francisco right afterward and had Fin check things out but he couldn't make any connection. I had just put it out of my mind, thinking maybe I imagined it."

"Well, obviously you didn't."

"Dev Patel," Olivia said, struggling to construct any scenario that she could understand. "But why? How, even?"

"I don't know. But Dev hates Alex, Liv. There's no way he doesn't. I mean, he can't even practice law anymore."

"He brought that on himself. It's not Alex's fault-you know that, Kate."

"Oh, I know it, you know it and everyone with any sense knows it. But he's exactly the kind of little shit who freely takes credit and never takes blame."

"None of this makes any sense."
"Not to you. You are a decent person, Liv. Your brain doesn't work that way, despite all the moral turpitude you bear witness to on a daily basis," she said. "When Alex talked to me, she mentioned something about Reilly's withdrawal from the race. She sped right past it and I didn't make any connection. But it was Madeline. She pulled the strings, and I'll bet she's somehow implicated Alex."

"But what's that got to do with Patel? Or with Laurie, for that matter?"

"Patel's the easy part. His involvement in the mayor's downfall was very public. It wouldn't have been hard for Madeline to seek him out. She's not a woman who does her own dirty work, believe me, and he'd have been ripe for the picking. It's Laurie I can't figure out, but it can't be good."

Olivia stood and walked to the window. She put her forehead on the cool glass and craned her neck a bit to look down toward West 4th Street, 14 stories below. "Tell me something, Kate. I get why Dev Patel hates Alex. It's absurd, but understandable. But why does Madeline despise her so thoroughly?" As mad as Olivia was—and as mad as she had every right to be—she loved Alex so much that it was inconceivable to her than anyone could feel hatred for her wife.

The confusion in Olivia's voice was real, the question almost plaintive, and Kate knew she'd been right to come here. Alex was too proud to tell Olivia the whole truth, whatever the hell it was, and she was too stubborn to see how much trouble she was really in. Kate was sure that Olivia had blown up at her, and just as certain that Alex had slunk of without offering so much as an excuse. She wouldn't admit weakness or vulnerability, even when it was costing her everything she valued in the world.

"Madeline doesn't hate Alex, I don't think. She may hate humanity, or happiness in general, or even herself. But not Alex. She thinks she loves her, in fact. And that might be even more dangerous."

"What the hell is she up to?" That was the million-dollar question.

"I don't know, honestly," Kate said. "When Alex told me what was going on, I'd assumed it was simple blackmail with a side of extortion. But that's far too pedestrian for Madeline, I think. If Patel is involved, it's far more involved than I'd imagined. I just can't figure out what, Olivia. But I'm pretty sure Alex has no idea that anyone else is involved."

"Especially not her chief of staff," Liv said.

"Especially her," Kate agreed. "She trusts that woman. She's done nothing but rave about her."

"Does Alex know?"

"I tried to reach her before I came over here, but she won't answer my calls or reply to my texts."

"What am I supposed to do?" Olivia asked.

Kate didn't hesitate.

"You have to get Alex to come home. As soon as possible. Now."

"I don't even know where the hell she went, Kate, and I'm not sure I care. Besides, she'll say no. Things weren't good when I told her to go."

"If she says no, then you have to get her to say yes. Call her, text her, beg her, Liv. She'll give in. She can't resist you."
"She should be begging me," Olivia said. It was pissy, but true, Kate had to admit.

"You're damn right she should. And she will. But right now, I don't know...I just feel like she's safer here. If she thinks she's lost you, she'll do something stupid, and that plays right into Madeline's hands." Kate paused for a beat, not sure if she should plow ahead or not. Alex had been keeping to many secrets, and none of them were doing her any good. "Did you know Alex has had death threats?"

"I didn't," Olivia replied. "Not until this afternoon, when I got in a fight with my partner and he told me that Alex's security detail had pulled a gun on him in the courthouse last week."

"Jesus."

"Yeah. Seems like there's a lot Alex isn't telling me these days." Olivia's head was down, a hundred thoughts competing for space in her brain. Two bourbons in quick succession hadn't helped-the alcohol had definitely slowed her synapses, but it hadn't gone far enough to obliterate the reason she needed to stop thinking. "She can go to hell, Kate, before I ask her to come home."

"I guess I went to the wrong place. I thought unconditional love was, in fact, unconditional," Kate replied.

Liv looked up and saw emotion in Kate's eyes—worry, and fear, and sadness—and it disarmed her. That, more than anything Kate had said, convinced her that everything wasn't what it seemed. Her last argument was feeble and half-hearted.

"I don't deserve this," she whispered. "I don't deserve to be treated this way."

"No, you don't," Kate agreed. "And she doesn't deserve you. She's really fucked this up, and I'm not sure she deserves another chance. But she's my best friend, and I love her, and I know that whatever is going on, she's better off with you on her side. Even if you aren't ready to do this for your wife, Liv, do it for my friend. Do it for me."

Olivia knew she was right. She loved Alex, and whatever Alex had gotten herself into, she wanted to try to make it better rather than worse. No matter what someone did, you didn't just stop loving them, or caring what happened to them.

She looked pointedly at Kate and then pulled out her phone. Pulling up the recent calls list, she pressed Alex's name. It rang and rang.

"She's not going to answer my call," Olivia said, wanting badly to hang up and knowing Kate wouldn't let her. I phoned her at work today and she brushed me off as soon as she picked up—said she was in a meeting, but I know she wasn't."

"She's stubborn," Kate said. "Leave a message."

Olivia nodded slightly and waited through the familiar greeting for the beckoning tone.

Alex, she said. It's me. I didn't handle things well. There's lots to talk about, but we can work this out. I love you. And I want you to come home. Call me. Please.

It was all true. There was more to be said, but that was all of the most important stuff, for now.
Alex didn't hear her phone ring, didn't notice the voicemail notification. She wasn't noticing much, really. She was sitting in a leather chair in Madeline's den—a sleek room with dark wood and an enormous glass desk. It was impersonal, much like its inhabitant, and Alex couldn't reconcile the elegant sterility of her surroundings with the hopeless devastation she felt sitting here, a bundle of raw emotion in a setting devoid of any warmth or comfort.

This cold place was very much a reflection of Madeline, and Alex wasn't sure what she'd hoped to gain by running here, of all places. Was it because she had nowhere else to go, or was it something worse—an attempt to escape the undeniably real emotions Olivia had displayed the night before? Alex was too weary to even try to understand her own motives, but she was sure she wouldn't be happy if she succeeded.

Madeline, for her part, wore a look of self-satisfaction that would have pissed Alex off beyond description, if she hadn't been too numbed by the drink in her hand, and the two equally strong ones she'd already had in the past hour.

Their conversation had been sparse, limited primarily to a scolding from Madeline for confessing to Olivia to begin with.

*Truth and justice are two very different ideas, my darling Alexandra, neither mutually exclusive nor inextricably linked.*

*I don't believe that.*

*Don’t you? Even now, when you told a truth you needn't have told, and are experiencing nothing less than injustice at the hands of one who vowed to love you. For better or worse, isn't that how it goes?*

Alex had chafed at the mocking reference to her wedding, a day that represented her greatest joy. Less than a year later, she could barely remember the freedom and peace she'd felt that October Saturday morning.

Madeline had filled Alex's glass before it emptied, and Alex hadn't objected. No one said much after that initial discussion. The potent mix of sadness and shame and fury that had propelled Alex through the past 24 hours, and brought her to Madeline's door, had been blunted into an overwhelming feeling of despair. Madeline had skillfully waited her out. She always did.

As Alex drained the glass one last time, she placed it back on the side table, careful to use the crystal coaster. She still didn't know why the hell she was here. She suspected it was a way to punish herself, and knew even in her sorry state that was wrong. *That's not what this should be, Alex. A relationship like this should be built on trust and desire. What the hell are you doing?*

Were those her own thoughts, or Kate's? She couldn't remember, and she didn't want to. If this was punishment—and God knows it wasn't love—then she certainly deserved her penance, and seeing the damage and pain she'd inflicted on Olivia didn't come close to the price she needed to pay. She was here, she realized, because nothing else would do. And that thought was more than she could handle.

She stood, and Madeline looked up at her expectantly.

*The punishment should fit the crime,* Alex thought. *But what if the punishment IS the crime?* She didn't want to think anymore.

There was a heaviess to the air between them, and Alex's words were low, like thunder rumbling
far away.

"Shall we?"

"I'm in no rush, Alexandra. We can talk as long as you like."

"We were never very good at talking," Alex countered. "Why start now?" She walked out of the den and headed to the bedroom, steps as heavy as those of a condemned man taking his last walk. Madeline watched her go, could see the vicious circle turn as she remained in the room alone a moment longer, savoring the change in circumstances that seemed to shift the very molecules in the air.

Why indeed, darling? We can talk forever. Neither of us has anywhere else to be.
Alex hadn't responded to Olivia's message-no call back, no text. It was a Friday morning and she'd be in her office, but Olivia couldn't bring herself to show up at Hogan Place. She wasn't the one in the wrong here. Kate had worried her, a lot. She didn't want anything to happen to Alex, but so far this morning her concern hadn't been strong enough to override her pride and her anger. She needed to tell Alex about Laurie having been seen with Dev, too, but she certainly wasn't going to do that in the DA's office, with the woman in question sitting 30 feet away.

Olivia had taken the day off, though. Nick was right: She was in no shape to be working, and her foul mood made her a detriment to whatever anyone else might be doing. Instead, she decided it was time to talk to Chael Bauer, if he was around. To her surprise, there wasn't even any phone tag involved. She told his assistant who she was, and less than 30 seconds later, the man himself picked up the call.

"Sergeant Benson, you don't know how happy I am that you called."

The man was either completely sincere, or a very good liar. His good mood threatened to be contagious.

"You promised to call me Olivia," she said. "I was hoping we could arrange a meeting."

"Of course," he agreed. "Are my software guys giving you a hard time? I'm sorry they haven't given you much to work with yet. You should know, they've become very personally invested. I think they're starting to get the tiniest inkling of what you must go through all the time, not being able to put the pieces together and solve the puzzle."

"It's not about them," she said. "They're doing what they can. It was a shot in the dark, anyway."

"I won't tell them you said that," he laughed. "We computer geeks think we can write code to solve any problem."

"Well, then we'll let my cynicism be our little secret. I'd hate to discourage them."

"Perfect. If it's not about them, what did you want to talk about?"

"You mentioned the possibility of us working together at some point," she said hesitantly. She'd been a cop all her life, always had the same job. Networking wasn't her forte. "I know it wasn't a job offer, but..."

"Actually, it was a job offer," he said. "A rather vague one, I admit, but that's just because I believe in finding the best people, letting them define their own jobs, and getting the hell out of the way. I'm thrilled that you've been considering what I said. I'd love to meet with you."

"Thanks. When would be good for you?"

"How about today?" he asked. "I'm out of town for a few weeks starting Tuesday, and I don't want
"Okay," Olivia said, surprised by his eagerness. "I'm actually free today-took some time off."

"I'm surprised they let you take any time off," he joked. "How do they function without you?"

"Probably better than I'd like to think," she laughed.

"Well, we're both free. Let's do this. How about you come by the office now-as soon as you can get here-and we'll talk a while and then grab lunch?"

"That works, sure. Thanks. I'll see you soon."

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10:30 a.m.

Madeline's cell phone rang. She was in her office, and almost didn't answer. She was about to cut the boy loose, though—he'd served his purpose. Perhaps it would be best to tell him now and then she wouldn't have to deal with him in the future.

She touched the screen to take the call. "What have I told you about contacting me?" she chided. "I call you, when I need you."

"And what happens when you stop needing me?" he asked.

"I would like to reassure you that that won't happen, Deval, but if you persist in disobeying my orders, you'll leave me with no choice but to end our partnership."

"We don't have a fucking partnership," he said bitterly. "I risk everything for you and get nothing in return. You, on the other hand, get everything you want, and can't even be bothered to throw me a bone."

"What on earth are you talking about, dear boy?"

"Alex Cabot," he said. "You wanted her, and you've got her. I know that her wife kicked her out, and I know she is staying with you."

"You may be suffering from paranoid delusions, Deval. Shall I call a facility and see if we can find you a bed?"

"I saw her."

"I don't know what that means."

"I saw Cabot leaving your building this morning at 6:30. Her car was parked in the garage. She spent the night there. I've done everything you asked me to do, and you have what you wanted. Now I want what's mine?"

"And what, exactly, do you imagine that to be?"

He wasn't sure, really. She'd dangled vague promises to him—the magical reinstatement of his law license, for one—but he realized now that she'd made no firm promises, and he'd been too caught up in the intrigue, too blinded by his hatred of Alex Cabot, to ask her precisely what his reward would be.
She didn't wait long for him to answer.

"You're not being an effective self-advocate, Deval. Never, ever go to the table to negotiate unless you are crystal-clear on what you're asking for. You'll never get that which you don't demand."

"A million dollars," he said in a rush. It was the first number that came to mind, and even as he uttered it, he knew it sounded hopelessly cliche and pitifully low.

Madeline laughed. "A million dollars? Well, you are ambitious, I'll give you that," she laughed. Then her tone abruptly changed. "That's not going to happen."

"You owe me," he said.

"Prove it."

"You can't do this," he argued. "I've taken a lot of chances for you, and all I've gotten for my trouble is a few thousand dollars. I want what's coming to me."

"Don't worry, Deval. While I'm not willing to meet you absurd demand for movie-script ransom money, I am not planning to leave you hanging. Give me a few days. I'll assure that you get what's coming to you."

She hung up, leaving him to contemplate whether or not he'd just made a giant mistake, and how big it would be when compared to all of the others he'd made over the past year or two of his life.

After a minute or two, he texted Laurie, who he knew would hector him until he reported that he had talked to Madeline.

*Spoke with her. All will be arranged in a few days.*

Laurie responded quickly:

*What did she promise?*

His answer was terse:

*No specifics. Not worried.*

Her reply was dripping with anger and contempt, as much as any pixels on a screen could possibly be:

*Of course you're not worried. You're too stupid to worry. You've fucked this up.*

He texted her several more times, insisting that he had the situation under control and was confident that Madeline would deliver on her promises. Laurie didn't reply again.

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11:45 a.m.

Chael Bauer's office was a 10-story building on West 22nd, not far from Chelsea Piers. His company occupied the top five floors, and the offices were open and cheerful. The normal perks of a tech company were readily apparent—a good-sized gym, a coffee bar with all the free, tricked-out drinks anyone could want, games, air hockey and a small cafeteria. Bauer had met her at the reception desk himself, and his pride had been evident as he gave her a tour of the facility. They
ended their walkabout in his 10th floor office, which was surprisingly small and nondescript. He had some baseball memorabilia, and a small basketball mounted on the wall above his trash can. There was no clue that the resident of the space was a billionaire mogul. She found herself once again impressed with Chael Bauer.

"Wanna grab lunch?" he asked. "The tour was just to show off the place, see if we could top the deluxe accommodations that the NYPD is currently providing you."

"I thought we were going to have a meeting," Olivia said.

"Oh, we are. I just prefer to talk and walk. I thought we could get something on the street and take a stroll. The High Line is a block away."

"Sure, sounds good to me."

Bauer grabbed his jacket. As they turned to leave, Olivia saw something she hadn't noticed when the walked in. Just to the right of the office door, on the wall that faced Bauer's desk, was a tribute to his dad. A huge shadowbox frame contained a photo of the elder Bauer, resplendent in his dress uniform, beside a smaller snapshot of the uniformed man holding a small boy. Clustered around the photos were some mementos of Paul Bauer's years of service in St. Louis: his shield, a couple of commendations...and a duty belt. Her brain started firing, too many thoughts at once, and just as quickly she was rejecting each and every one. Of course his dad wore a duty belt. His dad being a cop was the reason he was offering his help, in fact. She showed no outward sign of her discombobulation.

"Is that you there, in your dad's arms?"

"Actually, no," he said. "My dad gave me that picture a few years ago, but it isn't me. It's my older brother, Greg. I didn't have the heart to tell Pops that he'd gotten us confused, so I just framed it with the other stuff."

"You're a good son," Olivia laughed.

"Well, not to hear my dad tell it," he said. He was struggling to keep his tone light, but there was some sharpness to his words. "But thank you, Olivia. I'm trying to recruit you. We should save the unburdening of secrets for some workplace bonding once you've signed on, huh?"

"I still have no idea what I could offer here," she said. "Aside from my short stint in computer crimes, I know next to nothing about cybersecurity."

"You know how humans work, what motivates them, what makes them tick. You know how to take what you know, and find out what you don't know. Those are things that can't be taught, and I'm sure they make you as good a coworker as you are a cop. Now, let's get out of here. Let me buy you a five-dollar lunch from a cart and let's go enjoy this weather. It's 50 degrees in November—two days from now we'll be freezing our asses off."

They were on the High Line 20 minutes later, and they walked and talked for over an hour, the brilliant autumn sunshine making the day seem even warmer than it was. It wasn't any kind of formal job interview, but Bauer told her a lot about his company, and what he thought she could contribute. They discussed their personal lives a bit, too, exchanging basics on family background and upbringing. He had grown up in St. Louis with a brother and a dog, a cop for a dad and a stay-at-home mom. "Boy Scouts, baseball, canoe trips, snacks after school: real "Leave it to Beaver" crap," he laughed. She told him just enough about her own formative years for him to realize they came from different worlds.
"I don't surround myself with people just like me, Olivia," he told her. They were making their way back to his office, wending their way through Clement Moore Park on the way. "Tech companies tend to be diverse in some ways, and completely homogeneous in others. I don't believe in hiring only geeky young guys."

"I'm not sure what you're implying," she joked. "Do you need a little chronological diversity in your workforce?"

"No, no," he laughed. "Nothing like that. I just mean, I don't look at you and see a cop, at least that's not all I see. You're tenacious, brilliant and you get the job done. I need you on my team. We'll find the right job for you, or we'll make it. I can pay you at least twice what you're making now, and I can just about guarantee you that you'll never get shot at. That alone should make your wife happy."

Olivia let that reference go unchallenged. She didn't know anymore what would make Alex happy, and knew she had to do whatever she needed to do for herself now.

"I've enjoyed spending time with you, Chael."

"It's a job offer, Olivia. A real one. Like I said, we can work out the specifics later. I'll guarantee you at least double your salary, and we can negotiate from there. What do you say?"

"I'll have to think it over," she said. "I am really interested, though. As soon as I catch this killer, I'll make a decision, if you won't mind waiting."

"I don't mind," he replied. "It's an open-ended offer. As long as I'm running the place, the job is yours when you want it. And who knows? You might get tired of hunting for killers. Russian hackers are so much more fun."

They were back at his building, and they said their goodbyes, he heading up to his office and she back to her car. As soon as she was in the driver's seat and out in traffic, she pressed the button on her steering wheel to make a call, and voice-dialed the one person she really needed to speak to more than anything.

She answered on the second ring.

"Mackey."

"Kris, it's Olivia," she said. "You're going to think I'm crazy, but…"

"News flash. I already do, so spill it. Whatcha got?"

"Chael Bauer is our killer."

"Shut the fuck up."

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4:45 p.m.

Dev had been summoned to his boss's office, which hadn't in and of itself been alarming. When he arrived there, though, he saw the firm's managing partner sitting in one of the two chairs facing the desk. The other was clearly meant for Dev.
His boss had greeted him, but since then the other man had done all of the talking.

"We're letting you go, Dev. Things simply aren't working out as we'd hoped."

"You're what?" He was asking the question, but he knew it was pointless. He'd spoken to Madeline a mere six hours earlier, pushing her to reward him for a job well done, letting her know that he was watching her, and was fully aware of her relationship with Cabot. It was no coincidence that he was now being fired for no reason, with no warning.

"We are parting ways, Deval," Jordan Lowe continued. "Effective immediately."

"On what grounds?"

"We don't need grounds, and are under no obligation to divulge to your our reasons for making this business decision. We wish you well. You will receive two weeks' severance pay, which is being wired to your usual direct-deposit account as we speak. Security is waiting in the hall to assist you with getting your things…"

"You mean to escort me out of the building."

"The phrasing is not my concern," Lowe said quietly. "You will gather your belongings and quit the premises by five o'clock. Is that clear?"

"You'll hear from my attorney," Dev said as he stood to leave.

"We'll look forward to that," Lowe replied. "When you engage the services of an attorney, please share with him or her the details of the nondisclosure agreement you signed. It contains a rather ironclad agreement to resolve any and all disputes via arbitration rather than legal action. You did read it closely, didn't you? I mean, you were once an attorney."

"Fuck you," Dev said. He walked out to go to his desk and gather his few belongings, but the security guard had beaten him to it. The burly man awaited him in the hallway with a cardboard box, which he pushed into Dev's arms.

"Just head toward the elevator, Mr. Patel. You don't want to make a scene any more than I want to defuse one. I'm more than willing to do so, however."

Dev didn't doubt it—the man was 6'5" tall, a former Marine who still looked fit for fighting. He went to the elevator, rode down to the lobby and walked out the front door, without a single word, trailed the entire time by the guard, who stood in the lobby long enough to make sure Dev had left the area before heading back upstairs.

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Saturday, November 15, 2014

1:15 p.m.

Laurie Medlin's phone rang, and she didn't attempt to hide her dismay when she looked at the caller ID. Not that there was anyone around to see it, mind you. She was enjoying a Saturday brunch by herself, as she usually did, and didn't relish the interruption, but she'd ignored his texts all day yesterday. Now he was calling, so something must be up.

"Dev."
"That bitch." He didn't need to say who he was talking about.

"What's going on?"

"I called her yesterday, like you said to do. I had gone to her building after I left the restaurant Thursday night."

"To talk to her?"

"Hell no," he said. "To do reconnaissance. And sure enough, it paid off. I stayed there until about 1 a.m., then went home and slept for a few hours. Went back by 5 a.m. and not long after that, who do I see driving out of the garage but Alex Cabot."

"I told you," Laurie said. "So Cabot is living there?"

"I don't know that, but I know enough. I called Madeline at her office in the morning and told her I knew she'd gotten what she wanted and now it was time for me to be compensated for my work."

"What did she say?"

"Oh, she said I'd get what was coming to me," he said ruefully. "I was fired yesterday just before five o'clock, and marched out of the building by some goon who'd gathered up my things in a cardboard box."

"They can't do that."

"They can, and they did," he argued. "I had signed a nondisclosure agreement in which I agreed to binding arbitration."

"You were aware of this?"

"Of course not," he said. "Who the hell reads those things? It was 30 pages."

"Lawyers read those things," Laurie supplied. "I have to remind myself that you're no longer a lawyer."

He didn't take the bait, willing himself to be calm and think clearly. Too much was at stake here.

"It gets better," he told her. "I just went to get money and my bank account is cleared out, including the severance pay that was supposedly wired to the account yesterday before close of business."

"Cleaned out? How?"

"Madeline, of course. That extra money I was getting, it was coming from her. She had my account information and obviously has a friend at the bank who has no compunction about breaking the law."

"She seems to have a talent for finding people like that," Laurie observed wryly. "So she gets you fired and takes every dime you have?"

"Not every dime," he clarified. "She left $19.99. Just enough so that I couldn't even get a twenty out of the ATM. If I had any doubt it was her, that would have been all I needed to be sure."

"Are you okay?" Laurie was beyond exasperated with Dev in general, but it wasn't hard to have sympathy for him now. He was clearly in over his head. She was worried for herself, too, of course-Madeline knew that Laurie was Dev's contact in the DA's office and she would be fair
"No, I'm not okay," Dev said. "I'm mad as hell. I won't stand for this. I need you to do something, today, now."

"What?"

"Go into the office and get that flash drive that you hid in Cabot's desk."

"Can it wait til Monday? It could arouse suspicion if I just go in for five minutes on a Saturday."

"Then stay for five hours, I don't care. Say you left your wallet or make up some bullshit. It doesn't matter. We have to get that drive out of there today."

"Why?" Laurie had planted the drive at Dev's request, back in the far recesses of Cabot's top left desk drawer, wiped clean of fingerprints and hidden under a pile of papers. She hadn't known what was on it, or if it would ever even come into play, but Dev had insisted it had to be done. Madeline required it.

"It's got information on it that would implicate Cabot in forcing Reilly's withdrawal from the DA's race. It was put there in case Madeline ever needed a backup plan."

"Which she will now…"

"I don't know if she will. If Cabot is being compliant with whatever is going on there, then maybe that bitch will be content with just ruining my life. But I'm not taking that chance. All she has to do is phone in a tip to someone or other and Cabot's office will be searched. There's child pornography on that thing, along with digital footprints that lead to a computer in Reilly's campaign headquarters."

"Hold on. Why are we protecting Cabot? If she did that…"

"She didn't. I did, on Madeline's behalf. It was her ace in the hole, and she'll play it if she needs it. We can't risk that."

"I don't understand why we're protecting Cabot. Whether she did or didn't do anything to Reilly, she's the enemy here, isn't she?"

"She was," Dev said. "She is. Hell, I don't know. But my dad always told me, 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend.' And right now Madeline Taylor is most definitely the enemy, so we may need Cabot. Or her wife. Or both."

"Dev, this is all too…"

"Fucking crazy?" he laughed. "Yeah. Yeah, it is. Look, Laurie, I don't know what I'm doing anymore. Maybe I never did. But right now I just think it's imperative that we get that drive out of Cabot's office. Get it, meet me somewhere later. You don't have to hold the bag on this one. I'm ready to do whatever I have to do to get back at Madeline Taylor, even if I end up being the collateral damage. I'll try to protect you, but I can't make any promises."

"Fine," she said, strangely touched by his heretofore unseen maturity and protective instinct. "I'll go get it. Do you need money?"

"I'm good right now," he said. "I had some cash squirreled away at the apartment. I'll get by for a little while. I'm not worried about that. Just go now and take care of this, before it's too late."
"I'm going. I'll call you later."

"Laurie?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," he said. "This will be over soon, one way or another. I promise."

4:00 p.m.

Kris Mackey had flown into New York Saturday morning, and arrived at the precinct around 1 p.m. Once she'd recovered from the shock of Liv's call the day before about Bauer, the whole thing had begun to seem more and more plausible to her. They'd spend the rest of the day and long into the night coordinating his movements as best they could, to match up his whereabouts to the various crime scenes. Initially they'd had to go on what they knew and what was publicly available—meetings, press conferences, and so on. Once they'd gotten some more information, they obtained subpoenas in two states for the flight logs from his private jet, as well as commercial passenger manifests. Kate took the first flight out on Sunday morning.

All hands were on deck all day Saturday, running down details and looking for any link between Bauer and the victims.

"It's him," Kris said when they took a break at 4:00. "I can't fucking believe it. Right under our noses the whole time."

"Not under our noses," Nick said. "In our faces. Helping us, even, or so he claimed."

"But why? What's the motive?" Amanda asked.

Olivia thought she knew. "He hates his father, and his father is a cop."

Kris wasn't so sure. "He talks all the time about how much he admires his dad, Liv."

"Smoke and mirrors," Liv asserted. "When we talked yesterday, his guard must have been down, I don't know. He said nice things about his dad, but just under the surface, I could hear the contempt." She'd already explained to them how and why she happened to be in his office.

"This is a hell of a way to get back at your dad for being a shitty parent," Fin said.

"I think there's more to it than that," Olivia said. "I don't know what exactly, but it's not just that."

"I think he's just a fucking psychopath with means and a little extra motivation," Nick said.

"You're probably right," Olivia agreed.

"My folks in St. Louis are working backward," Kris said. "Looking for anything they can find. Unsolved crimes from when Bauer still lived there, any unusual incidents with his dad, anything."

Olivia's phone rang, and she excused herself from the group to take the call.

"Benson."

"Benny, it's Uncle Bill."
"Hi, Bill! How are you?" She worked to sound upbeat, figuring there was at least a 99% chance that Alex hadn't said word one to Bill about their problems.

"I've been better, Liv."

"What's wrong?"

"I can't get hold of Alex. I've been trying for a week and she won't return my calls."

"Her cell or her office?"

"Well, her cell," he said. "I haven't called her office. Don't want to be the meddling, worry-wart uncle, you know. I'm sure she's just busy. Is she there with you, by any chance?"

"I'm actually at work today, Bill. I'm not sure what she's up to," she fudged. "I'll have her call you as soon as I talk to her myself though."

"I'm sorry to bother you at work. If you could have her call, that would be great," he said. "Is everything okay?"

"She's having a rough time right now," Olivia said. That's putting it mildly, she thought to herself. "I think things are just piling up. She'll be okay, though."

They signed off, his fears at least temporarily assuaged. Before Olivia rejoined the group, she called Kate.

"Hey, it's Liv. Have you talked to Alex?"

"No," Kate said. "When I saw it was you calling, I was hoping you'd been in touch with her."

"No luck here. I was planning to stop by her office yesterday but something came up and I'm knee deep in a case that's about to become a three-ring circus. I've been calling and calling her but I don't have time right now to keep trying. Bill just called and he can't get her either. I don't know what to do."

"Go catch the bad guys, Sergeant. I'll take over the phone-a-thon for now. I'll let you know if I reach her."

"Thanks, Kate."

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**Sunday, November 16, 2014**

**5:00 p.m.**

The team had worked all day Sunday. At three, Olivia had pleaded her case with Cragen.

"We've got enough to arrest him, Captain," she argued. "He's about to leave town. Let me go get him now."

"Not quite yet, Benson. This is going to be huge and we are not moving on him until we are 200% sure, you got me?"

"I am sure," she said. "As sure as I've ever been about anything."
"And someday I'll retire and you'll take the exam and be the captain of the Titanic yourself, and then you can do whatever you want. For now, though, we play by my rules. The guy is under surveillance, Liv. He's not going anywhere. Nail down all the details and we will get a warrant and take this guy down. I'm not risking my pension on a hunch."

She stalked back to her desk and kept working. She didn't usually disagree with Cragen so strongly, but she knew he was wrong about this. About 6:30, she got a call that went to voicemail while she was on the phone trying to connect the third victim to Bauer. When she listened to the message, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

"Holy shit."

"What is it, Olivia?" Kris asked.

"That was Bauer's software guys. They say they have something they need to talk to us about it, something urgent that they don't feel comfortable saying on a voicemail message. They've made some connection."

"Jesus. What if they tell Bauer?"

"Exactly," Olivia said.

They filled Cragen in immediately, and he called his counterpart in San Francisco.

"Pick 'em up," Cragen urged. "Get them to your precinct, now, and put them on lockdown. No calls, no emails, no texts," he ordered.

"Based on what?"

"Material witness warrants, something, fuck if I know. We don't even know what they've got going on. We're going to move on Bauer tonight, and they can't be in touch with him before that. Do you understand me?"

"Sure, we'll suspend the Constitution for you, Captain. Is this how things go in New York?"

"When we're about to arrest a serial killer who has the means to run so far he'll never be seen again? You bet your ass it's how we work. Do it now."

He looked at Benson and Mackey, who were standing in his office listening to his side of the call.

"They're going to get the guys who called you, Liv. They should be able to occupy them long enough. I've had enough of this shit now. We'll take our chances. Go get him."

"What about your pension?" Benson teased.

"Fuck the pension," Cragen answered. "I'll live on the streets if we can put this asshole away. Let me call the surveillance squad and see where he is so you can pick him up."

A moment later, he gave them their marching orders. "He's in his apartment. Hasn't left all day."

They looked at him for a moment, digesting the enormity of what was happening. They were about to close a case that had consumed them both for a long time.

"What the hell are you standing here looking at me for? Go. The warrant will be there when you get there."
That was all they needed. They geared up and rolled out in a three-car convoy. Kris and Liv rode in one car, Fin and Amanda in another, Nick bringing up the rear with a new detective. They'd decided not to deploy the SWAT team-uniformed officers would meet them there instead.

Less than 30 minutes after Cragen gave the okay to arrest Bauer, they were in his apartment building, knocking on the door. Several knocks yielded no reply, so they knocked the door in and entered. They took every precaution, cleared every room-everything by the book. In the end, there was no struggle, no resistance—no Bauer.

"He's not here," Olivia told Cragen by phone. "The motherfucker isn't even here."

"Get the surveillance team up here now," Nick yelled down the hall.

The two officers who'd been watching the apartment since noon appeared. Their sheepish expressions indicated that they'd heard the target of their observations was, in fact, not where they'd reported him to be.

"What the fuck happened?" Nick shouted at them, his face contorted with anger and so close to the theirs that they could feel the spittle flying from his mouth.

"Nothing," the younger one said. "We were here, Detective. We took our breaks separately, we never lost sight of the building. We did what we were supposed to do. Maybe the earlier shift lost him. Maybe he wasn't even home when we got here."

"Cut the crap," Nick screamed. After several more minutes of haranguing them, he finally determined that the rookie had taken his break as scheduled, at 5, but while he was on break, his partner had taken a personal call.

"You lost sight of the suspect because you were whispering sweet nothings to your girlfriend?" Liv asked incredulously. "You fucking idiot. Bauer could be anywhere. Goddamn it."

The detectives then set about working other options. Checking flights out of the city, the private airstrips. They were about to head to Bauer's office when Cragen called Olivia.

Her face when white when she heard what he had to say.

"Another victim," he relayed, his voice as dispassionate as possible. "Not dead long, maybe a couple of hours. No sign of Bauer in the area right now."

"Where?"

"Clement Moore Park, near…"

"Near the High Line," Liv finished. It was the park she and Bauer had cut through the other day on their way back to his office. "Motherfucker."

She filled in the other detectives and they all headed to the scene. En route, Kris called Bauer's building and spoke to security, who said they hadn't seen him all day.

"Fine," Olivia said. "Let's stop by the scene and then we'll try to figure out where he's gone."

Less than two minutes later, though, Olivia's phone rang. She looked at the screen, then at Kris.

"It's Bauer," she mouthed as she answered the call.

"Benson."
"Sergeant Benson," he said. "It's Chael Bauer."

"Hi, Chael, I thought we had agreed that you'd call me Olivia."

"We had, you're right," he said. "But since this is a professional call, I feel more comfortable with
the formality of your title, if you don't mind."

"Professional?" she asked. "Are you calling to get my answer on the job?"

"No, I wish I were," he said. "I'm calling about the job I've been doing. I was working
anonymously, but I think you probably know by now about my latest project."

"Where are you, Chael?"

"I'm at my office. Want to come by and talk?"

"We just talked to your security there. They said you haven't been in all day."

"They don't know everything, Sergeant. Even the most highly trained investigators sometimes don't
see what's right in front of them."

"I'll come to you," Olivia said, looking over at Kris for confirmation. Kris nodded, and they took a
hard left at the next corner to head up the block to Bauer's corporate headquarters.

"I'll be waiting for you," he said. "I'm at my desk. Just come on up." He hung up.

"We need backup?" Kris asked.

"Probably," Olivia agreed. "But I'm not waiting. Are you?"

"I like the way you think, Benson. Let's go get him."

They entered the building alone, flashing badges at the security guard. The guard grabbed his iPad,
app open showing the cameras around the building, and they rode the elevator up to the 10th floor,
opening it only when they were satisfied that no one was lying in wait in the hall. They ordered the
guard to go back down to his post and call for backup for them.

Bauer's office door was partway open and Olivia entered slowly, gun drawn, while Kris covered
her. They found Bauer sitting at his desk in the dark, a gun pointing at his own head.

"Put the gun down, Chael," she warned him.

"Thanks for coming, but I think I'll just hold onto it a while longer, if you don't mind," he said.

"We do mind," Kris said. "Make this easy for everybody and just put it down on the floor and kick
it over here."

"Detective Mackey," he said. He seemed slow, like he was underwater. "Sorry to have dragged you
out here from St. Louis, but it's always nice to see another familiar face. I'm sorry, though-I can't
put down the gun."

"It's over, Chael," Olivia said. "I can only imagine how hard this has been, but it's over now. You
can relax. We'll take care of everything."

"He never loved me," Bauer said woefully. His eyes had shifted to the shadowbox frame on the
wall behind Olivia, gun still pointed at his temple.
"Your dad?" Kris asked. "He brags about you all the time."

"In public," Chael corrected. "In private, he says I'm weak, that real men don't make a living writing code and enabling the rapid disintegration of our society's fabric of propriety. Real men are like him and my brother, cops and firemen. Real men are so busy doing manly things that they can't look at a snapshot and tell which of their two kids is in it," he laughed.

Olivia didn't take her eyes off of him to follow his gaze, but she knew he was fixed now on that picture of his dad and brother, hanging in a frame as a reminder of his father's indifference and lack of involvement. The whole frame, she realized now, wasn't any kind of tribute to his dad. As she'd suspected when they talked, something was under the surface—it was a daily reminder of the fact that his father viewed him as both inconsequential and inadequate, so unimportant that he could be easily mistaken for his only sibling.

"You've done a lot of good," Olivia told him. "You employ thousands of people, donate millions to charity, and you've changed people's lives."

"My father changed lives, too," Chael said. "You probably know everything I've done by now, but you have no idea what he's done."

"Tell me," Kris said. Both women still had their guns pointed at Bauer—a total of three pistols were pointed directly at his head, but he seemed as calm as if he were in a trance. Olivia's radio squawked, startling all three of them.

_Benson, backup on the scene._

"Don't let them come up here," he said. "I'll pull the trigger."

She looked at Chael, gesturing for him to relax with her free hand. She got on her radio. "Stand down," she instructed. "The situation is under control. Repeat, stand down."

Kris spoke. "It's okay, Chael. Just the three of us. Tell us what you were going to say."

"My father. My father is a fucking hero," he chuckled. "And when I was nine years old, he raped and killed a prostitute. He was never caught—hell, he was never even a suspect. He and his partner had raped women when they were out on patrol—I heard them talking about it in our garage one day. No one ever reported it. He was free to do whatever he wanted. Good ol' Paul Bauer."

"Maybe you misunderstood, Chael. You were young, you overheard a conversation…" Liv was trying to calm him, but her words had the opposite effect.

"No!" He shouted. "I didn't misunderstand a word. I heard it all. Things go out of hand, the hooker fought back, my dad ended up killing her. He laughed about it, Sergeant! _Bitch shouldn't have fought back_, he said." 

"There's no statute of limitations on murder," Kris said. "We'll put him away."

"The hell you will. His partner's dead. The victim can't talk. He got away with it."

"And now you're no better than him," Olivia said.

"Oh, I am," Chael said. "He thinks I'm nothing, that what I do is worthless. I did all of this myself though. I had cops in three states chasing their tails. I had the citizens of New York thinking a cop was killing innocent young women. And if I hadn't had you up here to this office, Sergeant Benson, you still wouldn't know."
"You did that on purpose," she said. "You're tired, Chael. You wanted this to be over."

"I guess maybe I did. I'm exhausted," he said.

"Put the gun down," Olivia urged again. "It's all over. We can just end this now."

"You're right," he said slowly. "We can. Let's just end it now."

Everything happened so quickly. He seemed to squeeze the trigger, but then abruptly turned the gun toward Kris and fired, in one smooth motion that surprised all three of them. Before the bullet reached Kris, Olivia had fired, hitting Bauer in the forehead. He slumped over his desk, blood spreading beneath him, as Kris fell to the ground. Olivia stepped toward Kris, who shouted at her.

"I'm fine. Make sure he's dead."

Olivia checked his pulse, even though she knew without a doubt that it had been a kill shot. Once she verified that he was dead, she kicked the gun away that had fallen on the floor by his feet, and went to check on Kris.

"He hit you?" she asked.

"Grazed me," Kris said. "It's nothing."

Olivia radioed. "Shots fired, suspect dead, officer down. Get me a bus now."

Kris looked up at her. "I don't need a fucking bus, Benson. It's a scratch."

"Shut up. The bus is coming."

Nick and Amanda entered the room a few seconds later.

"What the fuck happened?"

Olivia looked up at them. "I killed him." She handed her gun to Nick, who unloaded it and put it in his waistband.

"Are you okay?"

"I am," she said. "Mackey here, on the other hand, got hit in the shoulder."

"Grazed," Mackey argued. "I don't even need a fucking ambulance."

Nick looked at them both. "You two are both so goddamn stubborn. You're lucky you're not both dead."

The paramedics arrived a few minutes later, and Kris was right. The wound was minor—they cleaned and bandaged her at the scene, and then both women went back to the 1-6 to give their statements to the shooting team leader.

"Looks like a clean shoot, Benson," he advised. "Good thing, too, or your wife would have your ass in court by morning."

Alex. The night had been so crazy that she hadn't even thought about the fact that Alex would hear this on the news.

"I need to call her," she said.
She tried and didn't get Alex...again. She didn't even bother to leave a message this time.

When they were both done with their statements, Olivia volunteered to drop Kris off at her hotel. As Kris got out of the car, Olivia spoke.

"Hell of a night, Mackey."

"You aren't kidding."

"Sure you're going to be okay?"

"Eh, it hurts a little, but I'll survive. You?"

"I'll be on desk duty until the shooting is cleared, but that's nothing new. I'll be okay. Thanks, Kris."

"What are you thanking me for? You're the one who shot that lunatic and saved my life."

"He had bad aim," Olivia joked. "Do you think he was a lunatic?"

"You know," Kris said, "I don't. Not really. He was nursing a lot of wounds. That's not how most normal people handle it, of course, but if he'd grown up in a different family, would he have done this? I don't think so."

"Me neither," Liv said. "Dealt a shitty hand, for sure. But was it his destiny?"

"No," Kris said emphatically. "He still had a choice, and he made it. We all do. Goodnight, Benson. Get some sleep."

"You too," Benson said. "There'll be a press conference. Gotta look good for the cameras. I suspect it'll be a little more media than you normally deal with."

"Welcome to New York," Kris laughed.

"Goodnight, Mackey."

Olivia drove home, showered and went to bed. She checked her phone one more time before she turned out the light. Still no message from Alex.

*We all make our choices,* she thought. *I guess Alex has made hers.*
Chapter 48

Sunday, November 17, 2014

10:15 p.m.

Alex reached the bedroom and turned to await Madeline—she didn't make a move without being told. This part felt like a formality to her, really. Up to this point, everything had been predictable between them, especially since Alex had been staying here for the past several nights.

Madeline had something else in mind for tonight, though. She had lulled Alex into a false sense of security. When Alex had shown up after having been kicked out of her house, Madeline had been comforting and kind. The repetitive scenes, the relatively gentle treatment she was affording Alex—that had now come to an end. This evening, Madeline was determined to up the ante.

She wasted no time in getting Alex naked and onto the bed, but instead of following her usual practice of administering a flogging, she had Alex lie on her back. She cuffed her to the bed, arms first, and then legs. She got out a cat o’ nine and began whipping Alex’s thighs with light strokes, careful not to let the tails stray onto more sensitive skin. Alex was surprised by the slight change, but not alarmed.

Then, something in the room changed. Something in Madeline changed. Instead of praising her for absorbing the blows, Madeline began to degrade her. She said awful things, calling Alex a slut and a whore, forcing her to repeat the words herself. When Madeline had begun humiliating her before, she had lost all interest in their games. But it's not a game for her, is it, Alex? She means the things she’s saying.

Alex had a safe word; it was on the tip of her tongue, but she was afraid to use it. She had no idea why. In the space of five minutes, she remembered what had gone so wrong between them. She’d tried so very hard to forget it, to put it completely out of her mind, but it all came rushing back now. This was the shame she’d carried for years, not physical scars, but emotional ones. This was why she’d been so angry at Madeline, and why she’d never told anyone what had happened.

Human sexuality was a fascinating and varied thing; she knew that humiliation was something that people enjoyed, and would never judge that. To each his own. She hated it, though, and she’d made that known to Madeline, but it hadn't stopped. It took Alex a long time to see it for what it was, and even when she did, she still felt somehow responsible, as if she'd brought it on herself. Someone in her line of work should know better. Ironically, it was the degradation she’d been subjected to that had finally allowed her to regain her strength.

The pain of the words combined with the emotional reaction it created in her made it impossible for her to let go and enjoy anything that was happening. Alex was fighting tears—she wouldn't give Madeline the satisfaction of seeing her cry, so she tried instead to break her concentration, take her out of the scene.

"Madeline."

"Shut up," came the fast reply.

"Please."
"That's not your safe word, you stupid bitch," she said. Seeing Alex open her mouth, she continued, "Be careful about using it. I won't hurt you, but I can't promise I won't harm your wife."

All bets were off. Madeline had made it very clear that she was prepared to do damage, and it was up to Alex if she'd do that damage here and now, to Alex's psyche, or later, to Olivia. When Madeline began to stroke Alex's clit with her fingers while she insulted her and disparaged her body, Alex was horrified to find that she was responding to the stimulation even while she reeled from the verbal abuse. She was so keyed up, so furious, so aroused from the lead-up—the cuffs, the flogger—that she came fast and hard, that damn safe word still unspoken, now bitter and caustic in her mouth.

Madeline uncuffed her quickly and Alex got up from the bed without asking for permission or waiting to see what was next. She had no interest in anything else Madeline could possibly want.

"Where do you think you're going, darling?"

"Away from you," Alex said. "Anywhere, as long as it's away from you." She couldn't believe she'd ever tolerated this before—even one incident was too much now.

"I must admit, I don't understand your reaction, Alexandra. This is nothing that we haven't enjoyed before."

"Enjoyed? You can't seriously believe that I would enjoy that?"

"Oh, I believe that you would, because I know that you have. You did tonight, and you will again."

"I won't. You won't ever touch me again."

"That's very amusing, my dear. Full of ill-advised bravado, mind you, but amusing nonetheless."

"I'm not joking, Madeline. Go to hell. This isn't happening. Never again."

Madeline's disingenuous concern and feigned politeness were suddenly gone, and her face changed abruptly, darkened as if a curtain had been drawn over her. "Don't be ridiculous. You don't decide what will happen; I do. You don't even know what you need, do you?"

"I know exactly what I need, and it isn't you."

"You are a stupid girl, Alexandra. A lying, manipulative whore who's led around by her cunt rather than her brain. You can sit here all night long and tell me you don't want what I give you, but your body doesn't lie to me like you do. You came so hard for me. Fighting it makes it so much better, doesn't it? You'd forgotten how good that could feel."

"What I'd forgotten is how badly you treated me," Alex said. "How worthless you made me feel."

"You need that, darling. You are a woman who needs to be taken down a notch, to be reminded that I can control you far better than you could ever control yourself. And don't even try to tell me that your bastard cop of a wife can do that for you. You give and give and give to her, and what do you get in return? Nothing."

"That isn't true," Alex said. She had been angrily pulling on her clothes and she was now fully dressed once again. Her courage—and her anger—were stoked more with every word Madeline said.

"It's true, and you know it. I give you every single thing that you need, Alexandra, and all I take is what's rightfully mine. **You** are mine, darling, and you always have been."
"You don't understand," Alex said. "You never did. That's why it ended before, and I guess I should thank you or showing your true colors again. You've reminded me why I left you: What you do, you do to me. Not with me, and certainly not for me. It's for you, about you...all you. And that's not a relationship that I want or need to be in. This is over. I'm leaving here, and I'm not coming back."

If Madeline was taken aback, she didn't show it.

"Very well," she replied. She was shocked, but it wasn't her style to show it. She'd made her money-and her reputation-by being unflappable and unrelenting. It took her no more than two deep breaths to slow her racing heart and quiet the effects of the adrenaline rush. As angry as she was with Alex-and she was furious-something about the defiance she'd exhibited was a huge turn-on. She reached into a drawer near her bed and withdrew the cuffs she'd just used to immobilize Alex's wrists; she offered them up.

"I don't want those," Alex said. "They hold nothing but bad memories for me."

"Take them, darling. They're yours. They're the same ones I've always used on you, and you've earned them-keep them, please."

"As what, a souvenir to remember you by?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary, do you? You could never forget me. I don't think I'd say remember. Perhaps remind is a better word. Those will serve as a nice reminder of your audacity this evening, your very own badge of courage, if you will."

"I don't want to remember you, or anything about this night. I wish I'd never met you, and when I walk out that door, I don't ever want to see you again."

"I'm going to let you leave, Alexandra, but make no mistake: This isn't over. It will be over when I say it's over."

"You can't force me to do anything."

"Nor would I ever want to. I do respect you, whether you think so or not. I admire your independent nature, and I want you to come to me because you choose to, not because I've forced you. So, it's up to you. You will make the decision."

"What decision?"

"You will decide how things will go from here. If you continue to do what I want you to do-see me when I tell you to, do what I ask you to-then everything can continue peacefully. You can continue to do your job, and if your wife will have you back, you can remain in your shell of a marriage. Sergeant Benson can continue to play gumshoe every day on the streets of Manhattan, allowing her soul to be eaten away by the knowledge that her wife has to go elsewhere to get the things she truly needs to feel loved and wanted."

Alex shuddered, unsure what disgusted her more, the idea of succumbing to Madeline's blackmail, or the thought of walking willingly into this nightmare. It had taken all of her nerve to stand up to Madeline—the next phase of the stress response was overcoming her now, and she had that shaky, queasy feeling that comes from narrowly avoiding a car accident.

"Olivia already knows, Madeline. You know that. She's kicked me out and she won't take me back, which means you have no leverage. You have nothing to hold over my head."
"Really?" Madeline asked. "You should think carefully about that, darling. Consider your wife."

"What are you talking about?" Alex asked. "I've already told you-my marriage is over. You can hurt me, but you can't touch her. She's bulletproof. I'll make sure of it."

"Hurt her?" Madeline laughed. "Oh, heavens no, darling. I don't plan to hurt her. I plan to destroy her, much like you've very nearly done yourself. Your unyielding nature and ambitious self-righteousness have led her to the brink of career ruin like a lamb to the slaughter at least once before, haven't they? You saw what a disgraced young ADA and a vengeful but inept Internal Affairs investigator did to her. Just imagine the havoc I could wreak. If you don't come around-and soon-I'll have that badge of hers mounted on my wall. I promise you that, darling. I know that you see yourself as a fiercely independent person, with choices and agency and unfettered free will. And you are headstrong, I'll admit that. But I also know that you do your best work when you're backed into a corner, with no choices at all. And you feel safest when the danger is the most clear, and someone strong is there to protect you. I can do that. She can't. I'll prove to you just how powerless she really is, if I have to. I'll make sure she never works in law enforcement again."

"You wouldn't." But even as Alex said the words, it felt more like a line from a bad soap opera. She knew Madeline would do exactly what she was threatening—and probably even more things she hadn't verbalized.

"I appreciate your faith in my character, Alexandra, however misplaced it might be. But I would do that. I most certainly will do whatever I have to do," Madeline said. "Who knows? Maybe politics will have sufficiently changed you enough that you won't feel guilty about having left me no choice but to ruin her. I doubt it, but perhaps."

"How do you sleep at night?" Alex was cunning and relentless, and not above using every trick in the book to put criminals in jail, but Madeline operated on another level entirely. She was soulless and without a conscience.

"Soundly and without dreams," Madeline answered. "Please don't act as if I'm being unreasonable, Alexandra. I'm not asking you for a decision tonight, not at all. I know that there are two possible outcomes here, and either of them suits me quite well. I'm not willing to wait forever, though. If you feel the need to assert yourself, just remember: It's your decision, darling. All of the consequences stem from that. You're used to making the tough calls now, Madame District Attorney. This one should be a piece of cake."

She walked toward Alex, placing her cold hand over Alex's wrist, gripping her roughly, fingers wrapping around the delicate bones and covering the skin where the cuff had so recently been.

"I'm here to love you, Alexandra, and to remind that this isn't about want. It's about need. You need this, and you need me. You just have to admit it to yourself. Either you will or you won't. There are consequences to every choice. You have 24 hours."

She walked past Alex toward the master bath, calling back over her shoulder as she began to disrobe, dropping her clothes to the marble floor. "You have a lot to think about, Alexandra. I know this has been an emotional evening for you. I'll let you see yourself out."

She didn't linger-Madeline heard her footsteps on the stairs, then in the foyer, quickly followed by the sound of the door opening and closing.

Alex was too exhausted, mentally and physically, do anything. She knew Madeline's threats were very real—if she didn't do as she was told, Madeline would do anything she could to exact revenge—and she had to figure out some way to protect Olivia from an unknowable threat. She threw the
leather cuffs into a trash can in the parking garage, and pulled the Mercedes out onto the street. It was too late at night to call Kate, even though she'd been ignoring numerous messages from her best friend, who was clearly desperate to talk to her. And she wouldn't even think about turning up on Bill's doorstep. She went instead to a hotel, checked in and collapsed on the bed without taking of her clothes or looking at her phone. Tomorrow she'd have to try to put her life back together again, somehow, but not tonight. Right now, she was too spent to cry, or even think. She slept as deeply as she had in months.

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**Monday, November 17, 2014**

**8:15 a.m.**

Olivia was at her desk bright and early Monday morning, filling out paperwork. She would be on desk duty a while longer, until the shooting was thoroughly investigated, and maybe even longer if Cragen had his way. *You're still not safe, Benson. You weren't on desk duty because of Chael Bauer. You were on desk duty because half the cops in this city would be glad to take you out in a friendly fire incident,* he'd reminder her.

There would be press conference at 11, but she hoped to finish her report and stop by Alex's office for a moment before picking up Kris to head to 1PP to talk to the media. She had stood up from her desk to head toward Hogan Place around 9:15 when she was surprised to see a very familiar face enter the room.

Dev Patel was looking around. He was a mess and looked like he hadn't slept in a couple of days. When his eyes lit on her, he came walking over.

"Detective Benson," he said. "I'm Dev Patel."

"Sergeant Benson," she corrected. "And I know exactly who you are. What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you. I have a story to tell and I think you're going to want to hear it."

"Then talk."

"In private," he said. "It's a long story."

He was right. It was a long story, but every word of it was interesting. She never made it to Alex's office.

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**Monday, November 18, 2014**

**9:30 a.m.**

Alex's office door flew open, and she looked up, startled and angered in equal measures. She was surprised to see Kate standing there.

"What…"

"Get up. We need to talk."
"So talk."

"Not here," Kate said. "Let's go out."

"Kate, I've got things to do. You can't just barge in here and make me go wherever you want, anytime you like."

"But I can leave my house to cab around Manhattan and rescue your drunk ass anytime you like? You owe me, Cab. You haven't been answering my calls or texts, so I came to you. Let's go."

Alex knew better than to argue any more. She grabbed her jacket and followed Kate out the door; Laurie was at a meeting herself, so Alex didn't disclose her whereabouts. As they exited the office into the hallway, the man who'd been sitting near the door stood up and followed them at a discreet distance.

"Still not free of your skulking goon?" Kate asked.

"Not yet," Alex said. "Hopefully soon."

"Any new threats?"

"Not for a few days," she said hopefully. "But the trial will start eventually."

"The calm before the storm," Kate observed.

Once they were outside, Kate grabbed a cab and they went to a cafe on West Broadway. They made small talk until they were seated and they ordered coffee and bagels; Kate clearly had something to say, but she was waiting until they wouldn't be disturbed. As soon as the waiter took his leave, she unloaded on Alex.

"Where do you get off?"

"Meaning?"

"I'm trying to help you, and you don't even have the courtesy to let me know if you're alive."

"Help me?" Alex asked incredulously. "You got me kicked out of my house, Kate."

"No, you did that all on your own, beautiful. I'm not the one who made you cheat on your wife, am I?"

Silence was the only answer.

"Exactly," Kate continued. "Look, Alex. I'm sorry she kicked you out, but can you blame her?"

"No."

"Me neither. Have you been served with divorce papers?"

"Not yet."

"Then there's still a chance she'll take you back," she said. "I saw her the other night."

"Saw Olivia? Why?"

"Because I was worried about you. You won't communicate with me, and neither would she, so I
just showed up and invited myself in."

"I'm sure she loved that."

"She hated it. She's pissed at you and she's pissed at me."

"Are you the reason she called me Thursday night?" Alex asked.

"So you did get the call," Kate confirmed. "Why didn't you answer her?"

"I was with Madeline."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Alex. Are you an idiot?"

"I had nowhere else to go."

"Fuck that noise. You have me. You have Bill. You have a goddamn credit card and a thousand hotels to choose from. You might want to use one of them to buy something to wear, by the way. You look like hell."

"I'm working it out, Kate. In my own time," Alex insisted. "I'll call Olivia. I'm just not ready yet. If you kidnapped me from my office and brought me here just to yell at me, I'd have preferred to eat at my desk, thanks."

"I brought you here because you can't trust Laurie Medlin."

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw her Thursday night, Alex. With Dev Patel. That's what I've been trying to so frantically to tell you."

Alex paled. "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent certain," Kate said.

"It could be a coincidence. He did used to work here," she offered, grasping at straws. "Maybe they bumped into one another."

"They were at a restaurant in Prospect Heights, sitting at a table for two, so deep in conversation that they didn't notice me or anyone else around."

"Oh my god."

"Yeah. Any idea what they could be up to?"

"No," Alex said. "Not a clue. But it can't be good. I'm such a fool."

"I won't argue that."

"For months I've been questioning the motives of everyone in the office."

"Everyone except her."

"Exactly," Alex affirmed. "I thought they were disloyal and untrustworthy. One of my EADAs said a couple of things to me, sort of hinting around that I should be careful who I listened to. I thought maybe...but it seemed too absurd."
"Why? People are fucked up, Alex. They'll do anything."

"She had no reason," Alex said. "Colin trusted her implicitly."

"Well, you're not Colin. I did some digging around today, Alex. Dev Patel is Laurie's nephew. If he
hates you, I think it's fair to say you're probably not her favorite person, either."

"I asked her to stay on," Alex said. "Promoted her. I thought she was the only one in the office I
could rely on."

"You're the most trusting prosecutor I've ever met, Alex. Aren't you supposed to think question
everyone's motives?"

"My god. What have I done to myself?"

"I don't know, but you need to figure out how to undo it. I have no idea what all of this means, but
you can't stay at Madeline's. People are trying to kill you, for sure, and there's probably at least a
couple of them trying to ruin your life. Get away from Madeline, first and foremost."

"That's already done," Alex said. "I told her last night that it's over, and that I won't see her again."

"How did she react to that?"

"She wasn't pleased. She's threatening to ruin Olivia's career."

"Alex. You've been going it alone for long enough. You need to tell Olivia ever tying you've told
me, and anything else you're keeping a secret, as well. She can't protect herself if she doesn't know
she's in the crosshairs."

"What about Laurie?"

"That...I'm not sure. I told Olivia about seeing Dev and Laurie, which you'd have known if you
bothered to return her calls, either. Maybe she'll have some ideas. Until then, keep your friends
close, and your enemies closer. Close the gates, Alex, and pull up the drawbridge. Go home to
Olivia. I don't think you're safe anywhere else. Have you watched any TV, by the way, or read the
newspaper?"

"No, I've been a little busy. Why?"

"Your wife shot and killed Chael Bauer last night."

"She what?"

"He was the serial killer she's been hunting for so long. Christ, Alex, it was all over the place. Get
your head out of your ass."

Alex looked at her phone. Another missed call from Olivia, last night-no message.

"I'll call her," Alex promised.

"It's about fucking time," Kate said.

Monday, November 17, 2014
By the time Olivia had finished with Dev and then the press conference, and took Mackey back to the airport, there were three missed calls from Alex. She was on her way back to the precinct, totally spent but with no time to rest. If even half of what Dev had told her was true, she had work to do, but first she detoured by Hogan Place.

Laurie seemed surprised to see her there, and Olivia had the distinct impression that she didn't know that Dev had been to see Liv that morning, and had detailed not only his own involvement in Madeline's schemes, but also Laurie's.

"Let me see if Ms. Cabot is available," Laurie said.

"If she's in her office, Laurie, I'm going in," Olivia said. "I don't much care what she's doing."

Olivia let herself into Alex's office, and Alex was just as surprised as Laurie had been to see her there.

"Olivia."

"I got your messages. I was starting to wonder if you were dead."

"You're a fine one to talk," Alex said. "I saw the press conference. Are you okay?"

"I'm exhausted," Olivia confessed, collapsing into the chair in front of Alex's desk.

"I'm sure," Alex said softly. "Is Mackey okay?"

Olivia looked up. "Do you care?"

"Liv."

"Don't, Alex."

"Okay," Alex said. She wasn't sure if it was what she'd said or how she'd said it. "Yes, I do care. I'm sorry, Olivia. I'm sorry for everything."

"You should be."

"I deserve that."

"You're damn right," Olivia said. "That and more."

Alex just nodded. She had no rebuttal.

"Things aren't right, Alex. You need to come home."

"Do you want me to?"

"No, not really," Olivia said. "I don't know what I want yet. There's a lot going on. I can't really fill you in right now, but I think it's best if you come home, at least for a while."

"I know what you're referring to," Alex said. "Kate was here earlier."

"Then you know why I can't say any more than I already have."

"You're not a safehouse, Olivia. You don't have to take me in. I can stay at a hotel. I have a security
"I don't trust them," Olivia replied.

"I don't want to come home and then get kicked out again. I can't take it."


"Can we work this out?"

"I don't know," Olivia said. "I really don't."

Alex's face fell. "I should have expected that, but it hurts anyway."

"It hurts me, too," Olivia said. "I do know one thing though."

"What's that?"

"The sharks are circling, Alex. We can't work things out until whatever is about to happen can either be prevented or dealt with. We can't work things out playing phone tag while you stay in a hotel. Come home. That's the only chance we've got."

Olivia left without saying goodbye, not sure if she'd see Alex that night or not. She'd done all she could do. The door was open-Alex would have to take it from there.

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

4:00 p.m.

Alex had, in fact, gone back home on Monday night. She had slept in the guest bed-she didn't want to, but it wasn't hard to suss out that that's what Olivia preferred, for now at least. They had talked some, but not about their problems. Instead, Olivia filled her in on what Dev had told her.

Madeline had wanted to destabilize Alex, and Dev had gone along, believing the point of the exercise was to bring Alex to her knees. When he found out that Madeline's idea of bringing Alex to heel was very different from his own, and that Madeline had cut him loose with no compensation or reward, he'd decided to take action himself.

He'd told Liv how Madeline had told him to plant child pornography on computers in David Reilly's campaign headquarters, and had later had him hide the flash drive in Alex's desk, an insurance policy of sorts, carefully planted by Laurie.

What Madeline hadn't known was that at some point Dev had switched out the drive-he'd destroyed the one she'd given him initially, and replaced it with an ExactTrak drive. It was trackable, so he had a record of every computer it had been attached to, and every keystroke recorded on it. When Madeline gave it back to him to plant in Alex's office, he had proof that it had been in her computer. Madeline had no idea, of course-she didn't make mistakes like that often, but she seriously underestimated Dev Patel. He had no intention of using that evidence-he didn't think he'd need it-but when she had him fired and cleaned out his bank account, he acted quickly. He knew her next move would be an anonymous tip that would lead to the drive being found in Alex's office—at that point, his fury toward Madeline overrode his hatred of Alex, and he had Laurie
remove the drive. He delivered it to Olivia instead, with all of the evidence she needed.

Sure enough, by Tuesday morning, when Alex hadn't been in touch with Madeline for over 24 hours, an anonymous tip to the New York field office of the FBI resulted in a search of Alex's office. Alex had called Olivia immediately, and Olivia arrived at the office as the agents were tearing everything apart.

That wasn't the only tip Madeline had phoned in, though. She also called the Sloane Jansen show, providing them with a juicy story. She said the DA was being implicated in planting child pornography in order to force her rival from the race, and that the FBI was searching the DA's office at that very moment.

When the producer who took the call said, "We have no idea if you're credible or not. This could be bullshit," Madeline said just the right thing to pique the woman's interest.

"I'm credible," she said. "I'm the DA's Chief of Staff, and I'm in her office now. My name is Laurie Medlin."

Tuesday, November 18, 2014

9:00 p.m.

By the time the Sloane Jansen show came on that night, the producers had realized that the story itself was a non-starter. The FBI and NYPD had issued statements that they had received a bogus tip and that no evidence was found to implicate the DA or her staff in any illegal or unethical conduct. Jansen, though, still believed the tipster was Laurie Medlin, and that there was much more to the story than a flash drive.

She led of the show with her usual hectoring commentary. "If you live and work in New York County, you have to be asking yourself tonight, Who in the hell did we elect to be our District Attorney? Alexandra Cabot has always been a climber, that was no secret. She used her connections to advance through the ranks at Hogan Place faster than anyone could have imagined, and now that she's your DA, she's made one mistake after another. She's prosecuting a cop for doing his job, for God's sake. And that's not even the worst of it. The FBI spent the day searching her office for a flash drive of child porn that may or may not have been used to discredit David Reilly, her rival for the office of District Attorney. The feds and the NYPD now say the tip wasn't credible, but we're not so sure. We got our own tip today, and it came from Laurie Medlin, the DA's very own Chief of Staff. Maybe there's a flash drive, maybe there isn't, but when your own assistant is calling CNN about you, something's wrong, folks. Someone's out to get Cabot, and we want to know why. Stay tuned-something's rotten in the state of Denmark, and we'll get to the bottom of it. We always do."

Alex was watching at home. She hadn't heard anything from Madeline, but now that all of this was public, things were about to come to a head. She looked over at Olivia.

"Laurie Medlin?"

"It wasn't her, Alex. She didn't phone in any tip to anyone. First of all, she knew that the flash drive wasn't in your desk-she'd taken it out of there herself on Saturday. Dev knew it wasn't there-he is the one who told her to remove it."

"Laurie Medlin?"

"It wasn't her, Alex. She didn't phone in any tip to anyone. First of all, she knew that the flash drive wasn't in your desk-she'd taken it out of there herself on Saturday. Dev knew it wasn't there-he is the one who told her to remove it."
"Madeline," Alex said. "She was the only one who thought it was still there."

"Exactly," Olivia said. "She didn't count on Dev coming to me. She knew that to bring her down he'd have to own up to his part in it, and she didn't think he'd be willing to do that. I don't think she had any idea how angry she makes people."

"Then who phoned Sloane Jansen?" Alex asked.

"I'm sure that was Madeline, too. She was going to get this out in public one way or another. She couldn't be sure the FBI would act on her tip, or how quickly, but she knew Jansen couldn't ignore it. The woman loves dirty laundry-she makes her living off of it."

The truth of that statement hit Alex like a ton of bricks. The FBI could issue all the statements they wanted, but Jansen wouldn't be satisfied. There was a story here—it didn't take an idiot to see that, even if the exact nature of the narrative was not what it appeared to be at first glance. Jansen would dig and dig until she knew what had really happened, in all its sordid glory. Dev had turned over the flash drive, and it was being analyzed. As soon as they had what they needed, there would be a warrant issued for Madeline's arrest. Dev had agreed to testify in exchange for a reduced sentence, and Laurie would be granted immunity in exchange for her resignation and her own testimony. Once those dominoes started to fall, everyone would know her secrets, would know what she had done, and what she had allowed to be done to her. They'd know she betrayed her own values, and that she'd betrayed her wife. She started to cry, furious, ragged sobs escaping her chest.

"What, Alex?" Olivia asked. "Talk to me."

"I've ruined everything," Alex said. "I've ruined my life, I've ruined my career, and worst of all I've ruined our marriage. Nothing I can ever say will make things better."

Alex was pacing now, tormented. Her anguish was so raw and consuming that it temporarily obliterated Olivia's own sense of anger and betrayal.

"I'm going to resign," Alex said. "It's the only option."

"It's not," Olivia insisted.

"I'll have to testify against Madeline. She'll say anything and everything she can to hurt me, and to hurt you. She will finish what I started, Liv. There won't be anything left."

Olivia hated to see her this way: weary, beaten down and unsure of herself. She felt like she had just this evening—a few hours at most—to halt this slide into the abyss. Alex was on the verge of doing something she might regret for the rest of her life.

"Alex."

"I can't get around this. It will never, ever go away." She was still moving back and forth across the room, glasses in her hand, gaze firmly focused on the floor.

"Baby, please don't make any decisions tonight."

Alex was in constant motion, her words acknowledging Olivia's plea without really acknowledging Olivia. "Time to mull this over is a luxury I don't have."

"This will all work out, Alex." Olivia tried again to avert the disaster she could see looming ahead in the darkness. "You've done nothing wrong. People will see that. They will understand."
Finally, the blonde stopped and turned to face her wife. "Rebecca, we left Sunnybrook Farm a long time ago."

Olivia was trained to hold her cards close to the vest, never show surprise, give away nothing. And she was good at it. There were only a handful of people in the world who'd have seen the hurt flash across her face. The one in front of her was too preoccupied to notice and too pissed off to care. She gathered herself, shrugged off the insult and tried once again to calm Alex.

"Alex, I do realize it's serious. I'm not trying to minimize this. But you have a long reputation to stand on. People will see this for what it is. You are the victim here."

She knew immediately she'd gone too far, said the one thing that she should have swallowed. Alex was just as good at hiding her shock as Olivia—maybe better—but she couldn't hide her anger now. Especially not from her wife. If observing others was Olivia's bread and butter, observing Alex was her calling in life, and what she was seeing now was fury.

She expected a raised voice. Instead, the low tone raised hairs on her neck.

"I am not a victim."

"Fine," Olivia said angrily. "You're not a victim, then. I am. You have victimized me, Alex, so you'll forgive me if I don't feel like consoling you and trying to figure out how to save your job."

It worked. The words cut to Alex's core, broke through all of her self-pity and paranoia, and reminded her exactly what she had done. Madeline was the one who had pulled the trigger, yes, but if Alex hadn't been so damn proud—if she had told Olivia at the beginning what Madeline wanted, and what that relationship had been like before—there wouldn't have been any ammunition in the gun.

In the short time Alex had been back home, they hadn't talked about it, content to let it sit between them while they dealt with the more immediate issues at hand. That had to end now.

"It was never sex, Olivia," she said abruptly. "We never had sex. It wasn't about that."

"I'm not sure if that's better or worse. Sex would make it an affair. There's a script for that, maybe I could make sense of it. I don't know what to do with this—what to say, how to act. What was missing between us that sent you to her? I had no idea that's what you wanted, Alex. You wanted me to dominate you, get rough with you?"

"No," Alex said. "Not at all. I never asked you for those things because I had come to resent Madeline for it. I felt that she took advantage of me when I wasn't in a good place and I eventually hated her for it. I couldn't separate in my mind those activities that she and I engaged in from the feelings of hatred and pain that they caused me. I never wanted to associate you with any of that."

"So, when we had sex, you weren't fulfilled? You were willing to forego something you needed and never tell me?"

"God, no," Alex insisted. "I was fulfilled. I love you. I love making love with you."

"But you needed what she had. I'm not enough."

"This, Liv. This is why I didn't tell you. I knew this is how you'd react," Alex said hopelessly. "Now this is never going to be gone. It will always be here between us, you wondering what you should've done differently, and whether I'm truly happy."
"Do you blame me?"

"I guess I don't. What can I say?"

"Make me understand what happened, Alex. Explain to me why you went back to her, if you love me. If I'm enough, then how did this happen?"

"I don't know if I can explain it."

"You have to," Olivia said quietly. "I deserve at least that."

"Let me start at the beginning," Alex said. "Years ago, when I first met her. I should have told you all of this already. I'm so sorry."

"Tell me now, Alex."

Alex sighed before she spoke. "I was seeking shelter, Olivia. All those months I was gone, not letting anyone get to know me, or letting someone see a fictional version—I came home and lived the scenario I thought everyone expected of me: Robert, the engagement, the ball-busting ADA. I reinvented myself. The funny thing is, no one really expected that of me. Everyone else assumed I'd need time to settle in, but I wasn't willing to allow myself that. I made a few tentative forays into my old life, but I'd lost the thread. People move on. You had moved on. I knew I should, too, but I didn't want to. That was the real issue. I wanted to go back to that night, to find myself lying in a regular hospital room with some inconsequential bullet wound and the clarity and courage I needed to finally tell you everything I felt for you."

"Some love story we have here," Olivia said. "You needed me then, and I didn't show up for you. I'm so sorry, Alex."

"It's not your fault. Once I realized that wasn't me, that it couldn't be me, I felt lost. I couldn't seem to pick up where I'd left off—I wasn't the same person you and Elliot had been talking to in the bar that night, but I wasn't doing very well at reinventing myself either. I saw you at that crime scene when Jack asked me to pick up Greylek's cases, and it threw me for a loop. I met Madeline that night at some charity dinner. We talked, but just a little. And I'll be damned if she wasn't flirting with me. Everything I hadn't felt for Robert, it was all there in a rush, Liv. It was completely unexpected. She was completely unexpected. It was like she'd known me forever—the real me, not the public me. I was so desperate for a connection, to belong to someone, that I didn't realize it was a con."

"A con?" Olivia had been quiet up to this point, taking it all in. She was surprised by so much of what she was hearing. Their timing had always been bad—to know that seeing her at a crime scene had knocked Alex so far sideways on the very day she met Madeline was another of their near-misses, another "if only" scenario in their shared history.

"Yes," Alex said. "She conned me, and I let her. I thought she was offering me a shelter but it turned out to be a prison. She was like an alchemist, trying to transform me, turning me into something I didn't recognize, but it wasn't real."

"She expected nothing from me—no decisions, no opinions...no emotion, to be honest. Of course, the fact that I contributed nothing meant I gave up everything. You, Olivia, you're so sweet, so soft, so damn kind, and that's what I need from you. But then—and sometimes now, even—I don't feel I deserve it. I don't feel capable of holding up my end of the bargain. You and I have a give-and-take. While you'd think that all I did with her was give, all I really did was take. I was so passive. I wanted to belong to someone, and that's the only way I was capable of doing that. I'd never felt it
with Robert. Ironically, I had to give up all of my control to get any back. What I eventually realized was that I didn't really want to belong to someone. I wanted to belong with someone, and that was you. All she did, in the end, was focus all of my need and longing, and give me an outlet for it until I realized that what I needed—what I was really longing for—was you, Liv. I've said before that I couldn't come back to you because I wasn't myself. If you were in love with me—and I know now that you were—then you fell in love with an Alex Cabot who was confident and decisive, who was fearless. Who, for lack of a better term, had her shit together. I wasn't her, and I didn't know if I ever would be again. I was afraid and confused and I needed things I'd never needed before. Things I didn't even understand. It's like that was my penance, or something. I had to walk through that to get back to you.

"But you did get back to me, Alex. You have me now. I'm right here. Why did you go back to her? Why do you keep living your life like you're some kind of refugee?"

"I don't know. The pressure I was under, seeing her again...she stoked a fire that I thought I'd managed to extinguish. When the stress mounted, and things between us became so hard here at home, I was weak. That's all I can say. I thought it would make me feel better, and it didn't. But by then it was too late."

"But she was blackmailing you, Alex. Everything Dev told me...she didn't leave you any choice. Why didn't you let me help you?"

"I suppose she was," Alex admitted. "But I won't make excuses, Olivia. I thought I could handle it myself. I realize now that if I'd been honest with you, that would have taken her power away. I could have lived with anything except losing you, and then I did the very thing I couldn't bear."

"Why didn't you ever tell me about the BDSM, Alex?"

"I was afraid it would repulse you, Liv. You see the worst things every day, and I was afraid that you would be so turned off that you'd leave me," Alex said. "Olivia, before I met you, I didn't believe in redemption. I thought I was lost forever because of the mistakes I'd made in my life. But then I found my way back to you, and you loved me so truly and so deeply, that I never wanted to be without that love again."

"Alex," Olivia began. "I'm not a religious person. You know that. You are the only faith I have, and the only thing I've ever believed in. I love you unconditionally and I accept you as you are. I wouldn't have judged you for what you wanted to needed. I would have tried my best to make you happy and give you everything I could."

"But what I needed didn't even make sense to me. I couldn't explain it to you."

"That's the difference between you and me, Al. I don't question emotions. I don't need to know why you feel some certain way, and I don't need your feelings to be logical or productive. I just need to know what they are, so I can love you."

"Can we make this work?"

"I don't know for sure," Olivia answered. "I'm being honest with you. I'm very hurt, but I think we have to try. A few days ago I didn't want to try—I didn't want to work it out. But we worked too hard and waited too long to get where we are. I can't tell you it will be easy, but I will give it everything I've got, if you promise you will, too."

"It was always you in my head, Liv. Always, every minute. It was never her."
"I didn't want to be in your head Alex. I wanted to be in your heart, in your arms, in your bed."

"Wanted?" Alex asked.

"Wanted. Still want," Olivia clarified. "I still love you, Alex. I never stopped. I never will. Don't you know I'd do anything for you? Loving you has been like finally feeling the sun after a lifetime spent in the shade. Once you've felt that warmth on your skin, you can't live without it. I can't go back to a life without you, Alex Cabot. I'll do whatever you need me to do. If you want her-if that's what you need-I'll learn to live with it. If it's something I can give you, I'll do it."

"I don't want her," Alex said. "I don't know what I thought she could do for me, but I think there's an empty space inside of me and I thought she had made it, and she was the only one who could fill it. I was too ashamed or embarrassed to tell you. I wanted to blame her so I wouldn't have to admit to myself that something was wrong. I realize now that she didn't create it and she can't fill it. You can't even fill it, Liv. Only I can."

"I know that empty space, baby. We all have one."

"Please don't leave me, Olivia. I'll do anything I can to make this better. It isn't her I want. It's you. I'll spend the rest of my life working for your forgiveness."

"It's too late," Olivia said.

Alex looked at her, stricken. "What do you mean?"

"I've already forgiven you, Alex."

"How can you forgive me when I can't forgive myself?" Alex asked.

"That is unconditional love. I've made mistakes too. I've done things that drove you away, and I'm sorry for that. We have work to do, but I'm willing to do it. I think we can come out stronger on the other side."

"I don't deserve you, Liv."

Olivia moved into Alex's space and embraced her tightly. "You do deserve me, Alex Cabot, and you deserve love and happiness. You deserve my forgiveness, but even more than that, baby, you deserve your own. I love you, and I will tell you that every day. I will tell you so softly, in a whisper, while my arms are around you tight and you can't run away from me, how very perfect you are for me. And I will tell you that the things you run from, the things you try so hard to hide...that they're not scary at all. That they are, in fact, the very best things about you, and they are what makes you so wonderful."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, Alex. I'll stop running if you'll stop hiding. I want to make this work. I'm not scared, not one little bit. We can do this."

"I'm done hiding, Liv. I'm here, and I love you."

Olivia kissed her softly and then tightened her embrace, whispering softly in her ear.

"I love you, Alex. Welcome home."
"And if these trouble should vanish like rain at midday, well I've no doubt there'll be more.

And we can't run and we can't cheat, 'cause baby when we meet what we're afraid of,

We find out what we're made of."

-Everything But The Girl

"We Walk the Same Line"
Chapter 49

"And he said, 'I tell thee, Peter, the cock shall not crow this day, before that thou shalt thrice deny that thou knowest me.'" Luke 22:34

Being honest with Olivia-finally, fully honest—had been the most freeing thing Alex could have imagined. She'd stayed out of the office all week, primarily to avoid the media. Sloane Jansen's rumor-mongering had chummed the water and Alex knew she wouldn't get anything done at Hogan Place. Instead, she'd spent some time talking with her Uncle Bill, telling him what was going on and asking for his forgiveness, too.

"You don't have to ask me for a thing, Ace. You're a human being, and human beings sometimes make choices they wish they hadn't made."

"I'm sorry if any of this will embarrass you," she said sadly.

"You've never embarrassed me," he assured her. "You haven't, and you won't. You can't, really. I'm as proud of you as I've ever been, Alex. You don't run from your problems."

"Well, I think I do," she said. "I think that's what caused this whole thing."

"I'm not here to judge you. God knows you do enough of that yourself. I love you, Ace. I want you to be happy. I love Olivia, too, but if you two aren't happy together, then I understand that."

"No, it's not that," Alex insisted. "We can be happy. We want to be, and we're going to try to get through this. There were lots of things in my past that I thought I had dealt with, and I hadn't. All the cards are on the table now, though. My future can finally begin."

He raised his glass to her. "To your future, Ace," he offered, then amended his toast. "To a happy future. You've earned it."

She also found time to persuade Ellen to come back to the office. *On a limited basis,* Ellen had emphasized. *Until you can find someone else.*

*Someone I can trust,* Alex said.

*Yes, someone you can trust,* Ellen agreed. *Just don't forget to trust yourself, Ms. Cabot. That's the first step.*

Friday, November 21, 2014

11:00 a.m.

Madeline's assistant looked up at the woman standing in front of her desk. Ms. Taylor didn't have any meetings scheduled, and it was never pleasant to tell her about any sort of surprise.

"Do you have an appointment?"
"I do not," Alex said. "I need to see her anyway."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," the young woman said. "She's all booked up."

"Tell her it's Alex Cabot. She'll see me." Her voice was firm and her intent was clear-she was seeing Ms. Taylor, and she wasn't leaving until she did. Olivia had offered to come with her, but Alex had declined. She felt stronger than she had in quite a while, and this was something she had to do. It wouldn't change anything in the long run-the die was cast, after all-but it was important to Alex that she fight her own battle this time.

The secretary looked at her, recognition dawning in her eyes. She picked up her phone and called her boss. Alex could only hear one side of the conversation.

"Someone is here to see you...no, you don't have any appointments, but I think this is important...yes, right now...but Ms. Taylor, it's the District Attorney."

Less than a minute later, Alex was being ushered into Madeline's inner sanctum. She'd never been in Madeline's office, not even when they'd been involved years earlier; she observed the space for a moment while Madeline eyed her coolly, an expression on her face that could either be mild amusement or fury building to a crescendo. The art on the walls was similarly inscrutable: large canvases, almost uniformly monochromatic, were the only real color in the room. The red expanse of a Rothko demanded attention in a landscape of steel and smoked-glass furniture, all grays and blacks, with clean lines and no flourishes. It was, oddly enough, completely unlike Madeline's Upper East Side apartment, with its formal French Provincial aesthetic, fussy furniture and soft palette-with one exception: While the art was very different from that in the apartment, Alex had no doubt it was also original, and obscenely expensive.

While Alex took in her surroundings, Madeline took in Alex, watching her very carefully, as she always did.

"This is a pleasant surprise," she finally said.

"I know you hate surprises," Alex said. "And it's certainly not intended to be pleasant."

"Yet it is," Madeline corrected. "I'm always happy to see you, darling. Or are you here on some official business, Madame District Attorney?"

"While it would give me great pleasure to put you behind bars, I'm afraid your reprehensible nature won't be enough to get a conviction."

"I'm entitled to a jury of my peers, anyway, and we both know such a thing doesn't exist. Only one person is up to that task." Madeline looked pointedly up and down Alex's body, and then locked eyes with her. "Forgive my manners, Alexandra. Please sit down."

"I won't be here long."

"Nonetheless..." Madeline trailed off, her right hand extended, gesturing toward one of the two Barcelona chairs in front of her desk. When Alex hesitated, she continued. "Don't repay my inadvertently delayed hospitality with willful rudeness, Alexandra. No one appreciates insolence."

Alex sat down, almost without meaning to. Madeline didn't make requests, really. She gave elegantly phrased orders, and was accustomed to having them obeyed. Her tone brooked no discussion, and someone like Alex, who'd been raised to be gracious and polite in any situation, was programmed to follow those commands, observing social niceties as unconsciously as she was adhered to the laws of physics or gravity.
Madeline put her in a trance—always had. Alex had no idea why, or how, but she was prepared for it today. She broke the nascent spell by placing her left thumb on the underside of her wedding ring—a tiny gesture, imperceptible to someone who was focused on her face and her overall body language. It was enough, though. It slowed her pulse, reminded her to breathe—reminded her of Olivia. Alex's life was a series of these minute gestures: gripping her thumb tightly between her fingers to keep from crying—a detail Olivia had spotted on that trip to Baltimore; smoothing her skirt as she rose to question a witness or deliver a summation; a gentle tap of her watchband to focus herself in a meeting or interview. They were a means of coping, a method to find control when it seemed well and truly lost, a talisman against fear or failure. They were quirks, possibly even superstitions—but they worked. She was ready to face her demons, and that was something Madeline hadn't counted on.

"I'm glad to see you've come to your senses, darling. You've forced my hand a bit the past few days, and I've had to deploy some measures I didn't enjoy."

"Involving Sloane Jansen was a nice touch," Alex said.

"I'd have preferred not to," Madeline claimed. "You left me no choice. I hope we're past that unpleasantness, though."

"We are past it," Alex said. "Though not in the way you might imagine. I've come here to tell you that I won't be complying with your ridiculous demands. Our recent encounters were a mistake that I have decided not to continue. My life has been infinitely better since our relationship ended, and I have neither the need nor the desire to return to that darkness."

"Darkness?" Madeline seemed genuinely puzzled.

"I can't do it again, Madeline. I can't, and I won't."

"Very well. I'm not happy to hear that, of course, but I'm prepared for any contingency."

"Just let it go," Alex implored. "For your own good."

"My own good?" Madeline laughed. "You mean Sergeant Benson's own good, don't you?"

"No, I don't. You're making these veiled threats because you don't have a prayer of doing anything to harm her career. I've made sure of it. She's bulletproof. You'd have had better luck coming after me."

"I never pictured you as the fierce protector, Alexandra. This is a new side of you. I think your bravado is ill-advised, but I am always happy to discover new things about you."

"You never saw this side of me because when we were together, I had nothing worth protecting." It was true—she hadn't even deemed herself worthy of protection then. She still wasn't sure she deserved it, but she knew Olivia did. "I won't let you ruin my life, Madeline. This ends now."

"You're not leaving me with a lot of options, darling."

"There is one option," Alex said. "It's the simplest thing in the world to do. Just move on. It isn't worth it. I'm not worth it."

"I can't do that. Steps were taken, Alexandra. I've risked so much to get you back. I believe you belong with me…"

"You believe I belong to you," Alex said.
"Is there a difference?"

Alex sighed. "The difference is so profound I can't even explain it."

"You have no idea how high the stakes are, or what cards I'm holding. My hand is too good to simply fold and walk away. I will, however, respect your wishes by leaving Sergeant Benson out of this. She seems predisposed to self-sabotage anyway—I'll leave her to her own devices."

"Thank you."

"You won't be as lucky, I'm afraid."

"I figured as much," Alex said. "You'll do what you have to do. We all will."

"You're very sanguine about this, darling, which tells me you have no idea what is about to happen. I will tear your world apart. You'll be electoral poison. The media will be unrelenting. Your vanquished opponent will be seeking revenge, and he'll be armed with all the evidence he needs to accelerate your undoing…"

Alex interrupted her. "I didn't do anything, and you know it, Madeline. You planted those files on Reilly's computers, or you had someone do it for you. I had nothing to do with it."

"That won't matter," Madeline said flatly. "I've told you all that before, Alexandra. It will appear that you broke numerous state and federal laws in order to discredit a man in the worst possible way, ruining his life for your own selfish purposes. You'll never be a prosecutor again. And your wife? She won't want anything to do with you."

"You don't know her," Alex said. "I've told her everything, and she is standing by me."

"For now, perhaps. Don't be fooled. She's a runner, darling, and she's spent her whole life looking for a way out. She's a self-righteous do-gooder who will flee your sinking ship so fast it will make your head spin. How do you think a sex crimes detective will feel about staying married to someone who planted child pornography simply to win an election? She'll never trust you again. In fact, no one will ever trust you again. You will have no hope of recovery, personally, professionally or politically."

Alex had heard all she needed to hear.

"I'm done, Madeline. And so are you. You just don't know it yet."

Alex walked out of the office, not giving Madeline a chance to reply, closing the door behind her. She met two men in the outer office—they had taken over the space and asked Madeline's frightened assistant to leave. She took off her suit jacket, and one of the men reached up under the tail of her blouse to remove the wire she was wearing there.

"Did you get what you needed?" Alex asked them.

"I think we had more than enough already," he assured her. "This is just insurance in case Mr. Patel changes his mind about testifying."

"It's good insurance, though," his partner smiled. "You did a great job. Wanna stay around and watch all this?"

"No, I don't think so," Alex said. "I've got better things to do."
She slipped her jacket back on and headed toward the door that led into the hallway, planning to go have lunch with Olivia and fill her in. Neither of them would be involved in this case any further, unless they were called to testify. This was one prosecution from which Alex would have been glad to recuse herself. She heard the two men behind her as they loudly knocked on Madeline's door, opening it and entering without waiting for the occupant's permission.

"Madeline Taylor?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Special Agent Christian Lewis, this is my partner Jason Rogers. You are under arrest for violating Title 18, Section 2252, relating to the possession and distribution of child pornography. You have the right to remain silent..."
Author's Note: This has been a long slog—much longer than I ever imagined. Thank you for reading, reviewing and encouraging me throughout the process. I almost gave up more times than I can count. This only got finished because one person believed I could do it and, more importantly, believed I should. This is for her.

"I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do.
My gift is my song and this one's for you...
And you can tell everybody this is your song."

-50-

Friday, March 6, 2015

4:00 p.m.

"How are you, Alex?"

Alex laughed. "If I went to Mars and came back," she joked, "would that still be your first question?"

"Probably," Dr. Jackson said, laughing along with her.

"Why is that?"

"Because that's all I care about, Alex. Your well-being is my only concern. You're the only dog I have in this fight, so to speak."

"I owe you an apology," Alex said.

"No, you don't," Jackson said. "You don't owe me anything."

"I walked out of here in a huff when what you said hit a little too close to the truth, I avoided your calls," Alex recounted. "I behaved like a spoiled brat."

"You came back when you needed to. That's all that matters in the end. Which brings me back to my initial question. How are you?"

"I'm good," Alex said. "I'm really good, actually."

"That's wonderful. I'm happy to hear it. Are you happy?"

"I am," Alex confirmed. "Not 100% of the time, but in general, yes. I'm very happy."

"And Olivia?"

"She's good," Alex said. "Things unraveled, and for a while I didn't think we'd make it. There was always still the slenderest of threads tying us together, though, and when I wanted to give up, she wouldn't let me. We are in counseling together now."

"How's that going?"
"Hard," Alex laughed. "It's hard as hell."

"That's a good sign," Jackson said. "It means you're doing the hard work and digging in."

"We are. We've only had a few sessions, but we're committed to it."

"That's all you can do, you know."

"I realize that now. No matter how much we love each other, it won't ever be perfect. It can't be."

"Exactly," Jackson agreed. "Tell me, Alex. Do you think you're a good person now?"

"You mean have I taken Olivia down off of that pedestal? Yeah, I have. I see now that we are both flawed people who are better together than we are apart."

"That sounds like quite a breakthrough. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you," Alex said. "You had a lot to do with that."

"You did all the work."

"I realized a few things. I spent so long putting Liv on that pedestal that I couldn't allow myself to get up there with her. That's no kind of relationship. With Madeline, on the other hand—I had believed we were equals, but we weren't. At least, she didn't see it that way. The BDSM couldn't work for us because she didn't see me as her equal, not in the bedroom and certainly not outside of it. I've spent too many years expending my energy in the wrong places."

"Is that part of your life over?"

"It is," Alex said, then blushed ever so slightly. "Well, I won't say that Olivia and I aren't willing to explore a power exchange now and again, but it's coming from a place of love and respect. That's how it should be. Olivia loves me, and I know now that Madeline never did."

"Speaking of Madeline, I know you had to testify against her in court. I was very concerned for you."

"More than any other messages you left me, that's when I felt worst about not calling you back. I knew you were concerned, but I just wasn't in a place to spend any more time thinking about it than I already was."

"I understand, Alex. You don't owe me an explanation. I knew it must have been exceedingly difficult for you to go through that."

"It was hell," Alex said. "The prosecutor had her dead to rights on charges of trafficking child porn. It was the oddest thing, really. That's not what she was really doing, of course, but it was a means to an end, and it came back to bite her in the ass. She wasn't going down easy, though."

"She aired a lot of dirty laundry. How did you handle that?"

"I wanted to resign, to be honest. Olivia talked me out of it. She was a rock for me, when she had every right to cast me to the winds. She said America loves a second act, and she was right. In the end, I was honest and it turned out okay. I won't lie—it was humiliating. Having my uncle hear all of that—it was almost too much. He never said one word, though. He's been supportive the whole way."

"And you're still the District Attorney, obviously."
"For now, anyway," Alex laughed. "I don't know if I'll run again. I haven't decided. Part of me can't help but wonder if I would have won were it not for Madeline's interference, knocking Reilly out of the race, but I can't go back in time and find that out. I'll give it a lot of thought next time, and if I want to, I will, and people will either vote for me or they won't. I can't control that."

"For a long time, you've seemed haunted, Alex. I wonder now if the ghost that was haunting you was Madeline?"

"Yes and no. The ghost wasn't her, exactly, or even that relationship. It was the part of me that I gave up to be with her, years ago and again last year. It's not haunting me anymore."

"I'm very glad to hear it. What you've done is amazingly courageous, you know. You could have refused to testify-she probably would have gone to jail anyway. You could have denied the stories she was telling, but you didn't. You owned it, and you let people form their own opinions."

"How other people see me is none of my business, right?"

"Exactly," Jackson smiled.

"I wavered a bit. When I went up to testify, I walked past her at the defense table and she spoke to me, which shook me a bit."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Darling, do what you came here to do.'"

"Isn't that what Jesus said to Judas?"

Alex smiled. "I didn't know you were a Biblical scholar, Dr. Jackson."

"Years of Catholic school," the doctor answered.

"You're right, of course," Alex said. "That's also what I said to Madeline the night of our first encounter last September, the first night I allowed her to discipline me again. Her saying that in court wasn't a coincidence. She forgets nothing."

"And did you respond to her?"

"I didn't. I said all that I needed to say on the witness stand. I was done with her. If that was a betrayal, I was happy to play Judas that day."

"Those who don't know the value of loyalty can never appreciate the cost of betrayal," Jackson quoted. "Good for you. Will she be in jail for long?"

"Oh, probably not. There are already appeals pending, but I don't care. I'll deal with it as it comes. What Madeline did was unforgivable-not just what she did to me, but what she did to everyone. She didn't care who she had to run over."

"Have you given any thought to why she went to so much trouble?"

"My initial instinct was that she planned to use me-to use my position somehow-but that wasn't it. I was the one who got away, I think. Being able to exert power over a powerful person was just too tempting for her."

"Do you feel powerful?"
"I don't know that I'd say that, exactly. I feel strong, though. Finally."

"You are strong, Alex. Just remember-you being strong doesn't mean you're invincible."

"I won't forget that," she promised. "You had asked me once if I'd ever been evaluated for PTSD, and I have to admit I laughed it off."

"You did," Jackson recalled.

"It seemed absurd. That's for soldiers and cops, people who face danger every day."

"It's also for victims of violent crime, Alex, especially when the trauma of that experience plays out over several years."

"I know that now," Alex said. "For a long time, I didn't want to admit I was a victim of anything."

"And have you changed your feelings about that?"

"I have. I think that's part of feeling strong. I thought admitting I'd been victimized would make me weak, but denying it has caused me more pain than I could have imagined. I've dealt with it haltingly over the years, in fits and starts, but when the couples therapist asked about it, it reminded me of the conversation you and I had so long ago, and I realized that not acknowledging the issue is making it that much harder to overcome."

"That's a big deal, Alex."

"It is," Alex said. "I think I'm ready to come out of the dark."

"Good," Jackson said. "You deserve that."

"Thank you for seeing me today, so long after I vanished."

"It's my pleasure. Would you like to make another appointment?"

"No, not right now, but soon," Alex said. "I want to do some more work together with Olivia, and then I think I'll be ready to spend some more time on me."

"The door is open," Jackson said. "I'm here anytime."

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**Friday, March 6, 2015**

6:00 p.m.

Olivia walked in the door at six on the dot. Making-and keeping-regular dates was just a small part of their commitment to their marriage, but it was a part that Alex took particular pleasure in. Knowing that what she considered her darkest secret, and her worst mistake, was out in the open, and that Olivia still loved her-had been very liberating. She had a new lease on life, almost. They still had problems, and their jobs were still demanding, but they made plans and kept them as often as humanly possible, and it was making a huge difference for both of them.

They planned to have dinner and see a movie tonight, but when Olivia got home she had something on her mind other than food. She walked in and kissed Alex deeply before even saying hello.
Every time they kissed, Alex was reminded how close she'd come to blowing it all, and how happy she was that she hadn't. After a moment, they came up for air.

"Welcome home, Sergeant."

"I've missed you, honey."

"Oh, I missed you, too."

"Show me," Liv said.

"Mmm, I'd be happy to," Alex said. They wasted no time lighting candles or slipping between the sheets. Their hunger was stoked and they consumed one another greedily and with abandon. Alex's hands were everywhere, running beneath Olivia's shirt, unfastening her bra and roughly grasping at her breasts as they continued kissing. Olivia's own hands dropped to Alex's ass and pulled their bodies together tightly, eliciting a moan as the friction of the embrace stimulated Alex's already-swollen clit.

Olivia sighed heavily when Alex ceased her explorations but was relieved when those strong hands slipped down to her waist and undid her belt and unbuttoned her pants. In just a second, Olivia felt the palm of Alex's hand against her stomach, then moving downward with purpose. Alex slipped inside Olivia's panties and into her folds.

"Jesus, you're wet," she said, breaking their kiss. She pulled her hand up between their lips and licked her fingers off as Olivia looked on with desire that was increasing by the second.

"Fuck me, Alex," she whispered. "Please."

"Yes, ma'am," Alex said. Her hand retraced the same path and was inside Olivia just a second or two later. She easily inserted three fingers and curled them, making contact with the bundle of nerves she found there. Olivia shuddered. The heel of Alex's hand was rocking back and forth against Olivia's clit as she stroked in and out of the hot, wet cunt. She was biting Olivia's lip between kisses and using her left hand to hold their bodies close together, making sure that she was getting the maximum effect from every stroke of her fingers, pumping in and out, faster and faster, as Olivia begged.

"Come for me, baby," Alex urged. "Give this to me."

Olivia complied, coming hard and fast, the contractions of her muscles around Alex's hand providing a welcome release for both of them.

Moments later, they were on the couch, clothes stripped and discarded on the floor as Olivia eagerly lapped up Alex's honey, using her tongue to tease and stroke Alex's clit while she filled her wife, fucking her with slow deep strokes. Alex lasted as long as she could; Olivia had brought her so quickly to the edge, and she wanted to make it last, clinging to that precipice until letting go was all she could do. The sense of peace and euphoria that flooded her body as she reached orgasm was worth the wait, and as the waves subsided, they curled up together and pulled a blanket up.

After a few moments, cuddled close together, Alex spoke.

"Olivia?"

Olivia was wrapped around her wife from behind, her own mouth next to Alex's ear, and she whispered back. "Let me guess," she laughed. "You're hungry."
"No," Alex said. "Well, yes." She laughed too. "But that's not what I was going to say."

"What is it, honey?"

"I love you."

"I love you too, Alex. More every day." She paused a moment. "That's why I left SVU."

Alex sat up suddenly and looked down at her wife's face.

"You what?" That wasn't a job for Olivia—it was who she was, not what she did. "You're kidding."

"I'm not."

"I don't understand."

"I'm going back to computer crimes. I don't need to worry you anymore. When I was talking to Bauer last year, I realized how much I had enjoyed that. More and more crime, even crime involving special victims, has a cyber component. I'll still be putting bad guys away, I just won't have to be out on the street all the time to do it. I think it will be good for me, and for you. Less conflict of interest."

"Don't do this for me, baby."

"You're not happy?"

"Oh, no," Alex said. "I'm happy if you're happy. But I don't want you to give up what you love just to save me a little worry."

"I'm doing it for me, too, and for us. I'm excited about it, Alex. I've been thinking about it for a long time. Ironically, my talks with Chael Bauer started the wheels turning."

"You didn't say anything."

"I didn't want you to try to talk me out of it," she said. "I was pretty sure. And I'm happy about it. When you run for office again, maybe it'll be a little easier if I'm not always seen as a conflict of interest."

"If I run…" Alex corrected her.

"When," Olivia laughed. "It'll happen, but we can cross that bridge when we come to it."

"Always more bridges to cross," Alex said.

"Always more," Liv agreed.

"What happens if we get to a river that has no bridge?" Alex asked.

"We do what we've always done," Liv said confidently. "We stop and build one."

# # #

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