Alex has been back from witness protection for a few months and seems to have forgotten the friends she left behind. But when Robert turns violent, she turns to the only friends she knows who can help her get her life back together. Will eventually become A/O romance.

Rape of a main character in the first chapter, then it's over. Other references to sexual violence as part of cases/investigations. Canon-ish through about Season 9, with references to Conviction.

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Alex smiled to herself as she hung up the phone and began gathering up the case files on her desk. She'd been planning on staying late, like she usually did, to go over Monday's court appearances one more time, but Robert had called, explaining that he'd be going to a last-minute dinner meeting and would be home late.

With a little luck, I can have a nice, relaxing evening and be asleep before he gets back, she thought, packing up her attaché bag. The case could wait. She needed a break.

"Calling it a night already, Alex?" Jim Steele asked as she turned off the light in her office and locked the door. "I don't think I've ever seen you leave before 9, even on a Friday. Got some wedding planning to do?"

Alex smiled. "Nope, not tonight. There's a glass of wine with my name on it at home, and after the way court went today, I've just decided to give myself a night off for once."

"Well, have a good weekend. I'll see you on Monday to go over the Stahl case."

"Yeah, that's what I'll be working on this weekend. See you Monday. Have a good weekend, Jim."

When Alex turned the key in the lock to the penthouse she was relieved to find the lights out and Robert's coat wasn't hanging at the door. She hung up her coat and her bag at the entrance, and slipped off her heels. There would still be time to put them in the closet before Robert got home, after her bath.

Since she'd gotten engaged, she rarely had time to herself. Work was work, and since she was still new in her job as Bureau Chief, she justified her long hours to Robert by explaining that she had to make up for the three years she'd lost in Witness Protection. She still wanted to be District Attorney someday, so she had to prove herself all over again. And scumbags never sleep, she told him, so neither did she.

And of course, when she did get home, there was always Robert.

Alex went into the master bathroom and started running the bath, throwing in a handful of lavender bath salts and some bubble bath. She took her robe off the hook and brought it into her walk-in closet, slipping off her suit and hanging it up before she put on the robe. Crouching in the back corner, she pulled out a shoebox from the middle of the pile, smiling as she pulled out the paperback with the Georgia O'Keefe painting on the cover and the small waterproof vibrator from their hiding place and slipped them into her pocket before sliding the box back into place. Good thing Robert wasn't interested in her shoe collection, she thought.

She took a deep breath and went to the kitchen, pouring herself a generous glass of Chateauneuf de Pape, a red Bordeaux, from the open bottle in the wine fridge, and took a sip, relaxing almost instantly. She checked the batteries in the vibrator to make sure they still worked.

It's funny, she thought, as she plugged in her cellphone next to the bed and slipped her 2.5 carat ring onto the jewellery tray on the night stand. She never wore it in the tub so it wouldn't accidentally go down the drain. I don't think I ever felt this alone in Wisconsin.

In the bathroom, she turned off the faucet and tested the water temperature, hung her bathrobe over the heater and took her guilty pleasures out of the pocket and put them on the shelf next to the
bathtub. She sighed audibly as she slipped into the hot water, and reached over to turn on a CD of classical music.

Alex sat for a few minutes with her eyes closed, feeling the tension leave her body as the jets worked on the muscles in her back and she made a conscious effort to forget about work and about Robert.

When she finally felt relaxed, Alex reached over for the paperback and flipped it open to one of the more erotic passages. She'd read the romantic chapters another time. Tonight, she wanted to enjoy the smut.

By the time her wine was almost gone, she felt flushed, and she thought she might be sufficiently relaxed to take care of business. Putting down her glass of wine, she slipped one hand between her legs, running one finger over her clit and shuddering. It had been far too long. She dragged her fingers between her labia and began sliding her index finger in and out rhythmically, rubbing her thumb over her most sensitive part. She let the book fall to the floor next to the bathtub, breathing deeply and reaching up with her other hand to grab her breast and run her fingers around her nipples, arching her back away from the water jets.

When she felt like she was close, she stopped moving her thumb and left her fingers inside, picking up the book again and flipping to her next favorite passage. She had all night, and she wanted to enjoy it.

The next time she felt her muscles twitching around her fingers, she put down the book and reached for the vibrator, turned it on the lowest setting, and ran it across her nipples, down her flat stomach, and up each of her thighs. She made contact tentatively, applying light pressure to her clit before pulling it away, teasing herself until she was almost there.

Her heart stopped when she heard him growl. "That is so hot."

Before she could react, he pulled her up out of the tub and pressed her hand to his erection, his arm wrapped tightly across her back as his hand squeezed her ass.

"Robert, no..." Alex's eyes opened wide, and she felt tears stinging the corners of her eyes. How long had he been there, watching her touch herself? She cringed at the humiliation and felt her cheeks flush red. The bubbles were almost gone, and she'd only had sex with him under the covers in a dark bedroom. Here, she was completely exposed.

"I see you missed me tonight. I wish you would have waited for me though. Am I not enough for you? Do you need more?" His eyes darkened as he pulled her wet body closer, pushing his mouth onto hers and forcing her lips apart with his tongue. She could smell the scotch on his breath.

"Robert, please, can you give me a minute to put my robe on?"

Alex tried to push away, and the vibrator dropped from her hand onto the floor. Robert took his mouth off of hers but didn't move his face back as he studied her face and smiled. He looked down at the object that had crashed to the floor, then to the book she had placed face down to hold her spot.

"Oh sweetie, you won't need a robe for what we're going to do."

"Robert, I... not tonight, okay? I had a rough day at work and I'm really not in the mood..."

"Well it certainly looks like you're in the mood. And I'm certainly much better for you than your battery operated friend and your porn."

His voice turned to a growl again as he emphasised the last word.
"Robert, I just wanted a nice, relaxing evening to myself. This has nothing to do with you, okay? Please, just let me go."

Robert reached down and picked up the vibrator and the paperback, grinning slightly as he looked into his fiancée's eyes.

"Oh, don't you worry, sweetie. We'll still use your toys. You're in for one hell of a night."

"Robert, stop. I DO NOT want to have sex with you right now. Please let me go. You don't have to do this."

"Baby, by the time I'm done, you'll be begging for more. Now let's go to bed."

She struggled against him as he walked her backwards to the bed, laid her down, and straddled her hips. He took off his tie, and she whimpered as he took her wrists and tied them to the headboard.

"Now you won't be able to get away so easy," he growled, winking at her as he took off his suit jacket and folded it across the back of a chair.

Alex felt the knot in her stomach tighten as she realised what was going to happen. Not to me. This can't happen to me. She couldn't get the tie loose. And even if she could, where was she going to go? She took a breath. She could talk murders into taking a deal with hardly any evidence. She could certainly convince her reasonably intelligent fiancé that forcing her was not a good idea.

She put on her best prosecutor voice, the one that made defense attorneys shake in their boots and defendants cut off their own balls and present them to her with bows from the witness stand.

"Robert, you realize that I used to prosecute sex crimes and rapists, right? Believe me when I say you do not want to do this. Please untie me and we can talk about this later." She tried to hide the desperation in her voice, but she could feel herself starting to shake. Robert was naked and climbing on top of her.

"Alexandra, you are so hot right now. I came home to my beautiful fiancée, aroused and ready for me to take her any way I want to, all night long." He pulled back and laid next to her, dragging thick, hard fingers up and down her body, along her thighs and up to her breasts. "Besides, you ever let me see you like this when we make love. Tonight, you're all mine. And we're going to start by you introducing me to your friend."

He grabbed the vibrator off the nightstand, and Alex made one last-ditch effort to cross her legs at the ankles, trying to keep them together and willing herself not to cry.

Robert straddled her hips again, naked this time, and put his hands on her breasts, squeezing them as he leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Open your eyes, baby, and watch me make love to you."

"It isn't making love if you're forcing me, Robert," she choked out.

He licked each of her nipples and her navel, before sliding down until his face was between her legs. Taking one ankle in each hand, he unwrapped her legs and forced them apart.

"Trust me, Alexandra, I don't think I'll have to force you to do this. Although I've never understood why you've never wanted me to do this for you. I thought women loved this. And you certainly love reading about it. When I found that one the last time I never understood why a beautiful, classy woman like you would read this smut." He lowered his voice to a growl. "Although it is every man's dream for his trophy wife to be a whore in bed."
Alex flushed red and tears streamed down her cheeks. They'd had a huge fight one night when Alex had left out one of her books. Robert had thought it was a trashy romance novel and had told her in no uncertain terms that he wouldn't tolerate her reading such low-brow fiction and leaving it around for their friends in high places to see when they came over. No matter that she'd left it in her nightstand drawer and she'd never had guests in the bedroom.

She'd retorted that after spending all day going toe to toe with psychopaths and murders, she thought she was entitled to a little romance novel as a guilty pleasure, an escape. She was relieved when she'd realized that he hadn't figure out what the book really was. If he was that upset by the idea of her reading a trashy romance novel, she couldn't imagine what he'd do if he'd figured out what she had been reading. That was when she started hiding her more embarrassing books with her rarely-used vibrator in an old shoebox in the back of her closet.

He grabbed the vibrator off the nightstand and put it on a medium setting, and he felt Alex's body tighten under his. She twisted from side to side, freeing one leg and kicking him in the shoulder, before he grabbed her thighs and forced them apart, holding her pelvis down.

"Relax, Alexandra. Relax."

He pressed the vibrator to her clit and thrust two fingers into her, his forearm pushing her thigh back into the bed. She held her breath as he pumped in and out of her, feeling her get tighter around him.

"Too much," she gasped at the direct stimulation, her breathing getting more and more shallow as the pressure built in her gut. She used it so rarely that she hardly ever got past the the second setting, and she never applied it directly. I can't let him do this to me. I can't let him have the satisfaction of giving me an orgasm while he's raping me.

She willed herself to stop being aroused. Think, Alex. Think of something, anything - the least sexy things you can imagine. Dirty socks. The date with Trevor Langan and his kiss with way too much tongue. Getting shot. Petrovsky jailing her for contempt.

"Oh," she moaned, against her will. It wasn't working. She was almost there. And Robert knew it, too. She wondered how long it was going to take him to figure out that she'd been faking it all along. He was a lot of things, but he was not a stupid man.

He withdrew his fingers and took away the vibrator, dropping it next to her on the bed as he knelt before her. She tried to force her legs together again, but he pushed back hard on both of her thighs, finally forcing himself into her.

She gasped at the pressure when he thrust into her, leaning into her with all of his weight as he reached his hand down and rubbed her clit with his thumb.

Alex choked back a sob as her body started to shake and twitch, the orgasm taking away whatever dignity she thought she might have had left. She kept her eyes squeezed shut and didn't know how long he kept thrusting into her, each one more painful than the last, until he finally collapsed onto her after his own orgasm.

"Oh, baby, that was so good. You'll have to let me go down on you more often," he whispered into her ear, seeming not to notice that she was shaking and her face was wet. "Now, let's read some of that book of yours to get you turned on again. Then it'll be my turn to leave you hanging while I take a quick shower and go back downtown to that business meeting that was supposed to start half an hour ago. When I come back, there are lots of new things I want to try with you."

He picked the book up off the nightstand and his eyes grew wide as he started to read. This was no
romance novel.

"Alexandra, I can't believe you. How do you expect your future constituents to take you seriously if you read this…" he paused, not knowing exactly what to call it. His lips curled in disgust. "… dyke porn?"

Alex looked right in his eye and willed her voice not to shake. "I hardly expect that anyone other than me would know what I read in my spare time in the privacy of my own home. I certainly wasn't planning on sharing that with you or anybody else."

Robert lowered his voice seductively again and cupped her breast before trailing lightly down her stomach and sticking two fingers at her entrance. "Well, I suppose I can't be too upset, considering I just gave you the best orgasm you've had with me."

"Robert, that was the only orgasm I've had with you. And you didn't give it to me, you took it from me." She fixed him with an icy stare as his nostrils flared in anger. "Now, you got what you came for. Please untie me and go back to your frat club dinner. We'll discuss this later."

His hand came down hard against her cheek and she whimpered as the blood rushed to her face and hot tears filled her eyes again.

"Do you mean to tell me you've been faking it this whole time? That you need to fuck yourself to dyke porn in the bathtub to get off?"

Alex stared at him defiantly as he grabbed the vibrator off the bed and turned it on high. He spread forced her legs apart again, pumping it inside of her several times before turning her on her side and thrusting it where she had never allowed anyone to touch her. She forced her eyes shut and refused to make a sound, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much he was hurting her.

After a few hard thrusts he stopped, turning the vibrator and leaving it inside of her while he reached up to untie her hands. Without another word, he took the tie and his suit into the bathroom to rinse off and get dressed before going back to his business meeting.

Alex reached behind her to take out the vibrator and stayed on her side, curling up into fetal position and reaching behind her to fold the duvet on top of her. She stared at the wall, her mind blank, as she heard the shower turn off.

When Robert came out of the bathroom a few minutes later, he looked at her contentedly, stroking the tie that he had used to restrain her as his mouth curled into a smile. He leaned over her and pressed a kiss to her temple.

"I'll see you in a bit, Alexandra. We'll continue this later."

After she heard the front door shut, she looked over at the phone that was still plugged in on the nightstand, reaching for it and dialling the only number she could.

"Benson," she answered after three rings.

Alex's voice shook as she tried to figure out what to say to the woman she hadn't spoken to in 3 years.

"Liv… Olivia," she paused, fighting back tears.

"Alex? Is that you?"
"Olivia, I'm so sorry, I know it's been a long time, I didn't mean to avoid your calls, and I know I don't deserve your help, but you're the only one I could call…" Alex knew Olivia was able to tell she was crying.

"Alex, sweetie, it's okay, don't worry about that right now. Just tell me what happened." she soothed.

"Liv… I was raped. Robert… he raped me." Her voice felt like it was coming from someone else. This wasn't happening to her.

Olivia paused. "Alex, where are you? Are you at home?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

"Did this just happen? Is he gone?"

"Yeah, he's gone."

"I'll be right over, okay? Can you text me the address and let me in?"

"The door's unlocked. I'll call down and tell the doorman to let you up. He won't be home for a few hours, at least."
Chapter 2

Alex hadn't moved when she heard the front door open fifteen minutes later. She tensed up, then relaxed when she realised it wasn't Robert's heavy footsteps she heard but Olivia's boots.

"Alex?" Olivia called out from the entrance.

"Back here," Alex choked out. "At the end of the hall."

Olivia knocked on the partially opened door gently before pushing it open. Alex was curled up in a ball on the right side of the bed, and she had folded the duvet on top of her so only the top of her head was visible. She surveyed the room, noticing the book on the nightstand and the women's bathrobe still hanging over the heater.

"Alex?" Olivia whispered her name, squatting down next to the nightstand, in front of the place where Alex's face was hidden under the covers.

Alex pulled the duvet down slightly to reveal her tear-stained face, and looked up at Olivia. She was wearing a low-cut black dress and boots, clearly dressed for a night on the town rather than work.

"Olivia, I'm so sorry, I know I have no right to expect you to cancel your plans and come help me, but I didn't know who else to call. Can you just get me to the hospital for the rape kit and then you can go back to your plans, I promise." Alex rambled, not knowing quite what to say to her former friend.

"Shh, Alex, it's okay. Plans are canceled, and I came straight here. Of course I'm not going to leave you alone in this. Can you tell me when Robert will be home? Do we have to worry about him coming back soon?"

Alex shook her head. "No, he left a few minutes before I called you and went downtown for a dinner with some of his clients. He wasn't planning on coming back until late, he said." She swallowed. "Liv, he..." she paused, unsure of what to say next. "I don't think he realizes he raped me. I think he really thought I wanted it. He said to expect more when he came back..." Alex trailed off.

Olivia looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "Sweetie," she soothed, "Isn't that what they always say?"

Alex nodded and looked away, feeling the shame creep up her neck and her cheeks.

Olivia put her hand on the nightstand to steady herself. "Now, let's get you into some pajamas so we can get you to the hospital, and pack some comfortable things to bring to my apartment when you get out. Can you tell me where I can find something for you to wear?" She pushed herself up.

"If you get me some pajamas to wear I can pack a few things." Alex looked up at Olivia, who was moving towards the dresser, took a deep breath, and tried to put on the ice princess façade that served her well in court. She needed to focus on getting out of the apartment and through the grueling and humiliating physical exam she knew was coming. "Can you grab a pair of sweatpants and a tee-shirt from the second drawer? And there should be underwear in the top drawer."

Olivia opened the top drawer first and tried to locate a pair of practical panties visually before sticking her hands in to move things around. "Alex, do you have anything, uh, comfortable in here?"
Alex turned red again, despite her best efforts. "Uh, probably in the back and under everything else." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Robert wasn't really a fan of anything practical…" she trailed off.

Olivia pushed back a handful of lace panties and found some black cotton ones in the back corner. She did the same on the other side of the drawer, finally locating a practical cotton bra underneath a pile of fancy lace lingerie.

After pulling out a pair of Harvard Law sweatpants and a Columbia University tee shirt from the second drawer, she handed put the pile of clothes on the nightstand.

"I'll wait right outside the door while you get dressed, okay? Let me know when I can come back in."

Olivia waited outside the bedroom door, wondering how much support to give her friend. Her former friend, who hadn't even let her know when she came back from Witness Protection. After all those movie nights and after-work drinks and late nights spent consoling each other after a tough case, Olivia had found out that she was back and engaged to Robert from Casey Novak, who'd seen the news in the Society section of the New York Times.

"Liv?" Alex slipped back into using her nickname easily. "You can come back in now."

Olivia pushed open the bedroom door. The covers on the bed were pulled back, and Alex was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at her feet and trying to find the courage to stand up. She saw drops of blood on the duvet and around the top of the vibrator, which Alex had partially hidden in its folds.

Sitting down next to Alex, Olivia laid an open hand on her own thigh and studied Alex's face. She didn't want to touch her friend without permission, but thought she might need some reassurance. Alex was wearing the poker face she wore in court while she was waiting for a jury to come back, except Olivia couldn't see the twinkle she used to have in her eye. Even though she looked lost, Alex reached out and squeezed Olivia's hand, making eye contact for a fraction of a second before sighing heavily and pulling her hand away.

When Alex touched her, Olivia's mouth twisted into a half-smile that didn't reach her eyes, and raised her eyebrows questioningly when she saw the red marks on Alex's wrist. She pointed without touching. "Alex, what did he use on you?"

Her face turned red with shame as she looked back towards the vibrator in the covers. She knew Olivia had seen it when she'd come back in, but hadn't wanted to touch it and risk removing evidence.

"No, sweetie, on your wrists. I don't see anything here that he could have used, unless you already put it away. What did he use to restrain you?"

Alex swallowed as tears filled her eyes again. "His tie. He used the silk tie I gave him for his birthday, and he put it back on before he went out."

The friend in Olivia wanted to wrap her arms around Alex and reassure her, but she knew that her embrace would probably not be welcome, and she knew that they'd have to leave the apartment soon to get to the hospital and avoid Robert's return. The detective in her surveyed the room and planned how to get Alex out of that apartment fast.

"Alex, honey, let's get ready to go, okay? I'm going to call someone from CSU to come down here and take these sheets into evidence. Then I'm going to call the Captain and explain what happened so
he knows we have a case and that we need to keep it discreet." Alex opened her mouth to protest, and Olivia shook her head to stop her.

"The Captain needs to know about this, and it's going to be our case anyway. I promise they'll respect your privacy, and we've all still got your back, no matter what has happened in the past. If you'd be more comfortable with me than with someone else from the squad, I can take your statement at the hospital, but I think it's better if I don't work this case so I can stay with you as your friend."

Alex nodded and Olivia continued, "Why don't you get some clothes in a bag and gather up whatever you need so we can go?"

Olivia stepped back into the hall to call a friend at CSU and give them the address. She'd have taken in the evidence herself, but knew the chain of evidence had to be respected.

Her next call was to Captain Cragen. "Cap, I got a case tonight." She paused, waiting for him to respond.

"How do we have a case? I haven't heard anything. Who's the vic?"

"Cap, it's Alex." He didn't seem to understand. "Alex Cabot was raped by her fiancé."

"She called you directly instead of calling it in?"

"She did. I'm at her apartment and we're going to leave for the hospital. I called Cohen at CSU to come and get the evidence. I told her I'd take her statement if she's more comfortable with me, but I think she's going to need a friend to hold her hand so I'd rather do that than work the case, if that's okay with you."

"Okay, that's fine. I'm going to call Munch and Fin to see if they can meet you at the hospital. If they're going to be working the case, I'd like to have them there, even if she decides to give her statement to you. And I'll call Casey as well to apprise her of the situation. She'll want to be in the loop."

"Cap, please keep this discreet. You know as well as I do this guy is all over the Society pages and has friends in high places, and all the Rape Shield laws in the world aren't going to protect her once this gets out."

"I know, Olivia. I'll do my best to keep this quiet, but you know as well as I do that it's only a matter of time."

"I know."

"Olivia, she's lucky to have you. Give her all of our love, okay? We'll get her through this."

"Thanks, Cap."

She hung up as she heard a knock on the door and looked out the peephole to see a pair of CSU techs.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Olivia said as she opened the door to greet them. "We'd like to get out of here and get the vic-, uh, Ms. Cabot to the hospital before her fiancé comes back, so let me show you to the crime scene."

She led them back towards the bedroom and knocked lightly on the door. "Alex, CSU is here. Can
"Yes," she answered abruptly, and when Olivia opened the door, she was at the dresser, putting clothes in an overnight bag.

Olivia sucked in a breath through her teeth as she noticed a red spot seeping through the back of Alex's sweatpants. Approaching Alex, she lowered her voice to a whisper. "Alex, honey, it looks like you're bleeding a little bit through the back of your pants. Why don't you get a pad and change into something else? CSU can take these in case they already have some fluids on them."

Alex turned red. She was still throbbing in pain everywhere, but didn't realize she had been bleeding. "Uh, thanks. I'll go take care of that in the bathroom."

"CSU is going to bag the sheets and the vibrator. Is there anything else they should take as evidence?"

"The book on the nightstand and the glass on the floor in the bathroom. I was having a glass of wine in the bathtub and he knocked it over when he pulled me out. There are cuts on my legs from some shards of the glass. The only other thing is the tie, but you'll have to get that after he comes back since he's wearing it tonight."

"Okay. Go get changed, and as soon as you're ready we can leave. And maybe grab a towel to sit on in the cab if you're in pain."

Alex nodded and went into the bathroom, careful not to go anywhere near the broken glass near the tub. After changing her clothes she put her hands on the sink and leaned forward, trying to look into her own eyes, her own soul, through the glass.

What happened to me? she wondered, studying the lines around her puffy red eyes, dark circles underneath from too many late nights at work trying to avoid her fiancé. I went from fearless prosecutor with political ambitions, to crusader for justice, to back from the dead, to victim of domestic violence and rape. Alexandra Cabot, where did you go? Did you ever really come back from Witness Protection?

When she came out to let the CSU techs in to collect the glass, she took a deep breath, and brought her overnight bag into the closet.

"Alex, you don't have to take everything now. We can come back with a team while Robert's not here and take whatever else you need, okay?"

"I know, but there are some things I don't want him to find once he knows I'm gone."

Olivia nodded, and Alex emptied the shoebox into her bag, taking her other vibrator and two more erotic novels. She doubted she'd be able to enjoy either ever again, but she'd wait until she got out on the street to throw them away in a dumpster somewhere. After wiping off her fingerprints and cleaning the vibrator with bleach to remove any DNA evidence, of course.

When she exited the closet, she grabbed the legal pad and pen she kept in the nightstand for whenever a brilliant legal argument or a poetic turn of phrase for a closing statement woke her up in the middle of the night.

Robert —

I'll pick up my things this week. See you in court.
Alex put the note on the stripped bed, took her engagement ring off the jewelery holder on the nightstand, and carefully placed it on top of the note.

She looked at Olivia. "Is CSU done?"

Olivia nodded as the techs came out of the bathroom and said their goodbyes.

"Okay, then let's get this over with." Olivia held out her hand to take the overnight bag, and Alex grabbed her phone, attaché case and coat, locking up the penthouse on the way out. Neither woman spoke as they took the elevator down to the lobby and stepped out to hail a cab.

Olivia climbed in first, placing the towel on the seat to make Alex more comfortable, and she grimaced and let out a soft "ooh" as she sat gingerly on the cushion. She had just closed the door when another cab pulled up behind them.

"Looks like we got out just in time," Olivia murmured as a familiar face got out of the cab and entered the building. Alex turned to look, her chest tightening and tears returning to her eyes yet again.

"Shh, sweetie, it'll be okay. You're safe right now." Olivia tried to calm her down as she took the same position she had on the bed inside, her hand open on her knee. This time, Alex took her hand and squeezed tightly, holding on as hard as she could until they got to the hospital.
Chapter 3

Olivia flashed her badge at the ER intake desk and the nurse ushered Alex into an exam room right away. The room was smaller and cosier than a normal hospital room, painted in earth tones and shades of blue, with a private bathroom in the corner. Olivia had been in this room countless times with many different rape victims, holding their hands while she took their statements about their attacks and endured the brutal evidence collection process called the rape kit.

Her usual strategy was to keep the victim talking, taking their statements and asking probing questions about every detail of the attack: the sights, sounds, and smells of the rapist and the timeline and the location, focusing on the first sexual humiliation to keep the victim from fully experiencing the second at the hands of the sexual trauma doctor. But she had never been in that room with a friend.

She looked at Alex, who was sitting on the edge of the examination table, between the stirrups, her posture perfect as though she were sitting in court. She looked straight ahead, her eyes fixed on a calm looking landscape of some sand dunes and waves crashing on the beach under a sunset, but Olivia knew she wasn't really looking at the painting.

"Alex," Olivia finally interrupted the blonde's thoughts, choosing her words carefully. "In here you're in control. If there's any part of this you don't want to do, you don't have to do it. If you want to stop at any time, just tell the nurse and she'll stop right away, okay?"

Alex nodded, answering calmly. "Olivia, you don't have to tell me how important this is. I'm going to do the whole thing, from beginning to end. I have to do this. For the case. For me."

"I know, sweetie." She had expected Alex to snap at her. The calm determination almost worried her more. No anger. No passion. Just brokenness.

"Normally, I should take your statement during the exam. A lot of women find that it helps keep their minds off the kit. Is that okay with you, or would you prefer that someone else take your statement later?"

Alex studied her carefully. "I want you to take my statement. I want to involve as few people as possible in this. I can't imagine telling a man about the most degrading experience of my life, even if it is Elliot or Munch or Fin. I know they're good… I just… I can't."

"I understand. We'll start as soon as the doctor comes back, okay?"

Alex mumbled an acknowledgement and went back to feigning interest in the painting and doing everything in her power to avoid thinking about the statement she was about to give. As an officer of the court, she knew she had to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, or risk destroying her credibility and integrity. But she acknowledged the part of her - the frightened, hurt human part of her - that wanted to omit certain details that said nothing about Robert's violence and only added to the humiliation she'd feel when they would be exposed in court.

The lesbian erotica and the vibrator they already knew about, because she had instructed CSU to take them into evidence in a moment of firm resolve to do everything in her power to send the sick bastard to jail. But they didn't know that she had been masturbating, that he'd made her orgasm, that she'd never let him - or anyone - see her completely naked or go down on her before, that he'd growled with pleasure as he whispered graphic passages from her book into her ear as he thrust the vibrator into her deeper and deeper.
She wished the bruises and tearing and DNA would be enough, but she knew from all too much experience that the Special Victims Unit first had to prove that a crime had taken place. Robert would claim it was consensual. And it would have to be the details in her statement - the fact that she was physically aroused because she was touching herself, not because she 'wanted it' - that would prove his guilt to a jury.

The door opened just as Alex was hit with a new wave of courage and resolve, and the doctor, an older woman with curly white hair, held out her hand and introduced herself.

"I'm Dr. Renée Logan, and I'm going to be examining you today."

"Alexandra Cabot. Nice to meet you," she added reflexively, shaking the doctor's hand. Her reply was programmed by her impeccable manners, but the irony did not escape her.

The doctor's lips twitched, but she refrained from commenting that she knew that it was anything but nice to meet her. She'd rarely seen a rape victim as composed and polite as Ms. Cabot.

"I see you've met Detective Benson, who is here to collect the evidence and take your statement. She has worked with many survivors of sexual assault and rape, and she'll talk you through the whole process…"

Alex held up her hand to stop the doctor's speech. "Actually, Detective Benson and I used to work together. I work in the District Attorney's office and I was the ADA assigned to her unit for several years. She'll take my statement, but she's here as a friend."

The doctor nodded. "I take it you're familiar with the rape kit procedure, then?"

Alex hesitated. "I… uh… not exactly. I mean, I've used evidence from rape kits in trial, and have been present during an exam once, but have never had the pleasure myself, so…" her voice trailed off.

"I see. I'm sorry you have to see this side of it. I'm going to talk you through the whole thing, and I'll tell you everything I'm going to do before I do it. If there's anything you don't want me to do, you don't have to do it. You're in control here, okay?" Dr. Logan looked at her patient with kind eyes, reassuring her and soliciting permission.

Alex met her gaze and nodded. "Okay. I know there's no case without this evidence."

Somehow, knowing that she was "in control" and explicitly authorized the kind doctor to inspect, poke, and prod the most intimate parts of her body didn't reassure her. She could stop at any time, at the expense of the case. She couldn't help but feel like the whole exam was coerced in the name of justice. Rape by physical force first, then rape by blackmail.

"Alright, the sooner we get started, the sooner we'll be done. I've laid out a large piece of paper on the floor behind the screen, and the first thing I need you to is to stand over there, take off all of your clothes, and put on the gown. Are these the clothes you were wearing when you were attacked?"

Alex stepped over to the paper and started slipping out of her clothing, hating that she already felt exposed and violated just by the other women's presence in the room.

"No. I was in the bathtub in my home when I was attacked. After the attack, I put on some comfortable clothing to wear to the hospital. I didn't realize I was bleeding, so I took off those clothes and gave them to CSU along with the sheets and other evidence they took from the apartment. I put a sanitary napkin in a new pair of panties and changed into a new pair of pants."
Olivia took notes even though she already knew the details, while Alex finished disrobing and wrapped the paper thin translucent gown around her tight. She bowed her head down and folded her arms across her chest as she went back to the exam table, dreading what was coming. She perched on the end of the table, forcing her legs together and eyeing the stirrups suspiciously.

The doctor noticed her apprehension and looked at her with a kind smile. "I'm sorry, Ms. Cabot, but I need you to put your feet up and scoot to the edge of the table for me. The next step will be for me to examine your body for fibers. I'm going to just take a quick look everywhere to see what we've got. I'll tell you before I touch you, and when I do, I'll be firm, but I won't hurt you."

Alex opened her mouth to acquiesce, but only a whimper came out. She nodded as her eyes filled with tears.

Olivia scooted her chair closer to the table and held up her hand. "Hold my hand, Lex, okay sweetie? Look at me, and try not to think about what she's doing. I need you to breathe and answer some questions for me, okay?"

Alex let out a long, audible breath through her mouth as she leaned against the table and lifted one leg, then the other into the stirrups, cringing and turning red at the exposure. She sees this all the time, she tried to tell herself, like she did every other year when she forced herself to go for a pap smear. At least the pap smear was always over in a few minutes.

"You're doing great, Lex," Olivia encouraged. Alex took her hand and held it tight, turning her head to look at her friend and willing herself not to feel the doctor lifting up the gown to uncover her.

"Ms. Cabot, it looks like you have some vaginal bleeding. Are you menstruating?" The doctor looked up at her, concerned.

"No."

"Okay, then I think you may have a tear or laceration. Usually this part comes later, but I'm going to take two cotton swabs, swipe them inside, and then I'm going to clean up some of this blood to see if I need to give you any stitches."

Alex flinched as she felt the cotton swabs and squeezed Olivia's hand when the doctor's firm fingers cleaned the blood off her with gauze. She bit her lip and took a sharp breath through her teeth, pushing down on the stirrups when the doctor poured the cool hydrogen peroxide on her, stinging open wounds before sliding in a speculum to check for damages.

"Ms. Cabot, it looks like you'll need a few stitches, so I'm going to get you some numbing spray. It should take about 5 minutes to work, and then I'm going to stitch you up. I think you'll only need 4 or 5, but I can't be sure yet." Dr. Logan pulled a rolling set of drawers towards her and pulled out some supplies. "This is going to be a bit uncomfortable, and you'll feel some cold."

"I didn't realize this could possibly get any more uncomfortable," Alex retorted bitterly, looking away from Olivia and turning her head towards the wall.

Olivia put down her pen and paper and stood next to Alex, taking the woman's other hand and squeezing both. "Lex, look at me, sweetie." She waited for tear-filled blue eyes to meet hers.

"Lex, you're doing great. I know this is uncomfortable, and embarrassing, and painful, but it'll be over soon, I promise."

Alex nodded, holding on tight. "Son of a bitch!" She cried as she felt the needle inside of her. The numbing spray clearly had only succeeded in freezing her from the inside out, but not at actually
numbing the pain of the stitches. She felt everything, letting out eight little yelps as she clutched Olivia's hands and resolved into sobs again.

"Shh, sweetie, it's alright," Olivia soothed. She reached over to grab a tissue off the side table, handing it to Alex, who wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "I got you. It's going to be okay. We'll be done soon. You'll be okay." She stopped herself before she reached up to brush Alex's hair away from her face and tuck it behind her ear.

Dr. Logan looked up. "Ms. Cabot, you've got a 4 centimeter tear, so I had to do 8 stitches. I'm sorry the numbing spray didn't seem to work very well, but it's a difficult area to stitch properly. I'm going to cover it with some antibacterial ointment, and I'll give you a small tube to take home as well. You'll have to apply it twice a day for the next 7 days. The stitches will dissolve on their own, so you don't have to come back in to get them taken out. Avoid tampons and penetration for at least the next 2 weeks to avoid reinjuring the area."

"I don't think I'll be experiencing any penetration for a while yet, being that I was just raped and all." Alex put her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"I understand. I just wanted you to be aware of the risks."

The doctor asked a relieved Alex to remove her feet from the stirrups and turn over. Examining her backside, the doctor placed 5 quick stitches in a whimpering Alex before continuing the rape kit.

When the doctor finished stitching, Olivia took back her right hand and sat down with her pad of paper to ask questions as the evidence collection proceeded.

"Okay, now that the worst part is over, let's get your statement down, okay? Can you tell me what happened?"

Alex took a deep breath and focused on the painting, determined to compose her statement like an opening argument and maintain emotional distance. "I usually leave work around 9:30 or 10, but Robert called me today to remind me that he had a dinner with some business partners downtown at 8:30 and that he wouldn't be home before midnight. I decided to take off early to relax at home after a long day."

"Did you tell him you were going to go home early?"

"No, I decided to leave after I spoke to him on the phone. I must have left the office just after 7, and got home around 7:15 or so. I poured myself a glass of wine, started a bath, lit some candles, turned on some music, just to relax. I got a book and uh, a vibrator from my closet."

She took a few shallow breaths and pinched the bridge of her nose. "After I was in the bath for a while, I started touching myself. I don't know how long... I had finished my glass of wine... I didn't hear him come in... he was watching me, standing in the door. He said, 'That's so hot' and pulled me out of the tub. The wine glass fell to the floor, and I got all these little cuts on my legs. He dragged me to the bed and got on top of me, and tied my wrists to the headboard with his tie. I told him multiple times to stop it, to let me put on my robe, that I wasn't in the mood, that I didn't want to have sex with him, that I used to prosecute sex crimes... I told him no as many different ways as I could come up with. He kept talking about 'making love' and 'trying new things.' I told him it wasn't 'making love' if he was forcing me."

"I kicked and struggled but I couldn't get away. He got down between my legs, and he..." she took her hand away from the doctor, who was scraping under her fingernails and cutting them short, covered her face, and cried.
Olivia sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing her thumb over Alex's knuckles and studying her as she waited for her tears to slow down.

"Alex, I promise you we're almost done, but I need you to tell me what he did. Now, take a deep breath for me. Breathe in and count to 5, then breathe out and count to 5. In, 2, 3, 4, 5, and out, 2, 3, 4, 5." She coached her breathing a few times and handed her the tissue box again.

Alex took a tissue and wiped her tears, using it as a shield so she could look away as she described the attack.

"First, he put his mouth on me and his fingers inside of me. I never… I always refused to let him do that to me before. And he used the vibrator." Alex turned to face the wall, covering her eyes with a crumpled up tissue. "When he, uh, thought I was about to, uh, orgasm," she cringed as she said it, turning red and feeling the tears well up in her eyes again, "he started penetrating me, hard. He used a lot of force; it hurt a lot. He kept using the vibrator, until I orgasmed, and then he turned it off but kept thrusting into me and it got really painful."

"When he, uh, finished, he laid on top of me for a while and told me how good it was, how we'd have to do all of those things again, and that he had lots more planned for me for when he got back from his dinner. He didn't even notice or care that I was crying and shaking."

"He told me he wanted to get me aroused again before he went out to dinner so I'd be ready for him when he got back. He pulled out the book I had been reading and started reading from it. He thought it was a romance novel, which he thought was trashy enough, and he got really angry when he realized what it was."

"Alex, what was the book?"

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Erotica." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Lesbian erotica. It was a sex scene between two women."

If Olivia was surprised by the revelation, she didn't show it. "And he got angry? What happened next?"

"He started insulting me for 'reading dyke porn' and for pleasuring myself without him, implying that people at the DA's office would find out and I'd never be elected… Liv, I'm not gay!"

"Lex, sweetie, nobody's going to accuse you of being gay just because you read some book."

"That's what I told him. I said I hadn't had any intention of anyone ever finding out, including him, and that what I read in the privacy of my own home is none of anybody's business."

"What happened next?"

"That's when he took the vibrator and turned it on high, and thrust it into me."

"Into your anus?"

Alex turned a deep crimson. "Not at first. A few times into my vagina, then he turned me over and put it… in there. I don't know how many times. It hurt so bad. And the whole time, all I could think about was that at least there'd be physical evidence that he'd hurt me so it wouldn't just be my word
"Spoken like a true prosecutor. Lex, we're going to nail him for what he did to you."

"He's going to claim that it was consensual, rough sex. As if I'd ever..." she trailed off, closing her mouth.

"Alex, was this the first time he's forced you?" Olivia studied her friend's reaction carefully, noting the sharp breath and downcast eyes.

"It's the first time he's been violent," she practically choked on the words. She'd fought tooth and nail to win impossible cases for years. She was the first one to get spousal rape past a grand jury in the state of New York. She burned with shame. "He... wanted it a lot more than I did. And at some point, it just became easier to give him what he wanted than to deal with him begging and whining when he didn't get it."

"Lex, fiancé or not, he doesn't have the right to coerce you to have sex with him. But you're telling me that aside from pressuring you for sex, he's never been violent, or hit you, or used force on you before? Has he ever been verbally abusive?"

"No, he's never been verbally or physically abusive before. And it's not exactly like he forced me before. He would just hound me and grope me until he got what he wanted. What was I supposed to do, file a restraining order? Ah yes, Judge Petrovsky, my extremely handsome and successful fiancé won't stop touching me. I'd like to file a complaint."

"Lex, you have a right to have your boundaries respected."

"Robert is just someone who is used to always getting what he wants."

The conversation was interrupted when the doctor warned Alex that she needed to pull twenty hairs from her head and ten from her pubic area, and Alex closed her eyes and gritted her teeth as she squeezed Olivia's hand.

"The last steps are to take a blood and urine sample. I'll have a phlebotomist come to draw two vials of blood. I'd do it, but I think you'll find that she'll be much more gentle and will probably leave a smaller bruise." Dr. Logan smiled at her, and Alex nodded. "Then we'll be done, and you can take a shower if you like."

The doctor stepped out of the room to go call the phlebotomist, and Olivia handed Alex the legal pad where she had taken all of her notes.

"I just have one more question for you. Since it's still technically your residence, we won't need a search warrant to look for the tie. But can you tell me what it looks like?"

"It's navy blue with light blue anchors on it. Ralph Lauren."

Olivia made a note on the page. "Okay, is there anything else to add to your statement before I give this to Munch and Fin?"

Alex looked over the pages filled with her friend's handwriting describing the intimate details of her attack. She took the pen, signing her name to the bottom of each page, the date, and time, and handed it back to Olivia.

"Everyone's going to know."
Olivia shook her head. "We're going to be as discrete as possible, you know that. Right now, nobody outside of the team knows anything, and we plan to keep it that way. You know that we protect our own, Alex. You're family. And we're going to help you get through this."

Alex forced a smile. "Thanks, Liv."

The phlebotomist arrived with Dr. Logan, and Alex eyed the young woman up and down. She barely looked old enough to have graduated high school.

"Do all of the grownups have the night off?" Alex barely tried disguising the distrust in her voice. "I really don't want to be a pincushion tonight too, so could you please get someone with a little experience to draw my blood?"

The young phlebotomist smiled at her. "Don't worry, Ms. Cabot, I'm older than I look, and I'm good at my job. I promise you'll hardly feel a thing."

Alex softened. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me. It's just been a long night."

"I understand. I'll try to make this as painless as possible, I promise. Can you give me your arm, please?"

"Lex, will you be okay for a few minutes? I'm going to run out and talk to Munch and Fin real quick, and give them your statement so they can go home."

Alex looked hesitant. "Actually, I really hate needles. Would you mind holding my hand for this before you go? I promise I won't make you stay for the urine sample." She cracked a smile.

"Sure, sweetie." Olivia took Alex's hand and Alex looked away and scrunched up her nose, bracing for the pinch in her arm that never came.

"Okay, you're all set."

"Already? I didn't even feel anything."

"Already. I told you I was good at my job."

"Listen, I'm really sorry for what I said earlier. I'm calling you every time I need blood drawn from now on."

"I've heard a lot worse. Don't worry about it." She looked at Olivia and then back at Alex, lowering her voice. "I've been in your shoes, and I know it's rough. But Detective Benson is the best there is. I known she'll get him." She squeezed Alex's hand.

"Thank you," Alex said softly.

"You're welcome," she replied. "Detective Benson, always a pleasure to see you again." She smiled over her shoulder and closed the door.

"Now I really feel like an ass."

"Lex, don't worry about it. Amelia's been called a lot worse, and I know for a fact she doesn't hold it against you - or against anyone. She's often here on weekend nights when I come in. And I always have her draw my blood. I hate needles too, and she really is the best."

"Was she…?"
"Raped? Yeah. Her ex-boyfriend. Casey prosecuted the case just after the Connors trial."

Dr. Logan picked up the plastic cup and handed it to Alex. "This is the last step. Other than that, I'm going to recommend that you take two ibuprofen every 4 hours for the pain caused by your stitches. It should help the inflammation and take the endue off a bit. Don't do anything too strenuous for at least a week while you're waiting for them to heal. You can go to your regular OB/GYN in two or three weeks to get cleared for exercise. Now, there's a shower in that bathroom there, and you're welcome to take one here while you're waiting for your blood and urine tests to come back. Or you can get out of here, take a shower at home, and I'll call you personally with the results in the morning. It's up to you."

"Thank you, doctor. I think I'd like to get out of here, if that's alright. No offense, Dr. Logan, but I hate hospitals, and I want to get out as soon as possible."

Olivia nodded. "Okay, then that's what we'll do. Go pee, rinse off quickly if you like, and get some clothes out of your bag. I'm going to go right outside to talk to Munch and Fin. Should I tell them to go away, or is it okay if they say hello before we leave?"

"I don't think I'm up for seeing anyone just yet, but please tell them I appreciate them coming."

"I will. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Olivia closed the door behind her and walked a few steps to the waiting area, and Fin, Munch, and Casey stood up to greet her. None of them so much as cracked a smile.

"How's she holding up?" Casey finally asked.

"She's doing about as well as can be expected. I have her statement here for you to read. It was pretty brutal. She needed stitches." Olivia explained, holding the notepad out for Casey to take and giving the rape kit to Munch.

She glanced over it and grimaced. "I knew I hated that guy. He's come into the office a few times and there was just always something off about him. I wondered what she saw in him, but it wasn't my place…"

"Not to worry, Case, we'll kick his ass," Fin commented. "Can we see her or is she not up for that?"

"She told me to say thanks for being here, but she's not ready to see anyone quite yet. But she knows you're all here for her, and she appreciates that."

"You remind her she's part of the family?" Munch asked.

"I did. I already told her Robert's ass would be thoroughly kicked." Olivia smiled.

"Good." Fin took the statement from Casey. "We'll bring this back to the precinct and work on it in the morning. We'll call if we have any questions."

"Thanks," Olivia replied. "I told Cragen that I'm not working the case and that I'm going to be there for Alex as her friend for the next few days. I'm not sure what she'll want to do, but for now, she's coming home with me."

"Liv, I haven't called anyone else at the DA's office since I talked to Cragen, but I think Liz Donnelly won't take too kindly to being kept out of the loop. Alex should call her in the morning, but if she wants me to talk to her, I can."
"Thanks, Case, I'll talk to her and let you know what she wants to do."

"You're a good friend, Liv, canceling an important date to help out someone who couldn't even give you the time of day when she came back to New York." Fin said. "I'm not sure I would have done the same thing."

"What else was I going to do? She needed someone here with her. Of course I came." Olivia was surprised at the comment. She never would have considered not being there for a friend in need. Even if said friend had disappeared from her life for three years and then not bothered to return her phone calls.

"And that's why they call you Saint Olivia. Good night, Liv, take care of our girl." Munch patted her back and smiled.

"Thanks for everything, guys. Casey, I'll call you in the morning… Actually, Case, you wouldn't happen to have your car, would you? Would you mind giving us a ride back to my place if Alex says it's okay?"

"Of course. It's no problem. Check with her and I'll wait here. But if she'd prefer the anonymity of a cab, I understand."

Olivia turned around to see the door partially open and found Alex inside, dressed and sitting on the table, lost in thought.

"Alex, I think we can go if you're ready. I'll get a nurse and a wheelchair, okay?" Alex nodded.
"Casey offered to drive us back to my apartment. Is that okay, or would you prefer to take a cab?"

"That's fine."

Olivia stepped outside, nodding to Casey before approaching the nurse's stand. "I'm here to get Alexandra Cabot discharged," she told the woman who appeared to be in charge.

The nurse brought the discharge papers and a wheelchair, and the women were silent as Olivia and Casey helped load Alex into the car. Alex stared out the car window without speaking for the entire ride back to Olivia's apartment. When they pulled up in front of the building, Olivia jumped out of the back and opened Alex's door, taking her bag and helping her steady herself. She sucked in air through her teeth as she shifted her weight in the seat, obviously still in pain.

"Do you need help, getting her up, Liv?" Casey asked, wondering where she would park if her friend said yes.

"I've got her. There's an elevator in the building, so we'll be okay, I think. Thank you."

"Alex, do you want me to call Liz Donnelly in the morning, or do you want to call her? It's up to you, but I think she should know."

"I can call her. She should hear this from me. Thank you, Casey."

"Alex, Liv, anything you need, you let me know, okay? I'm around this weekend, and you've got my support."

"I appreciate it, really. But right now I really want to go upstairs and shower." Alex smiled half-heartedly. "Good night, Casey."

"Good night."
Alex shut the door and leaned on Olivia, who helped her limp towards the elevator.
When they got upstairs, Olivia unlocked the door and led Alex straight into the bathroom, where she handed her a fresh set of towels and pulled a bottle of ibuprofen out of the medicine cabinet. She filled a dixie cup with water and held out two pills, which Alex promptly took.

"Help yourself to anything, okay? Let me know if there's anything you need. Would you like a cup of tea before you go to sleep?"

Alex nodded, still looking dazed. "I'd like that. I'm not sure I'm going to sleep much. Thanks, Liv. For everything."

"You're welcome. And I mean it. Let me know if you need anything. I'll get the bed ready for you and make some tea for when you get out."

Olivia heard the shower turn on and went into her bedroom, where she pulled some pyjama pants, a teeshirt, and some less sexy panties out of her top drawer. She sighed. The night definitely hadn't gone as she had planned. She immediately felt a pang of guilt.

Way to go, Benson. Your friend gets raped and you're thinking about how you didn't get to put those black lace panties to good use.

She put on her pyjamas and threw the dress and panties into the hamper, then got some blankets and a real pillow for the couch. She'd sleep in the living room and let Alex have some privacy, and sleep late if she wanted. It was already after 3 in the morning, and since neither of them had to work the next day, Olivia wanted to be sure that she wouldn't disturb Alex if she woke up first in the morning.

Olivia turned down the sheets and tidied up her nightstand and dresser. For once, she was thankful that her room hadn't seen any action recently. The only thing that might be considered romantic was the almond scented candle on the nightstand, but the sheets were clean and all of her personal items were tucked away in the back of her underwear drawer. Once she was sure everything potentially incriminating was out of sight, she put Alex's bag on a chair in the corner, closed her gun and her badge in the lockbox in her closet, and went into the kitchen to boil water for tea.

Alex undressed herself slowly, trying not to move her legs. The little she had walked from the examination table to the car, and then from Casey's car to the bathroom had been excruciatingly painful that she waddled instead to avoid stretching her stitches. She could only hope that the ibuprofen would at least take the edge off, but it hadn't had time to kick in yet.

She looked into the full length mirror hanging on the linen closet and touched her fingers to the fat lip he'd given her when he'd slapped her, and traced her fingers around the sensitive spot on her jaw that was starting to turn pale blue. She rubbed the ligature marks on her wrists, the skin red from being chafed, with bruising underneath. Touched the marks that was forming where he'd squeezed her breast too hard. And she slid her hand down between her thighs, wincing as she spread her legs slightly apart to see the big bruises where he'd kneed on her and forced her legs apart.

So this is what it looks like to be a victim.

Alex couldn't count the number of times she'd studied photos of victims' injuries, presenting them in court as evidence and forcing the victim to identify and explain each and every scratch and bruise to the jury to prove the attack had been violent and the advance unwanted. Dr. Logan had taken pictures of her own body during the rape kit, documenting everything in case her own attacker ever
made it to trial.

Victim. Rape victim. She contemplated the words as she looked at her reflection in the mirror, trying to recognize the person looking back at her. Even when she'd been in Witness Protection, even when her lover had to call out another name in bed, even when she'd been moved three times and wasn't even sure who she was anymore, she'd always known who was looking back at her. Now, the eyes looking back at her seemed to look right past her.

This is what happens when you die and come back to life to fulfil your Cabot duty of marrying some Wall Street schmuck and making perfect babies.

She put her hands on the sink and dry heaved.

When she could finally lift her head up without wanting to vomit, she turned on the hot water and eased herself into the tub. The water scalded her skin and overrode the dull pain she felt all over. She poured some intimate cleanser into her hand and tried to wash away the sticky semen she could still feel between her legs. He hadn't used a condom, even though she'd gone off the pill while waiting to get an IUD put in.

Robert's mother had started talking about babies and her ticking biological clock since they'd gotten engaged, and Robert had been eager for his future wife to give up putting away scumbags in favor of being barefoot and pregnant in their penthouse kitchen. She'd made it abundantly clear that she had no intention of sacrificing her career for motherhood when she'd already lost too many years of her life outside of a courtroom, and made the appointment for the IUD without telling him. Her erratic schedule had made taking the pill at the same time every day a challenge. And if she had an IUD she wouldn't technically be lying when she assured Robert she'd gone off the pill while waiting to get an IUD put in.

Oh god, I could be pregnant. No. Impossible. I just had my period, so I couldn't be pregnant. She exhaled, relieved. It had been lighter than usual, and come a few days early, but she figured it was just a side effect of coming off the pill.

She cleaned herself over and over until the water got cold, and despite her best efforts, she couldn't seem to shake the dirty feeling. She leaned against the shower wall and started to slide down to the floor, but the excruciating pain stopped her, and she put her forehead to the wall instead.

I was raped tonight. I guess I'm not so tough after all.

She didn't know how long she'd been standing there when she heard a knock on the door.

"Alex?"

She opened her mouth to answer, but a quiet sob came out instead.

Olivia knocked again. "Alex, sweetie, I have your tea ready." She paused. "I know my hot water doesn't last that long, so why don't you come out, have some tea, and you can have another shower in the morning, okay?"

There was no movement on the other side of the door.

"Lex, sweetie, I'm going to come in, but I'm not going to look, okay?" Olivia waited a few seconds to give her friend a chance to answer before opening the bathroom door. Alex was standing under the freezing water, leaning against the wall, her arms wrapped around herself as she shivered and sobbed. Olivia knew she had promised she wouldn't look, so she turned her head sideways and spoke softly.
"Lex, I'm going to turn off the water, okay?" The blonde flinched as Olivia moved slowly and deliberately, opening the shower door to turn off the faucet. Olivia took the towel off the hanger and held it out for Alex to take. She kept her eyes focused on the wall, but Alex cried harder and started shaking against the wall. Opening the towel and holding it in both hands, Olivia held it up to shield her friend's body from view, and turned to look at her face.

"Lex, honey, I don't want to scare you and I'm not going to touch you without your permission. If it's okay with you I'm going to climb in, wrap this towel around you, and then help you climb out of the shower. Is that okay?"

Alex nodded her head slightly. Without shifting her gaze, Olivia stepped into the bathtub and held the towel close to Alex's body. "Arms up, sweetie." Olivia didn't want to risk further traumatising her friend by swaddling her arms inside the towel and restraining her. "I'm just going to wrap this around you, but I'm not looking and I'm not going to touch you unless you say it's okay." She finished wrapping her and Alex put her arms down to hold the towel into place.

Olivia stepped out of the tub and held out a hand for Alex to take and another to spot her, and Alex winced again and hissed in pain as she lifted her leg to step out onto the bath mat.

"I got you, I got you," Olivia soothed. She pointed to a pile of clothes next to the sink. "I brought your pyjamas so you can get dressed in here. I'm going to get our tea and bring it to the couch. And I'll make you some toast. I thought you might not have gotten the chance to eat anything, but you should have something light if you're feeling nauseous."

Alex raised an eyebrow, still unable to speak without feeling like she'd collapse into tears.

"Hey, I didn't make detective for nothing, you know. Is toast good, or do you want anything else? I have some yogurt, I can make you a sandwich, or there's some leftover Chinese in my fridge."

"Toast is good," Alex croaked. Olivia nodded and went off to the kitchen.

Alex took her cup of tea and nibbled on some toast that Olivia had given her without saying a word. Olivia seemed to know that she didn't want to talk anymore about what had happened, that she needed time to process, and that she was embarrassed about having broken down so many times in front of her friend.

Olivia had seen her emotional before, after Sam Cavanaugh, after Cheryl Avery, after Livia Sandoval's case was dropped so the Feds could wage the drug war. They'd had drinks together and talked about justice and how they couldn't make things right no matter how hard they tried. But it had never been this personal. Olivia had never seen her completely lose control. Even when she went into Witness Protection and said goodbye to Olivia and Elliot, she'd shed a few tears but avoided breaking down until she'd arrived in the Marshalls' safe house, locked in and all alone with no identity.

Olivia curled up at one end of the couch, leaning on the armrest with her mug. She watched Alex out of the corner of her eye for a sign that she wanted to say something, that she wanted to talk, anything, and tried to think of something she could say that wouldn't sound trite. Despite many years of training and lots of experience with victims, she'd never had one stay in her apartment after an attack before. She could listen while she took their statements and help them through trial, but the rest was all new.

She watched Alex try to tuck her legs up on the couch, then wince at the pain, so she took a throw pillow and handed it to her, then put another one on her lap. "Lean against the armrest and put your feet up here," she offered, patting the pillow. It'll be more comfortable." Alex nodded and complied,
lifting her legs up together and pivoting. But she turned the opposite way, opting to lean her head on
Olivia's lap instead.

Neither woman spoke for several minutes.

"I'm sorry I ruined your date," Alex finally said.

"It's no big deal," Olivia replied.

"Fin said it was an important one."

"You heard that? Nothing's more important than helping a friend in need."

"I also saw the dress you were wearing."

"We went to a nice restaurant."

"Oh. How long have you been going out?"

"We went out for three months. That's like dating for 3 years in normal people dating time."

"You *went* out?" Of course Alex would pick up on the subtle use of the past tense. Lawyered.

"Yeah," Olivia sighed. "We broke it off."

"You were all dressed up like that to end a relationship?"

"Not exactly." Olivia really didn't want to get into the hows and whys of her failed date.

"Then what?" The realization slowly dawned on her. "Did you break up because you came to the
hospital with me?"

"Sort of. We were in a cab on the way back from dinner when you called. I told her that I had to go
and she was really upset and wanted me to stay. It's not the first time I've been called out when I've
been on a date with her, and we had an argument. I said that it was really important for me to be
there for you and that I get called out a lot, even if I'm not on call and there's a big case. She didn't
like my answer, so I told her that it probably wouldn't work between us."

"Liv, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have called if I'd known you were on a date."

"Nonsense. I told Fin and I'm telling you: you need me, I'm there. It's not just because it's my job, it's
because you're my friend. If you and I were out to dinner and Casey or Rossi or Maureen Stabler
was attacked, or in the hospital, or in trouble, would you even think about giving me a hard time
when I left? Or if it was any case at all?"

"No, of course not."

"That's my point. Tonight's date was supposed to be special, but I can't be with someone who doesn't
understand that helping people and taking care of my family are my first priorities."

"Thanks, Liv. And I'm really sorry."

"Me too."

Alex was quiet for a minute. "You were going to sleep with her tonight, weren't you?"
Olivia turned red and looked away. As much as she and Alex used to commiserate about tough cases over drinks, they’d never really talked about their sex lives before. And while Alex knew that Olivia sometimes dated women, she didn't usually bring up her female companions in conversation. She'd slipped up by admitting that her date was a she. Alex didn't seem bothered by the admission, but she also didn't find it totally appropriate to talk about her plans for getting laid with someone who had just been raped.

"Yeah, I was." She paused. "But I'm glad you called when you did. I would have been in a lot more trouble if I'd have left right after and skipped the cuddling."

Alex snorted. "I suppose that's true. First time?"

Olivia nodded. "It was going to be her first time with a woman, and I haven't been intimate with anyone since… well, in a while, so we decided to take it slow." Olivia didn't think Alex would have heard what had happened to her in the women's prison, especially since she had asked Casey to keep it quiet. It wouldn't be fair to dump that on her now.

"Don't tell me you've lost your touch, Detective?" Alex smiled at her.

"Hardly," Olivia replied, choosing her next words carefully. "I'm just not really sure what I want right now. I'm getting a little tired of all the games."

That part was true, at least. It wasn't so much that she'd had a dry spell in the nine months since Sealview. She'd had plenty of dates. She just had nightmares more often than not, and didn't want to spend the night anywhere with someone who wouldn't understand. And the thought of having sex still made her nervous, since she wasn't sure how she'd react. If she was totally honest with herself, she wasn't entirely sure she would have been ready tonight, since they hadn't gone beyond kissing and some groping. She had been banking on the fact that Jenna wouldn't reciprocate on their first night together.

Alex nodded and sighed. "I was looking forward to being done with all that."

"It's rough out there. It'll probably be a while before you're ready to start dating again." Olivia paused before she asked the next question. The last thing she wanted was for Alex to feel like she was being interrogated, or worse, somehow responsible for her attack. "Alex, if it's too personal, you don't have to answer, but why Robert?"

"You mean how did I end up engaged to a rapist?" Alex certainly cut right to the chase.

"Lex, no. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant the Alex Cabot I know wouldn't have given a guy like Robert a chance. She wouldn't have been impressed by the money and the penthouse and the political connections, she would have cared about his heart. And I don't really know the guy, but based on the gossip I've heard and facts recently entered into evidence, it doesn't seem to me like Robert has much of one." She paused, trying to read Alex's face to make sure she didn't go too far. Alex hadn't reacted yet, but looked serious. She'd save the joke about Alex's lack of judgment re: Trevor Langan for later. "Why were you settling for him?"

Alex turned on her side, regretting her decision to sit so close to her friend. There was no hiding the emotion on her face. She opened her mouth to explain her return, the betrayal everyone had felt when they realized she had lied to them about being dead, the complicated paperwork associated with being alive and reclaiming her job and her law career, the pressure to start a family at her father's society dinners, the fear that life in New York had gone on without her and that she'd always wake up alone.
"Olivia, Alexandra Cabot is dead. She died on that sidewalk in front of O'Malley's in 2003."

Olivia studied her friend's face, reading the pain in her eyes, and decided not to ask any more hard questions tonight. It was after 4, their tea was long gone, and Alex was going to need some sleep if she was going to recover from her injuries.

She reached out and took Alex's hand, and looked down into the eyes that were clouded with tears. "Lex, starting tomorrow we're going to track her down and bring her back from the dead."
It was nearly 11 when Alex slipped out of Olivia's bed the next morning. As soon as she shifted, she felt a sharp pain, and memories of the previous night rushed back to her. She jumped out of the bed, and barely made it to the bathroom sink before vomiting up what remained of the tea and toast she'd had the night before.

Fuck. She hurt all over.

Alex brushed her teeth to get rid of the taste and splashed cold water over her face. The bruise on her jaw was already starting to turn blue. Even relieving herself hurt, and she shuddered when she thought about the 5 stitches in her anus and how painful that would be later.

She finally made it out to the kitchen, where Olivia was sitting at the counter reading the New Yorker with a cup of coffee. She looked up when she heard Alex approach.

"Good morning, sunshine," Olivia said, smiling. "Take a seat. I made breakfast, I just have to warm yours up."

Alex approached the counter, hesitating at the high stools. "Hang on one second," Olivia said when she noticed her friend's hesitation. She went to the linen closet and retrieved a big, fluffy towel. "Sit on this. Can you get up okay?" Alex nodded, relieved that Olivia had anticipated her problem, and slid into the seat.

"Did you sleep okay? How do you feel this morning?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm still in a bit of pain." Alex replied, and Olivia nodded sympathetically.

"Did you take some more meds?" Olivia asked, grabbing some bowls and a package of cheese from the fridge and turning on the stove. She poured Alex a cup of coffee, cream and one sugar, and placed it in front of her on the counter.

"Not yet. I wanted to settle my stomach a bit first." She started to get up.

"Don't, I'll get them. You sit." Olivia rushed into the bathroom to grab the bottle before Alex had a chance to move.

When she returned, she poured some veggies from a bowl into a skillet and added a few eggs and some cheese. She turned on another burner where she had cooked some potato wedges to start heating them up.

Alex looked at her. "Liv, you didn't have to go through all that trouble."

"It's no trouble at all. I've been up a while." Olivia replied. "I remember when we used to go out for breakfast, you'd always order a vegetable omelette with cheddar and homefries, so if we're going to work on bring back Alex Cabot, we might as well start with what we know she likes."

"You even remember how I like my coffee after all this time."

"You can tell a lot about a person from how they like their coffee, you know." Olivia chuckled.

"Oh yeah? And what do my coffee preferences say about me?"

"Well, you like your coffee strong, but with lots of cream and some sugar. That means you're tough,
and you've got an edge, but you're not overpowering. You've got a soft side, and you're secretly a little sweet.

"If that's true, don't tell the perps." Alex retorted.

"Not to worry. Your secret's safe with me." Olivia answered.

"Do you still drink your coffee black? What does that say about you?"

"Black coffee means I'm all badass, Lex." Olivia winked, and Alex almost cracked a smile.

Alex ate in silence, realizing that she was going to have to face the music sooner or later. When she finished, she asked Olivia to grab her phone out of her bag. She usually used her phone as an alarm clock and left it by her bedside, but had purposefully avoided taking it out last night. She knew there'd be at least a few missed calls from Robert.

"Shit," she said when she finally mustered up the courage to open her phone.

"What?" Olivia looked up at her.

"Robert got to my family first." There were 8 missed calls and 3 voicemails from Robert, 2 from her father, 1 from her brother, 1 from Casey, and 1 from Liz, plus a missed call and a voicemail from a number she didn't recognize.

She ignored Robert's voicemails and went straight to her father's. "Alexandra, honey, Robert called me in the middle of the night to tell me you'd left him and he had no idea why or where you went. Please call me and tell me what happened. I'm sure the two of you can work it out."

Alex rolled her eyes. "I can't believe this."

His tone in the next voicemail was sterner. "Alexandra, I don't know where you are, but Robert's very worried about you. He's called me several times and can't get in touch with you. You can't just leave him in the middle of the night with no explanation. He's a good man."

The next message was from her brother. "Hi Lexie, it's the middle of the night and Robert just called me looking for you. Said you'd left him but said he didn't know why. Between you and me, I'm surprised it took you this long. Call me and let me know you're okay."

"Alex, it's Casey. I saw Liz briefly this morning at the office and told her she needed to speak to you. I didn't tell her what it's about, but you should call her. She's worried. Let me know if I can do anything for you."

"Alex, it's Liz. Casey told me I needed to talk to you, but wouldn't tell me why. Can you do lunch today at 1? Call me." Alex looked at the clock. It was already 11:30.

"Ms. Cabot, this is Dr. Logan from Mercy Hospital. I'm calling to discuss the results of your blood and urine tests. Please call me back at 212-555-5000 extension 824."

Alex sighed. She couldn't help but feel like the doctor would have told her that her tests were fine on a message, which means she must have something to say about them. If they had been clean, there'd be nothing to discuss. And that meant the doctor would be her last phone call.

She decided to call Liz first, but she didn't really feel like going out. "Hey Liv," she asked. "Do you mind if I invite Liz over for coffee this afternoon? Casey talked to her, apparently, but didn't tell her what happened, so I need to talk to her today. She called to invite me for lunch, but I'm not sure I'm
up for going out, so…”

"Of course. Until we get you settled into a new place, you're living here as far as I'm concerned. You don't have to ask to have anyone over."

"Thanks, I'll call her."

"And Lex, if you want me to make myself scarce, I can go out and do some errands while you talk to her." Alex nodded.

"Thanks." She dialed Liz's number. "Hi Liz, it's Alex."

"Well good morning, Cabot. Please don't tell me you just got out of bed? It's almost noon!"

"I had a bit of a rough night last night."

"So I've heard," Liz said. Alex froze. "I saw Casey this morning. She didn't tell me anything, but I could tell it's serious. I thought it would be better if we talked in person."

"I agree, but I'm not really up to going out for lunch, and it's almost lunchtime anyway. Would you mind coming over for coffee this afternoon?"

"Of course. At the penthouse?"

"No, actually. I stayed at Olivia Benson's apartment last night. She said she had some errands to run this afternoon, so it'll just be us. Let me give you the address. Is 2:30 okay?"

"2:30 it is. See you soon, Alex."

Alex hung up the phone and stared at it, trying to decide who to call next as she pushed the food around on her plate. The omelette was delicious, but she'd only taken a few bites before she didn't feel hungry anymore.

Olivia looked up from the dishes she was washing. "Lex, you haven't had anything but toast since yesterday afternoon. Can you try to eat a few more bites for me?" Alex nodded and picked up her fork, spinning the cell phone on the counter with her other hand.

Olivia frowned. "Do you want some privacy while you make your phone calls? Or is there anyone you want me to call for you?" she asked gently.

Alex opened her mouth to refuse, but was surprised by the words that came out. "I… could you call my brother and my father? I don't think I can talk to them yet, but I'd rather they stop talking to Robert."

Nodding, Olivia pushed a pen and paper in front of Alex for the phone numbers, and pointed to the plate, which she took and put in the sink when Alex indicated she had finished. "Do you want to take a shower, or can I help you to the couch?"

Alex hesitated. "The couch is fine. I don't think another shower will help."

"Okay," Olivia said, helping her friend off the stool and over to the couch, easing her back into the cushions to avoid causing her pain. "I'm going to go into the bedroom to get dressed and make these calls. You should call the doctor back, okay?"

Alex hadn't told her that the doctor had called, but Olivia wasn't a detective for nothing. She sat on the couch, staring at her phone, while Olivia went into the bedroom.
Olivia decided to call Alex's brother first, and when he answered, she explained briefly that Robert had attacked Alex, that she was safe, and that she needed a few days to recover without seeing anyone. William Cabot seemed horrified at the thought of that bastard hurting his sister. It seemed as though Casey wasn't the only one who'd had a bad feeling about him.

After promising to keep him updated on Alex's condition and have her call him soon, Olivia dialed the second number. She had a feeling the elder Cabot would be much harder to deal with.

"Mr. Cabot, my name is Olivia Benson, and I'm a friend of Alex's," she began when he answered the phone. He interrupted before she could continue.

"Do you know where the hell my daughter is and why she apparently walked out on her fiancé in the middle of the night? I hope she's called him. He's worried sick about her."

"Sir, Robert attacked Alex last night. She called me, and I brought her to the hospital, and got her a safe place to stay." She didn't want to give away that Alex was staying with her, in case her father took Robert's side.

"He attacked her? Why would he call me three times in the middle of the night wondering why she left if he attacked her?"

"I don't know," Olivia replied, "but she's got some bruises and some stitches. The hospital records and her statement to the police support her story. We're - the police are investigating the incident."

"He's from a good family, so I have trouble believing he would attack her. Are you sure it wasn't someone else?"

"The police will have to wait for a match on the DNA, but I've known Alex a long time, and she wouldn't lie about this."

"Are you with the police?"

"I'm a detective with the Special Victims Unit, where Alex worked before she went into Witness Protection." Olivia hoped that she wasn't giving away that Alex had been raped by identifying where she worked. "We specialise in handling cases where a certain amount of discretion is required, and since Alex is a friend and former colleague and an employee of the District Attorney's office, my squad is best prepared to handle this. I won't be working on the case, though."

Mr. Cabot seemed to consider Olivia's explanation carefully. "Well, I certainly hope you will be discreet. I have known the Sheldon family for a long time, and I have trouble believing Robert would be capable of hurting my daughter. I don't think she would lie, either, but your squad better be damn sure that this is more than just a ploy to break off the engagement before they go around accusing people like Robert Sheldon."

"I understand, and believe me, they will investigate thoroughly before making an arrest. Everyone on the team knows and cares about Alex, and the last thing any of us wants is to compromise this case," Olivia tried to hide her sigh. She couldn't believe that Mr. Cabot wouldn't automatically support his daughter.

"Can I speak to my daughter?" he asked, his tone softening.

"Actually, Mr. Cabot, she's in a bit of pain and resting right now. She asked me to call you because she isn't ready to talk to anyone yet. But I'll tell her you're thinking about her and that she should call you as soon as she's ready."
"Well, thank you for calling, Detective Benson. Please take good care of my daughter. In the mean
time, I'm going to call Robert and ask him what the hell happened."

"Mr. Cabot, I'd advise you to let the police talk with Robert and to not interfere with the
investigation. If you call him and sound like you're accusing him of something, he may be less
inclined to cooperate. But I will take good care of Alex, and I'll see too it that she calls you soon."

"Thank you, Detective."

Olivia hung up the phone, bewildered, and went back into the living room. Alex was sitting on the
couch, holding her phone in her hands, and crying.

Olivia walked over to the couch and sat down next to Alex, who didn't look up. She gently reached
over and took the phone out of Alex's hands, placing it on the table, and faced Alex, opening her
arms.

"Lex, sweetie, come here," she murmured, holding out her arms until Alex leaned over to let herself
be held. When she leaned into Olivia's touch, her body stiffened, and her crying turned to sobbing as
her body shook with sadness. Olivia held her tight, rubbing her back, and whispered soothing words
in her ear. "Shh, Lex, it's okay. It's all going to be okay."
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Chapter edited - accidentally included a section of Chapter 6 the first time.

Olivia held Alex, rocking her and rubbing her back, until the crying stopped and her breathing evened out. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked softly, wiping tears off Alex's cheek with her thumb and tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

Alex shook her head. "Not right now." Olivia nodded, and they sat in silence for a while, punctuated only by Alex blowing her nose.

"Liz is going to be here soon," Olivia said finally, looking at the clock. "Why don't you go wash up a bit, and I'll make some more coffee."

Alex nodded and leaned out of Olivia's embrace, looked down at where her head had been leaning on her chest, and grabbed a tissue. "I'm sorry, I got tears and snot all over you," she said, wiping the tissue on her shirt.

Olivia smiled at Alex and took the tissue out of her fingers. "Don't worry about it, it'll come out in the wash. I was going to change anyway. I'm going to take a run while Liz is here."

After the coffee was started and Olivia changed, she heard a knock on the door. 2:29 exactly. Liz certainly was punctual. She opened the door and ushered Liz into the living room just as Alex came out of the bathroom. Her eyes were still red and puffy from crying, but she seemed calmer, more collected, as she went over to give Liz a hug.

"Thanks for coming over," she said softly, stiffening as the older woman put her arms around her tight.

"Of course," Liz replied, pulling out of the hug. She held up a bag. "I figured these might help make it better." She pulled out a plastic box from Crumbs bakery, revealing three enormous cupcakes. "I got mint chocolate chip, peanut butter cup, and vanilla with chocolate buttercream frosting."

"You didn't have to do that," Alex said, touched by her godmother's thoughtfulness.

"Well, if you don't want them, I'm certain I could take care of them myself," she said, her eyes twinkling as she started to put the plastic container back in the bag.

"That won't be necessary," Alex said quickly, putting her hand on the woman's arm. "I wouldn't want you to have to eat all that by yourself."

Olivia saw the box and grabbed two plates, two forks, and a knife from the cupboard, which she brought in with the two cups of coffee she'd already poured, putting one in front of each woman.

"I'm going to go for a run and give you some privacy," Olivia explained in response to Liz's raised eyebrow. "But I wouldn't object if you saved me a bite of cupcake for when I come back." She grabbed her keys and her cell phone as she headed out the door. "There's more coffee in the kitchen, and feel free to help yourselves to anything you need."
Liz sat down next to Alex and cut the cupcakes into thirds, putting a piece of each on each plate and handing the plate to Alex. She studied the blonde before speaking.

"Robert called me this morning," she began. "He was looking for you and pretending to sound confused about why you left." Alex swallowed her cupcake and opened her mouth to protest, but Liz continued. "Fortunately, I had already talked to Casey. Can you tell me what happened last night?"

Alex put her plate down on the table, wiped her mouth with a napkin, and took a sip of her coffee before she looked up at Liz, who was studying her carefully. "Robert raped me last night. Violently." She held out her wrists to show the ligature marks, and pointed to the light bruise on her face. "When he left to go back out to a dinner party, I called Olivia, who took me to the hospital for a rape kit, then took my statement and gave it to Casey. Don had called her when Olivia told him what happened, and she came to the hospital and then drove us back here."

"I trust Casey to work on this and keep it discrete," Alex continued, "but I'd appreciate it if you'd help her out. I'm not technically Casey's boss, but I am her superior, so I wouldn't want there to be any allegations of impropriety against the DA's office. You know how Robert is when he thinks there's a scandal somewhere."

Liz nodded. "SVU has your full statement and evidence from the rape kit?"

"Olivia took my statement last night and handed it off to Munch and Fin. She's not going to work the case, but I trust them. CSU got the sheets and the… other evidence before we left the apartment. Rape kit will show fluids, bruises, tearing, and a total of 13 stitches."

Liz grimaced into her cupcake. "Ouch."

"Tell me about it. I'm very sore."

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I never thought he was good enough for you," Liz commented. "I know he's done well for himself, but I always thought he was far more interested in your bank account, name, and political connections than he was in you. When you announced your engagement, I thought you were settling."

"I just… I thought he was a good man. And when I came back to New York, I was just so overwhelmed trying to get my life back. I'd lost so much time, and I wanted to pick up where I'd left off."

"You can't hurry love, Alex. I've known you since you were a little girl, and you deserve the best. The last thing you should do is settle."

"I know. I've just… I've waited so long."

They sat for a while, sipping their coffee, Liz glancing sideways at her goddaughter. Alex's furrowed brow meant she was thinking.

"Is there something else?" Liz asked as Alex pushed the crumbs around on her plate.

"Maybe," Alex said tentatively. "I'm not sure. It might be impossible to prove. But if anyone could do it, you, Casey, and I could."

Liz nodded, waiting for her to continue.

"I want to test out the new statute on reproductive coercion as sexual abuse." Alex put down her
plate, leaned back into the couch, and looked directly at Liz. "The doctor called this morning. The blood test from yesterday showed I'm three weeks pregnant. And the more I think about it, the more I'm sure Robert was fucking with my birth control. He wanted kids now, and kept pressuring me to go off the pill. I was planning on getting an IUD put in next month..." she paused. "I'll have to go through my calendar for the past few weeks and go through each day to be sure, but I think he was hiding my pills or flushing them to make me think I'd already taken them, or something."

"That's going to be awfully hard to prove in court."

"I know."

"If you have any more packets at home, you should have the ME's office test them to make sure they're real. Finding packets of fake birth control pills with his fingerprints would be better evidence than your word that you kept losing your pills. The jury might just think you're a scatterbrain, despite all the evidence to the contrary."

"I have one unfinished pack in my purse, and I'll get the rest when I go over there with uniforms this week to move out my stuff. He keeps calling my family and friends wondering why I left, so he clearly doesn't think he's done anything wrong. I doubt he even suspects the rape allegations, much less that I'd catch on if he did something. He won't touch them."

"You're probably right. He did seem quite dense this morning in his message."

Both women looked up and then at each other when there was a knock on the door. Olivia had her key, so it wasn't her. Alex went over to look through the peephole, and was relieved to find Casey standing on the other side.

"Come in," she said, opening the door. "Have a seat. Can I get you some coffee?"

Alex went into the kitchen with another mug, and filled all three. She set a plate and a fork down in front of Casey, who was trying not to eye the cupcakes on the table.

"Here, have some. I'll get Liv another cupcake later," Alex said. "She went out for a run so we could talk privately."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt." Casey said. "I called your phone again, but you didn't answer and voice mail was full. Then I called Olivia, but she didn't answer either. I won't stay."

"It's okay. We're done for now." Liz explained. "Not that we're not happy to see you, but what brings you here?"

Casey took a sip of her coffee. "Well, Liz, after you told me that Robert had called you this morning, and he called me this morning, I took the liberty of chasing down Petrovsky for a temporary order of protection. We'll be waiting on the lab results from the evidence for a few days, even though Melinda's rushing the evidence. You know we can't get an arrest warrant until we have all of the evidence, but I could at least get the TOP. I'm hoping Melinda will have some preliminary results by Tuesday."

"He called you too? Jesus. Is he going to call the whole damn DA's office? He called my father twice, and my brother, plus he left 3 messages on my voice mail and 8 missed calls." Alex cursed. "Thank you. I actually was going to ask Liz to do that before she left."

"As far as I know, he hasn't called anyone else. But I did include in the order of protection that he is not allowed to contact you by phone, email, Facebook, text message, carrier pigeon, or any other means of communication. He's also prohibited from contacting employees of the DA's office who
aren't directly involved in the case. And just for good measure, there's a gag order prohibiting him from discussing the charges against him with anyone except SVU, me, Liz, Branch, and his own counsel."

"Casey, thank you," Alex murmured. "You have definitely earned your cupcake."

Casey cut the remaining pieces in half. "I think Liv has earned her cupcake just as much, if not more than I have, so I'm just going to have a taste. If she sees the box, she'll be hurt if we don't save her any."

"She did see the box before she left, and I promised I'd save her some," Alex agreed.

Olivia looked at her watch as she started to walk a final loop around the park. She had been gone just about an hour, but figured she'd cool down before she went back. After all, she was going to make up for lost calories when she got back.

Her phone rang just as she took a sip of water, and she answered without checking the caller ID.

"Benson."

"Why do you always answer like that when I call?" a familiar voice teased.

"Habit, I guess. Hi, Jenna." Olivia replied. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'm on my way to your apartment, actually," Jenna answered. "I thought we should talk."

"I'm not at my apartment right now. I'm in the park. And I'm not sure we have anything to talk about."

"Listen, I feel bad about how we left things last night. I know I was pretty insensitive, but I don't want to end things with you over this."

"Can you come meet me by the 73rd street entrance? I don't have a lot of time before I have to get back, but we can talk for a few minutes if you want."

Olivia waited at the park entrance and waved when she saw the young, petite redhead approach. She leaned in for a hug, and was taken aback when the normally timid woman placed a deep kiss on her mouth.

"Jenna, wow, that was unexpected," she said, pulling away after a few seconds. "I guess I didn't think you'd be that eager to see me today after what happened."

"Listen, Liv, I wanted to say that I'm sorry about what happened last night. I know how important your job is to you, and as much as I don't like it, I don't want to lose you over this. I wanted to invite you to dinner at my place tonight and make it up to you."

Olivia bit her lower lip. "Jenna, I like you a lot, I really do," she began slowly. She'd thought the breakup talk was already over, and wasn't prepared to have it again. "But last night, when I left, it was because a friend was attacked. It's our case," she added quickly, sensing Jenna's displeasure, "but I get called out of a lot of dates for work. How would you have felt if the call had come after we made love for the first time last night, and I had to go? I think you would have been pretty upset."

"I would have understood," Jenna said carefully.
Olivia stopped walking and turned to face Jenna, taking hold of both of her hands and looking into
her eyes. "Jenna, I think you want to understand, and I believe that you care about me. But I saw
how upset you were last night, and I know that if we stay together, and I keep having to leave in the
middle of the night, you're going to get tired of it very soon. We've only been together three months,
we're already having this argument, and it's only going to get worse the more time we spend
together. I don't want to make love to you and then break up in a week because I got called out
again. I wouldn't be able to handle that."

Jenna looked away as she started to cry. "It's just… I've never met anyone like you before."

Olivia cupped her hand around her girlfriend's cheek and wiped away a tear with her thumb. "But
you deserve a lot more than I can give you right now. There's always work, there's my friend who
was attacked who is going to be staying with me until she finds a new place…"

"Your friend is staying with you? I see how it is."

"She's just a friend, Jenna. We used to work together; we've been friends for a long time. Her fiancé
attacked her last night so she broke it off and moved out. She's also straight."

"I was straight too, until I met you."

Olivia sighed. "Jenna, there's nothing between us other than friendship, but she really needs my
support right now, and between that and our argument about me always getting called out, I just
don't think things are going to work out with us. I'm sorry."

"Me too," Jenna said softly. She turned to leave and hurried off without saying goodbye.

Olivia took a deep breath and wiped away the tears that were forming in her own eyes. She'd been
gone almost an hour and a half, so she turned and jogged the few blocks back to her apartment,
where she found Alex, Liz, and Casey drinking coffee and sharing office gossip.

"I hope you saved me some cupcake," she said as she sat down, taking what was left in the plastic
box and grabbing a fork from the kitchen. "I definitely need this after all that running."

Liz smiled, something Olivia had only rarely seen her do. "Olivia, thank you for helping Alex at the
hospital last night and for letting her stay with you."

"I'd say it was my pleasure, but given the circumstances, I don't really think that's appropriate."

"Hardly," Liz agreed. "She said you're not working the case, and that you took a few days off to
help her find a place and get her stuff moved out. I told her that she's free to stay with me if you need
your space back, and that I'll help in any way I can."

"Bringing these cupcakes is help enough, Liz," Olivia joked. "It's no trouble at all having her here.
Besides, we have an investigation of our own to work on once Alex is healed up a bit and ready to
leave the apartment." She reached over and squeezed Alex's hand.

"Oh yeah? What investigation is that?" Casey asked, amused. She wasn't aware of any open cases.

"We're going to solve the disappearance of Alex Cabot. And when we find her, we're going to bring
her back."
Chapter 8

After Casey and Liz reminded Alex and Olivia to call if they needed anything, they left, and Olivia excused herself to take a shower, leaving Alex alone on the couch reading.

Once Olivia was under the hot water, she allowed herself to cry. She wasn't sure if she was emotionally drained from supporting Alex and watching her friend's heart break, or confused and disappointed at the end of her own relationship. She suspected it was a little of both.

Nor could she figure out whether she had been completely honest with Jenna about the reasons for ending the relationship. Before Sealview, she'd had arguments with new lovers about her work obligations, but she hadn't ended a relationship before it had even had a chance to take off. If Jenna had happened a year ago, she wouldn't have waited nearly as long to get into bed, and she would have spent more time reassuring her lover, explaining her work schedule and putting extra effort into date nights.

Was she avoiding getting close to Jenna because of Sealview, and sabotaging the relationship? Did she actually think it wouldn't have worked out because of the argument over her work schedule? Or was she just getting less and less willing to continue relationships she was uncertain about because she was getting older?

Olivia wasn't sure, but it sure as hell hurt. She thought back to how she had held Alex this morning while she'd cried, and wished someone would do that for her. But Alex had enough of her own to deal with.

When she got out of the shower, she checked the mirror to make sure her eyes weren't too red from crying before getting dressed and going back to sit down on the couch. Alex was holding a book open on her lap, not actually reading, and staring off into space.

"You okay?" Alex finally asked, looking over at Olivia, who nodded without turning her head. "I know you saw her when you went out. You can talk about it if you want. Gives me a chance to focus on someone else's problems for a change."

Olivia's mouth curled into a half smile, and she sighed. "How did you know?"

"I knew when you came back that you were upset." Alex paused, unsure of how much to pry. "Did you ever tell her what happened?"

"No, I didn't tell her anything more than what I told her last night - that I had a friend who needed my help, and that I didn't think things were going to work out between us."

"That's not what I mean." Alex looked at her pointedly, and suddenly Olivia understood that Alex had caught her slip of the tongue at 4 in the morning. "Last night you said that you haven't been intimate with anyone 'since.'"

"Alex, I really don't want to talk about it."

"Liv, I'm not asking you to talk to me about it if you don't want to. I'm asking you if you told her the reason, or if you're using work and my… situation as reasons to break it off."

"I don't know," Olivia said softly. "I'm 41. I think part of it is what happened, and part of it is just losing my patience for relationships I don't think are going to work out. And it's not fair of me to dump this on her when I'm not sure she'd even want me after I told her and I don't think it's going to
work out anyway."

"Look, Liv, I know I'm probably the last person in the world who should be giving relationship advice right now, but I think if she really cares about you, she'll listen and help you through it. Isn't that what love is suppose to be about?"

"You're assuming facts not entered into evidence, Counselor," Olivia replied.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"That we're in love. I can't figure out if I love her, or if I'm just lonely and scared. And I think that if I have to think about it, it's probably the latter. And she deserves someone who knows for sure."

Olivia felt tears forming in her eyes.

Alex put a pillow on her lap and patted it, then tugged Olivia's arm until she put her head down on the pillow, and began rubbing her back.

"Listen, Alex, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to dump all this on you. You've got enough of your own stuff to deal with, I'm sure."

Alex looked down at Olivia and squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. "First of all, you're not 'dumping' anything on me; I asked. Second, I can't spend every minute thinking about my own problems, because I'll start to wallow. And wallowing almost killed me in Wisconsin. It's good for me to focus on something outside of myself right now. And third, given everything you're doing for me, it's the very least I can do for you. God knows I hardly deserve your help after the way I treated you."

Olivia reached up to grab Alex's hand and squeeze it, and looked up into Alex's eyes. "Lex, I never stopped being your friend."

"But at some point, I stopped being yours." Her tone was apologetic.

"I don't think that's true. And you don't have to do anything to 'deserve' my friendship."

"I picked up the phone to call you so many times when I came back, and I just… I couldn't. I wasn't the same person."

"You don't owe me an explanation, Alex. I can't imagine it's easy to come back from the dead after 3 years. If it were me, I'm not sure my first phone call would have been to the person who was there when I was shot," Olivia said.

"It's not. I'm still really screwed up."

"I told you we're going to work on that. Do you remember the conversation we had when you came back for the Connors trial?"

"You mean when you told me that it's hard to be someone you're not?"

"Yeah, that one. Except I think sometimes it can be even harder to be who you really are."

Alex nodded. "If you can even figure it out at all."

Olivia squeezed her hand again. "We'll figure it out. I promise."

"We can both work on a little healing this week."
After they sat there for a while, Olivia spoke. "About 9 months ago, I went undercover at Sealview," she began, looking straight ahead at the coffee table and trying to keep her voice steady. "Fin was there as a CO. One of the other COs had a reputation for taking advantage of prisoners. The prison was on lockdown because of a TB outbreak, and he, uh, provoked me, and then went to take me to solitary. He took me down to the basement instead."

She took a deep breath and made an effort to speak deliberately. She didn't want to cry. "I was in handcuffs. He locked the basement door. There was a mattress on the floor. He laid me down, and when he went to take off his pants, I struggled, and kicked him, and ran away, but there was nowhere to go. He got me up against the wall, and he told me if I bit him, he'd kill me. He'd just started to push into my mouth when Fin came through the door. If he hadn't…" Olivia stopped talking to swallow the lump that was forming in the back of her throat.

"Oh, sweetie," Alex soothed, rubbing Olivia's back again. "I'm so sorry, Liv. I had no idea. I should have been there for you."

"Nobody did. Casey took my statement. That makes you the only other person who knows the whole story. Fin guessed, but I never talked to him about it. I didn't tell Elliot. We had the guy on rape and murder, so he plead out to life, and it didn't go to trial. I was dating someone at the time. Kurt Moss, from the Ledger. I tried to pretend everything was normal, since I wasn't *actually* raped, until we tried to have sex and I freaked out. I couldn't tell him what happened, he couldn't deal with the nightmares and the no sex, we broke it off. That's what happened to me. I haven't been intimate with anyone since then."

"That's horrible. I can't believe he did that to you. What an asshole."

Olivia shrugged. "Happens a lot more than you think. We weren't that serious. Sex was a big part of our relationship, so…"

"So he dumped you instead of helping you heal? Jesus." Alex's face contorted into the scowl she reserved for unremorseful murderers and their defense attorneys.

"Yeah, it sucked. But I don't think it would have been helpful for me if he'd stuck around to pressure me back into bed. We already had an expiration date."

"And your girlfriend - ex-girlfriend - you couldn't tell her and give her the chance to be there for you? Or did you assume that she would leave you if she found out because Kurt did?" Olivia's face contorted in pain. "Liv, all I'm saying is that you've been seeing her for three months and haven't mentioned it, and I've been back in your life for less than 24 hours after having been gone for almost 4 years."

"That's different. We were friends for years before, and we both saw this stuff every day. Jenna works for an advertising firm, and I've told her as little as possible about my job. I don't want to lay that on her."

"You don't want to lay that on her, or you're afraid she'll run if you do?"

"A little of both, maybe. Are you saying I should call her and tell her?" Olivia asked.

"I'm saying maybe you should sort out your reasons and be sure you're breaking up with her for the right ones."

Alex's face softened as another question occurred to her, one she was almost afraid to ask. When she worked with rape victims, it was usually months or years after their attacks, and she had seen enough
of them become emotional wrecks on the stand to wonder how much they really healed. She was never quite sure if their pain was from being forced to testify and relive the worst day of their lives, or if they "Liv?" she asked, hesitating, her voice almost a whisper. "Do women ever have normal sex after being raped?"

Olivia understood the implicit question, the one she couldn't really answer. Some women never fully recovered from their assaults, but the last thing Olivia wanted was to tell Alex she'd be scared of sex for a long time, possibly years. Her experience with victims taught her that women varied widely in their recovery times, and those who had supportive, loving partners often fared the best, while those who had been victims of abuse in a relationship had a much harder time establishing trust with someone new.

She sat up and put her knee on the couch so she could turn to face Alex, who had tears in her eyes. She took both of Alex's hands in hers and gave them a squeeze, looking into her eyes and rubbing her thumbs over Alex's knuckles as she spoke.

"Lex, I'm not going to lie to you. It's going to be really rough, and it'll take a while before you're ready to have sex again and then even longer for it to feel good, and normal, and not scary. You're going to have to find someone you really trust, someone who'll respect your boundaries, and stop when you tell him to, and do whatever you need if you have a flashback or a panic attack. You were hurt by someone you were supposed to be able to trust. You'll have good sex again, you just have to wait for the right someone."

Alex shrugged and turned her head away from Olivia, and withdrew her hands as she blushed. "Now you're the one assuming facts not entered into evidence." Olivia raised her eyebrow. "One is assuming I trusted Robert to begin with. I didn't. He didn't respect my boundaries from the beginning, and I was an idiot for staying as long as I did. Two is assuming I've had good sex. I'm pretty sure I have not."

"Why not?" Olivia asked softly.

Alex looked back at Olivia, into wide brown eyes. She saw no judgement or shame in her eyes, just concern and caring in her soft features. Olivia bit her lower lip before pressing her lips together, arching an eyebrow and squinting just a little to study Alex's face for clues that she was prying too much into her personal life. Alex hesitated. She wasn't sure if it was because she had pressed Olivia for information earlier, or because her friend was so good at carefully extracting information from reluctant victims, but she felt at ease. A little embarrassed, maybe, but not uncomfortable.

"Why didn't I trust Robert, or why haven't I had good sex?" Alex asked finally.

"Either," Olivia replied.

"I didn't trust Robert because he couldn't keep his hands off me. He had to have sex every single night, and wouldn't leave me alone if he didn't get it. At first I thought it was a new relationship thing. You know, honeymoon phase. Of course we would have sex when we spent the night together. Then we moved in together, and I realized that he was settling for once a day. He'd even wake me up in the middle of the night if he got home late. And it was only ever about him getting off."

"I'm sorry, Lex. That sounds awful." A realization dawned on her. "That's what you meant last night, isn't it? I asked if it was the first time he'd forced you, and you didn't say yes, you said it was the first time he was violent."

Alex nodded, still avoiding Olivia's eyes. "I wasn't going to marry him, you know. I had figured that
much out already, I just wasn't sure how to leave yet."

Olivia reached over and took Alex's hands back into her own. "Alex, look at me for a sec, sweetie," she said, waiting until Alex's watery blue eyes met her own. "Alex, you know that no matter what, I'm never going to judge you for anything, okay? You don't have to be embarrassed about anything with me. I'm just here to listen and hold your hand and help you get back on your own two feet. Nothing more, nothing less. And nothing you say will be used against you here or anywhere else."

"I know. It means a lot. Although, to be honest, I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"Maybe because you feel guilty that you somehow managed to get all the details of my sex life and Sealview earlier, despite my best efforts?" Olivia's voice had a light, teasing quality to it. She wasn't upset that she had shared so much personal information; she knew she could trust Alex, but hadn't wanted to burden her friend.

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just feeling a bit vulnerable. And I'm trying to work some stuff out. I don't normally talk about sex. With anyone. Cabots don't talk about sex." Alex shook her head. "Hell, I haven't even had anything to drink."

"Even with your partners?" Olivia returned to the same soothing, serious tone she had used to reassure Alex a few seconds before, and Alex shook her head and turned away again. "Do you think that might have something to do with why you haven't had good sex?"

"There haven't been many partners."

"Well, in my experience, a lot of men assume that what's good for them is good for their partner, unless they're told otherwise and gently encouraged in the right direction. I don't think they're intentionally selfish - most of them, anyway - they're just straightforward and easy to please. Sex is a lot more complicated for women. Every woman is different." Olivia paused. "When you're ready, I'll give you the name of a good therapist who works with victims of rape and sexual assault. There's a support group that I go to that you might find helpful as well. Learning to communicate with your partner about sex will be really important for your next relationship."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "And you know that from personal experience too?"

Olivia grunted. "Just because I know it's important doesn't mean I'm any good at it. I was before. This is just... different. I'm working on it."

Alex nodded and picked up the book she had been reading, skimming a few pages without really absorbing the content. Olivia sat forward on the couch, her elbows on her legs and hands folded between her knees. She looked at the clock, then to Alex.

"Alex, do you want to stay in tonight, or would you be up for going out and starting our investigation?"

"Depends. What do you have in mind?"

"I thought we should start by going back to the scene of the crime."

Alex swallowed hard and almost choked out the word. "O'Malley's? I haven't been there since..."

"I know. If you're not up for it, that's okay. But I think we should go there at some point."

"Will you invite the guys and Casey?"
"Only if you want me to."

"Just give us a few minutes before we meet them there. I want to have a chance to freak out a little bit in private."

"OK, I'll call them. Let's go."

Alex gripped Olivia's hand as they walked the last few blocks to O'Malley's, her eyes darting around as she tried to study each person on the street to identify threats. She ducked behind a parked car when a black SUV turned the corner and drove past the bar, then collapsed on the ground, winced in pain, and started hyperventilating.

Olivia crouched in front of her, taking her hand and rubbing her back. "Alex, can you hear me? It's Liv. It was just a car that drove by. You're safe. Lex, you're here with me and you're safe. Take a deep breath. That's it. Deep breaths."

Alex slowly regulated her breathing and opened her eyes, looking at Olivia. "I'm sorry," she whispered, tears forming. "I didn't mean to freak out like that."

"Lex, it's okay. It's just a panic attack. I thought this might happen. I had them too, the first few times I came back to the bar after you were shot."

Alex moaned in pain as she shifted on the pavement. "Ouch. Can you help me get up, Liv, before I keep embarrassing myself?"

"You're in New York, sweetie. Nobody even noticed. Besides, this is why everyone's meeting us in 20 minutes, so they wouldn't see this. Nobody we know is here." Olivia smiled and put her arms around Alex to help her stand up, and kept rubbing her back and reassuring her.

"I don't think I ever got a chance to say thanks for saving my life, Liv."

"My pleasure," Olivia murmured. "I would have been devastated if you hadn't… I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

"I know. That's why I made the Marshals let me see you. I didn't want you to feel responsible for my death."

They stood there, quietly, for a few minutes, their hands on Alex's shoulder, until Olivia squeezed it. "You okay to go in and get a table now?"

Alex cried out in pain.

"Oh fuck, I'm so sorry, Lex. Did I hurt you?" She took her hand away from her shoulder and looked into Alex's blue eyes, which were filling with tears again.

"Aie, sorry, Liv, it's just… I never regained full mobility in my arm, and last night…"

"Robert re-injured it. Alex, I didn't think. I'm so sorry. I didn't know it was hurting. Why didn't you have the doctor look at it last night?"
"It hurt when he tied me up, and then other things hurt more, and the ibuprofen helped, and then this morning it was stiff, but I didn't really have to use it today." She began massaging it with the fingers of her left hand.

"Here, let me," Olivia said, touching gently. "We'll put some ice on it when we get home, okay? You should have told me it was bothering you." She wiped a tear off Alex's cheek, then pulled her into a hug.

"Really, Olivia? It certainly didn't take you long!" Olivia pulled out of her hug with Alex to see Jenna standing next to them with her arms crossed.

"Jenna, it's not what it looks like," Olivia began.

"Really? Because it looks like you're making out with another woman less than 6 hours after we broke up. Care to explain that?" Jenna was practically spitting.

"Jenna, this is my friend Alex. We're not together." Olivia wasn't sure how much of Alex's story to tell.

Alex wiped a tear from her eye and reached out to put her hand gently on Jenna's crossed arms. "Jenna, Olivia's just my friend. I'm staying with her since I ended up in the hospital last night and left my fiancé." She looked into Jenna's eyes, which were starting to soften, and lowered her voice. "We've been friends for eight years. A few years ago, I was shot outside this bar. Liv was there and she saved my life. I had to leave the city for a while. This is the first time I've been back here since, and I had a bit of a panic attack. That's all that was going on."

Jenna looked embarrassed. "Oh," was all she managed to say. She swallowed and looked away. "I better get going, then. I'm sorry."

Alex held onto her arm. "Wait," she said. "Why don't you come have a drink with us inside? We're meeting some of Olivia's colleagues for a drink. I used to work with them. Liv?"

Olivia nodded. "Yeah, come have a drink with us," she choked out, sounding unsure. "But I have to warn you, they can be pretty brutal, especially Elliot. And you should know I've never introduced them to anyone before."

Jenna contemplated the offer. "If you're uncomfortable introducing me, I understand. We can do drinks another time. I'm sorry I overreacted."

Olivia stepped closer and reached out to take Jenna's hand and squeeze it. "I usually prefer to keep my personal life personal. But it's okay. They won't bite. It's up to you."

"Okay, as long as you're sure."

"I'm sure. Come on." Olivia turned to look at Alex. "Are you ready to go in?"

Alex's eyes followed the phantom SUV and gunshot once more, pressing her hand to her throbbing shoulder again, before looking at Jenna, then Olivia. "Yeah. I'm okay. Let's go in."

The women went to the back of the bar and took a large booth. The bartender did a double take when he came over to take their order.

"Aren't you supposed to be dead?" he asked incredulously.

Alex laughed. "Not anymore, Tom. The cartel is dead, as of almost a year ago. I just didn't have the
guts to come back here before now."

"Well, welcome back, Ms. Cabot. It's not every day a beautiful woman who bled out on our sidewalk in front of a hundred cops comes back from the dead. What are you drinking? It's on the house."

"It's Alex, please. Ms. Cabot is for court. And I think I'll stick to Diet Coke for tonight, thanks." She flashed a smile at the bartender.

"Diet Coke it is. And for you ladies?" Tom asked.

Olivia looked at Jenna, who nodded. "We'll get a pitcher of Sam Adams, please. The guys are meeting us, so bring -" she counted on her fingers "5 glasses."

"Coming right up, Detective," Tom said, winking at her. "And good to see you again, Counselor."

"Thanks Tom," Olivia replied.

Alex adjusted her glasses, pushed her hair behind her right ear, and folded her hands on the table, studying Jenna. "So," she said, finally breaking the silence. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. My name is Alexandra Cabot, and I work for the District Attorney's office. I used to be the prosecutor working with Olivia's squad. You can call me Alex." She held out her hand for Jenna to shake.

"Alex, I'm so sorry I jumped to conclusions. I'm Jenna McFarlane. I work in advertising. Nothing glamorous."

"Nice to meet you, Jenna. How did you meet Olivia?"

"We kept bumping into each other at a yoga class at that place on 75th and Amsterdam. We got coffee afterwards a few times… Oh, THAT'S why you look familiar! You're that ADA who got killed a few years ago when you tried to take down the Colombian drug cartel. I read six newspapers a day for my job. You were front page news for weeks."

Alex smiled shyly and blushed. "That's me."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to get excited. I was just confused when you said you had been shot, and then the bartender said you were dead, and… I'm sorry, I'm babbling. So what happened to you? How are you alive?"

Alex started to answer, but Tom came back with their drinks, followed by Fin, Munch, and Elliot. Saved by the bell, she thought.

"Teflon!" Munch cried, as Alex stood up to hug each of the men. She only flinched slightly at their touch, then sat back down.

"Hey!" Olivia cried, grabbing the bill from Munch's hand. "What the hell is this? Were you betting
on my personal life?"

"How long?" she demanded.

"Well, I started working with you guys almost 8 years ago, so… 8 years?" Fin answered.

"Fine." She pointed at Munch. "You won? You're putting this towards our drinks." She put the bill down on the table.

Munch looked at Alex. "How long have you known?"

"Well, I started working with you guys at the same time as Fin, so… 8 years?"

"Damn. Cabot really does know everything." Fin commented.

"I'm glad you finally believe me," Alex joked. "It took you long enough."

Munch and Fin both looked at Elliot. "Did you know about this?"

"That Cabot knows everything? Or about Liv?" Elliot smirked. "I think I'm going to invoke my 5th amendment right against self-incrimination."

"You can't invoke, Stabler. You're a witness, not a defendant. You're not protected by the 5th amendment." Alex countered.

"Fine. Then, yes, I knew that Cabot knows everything. She told us so the first time she walked into the precinct after the Morris Commission." Elliot said.

Alex laughed. "Oh, God, I was such a bitch."

"No, you were passionate and stubborn. That's what made you and Liv such a great team," Munch teased. "I hope that hasn't changed, Counselor?"

Alex shook her head. "Nope. Still just as stubborn."

"And about Liv?" Fin asked.

"Yeah, El knew. Pretty much since we became partners," Olivia said.

"You could have settled our bet years ago! Bastard!" Munch replied.

"Liv asked me not too. Said she wanted to keep her personal life personal. I respected that," Elliot explained. "Besides, it was fun to listen you two speculate. Nothing like Munch's conspiracy theories."

"But what about all those boyfriends? The guy from the Ledger? The other guy, the one from when you took the 911 call from the victim of that kiddie porn guy?" Fin asked.

"Oh, that was the case where you guys busted the guy from Montreal who had that girl in his basement for years, the one who took hundreds of pictures and posted them online?" Alex started getting excited.

"First of all, those were the same guy, Kurt Moss. I dated him for 6 months, until around the time I came back from the undercover op in Sealview. Second, I'm bi. I've dated both men and women."
And third, we're done talking about my personal life."

Olivia thought that Casey couldn't have picked a better moment to come in and interrupt the conversation. "Sorry, guys, I got caught up talking to Liz Donnelly." Casey held out her hand to Jenna.

"You heard about that?" Olivia asked, surprised.

"Of course! It was national news. I was in Charleston at the time. Liv, your picture was in the paper. I cut out the article and saved it. I was actually on a date when the story broke on the TV in the bar, and I had a bit of a rough time explaining why I was so interested in this random case from a city I'd supposedly never visited."

"Jenna, this is Casey Novak, our ADA who replaced Alex while she was dead. Case, this is Jenna McFarlane." Olivia looked away from Alex to introduce Jenna.

"Now we all know that I could never dream of replacing Alex," Casey offered, shaking Jenna's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"They know that. They just want you to feel loved so you'll get them their warrants," Alex quipped.

"I see how it is," Casey replied, laughing.

"Casey, did you know about Liv?" Fin asked.

"Case, we were just discussing how we're done discussing my personal life. And yes, she did know. Now can we move on, please?" Olivia was starting to get frustrated. She hadn't wanted Jenna to feel pressured by meeting everyone. She smiled at her and put her hand on Jenna's knee to reassure her, but Jenna just looked amused. She'd once told Olivia that she didn't mind hanging out with big groups of people, but wasn't very talkative with people she didn't know well.

"Any good lawyer would argue that you opened the door to that line of questioning when you invited Jenna to join us, Detective Benson," Casey said. "But your objection is sustained." Casey sat down next to Alex and pointed at the Coke as she poured her own beer from the pitcher on the table and took a sip. "No beer? I thought you could use a drink after the day you've had."

Alex shrugged. "I'm on some pain medication, so I'm trying to be kind to my liver," she explained. Olivia arched her eyebrow at Alex, but didn't say anything. Alex wasn't taking anything stronger than ibuprofen as far as she knew.

"So, Case, how's Donnelley? Elliot asked.

"She's fine. We'll be working together on the Sheldon case. He can afford any defense attorney in town, and since Alex is technically my boss, we want to be really careful on this one. Alex, Liz was going to talk to Branch this afternoon, just to let him know what's going on. And," she pointed at Alex, "You're not expected back in the office for at least a week, if not two."

Jenna leaned over and whispered in Olivia's ear. "Is that Alex's fiancé who attacked her?" Olivia nodded, and Jenna looked confused. "I thought you guys only did sex crimes, like rape. You just said Alex was hurt…" A flash of understanding crossed her face.

"Jen, I'm sorry I wasn't clear before, but that's usually what we mean when we say someone was 'attacked.' It's a euphemism of sorts, I suppose." Olivia murmured.

"Who do you think will represent him?" Elliot asked.
"As far as I know, he doesn't have a criminal defense attorney on retainer," Alex began. "But I think it will depend on his defense strategy."

"You think he's going to go for 'reason of mental disease or defect'?” Munch asked.

"I think I'm the one who should claim insanity for getting involved with him in the first place," Alex replied. "But considering he's at least partially mentally competent and I told him he was raping me and to stop many times, I doubt that defense would get past a judge."

"Alex, just so you know, none of us have read your statement or the medical reports yet. We thought we'd wait until Warner comes back, so you could have a few days of privacy before we dig in your business." Fin explained.

"Thanks, guys." Alex said softly.

Casey reached over the table and took her hand. "Liz and I read it, and we went over what you said this afternoon," Casey said, and immediately regretted her earlier comment about Alex's beverage choice. "And I thought you should know that Langan called this afternoon. Apparently Robert tried to hire his firm, and he refused. He said he'd call around and try to have him blacklisted. Maybe he'll end up with a public defender."

"Nah, he's worth millions. Some scumbag will defend him for the right price," Munch replied.

"Langan's probably still carrying a flame for Alex from that date all those years ago. That's why he won't defend Robert." Elliot winked at Alex.

"For the record, that was not a date, it was a business dinner. And how do you know how much Robert is worth?" Alex said. Munch smiled cryptically.

"Well, Novak will wipe the floor with whoever defends him." Fin said.

"And Liz." Casey squeezed Alex's hand again. She didn't want to spend too much time talking about the case. Alex had already dealt with enough that day, she thought. And the more they talked about potential defense attorneys and strategies, the harder it would be to ignore the interesting angle to the case that Liz had discussed with her after they'd left Olivia's apartment that afternoon.

"And why don't you dress up like that for us when we have 'business dinners'?" Elliot retorted.

"Because I'm not trying to make you jealous? I actually did date Trevor, in law school, and I'll have you know that he didn't get past a kiss on the third date and he used entirely too much tongue." Alex took a sip of her drink to hide her smirk.

"El, close your mouth and stop drooling," Olivia said. "It's unbecoming. Don't you have a wife to get home to or something?"

"Oh shit! Thanks, Liv. I'm supposed to meet Kathy for dinner in 45 minutes." Elliot replied, getting up.

"Casey, I think you'll wipe the floor with him, and then Liz will put his balls in a cheese grater and grind them over her Wheaties." Olivia said.

"Well, she is my godmother, you know. And he would deserve it," Alex said.

Olivia looked at Elliot. "Don't forget flowers. Get her some orange blossoms. For 'eternal love' and 'fruitfulness'," Olivia winked. "Or some orange roses for desire."
"Who knew you were such a romantic, Liv? I think I'll go with the roses. God knows we don't need any more fruitfulness!" Elliot smirked.

Olivia laughed. "Oh, this has nothing to do with romance. I just know you'll be more tolerable if you get laid. Go get her, partner. My love to Kathy and the kids."

Elliot got up and reached over to shake Jenna's hand. "It was nice to meet you, Jenna." He reached over to put his hand on Olivia's shoulder and squeezed it. "Liv, take good care of Cabot. Cabot, it's good to have you back. Don't forget, you're family, and there's a long line of people ready to kick this guy's ass. And keep Liv out of trouble while she's off this week."

Alex nodded and smiled. "Will do. Thanks, Stabler."

"So, Cabot, what can you tell me about Area 51?"

Alex laughed. "John, Witsec sent me to Milwaukee, Portland, Bloomington, and Charleston. I know nothing about Area 51. And if I did, it would be classified." She winked.

"Portland wasn't too bad, was it?" Olivia asked. "I was there for a few weeks about a year ago on an ecoterrorism case with Dana Lewis from the FBI. They had me buying organic produce, giving up soda, and protesting estrogen feminizing the fish in the Great Lakes."

Everyone laughed. "Portland wasn't so bad, but I wasn't even there for 3 months. And Bloomington was okay, for Indiana. It's a college town, so it's pretty liberal. But Charleston was horrible. I was just outside the city, I couldn't go anywhere without a car, and the only social activities in town were through the churches. They had me singing in the choir and doing potlucks and everything."

"Alexandra Cabot, Church Lady. I can hardly believe it." Casey said dryly.

"The church ladies were nice enough, actually. I made some friends. Got a chance to play some music. The Feds let me have a violin, but not a piano. Can you believe a Steinway isn't in the witness protection budget?"

"Our tax dollars at work," Munch said.

"So I played a bit at the church, and played in a handbell choir, and made lasagna and macaroni salad for potlucks. It was horribly suburban. I even went to Bible Study. Although that - they kicked me out after three meetings because they didn't like my literary analysis. I was 'too argumentative' for their group."

Casey laughed. "Now that I can believe. Sometimes I think being a lawyer and being Catholic don't really mix."

Munch and Fin got up to leave. "Well, ladies, it's been fun, but we're catching tonight, so we have to go back to the house." Munch said.

"We'll see you soon. Nice to meet you, Jenna. And Cabot, we got your back." Alex smiled and nodded in thanks, waving goodbye.

The remaining women sat in silence for a few minutes, studying the remnants of their drinks. "Well, now that it's just us girls, and I'm the only cop left, we're probably going to start getting hit on."

Olivia said. "And our beer is gone, and we haven't eaten. I have a bottle of wine in my fridge. Do you want to come back to my place and get some takeout?" She looked at Alex. "Lex, you up for more company? Not too tired?"
"I'm okay. I have to take some more meds, but this is a nice distraction. I'm not staying up too late, though."

"We won't stay too late, then," Casey reassured her. "I know you need your beauty rest. We'll have some dinner and some wine, then go home."

"Sounds good to me," Jenna added.

"OK, let's just pay for our drinks, I'll call in an order to the place by my apartment, and we can walk over and it'll be ready by the time we get there? How does that sound?" Olivia asked, and the other women nodded in agreement.

They dropped some money on the table as Olivia called in their food order, and then got up to put on their jackets. It was dark out now, and Alex was apprehensive as she walked back towards the door. She had forgotten her nervousness inside, surrounded by cops and her friends.

Olivia sensed her tension and put an arm around Alex's back. "Lex, I've got you. You're okay. It's safe now, remember?" She whispered reassuring words in Alex's ear as they exited the bar. Alex stopped again, outside, scanning the street for a black SUV, and exhaling when she saw the street was clear. Olivia continued murmuring instructions to breathe and stay calm until they got a few blocks away, and Alex relaxed noticeably, breathing a deep sigh of relief.
Chapter 9

Once they got a few blocks away from the bar, Alex slowly pulled away from Olivia and took a deep breath, wiping away the tears that had started forming in her eyes.

Casey and Jenna had been walking a few steps behind to give Alex space, and once the two women pulled apart, Casey caught up and put her hand on Alex's elbow. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

"Yeah, Casey, I think I'm okay now. Thanks, Liv." Olivia squeezed her hand.

"Was that the first time you went back there since…?" Casey asked quietly.

"Yeah. I thought you knew. We got there early so I could have my panic attack before the guys got there."

"That's pretty brave."

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," Alex recited, smiling wryly.

Olivia and Casey laughed. "The old lie," Olivia said. "Hey, my mother was an English professor. I know my poetry."

"Uh, sorry to interrupt, but I think I'm actually going to call it a night," Jenna said, turning the corner onto West 81st Street.

"Are you sure?" Olivia asked, realizing that she had been so focused on keeping Alex comfortable that she hadn't done a very good job of including Jenna in the conversation.

"Jenna, listen, I'm sorry I put you on the spot earlier, and I should have realized that we would mostly talk shop," Alex said. "We all work 80 hours a week or more, we barely have time for social lives outside of work, so when we get together, well, that's what we talk about." She eyed Olivia. "I've told Liv that I don't intend interfere with her personal life while she's letting me stay with her, so the two of you should make plans for coffee or dinner sometime this week. You have things to talk about. Have I made myself clear?"

"Crystal, Counselor. So you're not interfering with my personal life by interfering with my personal life. Got it." Olivia sputtered. She reached over and took Jenna's hand. "I'll call you tomorrow, then, okay?"

Jenna nodded. "Good night, then. Talk to you tomorrow." She turned and walked away.

As soon as Jenna was out of earshot, Casey turned to Olivia. "So, does one of you want to tell me what that was all about?"

Olivia sighed and started to answer, but Alex beat her to it. "Look, Liv, I'm sorry, but I didn't see what other choice we had." She turned to Casey. "She saw us outside of O'Malley's before everyone else got there. I was having a panic attack... and I'm thinking it probably looked like we were making out. So I tried to explain everything, and ended up inviting her to drinks. But given that she barely said anything the entire time, I'm not sure it was a good idea."

"Alex, I broke up with her. Twice in two days. One of which was today. And even if I hadn't broken up with her, I certainly wasn't ready to introduce her to everyone yet. Or to expose her to Munch and Fin betting on my sexual orientation."
"Liv, I'm sorry. I just think you should talk to her. Tell her what happened. And I don't want you breaking up with her because of me."

"Lex, I didn't break up with her because of you. I broke up with her because I don't think she understands my job and I don't see it getting serious."

"I think you don't see it getting serious because you haven't told her anything serious. I think you should give her a chance instead of selling her short."

"I almost forgot how annoying you are, Alex."

"Does that mean you concede that I'm right?"

"It means I'll talk to her. But I still don't know if I'll tell her anything."

"Within an hour of meeting me she knew that I was shot and that I was raped by my own fiancé and she didn't seem fazed." Alex said pointedly.

"Well, she's also not trying to sleep with you. And I'm not sure 'not fazed by rape' is what I'm going for either."

"Case, what do you think?"

"Assuming we're talking about Sealview, I think that if you haven't told her yet, there are two possible reasons. One is that you're afraid how she'll react, which is normal. But I don't think that's it, because you're usually open and honest in your relationships, and you're not the type to shy away from tough conversations. Two is that you've been taking care of her emotional needs and she's been too busy to notice yours. And if, after 3 months, she hasn't managed to coax some information out of you, she's either oblivious or insensitive. Liv, I know you like to play it close to the chest, and she hasn't known you for as long as we have, but you need to figure out your reasons before you talk to her. If you decide to talk to her."

Olivia nodded, and their arrival at the restaurant stopped the conversation while they picked up their food and went up to Olivia's apartment. Alex again refused wine, and the women made small talk, but each focused mostly on her own thoughts, Olivia wondering whether Jenna really had ignored clues that she needed emotional support, Alex exhausted from pretending everything was okay during the hours of barroom banter, and Casey thinking about what she could do to help her hurting friends. Olivia and Casey shared a bottle of wine, but didn't manage to get to their usual level of drunken gregariousness.

After she finished eating, Alex excused herself to go shower, explaining that she was going to church in the morning. Olivia followed her into the bedroom.

"Alex, do you mind if I ask Casey to stay the night? She's had a lot to drink and it's late, but it would mean one of us sharing the bed with you. Or I can bring her downstairs and get her into a cab."

"Liv, you don't have to ask me to have guests in your house."

"Alex, I just wanted to make sure it was okay with you before I said anything in front of her. Are you sure you don't mind? If you'd prefer to sleep alone, I'll make sure she gets home."

"It's okay. I don't mind sharing with you. And I can hardly expect you to sleep on your couch for however long I'm here. Although I'll have time to look for a place this week, I suppose."

"Lex, there's no rush to go anywhere. You stay as long as you want, and I have no problem sleeping
on the couch."

"Really, Liv, it's okay." Olivia nodded, sensing that Alex didn't want to talk anymore, and grabbed some clean pyjamas before going back into the living room, where Casey was putting on her coat.

"Casey, come on, let me make up the couch for you. It's late, you've been drinking. Take these, and I'll get you a toothbrush when Alex gets out of the bathroom." Olivia took the sheets and blankets she had folded up after her own night on the couch, and put them on the table, clearing off the leftovers and pouring the last of the wine into their glasses.

Casey sat down on the couch and took another sip of her wine. "So what do you think she's going to do?" Casey asked quietly once she heard the water running in the bathroom.

"I don't know. She hasn't talked to me about it. I guessed after she got off the phone with the doctor this morning. I figure she'll talk when she's ready. But she's not drinking alcohol, which has to mean she's at least thinking about keeping it. She's not on anything stronger than ibuprofen."

"I was wondering about that. I regretted my comment about her Coke in the bar."

"How did you find out?"

"Liz. Alex didn't really tell her directly either, but said she thought Robert tampered with her birth control. We're going to try to prove it in court."

"That won't be easy." Olivia said, finishing off her own glass of wine.

"No, but it would open the door for women who are being abused to file additional charges. We both know that a lot of domestic violence victims are also coerced into unwanted pregnancies."

The water turned off, and Olivia made up the couch for Casey. By the time she said goodnight, brushed her teeth, and put on her pyjamas, the lights in the bedroom were already off, and Alex seemed to be asleep. Olivia climbed into bed, careful not to crowd Alex, and whispered goodnight.

Alex had begged off dinner early to cry alone, quietly, in the shower, and knowing that she had to get up in the morning to play music in church had been a good excuse to go to bed. Now, she lay on her side, staring at the wall and trying not to make any noise as tears streamed down her face. She kept her breathing steady, and secretly hoped Olivia would notice something, anything, and give her a hug and tell her everything would be okay. She desperately wanted to tell Olivia about the pills, and her pregnancy, and how she was terrified, and how she had no idea if she could keep a baby she had never wanted in the first place, but she didn't know where to start.

Olivia awoke to the sound of whimpering, and at first, she thought it was coming from her own nightmare. She had seen Lowell Harris in her dreams again, but this time, Jenna had been in the basement, laughing at her and telling her that it was all her fault, that she shouldn't have gone in there in the first place, and that nobody would ever want to have sex with her again.

When she opened her eyes, she realized that the sounds were coming from the woman next to her, who was curled up into fetal position and shaking.

"Robert, no. Robert, do you have any idea what time it is? I was asleep. I have court in the morning. Robert, not tonight. Robert, that hurts! Stop! At least wait until I'm ready. You can't just push in like that... Robert, women are not turned on by mere proximity to a penis. There's this thing called foreplay."

Olivia reached over to touch Alex's shoulder, then climbed out of bed and kneeled in front of her,
stroking her hair. "Lex, sweetie, wake up. It's Olivia. You're having a nightmare. It's okay. You're safe. He can't hurt you." Alex bolted upright in bed, her eyes suddenly wide open. She looked around, and when she saw Olivia, she relaxed back into the pillows, and started to sob.

Olivia continued to stroke her hair and soothe her. "Sweetie, you're soaking wet. Let me get you some new pyjamas," she offered when she put her hand on the blonde's arm and felt the soaked tee-shirt. She reached over to the dresser and grabbed the first one available, and reassured Alex while she pulled off the teeshirt with one hand and pulled the sheets to cover her friend's nakedness with the other. She tossed the wet shirt aside. "I'm going to get a washcloth and some water, okay, sweetie?"

Alex nodded, and Olivia filled a glass in the kitchen and grabbed a cloth, which she used to wipe Alex's face, neck, and arms, before asking permission to pat down the sweaty skin under her top. When Olivia had finished gently washing her friend, she sat next to her on the edge of the bed, and pulled her into a hug, rubbing reassuring circles on her back and occasionally running her hand through her hair.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Olivia asked softly, once Alex's breathing had slowed. She found Olivia's touch and the cool water on the washcloth soothing, and didn't flinch, even when Olivia washed under her shirt. Something about the way she silently asked permission with her eyes before each touch, and watched for signs she was hurting Alex reassured her. Olivia's touch wasn't sexual, she didn't try to take advantage like others had or had tried to do.

"It was just a dream about Robert. Not about last night. About another… other nights, when he would come to bed and wake me up for sex."

"Do you know what you said in your dream?"

"No," Alex started turning bright red with embarrassment.

"Hey, Lex, it's okay. It's just me. For starters, you told him you were not turned on by 'mere proximity to a penis.'" Olivia laughed, then stopped when she saw Alex's degree of discomfort. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I just thought that line was funny. Did you actually say that to him?"

"No," Alex said quietly. "But I thought it more than once."

"Did he do that a lot? Have sex with you when you weren't ready? Hurt you when he entered you?"

Alex hung her head and nodded, tears streaming down her face. Olivia squeezed her tighter. "I'm so sorry, sweetie. I wish we could have gotten you out of there sooner. But you're safe now, and nobody's going to hurt you. Okay? I've got you." She continued to whisper soothing words into Alex's ear and wipe tears off her face, until her breathing slowed and she had taken more pain medication and finished her glass of water. She laid Alex back down into bed, and, climbing into bed behind her, spooned her and held her hand with the arm draped over her side. "I've got you, Lex. No more nightmares, okay? You're safe right here. Goodnight, sweetie."

And Alex and Olivia both drifted off to a nightmare-free sleep.
Chapter 10

Alex woke up early, feeling safe and warm and surprised to find she was holding someone's hand. She tried to remember if she had ever woken up like this before, but the only thing she could think of was when she had been a little girl and had climbed into bed to snuggle with her mother in the mornings when her father was on business trips. She smiled at the memory.

When she let go of Olivia's hand and shifted to get out of bed, everything came back to her - the physical pain of her stitches and the still fresh bruises between her legs, Robert and her messed up life, the embarrassing nightmare she'd had in the middle of the night that had woken up Olivia and frightened her. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, her face flushing with the thought of how exposed and vulnerable she'd been the past few days. Today was a day to reassert some independence.

She climbed out of bed carefully to avoid waking Olivia, and began to get dressed, putting on black pants from her favorite suit and a black top with three-quarter length sleeves. She frowned as she realized she hadn't packed a long-sleeved black shirt, so she would have to cover up the fading ligature marks and bruises on her wrists with concealer.

After Alex tied up her hair in a twist and put on some makeup, carefully covering the marks on her wrist and her jaw, she slipped on some flats and put heels in her purse for when she arrived at the church. It was still early; she had time to get a coffee, walk fifteen blocks, and still get there early for rehearsal before the service. She wrote a note for Olivia and Casey and left it on the counter.

Didn't want to wake you. 10 AM service at Good Shepard Presbyterian 152 West 66th St., then lunch and leading youth group. Will call when I'm done this afternoon. xx

She was glad neither woman was awake as she slipped out the door. Aside from knowing that Casey shared being Catholic with Elliot, Alex had never heard Olivia discuss her own spiritual beliefs, and she had a feeling that her friend didn't really have any. Alex had grown up going to church on Christmas and Easter with her family, but had stopped going at some point during college, where most of her liberally-minded classmates had been suspicious of religious people. For some reason, religion seemed to mean judgmental ideologues, and Alex usually preferred to keep an open mind, judging people by their actions rather than assigning worth based on their beliefs.

During her time at SVU, Alex grew certain that there couldn't possibly be a God. The horrors she saw daily - and she knew she saw far less than Olivia - were the irrefutable proof that none existed. She couldn't find meaning in the suffering of children who were raped or prostituted out to their mothers' boyfriends, or women who were stalked and executed by jealous exes, or ambitious students who were taken advantage of and scarred for life at frat parties after a drink or two too many.

She had first sought out a church as Emily, when her mother died and she was living in the middle of nowhere, Wisconsin, unable to say goodbye. The day of her mother's funeral, she had called in sick to work, driven to a nearby church, and sat in a pew for most of the day. She'd silently cross-examined God, asking questions she couldn't ask anyone else, and praying for her old life back.

After she'd been there for a few hours, looking at the alter with tears sometimes streaming down her face, an older woman had sat down next to her and taken her hand.

"My name is Maggie. I'm the associate pastor here," the woman finally said after ten minutes of silence. Maggie's face was soft, and her eyes warm. Her friendly, loving look reminded Alex of her mother, which made her start to cry all over again.
"I don't normally go to church," Alex offered by way of explanation when she finally stopped crying.

"May I ask what brings you here today?"

Alex opened her mouth to speak, but her face contorted in pain. The older woman put her hand on Alex's back to reassure her. "I've lost…" she began, searching for the right words. "Everything."

Maggie took her hands and held them, sitting in silence with Alex for a long time. "May I pray for you?" she finally asked.

"I don't know how. Or where to start." Alex admitted, her pain quickly resurfacing on her face.

"It's okay. You don't have to know how." She raised an eyebrow at Alex, who nodded in agreement, before Maggie began offering quiet prayers for love and healing. Alex closed her eyes and held on to Maggie's hands, and stayed like that until Maggie finished her prayer and pulled Alex into a hug.

"Thank you," Alex murmured when she was able to speak again.

"You don't have to thank me," Maggie replied. "Thank God. And promise me you'll come back sometime if you need to. Even if you don't normally go to church."

Alex nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

It was two weeks before Alex mustered up the courage to go back to the church after her encounter with Maggie. She went on a Thursday after work, and sat in a dimly lit pew in the back for twenty minutes. She went again the following week. And then five days later. Each time, she sat for a few minutes, tried to cobble together a prayer, and left without speaking to anyone.

A month after she'd spent half a day praying and crying alone there, she decided to go to a Sunday service. It went against everything in her nature as a lawyer, a prosecutor, to set aside the logical and methodical for the spiritual. She mentally rebelled against asking questions she didn't already know the answer to; no good lawyer ever did that. But she wasn't a lawyer anymore, she reminded herself. She was just an insurance claims processor.

"I thought I might eventually see you here on a Sunday," Maggie said, holding out her hands to take Alex's when she exited the church after the service. "It is when most people come, you know."

"I… I had to work up to it," Alex finally replied, and Maggie nodded in understanding. "I just moved here from Tulsa about two months ago, and I was a bit overwhelmed with everything." She paused. "I don't think I ever introduced myself. I'm Emily."

Alex arrived, coffee in hand, at the Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church a few minutes early, and changed her shoes before entering and greeting her fellow ringers. She had first heard handbell players at Maggie's church, but had been whisked away for the Connors trial and relocated to Portland before she'd had a chance to try it herself. When she'd been in Charleston, most of the social activities in her town had centered around the local churches, and she chose one with a good music program so she'd have a chance to play.

Though she was relatively new to playing handbells, Alex was one of the better musicians in the group, and she took her spot at the end of the table. Each ringer played two bells, one in each hand, but she played the four highest notes: G6, A6, B6, and C7. The concept of handbell ringing was relatively simple: play your note when you were supposed to, and stop playing when you weren't supposed to. Alex's part was the most complex to play, not only because it was part of the melody and she had four bells and had to shift her wrist depending on whether she wanted to play one bell,
the other, or both at the same time, but also because her bells, the highest notes, carried the most. If she screwed up, people could tell. Fortunately, she approached music like she approached court: with focus and precision.

Alex put on the pair of black gloves all ringers wore to protect their hands and grip the bells, and relaxed as she rehearsed with her group. Music invigorated her; it helped her take her mind off her cases and her problems, and she'd always played piano or her violin when she wanted to unwind or work through something. Thursday night rehearsals, which she rarely skipped if she could help it, had done wonders for her mental health, in Charleston and once she'd returned to New York and sought out a church in her own city. And she had been glad to play that weekend; she needed a break from thinking about anything to do with Robert. Like her work, her music was a part of herself she'd alluded to but never truly shared with him.

Which is why Alex was surprised, at the start of the service, to see him sitting on the end of a pew, looking directly at her, and smiling.

Alex started to shake when she noticed him, and throughout the whole prelude, she stared him down, keeping one eye on him, and dividing her other eye's attention between the music and the director, never missing a note. She shook harder and tried to take deep breaths as she filed in to her seat on the end of the first pew as the service started, and took her phone out to text Olivia.

Robert's at the church. 20 rows back, right side of alter.

She received a reply almost immediately. On my way with Casey. Munch and Fin will meet us there. Hang tight.

Alex continued to shake involuntarily, barely able to pay attention to the service or the singing, which she usually enjoyed. A hand rested on her arm, and Carol leaned over to ask if she was okay. Carol had already noticed her bare ring finger, but hadn't said anything.

Alex nodded, and when the group got up to play their second piece during the offertory, she took a deep breath, and relaxed when she noticed Munch and Fin standing at the back of the church. Olivia and Casey were standing at the end of of the side aisle where Alex's own seat was. Robert, unaware he was being watched, kept his eyes fixed on Alex, and she stared him down as she played.

Communion made Alex nervous. As she got up, took communion, and filed back to her seat, she realized that Robert could take the opportunity to come closer, to say something to her, to threaten her. And while Munch and Fin had his picture, they could only see the backs of the parishioners' heads, and wouldn't be able to get him until he exited the church. Olivia noticed the people moving and slowly started to make her way to the front of the aisle, keeping an eye on Alex as she scanned the moving crowd.

It happened in slow motion. He rounded the corner after taking communion, and leaned down, grabbing her face and pulling it in towards his own. "Please come home to me, Alexandra. Come home and make love to me," he whispered in her ear, grabbing her wrist. "The other night was so good, Alexandra. I want you. Come home."

Alex gasped at the pain on her face and her wrist, and tried to hold down the bile she felt rising in her throat. Carol pulled her back, away from him, but he leaned in for a kiss. Olivia had been watching closely, but with the line of people filing back to their seats, she hadn't noticed him leaning down until it was too late. She rushed to Alex's side, grabbing Robert's arm.

"Please come with me, sir, and don't make a scene. You're under arrest for violating the order of protection." Olivia said under her breath. She preferred to usher him out of the church to arrest him...
outside, rather than cuffing him in front of hundreds of people in a house of God. He swung around and punched her, just as Munch and Fin arrived to each grab one arm and take him outside.

As he was taken out, Casey arrived at Alex's side, dispersing the onlookers and putting an arm around a shaking Alex to comfort her. She had joined the end of the communion line, using it as an opportunity both to assuage her own guilt for missing church that morning and to get to the front of the church, to Alex.

Casey rubbed her back and gently encouraged her to take deep breaths. "Munch and Fin are going to take him in. Liv will be back in a minute. Just breathe, Alex, okay?" she reassured her, realizing that Alex would be more easily comforted by the other woman.

Carol moved over to allow Casey to enter the pew, and Casey pulled out a hymninal, held it in front of her and Alex, and began to sing. "Oh, Christ the healer, we have come to pray for health, to plead for friends. How can we fail to be restored when reached by love that never ends?"

By the time they reached the last verse, Alex's breathing had slowed, and Casey put the hymn book back and sat down, while Alex filed up to play the last piece of the service.

Aside from the fact that her eyes were a it puffy from the few tears that had managed to escape, nobody who didn't know Alex Cabot or who hadn't witnessed the encounter would ever be able to tell that she was upset. She appeared perfectly composed, as she always did in court, as she had even at the Connors trial, the outcome of which her life had depended on. Casey noticed that her breathing was still off, and that she shook her bells more vigorously than the other ringers, but only Olivia, who had made her way back to Alex's pew, could see all of the emotions in her clear blue eyes.

The service ended with a benediction, and Alex came back to her spot in the pew, where Casey and Olivia were waiting. Olivia reached out to touch Alex's hand, to reassure her, but Alex didn't let herself be comforted. She was afraid that if she showed any vulnerability, she would break down, which she didn't want to do with hundreds of people milling around exiting the church.

"That was beautiful," Casey commented, pointing at the bells as Alex filed back in. "I've never heard handbells before."

Handbells were an English instrument, common in Protestant churches but never in Catholic churches, as far as Alex knew. "Thank you. It's fun to play," Alex struggled to get the words out without showing her emotions.

Olivia sensed her discomfort and leaned in. "Alex, is there somewhere private we can go? Why don't you take Casey and tell her what happened, and I'll get statements from the people who were standing around you." She gestured to the women who had been sitting next to and directly behind Alex.

Alex nodded and pointed to the front of the church at a door next to the chapel. "That's a stairwell. There's a bathroom in there, up one flight. Nobody will be there." Casey followed her in.

"I'll come meet you in a few minutes, okay?"

Alex started shaking again as soon as the door had closed behind them. She had broken down in front of Olivia before, even before she had gone into Witsec, after the Sam Cavanaugh case, after the Cheryl Avery case, after the Connors trial, but this was the first time she thought she might cry in front of someone else from the DA's office. She trusted Casey, as a prosecutor and as a friend, enough to handle her case with sensitivity and discretion, but trusting her with her tears and her fear was another matter entirely. She could count on one hand the number of people who had ever seen
her like that in her life, and most of them had known her when she was very young.

The bathroom was secluded, and relatively clean, and Alex had discovered it by accident when she had looked for an easier way to get up to the second floor one day after rehearsal. It was the closest bathroom to the sanctuary, but because it didn't connect to the theater or the church's classrooms, few people knew of its existence, and nobody went there after the service.

As soon as the door was locked behind them, Alex rushed over to the sink and vomited up her coffee. Casey pulled out a few paper towels and wet them, handing them to Alex before putting her hand on her back.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Casey asked softly.

Alex held up her index finger, silently asking Casey to wait as she vomited into the sink again, and rinsed the sink and her mouth out with water.

"Sorry," she murmured, putting her hand on her stomach to see if she could speak without puking.

"It's okay, take your time." Casey reassured her.

"He's never come here before. He knows I go to church every other week, but I don't think I ever told him which church, and there are hundreds in Manhattan." Casey nodded, and Alex explained how she had seen Robert at the beginning of the service, that he had watched her, smiled at her, and then grabbed her arm and her face and kissed her when he passed by during communion. She started to shake and cry as she told Casey what Robert had said to her, and Casey pulled her into a hug.

Downstairs, Carol and the woman from the second pew corroborated Alex's story, about noticing that the blonde had been preoccupied from when they started playing bells, to her shaking during the service, to her distress when Robert had pulled her in and kissed her. None of the witnesses had heard what he'd whispered in her ear, but they all recognized Robert from his picture. He had never been there before, as far as they knew, although they knew Alex had been engaged.

"What did he do to her?" Carol asked Olivia after the others had left. "I noticed this morning that she wasn't wearing her ring, and I think I saw a mark on her arm. She tried to cover it up with makeup, but the gloves rubbed some of it off, and more came off when he grabbed her."

"I appreciate your concern, but I can't comment on an open police matter," Olivia offered, hoping the woman would accept her answer. She seemed to care about Alex.

"I understand. But if Special Victims is involved…"

"Ma'am, Alex used to work with Special Victims, and she's my friend. My squad is involved because we're used to handling cases where discretion is required. And since she's an employee of the District Attorney's office, we're trying to keep the investigation discrete to maintain her privacy. That's all." She hoped her answer would satisfy the woman's curiosity. The last thing she wanted to do was out Alex as a rape victim.

"Are you going to check on her?" Carol asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to give these statements to the Assistant District Attorney who is handling the case and check on Alex, who is with her."

"Alex usually comes to brunch with us across the street after church. We'll understand if she can't make it, but please tell her we hope she comes. It might help her take her mind off things. We stay there until 1 or 2 drinking coffee, so don't rush. And please feel free to join us as well, Detective."
Any friend of Alex's is a friend of ours."

"Thank you. I'll make sure she gets the invitation."

Olivia looked around one more time before going up the stairs to knock on the bathroom door one flight up.

"Case, Lex, it's me," she said softly. "Can I come in?"

She waited as the door was unlocked, and was surprised to find Casey holding Alex, whose eyes were still wet and puffy with tears. Olivia knew if Alex was crying in front of Casey, it must be really bad.

Olivia put down the notepad she had used to collect the witness statements, and wrapped an arm around Alex's back. Casey pulled away and put Alex's arm around Olivia, effectively shifting Alex's hug to her. Olivia looked at Casey questioningly.

Casey took the notepads, and put her hand on Alex's shoulder. "I'm going to leave you with Liv, and go in with these statements and try to personally see to it that he gets locked up for the night, at least. Steele's on today, and I'm not handing this off to him."

"Thank you, Casey. For everything. I mean it." Alex truly appreciated the fact that Jim Steele wouldn't be finding out about her mess today. Or ever, if she could help it.

"Don't mention it. I'll call you and let you know how it goes." Casey replied, gathering her things and turning to unlock the door.

"And Casey?"

"Yeah?" She looked back over her shoulder at Alex.

"If anyone ever asks, you will deny, under oath, that you ever saw me cry. Are we clear?"

Casey smiled. "I didn't see anyone cry. Liv, did you see anyone cry?"

"Nope, not me."

"Good. I don't want any defense attorneys hearing any rumors that I've gone soft."

"Alex, I don't think any of them would believe it." Casey winked and opened the door. "I'll keep you both posted."

"One more thing. The tie. He was wearing it. Get it to Warner." She held out her wrist so Casey knew what she meant.

Casey's eyes widened and she shook her head. "I'll get it, Alex," she promised. "Sick fuck," she said under her breath as she exited the bathroom and went downstairs.

Once she had gone, Olivia locked the door behind her and held Alex tight. Alex felt another wave of sobs hit her, and her whole body shook as Olivia rocked her and soothed her, running her fingers through her hair. "They got him. You're safe. You're with me, and you're safe. It's going to be okay, Lex," she repeated, over and over, as she held her friend.

"I can't… I couldn't… In front of Casey… she saw…"

Olivia shushed her. "I'm sorry, sweetie, I should have come up here with you and let her talk to the
people downstairs. I shouldn't have left you alone. I should have known you wouldn't want to cry in front of Casey."

"No… right thing… police… take statements." She hiccuped.

Olivia understood. Alex knew that this case had to be by the book if they wanted to put Robert away for a long time. And that meant that the police had to investigate and take statements. Involving Casey in the investigative process was asking for trouble.

"Shh, Lex, don't talk, just breathe."

"Thanks for taking care of me, Olivia. I'm sorry I'm such a mess," Alex murmured after a few minutes.

"Lex, I care about you. You're my friend. Of course I'm going to help you through a rough time. You have nothing to apologize for."

"I just… Liv, I feel like I'm falling apart."

"It's okay to feel like that. And I already told you, we're going to find the pieces and put you back together, together." She looked Alex in the eyes and wiped the tears off her cheeks. "You're going to be okay. It'll take a while, but we'll get you there. And you're not alone. You've got me. And you've got Liz, and Casey, and Elliot, and Munch, and Fin, and Cragen. Okay? We're going to get you through this. I'm going to get you through this."

"I didn't know he was capable of this."

"I know you didn't, sweetie. A lot of abusive men don't show their true colors until they think they've 'sealed the deal.' This isn't on you for not noticing. This is all his fault."

"I know. But he came to my church and made me feel vulnerable and exposed in front of all those people. And I hate feeling like that."

"I know you do, Lex." Olivia paused. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't think anyone noticed how you were feeling while you were playing. I know you felt vulnerable, but you looked composed, like you do in court, and as far as I could tell, you played everything perfectly. So it was just a few people who saw what happened when he grabbed you. And anyone would have been shaken by what he did."

Alex nodded. Olivia could tell she was unconvinced by her argument, but she decided to let it go. Even a few people seeing Alex vulnerable was too many.

When she felt Alex finally start to breathe normally and relax, Olivia pulled back a little, and looked at Alex. The makeup on her face was smeared, her eyes were red and puffy, and she had taken out her hair. Olivia still thought she looked beautiful, but knew Alex would never go out in public without cleaning up first.

"How are you doing? What do you need right now?" Olivia asked, noticing that Alex was starting to look restless but seemed unsure about something. "Your friend from bells said they'd be across the street for a long time, if you feel up to joining them. Or we can go home, or take a walk, or whatever you want."

Alex looked at her watch. The service had started at 10, and lasted just over an hour. It wasn't even noon, and Alex already felt exhausted.
"I think I don't want him to take anything else away from me, today or any other day," Alex declared. She pulled out of Olivia's embrace and looked in the mirror, surveying the damage to her hair and makeup.

"Okay. What's the plan?"

"First, I need to get cleaned up. I have some makeup and a brush in my purse." She splashed water on her face, then opened the bag and pulled out her makeup, and hesitated. This was another first for her, doing her makeup in front of someone else. Olivia had seen at her worst. She'd seen her not made up at all. But for some reason, applying her makeup in front of Olivia seemed strangely intimate. Fortunately, it only took a few minutes for her to apply a light coat, just enough to blend the bruise on her face and the spots under her puffy eyes, and go over the marks on her wrists.

She ran the brush through her hair, opting to leave it down, and cleaned her glasses, which she'd taken off at some point because they fogged up when she cried. She put them back on, and exchanged the heels for the flats she had worn on her walk. Somehow, wearing flats to a church service seemed wrong, like wearing them for court would be. But now that she was just going to lunch and to lead teenagers in an ethics discussion, she thought she could relax a bit.

When she finished slipping on her shoes, she looked at Olivia.

"Feel a bit better now?" Olivia asked. Alex nodded, still quiet. "What do you want to do now?"

"Next, I need to pee. And I don't need moral support for that." Alex smiled as she unlocked the bathroom door so Olivia would leave. "Then, I think I need 15 minutes to myself, just to collect my thoughts. And then, I'm going to go to the diner for lunch and continue with the day I had planned."

"Okay," Olivia agreed, unsure of where she figured in all of these plans, or what her friend still needed from her. "How about this: I'll give you 20 minutes, and head over to the diner for a cup of coffee. When you get there, I'll go run my errands, unless you need me. Does that sound okay?"

"You can stay for lunch with us, Liv. I just wasn't sure if lunch with church ladies was your thing."

"As long as it's okay with you," Olivia offered, not wanting to intrude. "But only because Carol invited me first." She winked, and took Alex's phone to set the alarm. "I'm setting your alarm for 25 minutes. That should give you enough time to pee, do whatever you need to do, and walk over to the diner. I'm going to set my alarm for 25 minutes, and order you an omelette and some coffee when it rings. And if you're not there, I'm going to come find you to make sure you're okay. Okay?"

Alex nodded, and pointed to the door. "Okay, but now I really have to pee. I'll see you in a bit. I promise."

Olivia gave her a quick hug, and without thinking, pressed a kiss into her temple. "It'll be okay, Lex. I'll see you in a bit."

As Olivia closed the door behind her and walked down the stairs to the diner across the street, she let go of the breath she'd been holding since she'd seen Robert grab Alex in the church, and wondered why she had just kissed Alex. The blonde hadn't seemed bothered by the show of affection, but she was confused by her own actions. She chalked it up to her own vulnerability: not being able to protect Alex from a second attack that happened right in front of her, her complicated, unresolved, non-breakup with Jenna, her feelings about revealing Sealview to Alex, her elation that Alex was her friend again, even if the circumstances surrounding her return were nothing less than heartbreaking… Olivia could think of a dozen reasons why she was an emotional mess too, and in no position to be making advances on her straight, emotionally fragile friend. She took a walk around the block of her
own before heading into the diner.

After Olivia left the bathroom, Alex sat down on the toilet, breathing in and out a few times before looking in the mirror to make sure she was presentable. When she finally slipped out of the bathroom, she headed up one more flight of stairs, to an empty room with a piano, and she sat down to play and clear her head.
Chapter 11

When Olivia entered the diner, she immediately recognized the short, gray haired woman sitting at a larger table with several other churchgoers.

"Detective," Carol said, motioning to two empty seats she had saved at the table. "She decided not to come? I suppose that's understandable."

"Carol, please, it's Olivia. And she's coming. She just needed a few minutes first. I gave her 20 minutes and told her if she's not here to eat the omelette I'm ordering for her, I would go looking for her."

Carol smiled. "I'm glad. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd wanted to get out of here."

"She's tough. I think she didn't want him to ruin her day."

Carol nodded. "She stared him down the whole time we played. Never took her eyes off him. I don't know how she followed the music."

Olivia laughed. "That's Alex. I was standing in the back for the second piece, and I saw the look. She usually saves that look for defense attorneys."

"Well, if that's what the scum of New York City are up against, I feel much safer."

"Don't we all," Olivia replied.

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude. This is my partner, Marie," Carol said, pointing to the woman next to her. Olivia kept her expression neutral, but was glad that Alex's church seemed open and accepting. "Don't be surprised, Olivia," Carol admonished. "Not all Christian churches are homophobic. Jesus's message was one of love."

"Of course," Olivia sputtered, surprised that Carol had been able to read her face. "I just don't have a lot of experience with churches, is all."

Carol continued introducing the people around the table. "This is Mark, who plays with us, and his wife, Nicole, who sings in the choir. And Stacey, and Jane, who both play with us as well."

"Nice to meet you all," Olivia said, smiling and shaking each person's hand. "I'm Olivia Benson, with the NYPD. I used to work with Alex. The music today was beautiful. I've never heard a handbell choir before." She was deliberately vague, wanting to avoid getting into the details of her job with civilians.

"She's the one who dragged Alex's ex out of church by the ear today," Carol said, laughing. "It looks like he got you good, too," she continued, pointing to a bruise that was forming on her jaw. "Did you put some ice on that?"

"This little thing? I've been hit a lot harder. And I got him a lot worse once we got outside. Resisting arrest, you know. There were witnesses." Olivia winked.

"What was he arrested for?" Mark asked. While the women in the group understood the subtext of some kind of abuse, Mark's mind went to other kinds of offenses, like drugs or bar fights.

"He violated a temporary order of protection," Olivia explained, not wanting to get into why it was
filed. "It ordered him to stay at least 500 feet away from Alex at all times. Now, if he had just gone to
the church, it would have been hard to arrest him for that, because he could have just claimed that he
felt like going to church. But since he actually approached her and intimidated her inside the church,
we're hoping they'll at least keep him overnight until we can arrest him on other charges."

Mark opened his mouth to ask a followup question, and Olivia was grateful to see the name Casey
Novak light up on her caller ID.

"Excuse me, I have to take this phone call," she said. "I'll be right back… Benson." Olivia stepped
outside the door to get some privacy.

"Hi Liv, it's Casey. Is Alex with you? I just tried to call her and she didn't answer."

"No, she told me she wanted 20 minutes to herself, so I'm waiting with some of her church friends at
a diner across the street. She has…" Olivia looked at her watch. "8 minutes left before I go looking
for her."

"OK, I'll just tell you and you can pass it along, okay? Petrovsky is holding him 24 hours. It seems as
though he's having a bit of trouble finding legal representation in New York, so for now, he's
exercising his right to represent himself. Didn't want some 'fleabag legal aide attorney,' as he so
nicely put it. Munch and Fin got the tie to CSU, and they found skin cells and a drop of blood on it,
which Warner is going to test. She thinks she'll have the results from the rape kit tomorrow, so that
should be enough to indict and at least keep him a little longer. I'm not sure if a judge will hold him
without bail, though, so we can't count on him being held longer than tomorrow." Casey paused.

"I want to get a tech team into the apartment later this afternoon to see if we can find any evidence of
the birth control tampering. Can you and Alex meet me there so she can show the techs where to
look?"

"Let me check with her and get back to you, but I'm sure she'll think that's a good idea. I'll let you
know what time. Anything else?" Olivia replied.

"There's one other thing… and I think you should be the one to tell her," Casey said hesitatingly. She
doubted Alex would want her to see her cry again.

"Case, what is it?"

"Liv, Warner got some preliminary results from the sheets that were taken off the bed. There were
some dark pubic hairs and multiple samples of semen, which Warner assumed are Robert's. And
there were some blonde pubic hairs, vaginal fluids, and blood, which she assumed are Alex's."

"Well, that's about what we expected. What aren't you telling me?"

Casey took a deep breath. "Warner also found two other, unknown samples of vaginal fluids."

"The bastard was cheating on her, too."

Casey winced. "That's what I was thinking," she agreed. "And that's probably what happened. We'll
have to identify the DNA to be sure, and that will take a few days, at least, or longer if they're not in
the system. But I think, given her… reading materials… that we should consider all possibilities
before we go to court. I don't want to get sandbagged." She added the last sentence quickly, sensing
Olivia's anger.

Olivia looked around to make sure nobody was listening and Alex wasn't walking up the sidewalk
towards her, before lowering her voice. "Casey, are you asking me to ask her if she's secretly having
lesbian affairs and bringing lovers home with her? Are you really asking me that?"

"Look, Liv…"

"Hold on. Since I'm 125% certain she's not having an affair, here's what we're going to do. First, we're going to ask Alex and the cleaning lady who changed the sheets, and when, and figure out what kind of timeline we're looking at, and who else may have had access to the bed. Maybe the cleaning lady is having a lesbian affair. Then, Munch and Fin are going to get a timeline from Robert on when he was home, and dump his LUDS to see who he's been calling. You should have enough evidence for that now. Then, and only then, if none of that turns anything up, I'll ask her."

Casey sighed. "You're right. I'm jumping to conclusions. There's no reason to think that it would be her. I'm sorry. I'll get the guys on that."

"Case, I get it, and if it were any other victim, I'd ask the question. But it's not any victim, it's Alex, and she's already fragile. So let's just make sure we have to ask before we do, okay?"

"Okay."

"But I'll talk to her about the other thing, and let you know what time we can meet you."

Olivia hung up, and noticed that her timer had gone off and a new text from Alex had arrived. "Leaving now. Be there in 5." She went back into the diner and ordered Alex's omelette and another cup of coffee. Just as she was finished adding the cream and sugar, Alex arrived, and slid into the seat next to her, looking slightly more relaxed and refreshed.

"Feeling better, hun?" Carol asked, reaching across the table to touch Alex's arm.

Alex smiled. It was her polite courtroom smile, not her genuine, happy smile, but her friends didn't seem to notice the difference. "A bit," she conceded. "Thanks for the coffee, Liv. Did Casey call? I saw she called me but I didn't call her back."

Olivia knew Alex wouldn't have mentioned it if it wasn't okay for her to briefly summarize the more benign details of their conversation. "I just got off the phone with her, actually. Petrovsky locked him up until tomorrow. And it seems as though he's having trouble finding adequate legal representation in New York County. I can't imagine why," Olivia said, smirking.

"Why? Because he won't hire anyone who's not the best, and Casey already told me Langan blacklisted him." Alex laughed and smiled, and this time, Olivia could tell it was genuine. "But enough about this mess. Surely we have more interesting things to discuss."

"Like Alexandra Cabot having a life and friends outside of work? And changing the topic away from work at lunch? I never thought I'd see the day," Olivia said, a hint of teasing in her voice.

"Just one of the many skills I picked up in Witsec," Alex retorted, immediately regretting that she had referenced her 'time away' in front of her church friends. They knew she had left New York for a few years and had recently returned, but she had never been forthcoming about the details of her absence. She didn't know if they had read about her death in the paper.

"So, church, handbells, having a life… what else?"

"Yoga. Cooking without setting my stove on fire. Shopping at the Gap. Even gardening. I had a garden in Wisconsin, and one in Portland. Things I don't have time do do when I'm working 80 hours a week."
"You'll have to tell me about what it's like to have 'hobbies' sometime," Olivia said, smiling and pulling money out of her wallet for her coffee and lunch. "But for now, I'm going to run and do some errands before we meet Casey tonight. You going to be okay?"

"I'll be alright. Thanks for coming. And for checking up on me." She blushed. "I'm just moderating a youth group debate on the death penalty this afternoon. Should be fun."

"Are you going to tell them about the time you told our perp you'd be answering the phone from the Governor's mansion to turn down his request for a reprieve?"

"Uh, no," Alex replied, laughing. "Although I am planning on bringing up the question of gender equality in capital recommendations." She looked at her friends, explaining. "A few years ago, I sought a recommendation from the capital committee on a case where a woman had killed 4 men and claimed self-defense each time. Unfortunately, the DA didn't want to make that the first capital conviction of a woman in the state of New York, so we didn't end up seeking the death penalty."

"We had a case recently where this guy was raping 11 year old girls, and Louisiana wanted to extradite him, because raping a child under 12 is a capital offense there. Ask them what they think about that."

"What happened?" Alex asked.

"Guy was an unmedicated schizophrenic who wanted to be extradited when he realized what he'd done. He'd been doing it because he'd seen his sister get raped when he was younger. I wanted to hand him over to the Feds, but Casey got him a 730 hearing and he was declared incompetent to stand trial and couldn't be extradited. He's still in Bellevue."

Alex pressed into her temple and shook her head. "You sure you don't want to stick around for the debate? SVU cases are good material."

"No, and you don't need me to talk about SVU cases, either. I'm going to run some errands. Leave catching the perps to me, and I'll leave the political debates to you." Olivia stood up and put on her jacket. "It was nice to meet all of you. Have a good afternoon."

As soon as Olivia was out of sight, she pulled her cellphone out of her pocket and dialed a familiar number.

"Jenna? It's Olivia. Listen, before you say anything, you should know that there are some things I haven't told you, and I think I wasn't totally honest with you about the reasons I broke up with you. I think we should talk and figure out what to do." She held her breath, waiting for the sigh on the other end and an invitation. "Okay, I'll be there in 10 minutes."

Olivia could hear her heart pounding as she took the elevator up to Jenna's apartment and thought about what she was going to say. Alex was right. Jenna deserved to hear the whole story from her. To be given a chance to be supportive. Olivia hadn't been fair to her in the first place, focusing on fun dates and systematically avoiding all talk of the terrible things she saw at work and the darker parts of her past. She didn't need to tell Jenna everything about herself today - just enough to show that she trusted her. Enough to see that Jenna could handle some of her darkness.

Jenna opened the door and pulled her inside for a kiss, wrapping her arms around the detective under her leather jacket. Off to a good start, Olivia thought, as she kissed the shorter, younger woman back. She doesn't hate me for being indecisive.

"Hey," Olivia finally said, smiling, when they broke the kiss to breathe. "I'm happy to see you, too.
And I take it that means I haven't completely fucked this up?"

Jenna laughed. "Alex told me last night not to give up hope on you yet. And we've had too much fun together these last few months to just throw it all away." She smiled seductively. "And I'm hoping, after we talk, that we can try a different kind of fun…"

Olivia gulped. That wasn't what she'd had in mind when she'd called, but her breath hitched as she thought about finally undressing the woman in front of her and putting her own insecurities to rest. It would reassure both of them, she thought, after she'd told Jenna what had happened to her.

"Let's sit down," Olivia suggested, motioning towards the couch. She left some space between her and the other woman, but pointed her knees towards her and looked into Jenna's eyes. Olivia opened her mouth, faltering, and decided to start with the easier stuff. "I'm sorry we put you on the spot last night. We're not used to going out with non-colleagues, and we tend to talk about work too much."

"Last night was fine," Jenna said. "They all seem nice. Although the conversation was a bit morbid. Bringing Alex back to the bar where she was shot and gossiping about her fiancé who raped her?"

"First of all, it was her decision to go there, and we talked about it first. We were there for moral support. She's just getting her life back after being gone for three years, and it was really hard on her. Second, Alex knows that my squad is doing everything they can to kick Robert's ass and put him in jail for a very long time."

Olivia paused. This conversation was definitely not going the way she'd wanted it to. If Jenna had trouble understanding why Alex would need to visit the place where she'd been shot, or why she'd want to talk about what had happened to her… Maybe Casey had been right after all. Maybe there was a subconscious reason she hadn't discussed anything serious with Jenna.

"Jenna, listen. I have had a lot of fun with you these last few months. And I hope we can keep having fun together. But if we're going to be in a relationship, I need you to know now that it's not all fun with me." She looked for Jenna's reaction, but her face remained neutral. "I work really tough cases. I get personally involved. I'm affected when children are hurt. I get called out in the middle of the night to talk to rape victims, and I hold their hand while they tell me about the worst thing that's ever happened to them. I've been shielding you from it so far, because I know you're not used to dealing with the same things I am. And I need to know you're going to be able to handle me when I've been chasing a child molester for 72 hours with no sleep and I come home crying because we were too late to save his last victim."

Jenna nodded slowly, looking serious. "I can try, Olivia, but you're going to have to give me time to get used to the idea."

"Of course. I just feel like we hardly ever talk about anything serious, and I want to make sure we can talk about difficult things before we take the next step. Because sometimes, I need to talk about what happens at work and cry or be angry about my cases."

"I understand," Jenna said. Olivia was quiet, and Jenna, assuming she was done with her serious talk, leaned over and pulled her into a hot kiss, pushing her tongue into Olivia's mouth and grazing her fingertips down Olivia's side until she cupped her breast. Olivia was surprised by Jenna's forwardness, but took it as a good sign that she hadn't flinched at the intimate touch.

She ended the kiss and pulled back, cupping her hand on Jenna's cheek and looking her in the eye. "There's one more thing I have to tell you about." She took a deep breath, and tried to keep her voice steady. "A few months ago, during a case I was working, I was sexually assaulted. A man tried to force himself into my mouth. My partner got there just in time to stop him." She couldn't read Jenna's
"Okay," Jenna offered, unsure of what to say. Olivia knew not everyone had her skills at putting people at ease, but she wished Jenna would offer a bit of reassurance.

"I'm just saying I may need to take it a bit slow. I haven't been intimate with anyone since," Olivia explained, blushing and looking down at her hands on her lap.

Jenna leaned in with another deep kiss, and started running her hands up and down Olivia's back and sides. "Well I guess it's a good thing that I'm not a man," she explained.

"I guess so," Olivia said, glad Jenna wasn't making a big deal of her assault. She was getting very turned on, and it felt so good to finally be in a position where she wanted to have sex.

"Jenna," she said, her breath speeding up. "I've only got a few hours. I can't stay over tonight because I have to go pick up some things at Alex's old apartment with Casey. I have to leave at 5:30."

Jenna kept kissing her. "It's okay. I can't wait anymore."

Olivia pushed Jenna back onto the couch and tugged at the collar of her shirt, putting her mouth on Jenna's pulse point and swirling her tongue down her collarbone. Jenna gasped. Olivia quickly unbuttoned her shirt and pulled it off, dropping it on the floor, and slid a right hand under Jenna's bra to kneed her breast.

Jenna pulled her up and walked backwards to the bedroom, where Olivia removed her bra and laid her down on the bed. She opened her mouth and started kissing all over Jenna's responsive body, pausing to tease each nipple with her tongue and to lick under her navel as she undid the button on Jenna's jeans, and pulled off her pants and her panties.

She looked up at Jenna's face for approval before spreading Jenna's legs and kissing the inside of her thighs and behind her knees.

Olivia took a deep breath before she continued. I can do this, she thought, sticking out her tongue. This is nothing like what he did to me. I'm good at this. I'm in control here.

She touched a finger to Jenna's entrance, spreading around the moisture before swirling her tongue around Jenna's clit, and latching on with her mouth. Normally, she would draw it out, teasing her lover and bringing her to the edge over and over before letting her climax, but today, she just wanted to prove to herself that she still had it in her. She had barely registered how nervous she was until she was kissing her way down Jenna's body, and though she didn't want to stop, she also knew she wasn't emotionally ready for extended lovemaking.

Besides, she thought, I'll have plenty of time ease Jenna in to lesbian sex and multiple orgasms. I'm sure for her first time she'll be happy even if I don't take too long.

Olivia pushed two fingers into Jenna, curling them forward as she sucked hard on Jenna's clit. Jenna arched her back, crying out Olivia's name, and Olivia slowed her fingers and rubbed her thumb over the sensitive spot until Jenna's breathing slowed.

She crawled up Jenna's body and pulled her in close, wiping her fingers on the sheets and kissing Jenna deeply.

"That was incredible," Jenna murmured. "Nobody's ever… I've never felt like that before."
"It was my pleasure," Olivia whispered back, smiling. "And there's plenty more where that came from. Welcome to sleeping with a woman."

After Jenna recovered, she pushed Olivia onto her back, and began removing her clothes and kissing her way down her body. Olivia's eyes widened as Jenna pushed her thighs apart, and she willed herself not to flash back to the almost daily invasive pat-downs and cavity searches she had endured at the women's prison.

Calm down, Benson, this is consensual sex, not a cavity search, she pep-talked.

"Jenna, you don't have to, you know… not right away," she tried to reassure her new, inexperienced lover.

"Oh, but I want to," Jenna murmured against her nipple. "I've been doing my homework."

Olivia gasped and closed her eyes as she felt a finger teasing her entrance and circling her clit. She reached for a hand, and tangled her fingers in Jenna's hair, willing herself to relax, and trying to stay grounded, connected to the present moment.

She opened her eyes and sat up suddenly, pulling Jenna's mouth away from her body by her hair. "Jenna, I think I'm not as ready for this as I thought," Olivia choked out, tears forming in her eyes.

Jenna put a hand on her chest, gently trying to push Olivia back down towards the bed. "Shh," she whispered. "Sure you are. It'll be okay. Just relax and let go," she soothed.

Olivia allowed herself to be pushed back down, and she closed her eyes, willing her body to relax as Jenna kissed her way back down her body and went back to what she had been doing. Jenna is gentle. She's not going to hurt me. It'll be okay.

The more Olivia felt the pressure building between her legs, the more she tried to reassure herself that it was okay. Her breath quickened as her internal battle raged. It'll be over soon. Her eyes snapped open and she shifted suddenly, dislodging a confused Jenna. "Stop. Please, I need you to stop," Olivia said, tears forming in her eyes as she quickly made her way to the edge of the bed and tried to cover herself and get dressed. "I'm sorry. I'm not ready for this. I'm so sorry."

A look of hurt, then of anger flashed across Jenna's face, and Olivia understood. She hadn't truly wanted it, she had been trying to purge Harris's assault from her body by replacing it with her own: forcing herself to submit to something that she desperately wanted to enjoy but that had given her little pleasure. She had wanted to prove she still had it, that she still liked it, that she was still desirable. She had wanted to prove that she hadn't thought of Jenna only as a fun distraction, but as a serious, fulfilling relationship.

Somewhere along the line, she realized that Jenna had been so focused on trying to give her physical pleasure that she had completely neglected her lover's emotional state. She hadn't offered any support or understanding when Olivia had talked about the perils of her job, or pressed for more information about the assault. Jenna had treated their serious talk as an obstacle to sex, something that had to be gotten out of the way before they could get naked together for the first time.

And once she had begun touching Olivia, Jenna had been oblivious to her lover's distress. Jenna hadn't taken her fears or her hesitations seriously; she hadn't tried to put her at ease or initiated a conversation about her limits or her triggers, or sought to reassure her. These were things Olivia would have done if her own partner had been an assault victim. Olivia knew she couldn't expect everyone to be as sensitive to victims as she was, and she knew she could have started the difficult conversations herself, but she realized, suddenly, in the middle of sex, that Jenna herself was the
reason she hadn't talked about the assault before.

Olivia hadn't intended to have sex with Jenna if she hadn't planned on continuing the relationship. But Jenna wanted fun, not emotional and difficult. And Olivia couldn't expose herself, make herself physically vulnerable to someone who at best, was oblivious to, and at worst, willfully ignored her emotional vulnerability.

Jenna looked crestfallen as she sat, naked, on the edge of her bed. "I know I haven't done this before, and I'm sorry if it wasn't good, but…"

Olivia interrupted her, not wanting to be cruel. "Jenna, look at me. This isn't about you, and it doesn't mean your skills are lacking. It's about me, and my assault, and the fact that I've been trying to force myself to be ready for a physical relationship when clearly, I'm not. I'm not what you need right now, and I think I need to be alone right now, to heal. It wasn't fair of me to do this to you, and I'm sorry, but I really have to go. Please know I didn't mean for it to turn out like this."

She kissed Jenna softly on the cheek, grabbed her coat and walked as fast as she could, out of the apartment and down 78th Street towards Central Park. Olivia took the long way to her thinking spot, a secluded rock overlooking a stream where she went to think about difficult cases, and when she finally sat down, she pulled her knees up to her chest and cried.

After her first round of crying, she sent a text message to Casey. You were right about Jenna. It's over.

Olivia touched her forehead to her knees and rocked herself back and forth.

She didn't know how long she had been sitting there when she felt a presence beside her, and then an arm around her back.

"Casey," she said, wiping her tears on her sleeve and lifting up her head.

"Liv, I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"I called her, to talk. Tell her about Sealview. Then we tried to, but I couldn't… I mean, I could, but I freaked out when she did, and she didn't even notice. And then she thought I was upset because she wasn't good, and I had to explain that that wasn't it, and that it's me who's fucked up."

"Liv, it's not your fault." Casey murmured, rubbing her back.

"It's my fault for getting into bed with her when I should have known I wasn't ready. But it's been 9 fucking months. I should be ready. I wasn't even raped."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Olivia. You came really close to being raped, and I can't imagine how scary it must have been for you in that basement. You can't put a timeline on your recovery, or say that it 'should only' be so long because it wasn't something worse. You know that. You tell women that every single day."

"I know, Casey. She just… If it had been me, I would have made damn well sure she was okay, and comfortable, and that everything I did was okay before I did it, and she didn't even have the courtesy to…"

"Shh, Liv, it's okay. I know you would have. But not everyone is as compassionate as you are, and not everyone can deal with other people's problems. I'm sorry."

"I think I wanted a distraction. I dated someone who was fun and carefree because I wanted to be
fun and carefree instead of hurt and lonely and screwed up."

"I dated someone like that after I broke up with Charlie," Casey said quietly. "It was fun. We did things together, went to museums, the park. We didn't fight. The sex was good. Lasted almost a year. At some point I realized we didn't fight because we didn't have anything to fight for. And he knew about Charlie, but I could never talk to him about him, or about our tough cases. I broke it off a few months after I started with SVU and I couldn't deal with not talking about how much some of our cases upset me. And he couldn't deal with me not wanting to have sex sometimes because of something horrible I'd dealt with in court."

Olivia nodded. "That's the worst part about this job sometimes, is that nobody gets it. I told her about that today too, that I'd shielded her from it so far but sometimes I'd need support during tough cases, and she brushed me off."

"I think there's a place for short, fun, distracting relationships with no emotional depth. Mine helped me heal, a little, and yours probably did too. We just both need something more than that, and neither of us has found it yet."

"Thanks, Casey. You didn't have to come down here, you know."

"You're welcome. And I know I didn't have to come down here, but I thought you could use a friend. And I'm guessing you texted me and not Alex because she's had enough shit dumped on her this weekend, am I right?"

Olivia smiled. "You know me too well." She looked at her watch. "That, and she's probably just finishing up her church youth group death penalty debate right about now. She said she'd be done around 4." Casey raised an eyebrow. "Don't ask."

"I called her before I came over here."

"Case, I didn't want her to have to deal with this, and Robert, and the search of her apartment… it's too much for one person in one weekend."

"I know that, but you know as well as I do that she'd be able to read it on your face as soon as she saw you. I figured that this way, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." Casey pulled a plastic grocery bag out of her purse and opened it to show Olivia the contents and pulling out a DVD.

Casey continued. "We're going to walk over to meet Alex on her way out of the church now. On the way back to your apartment, we're going to stop and get a pizza for you two for dinner. Then, Alex is going to give me her keys and door codes and some clues on where to look for stuff so I can get into the apartment with Liz and CSU to do the search. Liz thinks it'll be better if you two aren't there anyway, so he can't claim conflict later. Meanwhile, you and Alex are going to eat your dinner, have some popcorn and some Milkduds, and watch The Dead Poets Society or some other movie with no violence and no romance, and try to relax. I'll call to let you know what we find in the apartment, okay?"

Olivia felt tears welling up in her eyes again. "Casey… thank you," she said softly, as they got up off the rock to head back.
Chapter 12

Casey got Alex and Olivia settled into the couch with pizza, snacks, and a movie before asking Alex for the keys to the penthouse apartment and some tips on where to find where Robert may have hidden evidence.

The two women sat side by side on the couch, picking at their food and not really watching the movie, neither feeling very talkative.

"How was the death penalty debate?" Olivia finally asked. She kept going over what had happened at Jenna's apartment and needed to get out of her own head.

Alex looked up at Olivia and opened her eyes, which Olivia hadn't realized had been closed.

"Hmm?"

"Were you asleep? I'm sorry. Here, lie down and take this blanket."

"I wasn't asleep, I was just resting my eyes. Pretending everything is okay is so exhausting."

"I know, sweetie. You don't have to pretend anything here. Lie down." Olivia soothed.

Alex covered herself with the blanket, but leaned into Olivia instead, putting her head on her shoulder. "Debate was okay," she murmured. "They're a bunch of softies."

"Well, you were having the debate at a church. What did you expect?"

Alex laughed. "Fair point. I guess they have more faith in the power of forgiveness and rehabilitation than I do."

"You've seen a lot more horrible stuff than they have. Than most people have. And they're young, too. What's the adage? If you're young and conservative you have no heart, and if you're old and liberal you have no brain?"

"Are you calling me old, Detective?"

"No, just older than them. I know you're about as liberal as I am." Olivia paused. "I didn't know you were religious, though."

"I wasn't," Alex answered simply. "I went to a church in Wisconsin a few times after my mom died. The pastor there - a woman named Maggie - saw that I was in pain and tried to help me, encouraged me to come to services. Never asked too many questions I couldn't answer. I got into the habit, and then when I was in Charleston, being in a church was basically the only way to have any kind of social life. I didn't like their politics, but I wanted to keep going when I came back to New York, so I did some research and found a liberal church, and ended up really liking the people there."

"I'm not sure what I believe, exactly, but nobody's ever asked me that. I doubt anyone ever will, unless I decide to run for national office someday. Considering that we still can't seem to elect non-religious candidates. But what I can believe changes from week to week. When we say the prayers, I only say what I believe. Don't want to commit perjury in front of God." Alex chuckled.

"I imagine God holding you in contempt would be a lot worse than Petrovsky." Olivia agreed, laughing.
"I bet. But it's refreshing to be around people who believe in the good of humanity and the possibility of redemption, after spending all week locking up murderers and rapists."

"That makes sense," Olivia said, nodding. "Does it help?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it makes me feel like I'm a part of something. Something good. Something bigger than me, or my job. And other times it makes me feel really small and alone, like there are all these people around me who believe in something powerful and they're so sure, and I just can't make myself be as sure as they are, no matter how hard I try." Alex paused. "When I was in Witsec, I really needed to believe that there was some plan. That I was going to come home someday. You know, that whole 'everything happens for a reason' bit."

"Did it work?"

"Not really."

"I think it's normal to have doubts, no matter what you believe." Olivia offered.

"Maybe, but nobody talks about it. And when I'm prosecuting cases, I can't afford to have doubts."

"Sometimes people have doubts not because they need more information, but because they're afraid. And I happen to know that you're fearless in a courtroom, Counselor."

Alex got really quiet, and Olivia watched her for a moment until she said, barely audibly, "And I'm terrified everywhere else."

Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex and held her, cradling her gently for a few minutes. "What are you afraid of, Lex?"

"Everything. That they're going to tell me they made a mistake and I have to go back. That I'm going to push too hard on a case and get shot again, and killed next time. That I'll always be alone. That Robert is as good as it's going to get for me."

"Hey, Lex, shh, it's all going to be okay. First of all, I saw Velez's body myself, and he's not coming back. And I bet you're a lot more careful now with your cases. Have you been insulting the sexual performance of any violent drug lords recently?"

Alex giggled and shook her head. "Okay, then you're all good there. And as far as Robert is concerned, I promise you that you deserve so much better than him, and you'll find it. It'll just take time. You won't be alone forever. Worst case scenario, you hit 50 and you're still alone, you move in with me, and we'll get a couple of cats, okay? But you've got plenty of time."

Alex nodded sadly. "I was being honest the other night, you know, about my relationships. I… I just feel like the men I've dated have gone out with me because of my looks, or my money, or my political ambitions. The only person who dated me for who I am was my insurance adjustor in Wisconsin, when I didn't have money or political ambitions, and he didn't even know my real name."

Olivia's heart broke at the admission. She had never been in love herself, but at least she usually dated people who wanted to be with her. People who found her attractive and who made an effort in her bed. The advantage of being working class and a cop was that nobody ever had ulterior motives for dating her. "I'm sorry, Lex. You don't deserve that. But I bet there's some lucky guy out there who will be willing to look past the gorgeous, rich, brilliant, ambitious, successful Alexandra Cabot and who will love you for your beautiful, compassionate heart."

Alex smiled sadly. "You're so sweet, Liv."
"It's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, Counselor. I'd say it under oath."

"I'm just not sure if I believe it," Alex whispered.

Alex paused and leaned out of Olivia's embrace, wondering how to bring up what Olivia had at Jenna's apartment. She had sensed Olivia's sadness on the walk back and wanted to inquire, but a look from Casey and a shake of her head had suggested that she should wait until Olivia brought it up.

But she knew Olivia. Olivia wouldn't mention it if Alex didn't ask. She'd focus on comforting Alex, choosing distracting topics of conversation and watching movies and doing anything to avoid potentially upsetting her friend. Olivia always tried to put her at ease, and had never pried into anything serious unless Alex had wanted to talk about it, and there was no reason to think she'd willingly bring up Jenna now, when Alex was hurting and vulnerable.

Alex looked at Olivia, and saw the pain hiding just under the surface of her eyes. She rubbed her hand gently along the top of Olivia's back. "Liv," she said softly, tentatively. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it, but when you're ready, will you tell me what happened this afternoon?"

Alex saw a flash of something - of pain, of shame, maybe, of embarrassment - cross Olivia's face, just as she shifted and leaned over to pick up her phone off the coffee table as it rang and flashed Casey Novak's name on the screen.

"Hey, Casey," she answered. "Hold on, I'm going to put you on speaker."

"Hi Liv, Alex," Casey replied. "We got him. Aside from the packets of pills we found in your medicine cabinet, we found a stash in a baggie in the back of his sock drawer. The packages look very similar, but one set's probably fake. CSU is going to run the prints, but they're betting that the set in his drawer will be yours, that he was taking and hiding, and that they'll have both of your prints on them. The ones in your medicine cabinet will probably have just his prints, if they're fake. Liz and I are going to get a warrant for his financials to see where he ordered them. We might be able to get him on drug charges since I doubt these are legal, and hopefully we can shut down the people who have been selling these to dishonest men, too. Might even be a RICO charge in there."

Alex's face went blank as she pushed up off of Olivia and ran to the bathroom, where she promptly lost the contents of her stomach.

"Case, Alex went in the other room. You're off speaker. Did you get anything else?"

"Yeah. Fin talked to the doorman. Turns out, Robert has been inviting women over on Tuesday and Thursday nights for at least a few months. Alex told him she usually has yoga on Tuesday nights and bells on Thursdays. He's getting us the guest logs for the past few months, along with the security tapes from the past week, but he says it's almost always different women. That'll probably help us find the two fluid donors. Of course, having affairs isn't illegal, and they weren't married with a fidelity clause in a prenup, so I'm not sure this does anything for us except prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Robert was an even bigger ass than we thought. But we should have plenty to arraign him tomorrow."

"Thanks, Case. I'll talk to Alex about this tonight. Let me know about the arraignment and I'll see if Alex wants to be there."

"Okay. I'm probably going to go question him tomorrow morning, try to get a confession out of him before he lawyers up. Push his buttons a bit. I have a feeling Alex would rather this didn't go to trial, so she can avoid the publicity. She'll be protected by rape shield laws, but if it gets in the papers,
people might figure it out anyway."

"She knows that. You can ask her tomorrow, but she'd probably want a deal as long as he does real
time," Olivia said. "I'm going to go check on her. Thanks for everything today, Casey. It means a lot
to both of us."

"My pleasure. The women of New York need both of you back here, kicking ass and taking names,
and I'm happy to help make that happen sooner rather than later. You're both good people, and good
friends."

Olivia hung up the phone and went into the bathroom, where she found Alex curled up in front of
the toilet. She took two washcloths out from the linen closet and wet them with cool water,
crouching down beside Alex and using one to wipe Alex's mouth, and the other to press to her
forehead and the back of her neck.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" Olivia asked softly. "Do you still feel sick, or do you think you're
done for now?"

"I don't know."

"He just wanted me to breed. To be some trophy wife. I guess I knew he didn't love me… I didn't
think he was capable of…" she leaned over the toilet to dry heave.

"Shh, Lex, come here." Olivia closed the toilet and put a towel on it, then pulled Alex up so she
could sit and crouched in front of her. "Sweetie, Robert's a bad guy, but it's not your fault. You
couldn't have known what he would do."

"I feel so stupid. I was engaged to this guy. I considered marrying him. I slept with him. God, I'm
such an idiot."

"You're not stupid, Lex. Don't talk about my best friend that way. Robert's the one who's stupid, for
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Alex looked at her curiously, unsure of what to think. Surely there couldn't be more.

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Alex. "Sweetie, there's one more thing we need to talk about. About Robert."

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Olivia reached out and took Alex's hand. "Alex, Casey told me that Warner found DNA from two
other women on the sheets." She paused to let the news sink in. "She said that the doorman said
Robert would bring women home on Tuesday and Thursday nights, when you were out. I'm sorry."

Alex didn't react, she just continued to stare straight ahead, her expression blank. "Lex, I have to ask
you this," Olivia continued, speaking softly. "When you did the rape kit the other night, did they
check for STDs?"

Alex shook her head. "I told them it was my fiancé and they didn't have to because we were
monogamous."

"And before Friday, were you using condoms?" Olivia ran her thumb over Alex's knuckles, trying to
ask as gently as possible.

Alex bit her lip. "I thought I was on the pill."

"Okay then, tomorrow we're going to go back to the hospital and have Amelia check your blood,
okay? Just to make sure."

Alex nodded and stood up. "I'm tired. I'm going to go to bed," she declared, emotionless. Olivia
looked at her watch. It was barely 7:30.
"Lex, take a quick shower first to relax a bit, I'll make you a cup of tea and some toast to settle your stomach, and then I'll give you half of one of my sleeping pills, okay? It'll help you sleep through the night."

Olivia reached over to touch Alex's arm, guiding her gently back into the bathroom, and turned on the hot water. Alex conceded, following Olivia's touch, but her expression was blank, and she didn't blink. Olivia took a small orange bottle out of the medicine cabinet and brought it with her into the kitchen, closing the bathroom door behind her.

When Olivia heard the hot water stop and Alex go into the bedroom to get dressed, she put in some toast and poured a cup of mint tea and a small glass of water, and set everything on a tray. There was no response when she knocked on the door.

"Alex?" Olivia inquired, knocking again. "Lex, unless you tell me not to, I'm coming in. I've got some tea and some toast for before you go to bed." After waiting a few seconds for her to protest, she opened the door.

Alex was laying on her side, wrapped in a towel, curled up in fetal position, her wet, tangled hair on the pillow she was clutching to her chest. Her face was still emotionless, and she stared straight ahead, not acknowledging Olivia, who realized it was much like the position she had found Alex in after the rape.

Olivia approached Alex slowly, setting the tray down on the nightstand and taking Alex's bedclothes off the dresser, where she had placed them in the morning. She slid a hand under Alex's left shoulder, pushing her gently up into sitting position, before guiding Alex's arms into the sleeves of her nightshirt and pulling it over the top of the towel. Then, she slid a pair of panties and pyjama pants up as far as they would go on Alex's legs, and looked away while Alex reluctantly stood up and pulled them up to her waist.

Olivia took the towel from Alex and gently pat her hair dry. She handed the mug of tea to Alex as she hung up the towel and took a comb off her dresser, running it through Alex's hair. Alex held onto the tea, but made no effort to drink any of it. She didn't react to the gentle touch of the comb on her scalp.

When Olivia finished, she put down the comb on the nightstand and turned to Alex. "Have a few sips of tea and a couple bites of toast before you go to sleep, okay?"

Alex nodded and brought the mug up to her lips. The tea was cooler, now, and she took a long sip. Olivia held out the plate of toast, and Alex managed a few bites before putting the uneaten portion back on the plate and handing the mug back to Olivia. Pulling down the covers, Alex slipped into bed and curled up in a ball again.

"Lex, do you want to take an Ambien to help you fall asleep?" Olivia held out the pill and glass of water.

"Are you offering me a Schedule IV controlled substance without a prescription, Detective?" Alex tried to make a joke, but just sounded sad.

"It's a misdemeanor at best, so I'm sure the DA's office would decline to prosecute. You don't have to, I just thought it might help you sleep through the night." Olivia went to put the pill and glass back on the nightstand, when Alex reached out her arm to take it.

"I took these in Witsec. They helped, sometimes, a bit."
She took the pill, and Olivia sat with her, stroking Alex's still damp hair as she closed her eyes and tried to breathe deeply, inviting sleep.

"Liv?" she whispered, as sleep began to overtake her. "I'm sorry about whatever happened with Jenna. I'm sorry I'm being selfish and needy and a terrible friend…"

Olivia put a finger to Alex's lips, interrupting her. "Shh, Lex, it's okay. You're not a terrible friend, and it's okay to lean on me. I know you need it. Go to sleep. We'll talk about it later." She slipped out of the room as Alex drifted off to sleep.

Olivia closed the bedroom door and cleaned up their dinner, trying to banish all thoughts about Jenna from her mind. Before Sealview, she had had plenty of one night stands that ended in her leaving her lover's apartment in the middle of the night, but when she was in a relationship, she made it a point not to leave after sex unless she got called out.

Giving up on avoiding the topic that was haunting her, Olivia tried to sort out her feelings about what had happened that afternoon. Jenna had clearly assumed she meant to consummate their relationship when she'd come over, and had barely given her an opportunity to talk. Maybe she'd figured that the best arguments against breaking up were a different kind of oral. Olivia was mostly embarrassed at how easily she had gotten caught up in the moment, how her instincts that had screamed at her about Jenna's lack of sensitivity about her demons had been silenced so quickly once she'd started pleasuring Jenna.

Most of all, Olivia felt incredibly guilty. She and Jenna had both been adamant about not wanting casual sex or a one night stand. Jenna had been apprehensive about their first time, and nervous about her ability to satisfy her more experienced lover. And by jumping out of bed and running away as Jenna tried to touch her, Olivia knew she had inadvertently validated Jenna's fears of inadequacy.

After she finished the dishes, Olivia retrieved her cell phone from the table by the door and sat down on the couch with a beer to check the messages Jenna had left.

The first message was angry. "Did you seriously just give me the best orgasm of my life and then run out on me? What the fuck, Olivia?"

The second message, left half an hour after the first, was more worried. "Olivia, did I do something wrong? Are you okay? Please call me so we can talk about what happened."

Olivia sighed, and debated the merits of waiting until the next day to call Jenna back, but ultimately decided to get it over with.

"Olivia? Where are you? Are you okay?" Jenna answered, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Jenna —" Olivia began, not quite knowing what to say. She decided to go with the simplest version of the truth, not really wanting to rehash the details of her assault. "Jenna, I'm so sorry about this afternoon. I wasn't ready and I freaked out. I shouldn't have started something I couldn't finish."

"Did I do something wrong?"

Olivia hesitated before answering and chose her words carefully. Jenna hadn't done anything wrong, per se, she just hadn't been overly sensitive to her more experienced lover's needs. "It's not that you did anything wrong. It's just that I'm still recovering from my assault, and I felt like you brushed me off to get me into bed. I wanted to sleep with you - I really did. But I wasn't ready, and I shouldn't have put myself - or you, for that matter - in that position."

"You mean the position of giving me amazing sex and then running out on me before I could return
the favor?" Jenna asked, trying to hide the bite in her voice.

Olivia sighed. "No, I mean the position of getting carried away and sleeping with you when I didn't feel comfortable opening up to you about my assault. Jenna, I like you a lot, and we've had fun together, but I haven't been able to talk to you about anything serious." Olivia paused. "In my job, I have to deal with a lot of serious stuff and a lot of hurt and broken people. Sometimes I like to get away and try to forget all of that, but sometimes I'm hurt and broken, and I need some support. This weekend was rough on me. My best friend, who was shot and bled out in my arms, literally came back from the dead and was violently assaulted by her fiancé, and then stalked by him this morning. And not only am I trying to be supportive of her in her return to New York and take care of her after her rape, I'm also recovering from something. I was really vulnerable this afternoon, and instead of letting me talk about it, you dismissed it and got me into bed with you." As soon as she said it, she realized it didn't sound right. "I know I'm just as responsible as you are. And I don't regret what happened because of anything you did, just because of me. I'm sorry."

When Olivia stopped ranting, she realized Jenna was crying quietly. "So that's it, then?" she sniffled.

"I didn't mean for it to turn out like this. I feel like an ass. I'm sorry."

"Me too."

Olivia ended the call and stared at her phone for a while without moving, before finally deciding, at around 9, to take a shower and get ready for bed. As she stood under the hot water, washing away thoughts of Sealview and her major screwup with Jenna, Olivia tried to think back to times when she'd really enjoyed sex, and ran her hands over her body. Her therapist had told her - and she had told countless victims - that masturbation and fantasies were good ways to regain control over her body and feel pleasure again.

It had taken Olivia months after her attack to even consider using the technique, and a few weeks after that of touching herself in the shower or in bed before falling asleep before she had been able to coax herself to a gentle orgasm without seeing flashbacks of being cuffed to the chain link gate in the prison basement. She generally liked to remember encounters with her best ex-lovers: her college boyfriend, Rebecca Hendrix, who had been her first female lover while they had been in the Academy together, and Kurt Moss, who had been great sex and not a lot else.

When her fingers weren't enough for her anymore, Olivia pulled down the showerhead and turned it to the pulse setting, stifling a moan as she crouched down and let the pressure build. Good thing Alex took that sleeping pill, Olivia thought. At least she wouldn't have to worry about her guest overhearing her from the bedroom. I'll have to make sure Alex knows to do this, once she's ready.

Olivia tried to push thoughts of Alex from her mind, feeling guilty about thinking about her straight, hurting friend in a moment of pleasure, but the sudden image of Alex touching herself turned her on. And before she could stop her brain from going there, Olivia thought back to Alex's comment about how she didn't think she'd ever had - or would ever have - good sex, and imagined holding Alex, caressing her, kissing her gently all over her soft, gorgeous body, and bringing her to orgasm with her tongue.

Olivia bit her lip to swallow a cry as she slipped over the edge, and momentarily felt embarrassed that one of the best orgasms she'd given herself - and the best since her attack - had come from fantasizing about her friend. Don't go there, Benson, she admonished herself as she rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. No good can come of crushing on straight friends. And the last thing Alex needs right now is her so-called friend making her uncomfortable with unrequited feelings.

After a humiliating experience in college, Olivia had developed a strict personal policy against
allowing herself to develop feelings for her straight friends. It worked, most of the time, but Olivia suspected that the deep connection she felt with Alex, combined with all the emotions surrounding her shooting and return from the dead, and the emotional intimacy they'd shared over the past few days had overwhelmed her.

When she recovered a little from her embarrassment, Olivia got dressed and made herself a cup of tea, before turning on the TV to some documentary station and turning the volume down low. Having some background noise and some flickering light helped her to fall asleep since Sealview, and she was less afraid when she woke up from a nightmare if there was something playing in the background. Alex had protested about taking the bedroom, but the reality was that Olivia had slept on the couch more often than not in the few months that had passed. She debated taking a sleeping pill, but ultimately decided against it, and locked the bottle in the lockbox with her gun. On the off chance that Alex's shock and her sleeping pill wore off in the middle of the night, Olivia didn't want to take a chance that she'd find the pills and take one too many. It was hard to judge her friend's emotional state in the wake of all the pain she'd experienced over the weekend.

Olivia didn't know when she finally drifted off to sleep, but she awoke sometime in the middle of the night to hear soft whimpering coming from the bedroom. After briefly debating whether or not to invade Alex's privacy, she decided to at least check on her friend, and tiptoed over to the door to knock lightly.

"Lex? You okay in there?" Olivia asked softly. Alex didn't sound afraid, and her crying was soft and regular, so Olivia doubted that she was having a nightmare.

Alex didn't answer, but the crying slowed, and Olivia turned the doorknob and opened the door slowly. Olivia didn't say a word when she saw Alex curled up in fetal position and crying into her pillow. Instead, she walked over to the other side and crawled over the top of the covers, curled up behind Alex and wrapped an arm around her, taking her hand and squeezing it in reassurance as a new wave of sobs shook her body.

The comfort of Olivia's hug soothed Alex, and after a few minutes, she stopped crying.

"Liv, I don't think I can have his baby," Alex whispered after staying silent for a long time.

Olivia barely heard her, but when she realized what Alex had said, she pulled on Alex's hand, turning her over to face her, and, without releasing her grip, used her other hand to wipe tears from Alex's eyes. Olivia studied her friend's face before responding, equally quietly.

"Then don't."

"Just like that?" Alex asked.

"Just like that." Olivia paused before asking the next question. "How far along are you?"

"About 3 weeks. The doctor said the period I thought I got last week was breakthrough bleeding."

"Well, abortion is legal in New York through 24 weeks, so you've got a while to make a decision. Although it'll probably be easier to do it sooner rather than later."

"I just never thought I'd be in this position. And you…"

"Nobody ever thinks they'll be in this position. But this has nothing to do with me. My mom made a choice, and abortion wasn't legal in 1967. It is legal now, and this is your body and your choice. If you want to have an abortion, I'll go with you and hold your hand, and nobody will ever know unless you want them to. If you want to have the baby, then I'll hold your hand for that, too. But
you're the one who has to decide, and it has to be based on your feelings and your best interests, not the choices other women make or how you think you should feel."

Alex was grateful for Olivia's pro-choice pep talk and for soothing her conscience. "I thought I was being careful. I shouldn't even be pregnant. And I'm terrified that if I have this baby, Robert's going to get off and sue for custody. And I'm equally terrified that if I have the abortion, someone will find out and my chances of ever getting elected will be shot. Not to mention the fact that I'm 33 with no romantic prospects in sight, and I might not have another chance for a baby."

Olivia squeezed Alex's hand again. "You were being careful. It's not your fault that Robert tricked you into getting pregnant. And I don't think Robert will get off or be able to sue for custody, but I understand if you don't want to have his baby after how badly he's treated you. And if you don't want it, we'll go to a clinic, out of state, even, and you can check in under one of your Witsec identities and pay cash, and nobody will ever find out. I know from previous cases that Robert's lawyer isn't going to be able to make you confess to the abortion under oath in open court. Liz and Casey would never allow it. You know that." Both women were silent for a minute until Olivia asked her follow-up question. "Are you considering having it? I noticed you didn't drink at O'Malley's last night, and it wasn't because of the over-the-counter ibuprofen you're taking."

Alex swallowed. "I just… didn't want to do anything until I was sure one way or the other." Olivia nodded. "The doctor told me I have to wait until next week when my stitches are healed if I want to do the abortion. She said that under 9 weeks she can give me the RU-486 pill and I can do it at home, alone."

"Okay, sweetie. You just tell me what you decide. You have my support either way."

Olivia rolled over onto her back and stared at the ceiling, maintaining her hold on Alex's hand even as the blonde closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. She thought Alex had gone back to sleep when she finally made another quiet confession.

"I thought about having a baby in Witsec. In Wisconsin. I went to a doctor to discuss fertility options. I even asked Hammond what would happen if I got pregnant while in the program. I was lonely, and for a while I thought that if I had a baby, at least I wouldn't be so alone. That if that was going to be my new life, I could turn it into some kind of maternity leave. I picked a donor, got inseminated. It didn't work. A week later, Cragen showed up to bring me back for the Connors trial, and I got moved to a new identity, and sometime between talking with a kid who was shot at twice and looking into starting the whole fertility process over, I realized it would be really unfair to bring a child into my…situation. I got moved twice more, and I wasn't sure I was ever going to come home, so I gave up on the idea."

Olivia had rolled back over to face Alex, who hadn't opened her eyes, and had tears streaming down her face. She tucked Alex's hair behind her ear and pushed her chin up until they were face to face.

"And now you feel guilty because you wanted a baby then and you don't want this one now?" Olivia asked softly.

Alex shook her head and opened her eyes, looking into Olivia's. "I don't know what I feel. I'm just so afraid, all the time. I thought when Velez was dead, when Connors was extradited, when I got my name back, my family back, my job back… I thought I'd stop being afraid, stop sleeping with the lights on, stop looking over my shoulder. I got engaged to Robert thinking he was a nice enough guy and there'd be a warm body in my bed, and I let him take advantage of me…"

"Lex, what Robert did to you is NOT your fault. You know that."
"I know that. But when we started out, I was using him as a 'nice guy' crutch just as much as he was using me as arm candy and a way to get his name in the papers. I don't know exactly when he crossed the line into being controlling and demanding… sexually, but I should never have let it escalate to rape. Or allow him to pressure me into sex."

"Alex, listen to me. You've had some horrible things happen to you. I can't pretend to understand what happened to you in Witness Protection, or how hard it was to come and get your life back, but I know it wasn't easy and I think it takes an incredible amount of strength to come back and try to get your life back. You're allowed to be afraid, Lex. You're allowed to feel vulnerable and alone. Despite the rumors your charges have been spreading around Hogan Place, you're human, Alex. You don't have anything to be ashamed of."

"After I came back for the Connors trial, everybody expected some triumphant return from the dead, and I just came back… broken. I think I came back wrong."

"I told you we're going to find you and work on making you whole again, and I mean it. But I don't think you're as lost or broken as you think you are. You know how many strong women we've seen who aren't able to go through a rape kit or leave a partner who's hurt them. You're strong enough to leave and file a report the first time he became violent, and to stare him down in church with your trademark Cabot look. You're not weak by any stretch of the imagination. You're just a little less fearless than you used to be. Getting shot will do that to you, but you know as well as I do that being a victim of violence doesn't make you less of who you are… Do you think you'd be ready for the stress of pregnancy and single motherhood while you're trying to get your identity and your life back?" Olivia asked gently.

"Is there ever a good time to have kids when you work 80 hours a week and have no serious romantic prospects?" Alex replied sarcastically.

"Touché," Olivia snorted.

"I don't know if I'm ready for a baby or if I just thought it could fill a hole in my heart when I was away. If I could create something that was a part of me, I'd know I still existed, you know?"

"Alex, not having a baby then and not having this baby doesn't mean you can't have a baby. It's not wrong to not want to have the baby of a man who hurt you and who might be able to take it away. Not having this baby doesn't mean you can't go to a fertility clinic in New York like you did in Wisconsin. You're only 33. You've still got time."

"Liv, you know I have no moral objection at all to legal abortion. I'm just not sure it's right for me to want to abort this pregnancy when I wanted one such a short time ago. And when I still do want one, just not with Robert."

"You're allowed to change your mind, you know. Can you answer something for me, though? Can you tell me you want kids right now as Alexandra Cabot, kick-ass ADA and Bureau Chief who works all the time and knows all too well the potential dangers of her job? Or did you want kids as Emily from Tulsa in Wisconsin, who had a three bedroom FBI safe house and a safe job as an insurance claims adjustor, who rarely had to work overtime, and who had time to learn to cook and do things like go to Lamaze classes and grow a garden?"

"I don't know," Alex answered quietly. Olivia had a point. Having children as Emily from Tulsa would have been a lot less complicated than having them as herself, even without her money and status.

"Alex, did you go to counseling at all when you got back?"
"I had mandatory counseling in witness protection, but nothing when I came back. I was focused on getting my law licence reinstated; I didn't want any mental health issues to come up."

"Maybe you should see if Huang can recommend someone who will keep it off the books. You know I'm always here for you as your friend, but it may be good to get an outside perspective on everything you've been through. Think about it, please?"

"I'll think about it."

Alex let go of Olivia's hand and rolled away, signaling the end of the conversation. When Olivia moved to get up and go back to the couch, Alex reached out to touch her arm. "Stay in here? Please?"

Olivia nodded and curled up on top of the covers behind Alex, who took her hand and wrapped it around herself until they were spooning. Alex didn't make any noise, but Olivia could tell from her breathing that she was still crying quietly.

"Lex, try to get some sleep, alright? It's going to be okay." Olivia whispered. She squeezed Alex's hand to reassure her, and waited until the tears stopped and her breathing slowed before she let herself fall asleep.
Chapter 13

Alex drifted in and out of sleep and tears, and when the clock finally read 6:30, she gently extricated herself from Olivia's arms. Her stomach lurched as she stood up, and she hurried into the bathroom, swallowing the bile rising in her throat and stepping into the shower. Alex breathed deeply under the hot water, trying to numb her heart and apply her courtroom persona as she did a light shade of makeup.

She dressed more casually than she normally would for work, since she just wanted to stop by to get some case files and clear her schedule for the upcoming two weeks. Aside from an arraignment and possibly a pretrial hearing on an important case, Alex didn't anticipate having any work she couldn't do outside of the office. Deciding to forego coffee in favor of ginger tea to settle her still queasy stomach, Alex left a note for Olivia and put on her game face.

Alex marched into the District Attorney's office with her normal air of confidence, though inwardly, she was trembling. She knew the rumor mill of city politics worked fast, but she wasn't sure how much information about her attack would have gotten out. Part of the reason she had decided to stop by the office first thing Monday morning was to limit the damage and quash discussions of her personal life, which she considered highly personal and kept closely guarded.

She knocked on Jim Steele's open door first. "Jim, can you please gather up the bureau to meet in my office? It will be quick." She turned to go to her own office before he had a chance to reply.

Once she was in her office, she began sorting through the case files on her desk, quickly evaluating which ones she'd need to work on in the upcoming weeks, which could be passed on to one of her subordinates, and which could wait until her return. Flipping through the documents in her inbox, she found two manilla envelopes, one from her attorney that had been received by courier service on Saturday, the other from Homicide detectives for the big case she was working on. She opened it up to find six DVDs, and she slipped the two envelopes in her attaché bag.

By the time she was finished sorting her case files into piles, her young charges had gathered in her office, looking nervous. Alexandra Cabot was a kind but formidable boss, and her expression was inscrutable to the young attorneys. It was clear that she was all business this morning, despite her relaxed outfit.

Alex inhaled as she closed the door to her office, walked behind her desk, and crossed her arms in front of her chest in a protective gesture as she stood to face her colleagues. She looked at the anxious faces standing before her, and realized that they hadn't heard anything yet. The concern and confusion at being called to an impromptu meeting reassured her that she still controlled the narrative.

"Good morning," she began slowly, forcing a smile. "I hope you all had a nice weekend. I called you all in here to tell you something about my weekend, before you start hearing rumors about my personal life. I expect this information will be sufficient to satisfy your curiosity and discourage you from participating in any office gossip that may occur, lest you wish to transfer to traffic court." Alex paused, to regulate her breathing.

"On Friday evening, I was attacked by my fiancé, Robert. A police report was filed, and he is currently sitting in jail for violating an order of protection I had obtained against him. He is likely to be charged and arraigned for the assault today or tomorrow. I would prefer to keep the details of the investigation confidential, and I trust that you will all respect my privacy in this matter. If Robert, his lawyer, or anyone else tries to obtain information on the case or on my personal life, you may direct them to Liz Donnelly or Casey Novak."
Alex exhaled slowly, and looked around the room, studying the faces looking back at her with care and concern. While the men focused intently on their shoes, Christina and Jessica shared a look before each smiled kindly at their boss. Despite her harsh tone and professional demeanor, they knew they were seeing a rare show of vulnerability. Jessica had seen enough domestic violence at home and through work to realize what Alex hadn't said and to notice that Alex's cheekbone and lip were still slightly puffy, despite the makeup.

Satisfied that she had made herself clear, Alex picked up the stack of case files on her desk that she had decided to delegate. "I will be taking time this week and at least part of next week to take care of personal business. In the meantime, Jim, you can take over the Stahl case, and Christina will second chair. Jessica, I'd like you to take over the Montgomery file, and work on the expert testimony and your opening statement. I'll take a look at your work later in the week and answer any questions. Peluso, you can take care of the Donovan file, and Potter, you're on arraignments for new cases. I will still be handling the Manning rape-homicides, and assuming he is apprehended this week, I will come in for arraignment and to field any motions his attorney may file. Since that should have been an SVU case, I'm going to ask Casey Novak if she'll sit second chair, but if she can't, I'd like you on it, Jessica. I'll let you know after I ask her."

Alex distributed the relevant case files. "If you need to reach me, I'll be checking my email once or twice a day. If there's an emergency, ask Jim first, and then you may call me if you need to. Liz and Casey know where I'm staying. I may stop by again during the week to get more files or to check in on you. Now, thank you for your time, and go put some perps in jail."

Satisfied that she had covered everything she wanted to discuss in the office, Alex opened her office door to dismiss her colleagues and end the meeting, and gathered her coat and attaché bag. There was no reason for her to stick around to see people staring awkwardly at her, and besides, she still had to go back to the hospital. She noticed that Jessica Rossi lingered a moment by the door as Alex turned off the office light and put on her coat.

"Jessica?" she asked kindly, noticing her hesitation as the younger attorney turned to walk out. "Something you need?"

Jessica turned around to look up at her boss, who gestured out the door and pulled it closed to lock it. "No… no, nothing I need. I just wanted to say I'm sorry about Robert. And take care of yourself this week." She reached out to squeeze Alex's hand and smiled at her, the only one of the group to have made eye contact after Alex's revelation about the attack.

Alex was surprised by the kind gesture, and felt a tear form in her eye, breaking the façade she had so carefully kept up during the meeting. "Thank you, Jessica, I really appreciate it." she murmured, returning the hand squeeze to show she hadn't been uncomfortable with the intimate gesture. "Email me once you've got something on Montgomery, and we'll set up a time to talk about it."

Jessica noticed that the weak smile Alex gave before she hurried back towards the elevator didn't reach her eyes.

Her cell phone rang with an unknown number as she hailed a cab to Mercy Hospital.

"Alexandra Cabot," she answered on the third ring, after giving instructions to the driver.

"Alex? Is that you?" a young voice she didn't recognize replied.

"Yes? Who's calling, please?"
"It's Laura Simmons. From youth group." the girl explained. "I'm sorry for calling you on your cell; I got your number from Nicole in bells. I wanted to talk to you yesterday, but there was something going on, and you looked upset, and then your friends were there and I didn't want to interrupt, and I'm sorry, I'm ranting."

"Laura," Alex soothed, suddenly worried about the girl. "It's okay. What can I do for you?"

"You're a lawyer, right? That means you can't tell anybody what I tell you?"

"Laura, I'm a prosecutor, which means that if you've been involved with anything illegal and need help, you should contact a defense attorney."

"No, I haven't done anything illegal."

"Have you been the victim of a crime?"

"No, it's not that... I just... I need some legal advice. It's... personal. But nothing illegal, I swear." Alex thought Laura suddenly sounded very afraid.

"Okay. And you're not in any danger?"

"No."

"Alright," Alex replied. The girl sounded desperate, and Alex didn't have any important plans beyond getting an STD test and looking at brutal crime scene photos. "I'm not working this week, so why don't we meet somewhere to talk this afternoon? My fee is $1, and that makes you my client. As my client, everything you tell me will be confidential unless I have knowledge of an actual crime you're planning to commit. What time do you get out of school?"

"You're sure about that?" Laura still sounded nervous.

"Yes. If I violate confidentiality, I could lose my licence to practice law and even end up in jail."

"Okay. I get out of school at 2:30 at 86th and Central Park West."

"There's a French café at 86th and Broadway. Can we meet there at 3?" Alex asked, looking at her watch. She'd have plenty of time to get her blood test and eat lunch before going to the café.

"Yes. Thank you, Alex."

"You're welcome. See you this afternoon, Laura."

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Alex sent Olivia a text message to update her on her plans for the afternoon just as the cab pulled up to Mercy. Taking a deep breath, she approached the desk and asked for Dr. Logan and Amelia, and was directed to a waiting room, where she opened her case file to read.

She was lost in the ME's report when she finally heard her name called and was led back to an examination room.

"I can't say I'm happy to see you, Ms. Cabot," Dr. Logan said with a smile as she escorted Alex back. "What brings you here today?"

Alex looked at the floor shyly. "It seems I need to do an STD test after all," she explained.
Dr. Logan nodded and paged for Amelia. "Are you experiencing any symptoms?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that according to the medical examiner working on my case, Robert invited several women to leave fluid samples on our sheets, which leads me to conclude that he was putting himself, and therefore me, at risk."

"Are you testifying, Ms. Cabot?" Alex saw the twinkle in her eye as the doctor reacted to her very detached explanation for her visit.

"I just… I have to deal with this logically, because I can't deal with it emotionally just yet."

"I understand." The doctor smiled sympathetically. Alex closed her eyes and looked away as Amelia pulled out a needle to draw her blood. She didn't feel the needle, but she could feel Dr. Logan examining her. "Your face looks much better. And your wrists."

Alex nodded and rubbed the fading red marks. "I'm glad. I keep getting strange looks from people. A woman at church yesterday, a colleague this morning… I don't want people thinking I'm a battered woman."

"Just tell them the other guy looks worse," Amelia offered, closing the vial of blood. "I'll give you a call this afternoon with the results."

"And these results, and the results of my pregnancy test, won't be forwarded to the investigating officers?" Alex asked, concerned.

"Not without your consent. The test results are for screening purposes only," Dr. Logan reassured her.

"And I'd like to make an appointment to terminate under a false name and pay cash so there's no record. Is that doable?"

"Yes, but we need to make sure your stitches are healed and that you don't have an infection first. I can get you in first thing next Monday morning if you like. You can call me on Friday and let me know." Alex nodded. "Can I check out your stitches real quick right now?"

Alex hesitated, suddenly regretting her decision to tell Olivia she could handle a simple blood test by herself. But the pain hadn't lessened as much as she'd hoped it would since Friday, and the prospect of prolonging her pregnancy limbo made her anxious, so she reluctantly allowed the doctor to examine her again.

"Both lacerations still look red and inflamed. Are they still very painful?"

Alex blushed and nodded. "Yes, I'm still in a bit of pain, but I'm taking the ibuprofen."

"Have you been using the antibiotic ointment I gave you?" Dr. Logan asked as she checked Alex's wounds and applied ointment liberally.

"I… uh… I was having trouble applying it myself. I tried but I'm not sure I got the right spot."

"I know it's uncomfortable, but maybe a friend can help. It's very easy to get an infection in the anal cavity, and it can be very risky. I'd hate to see you back here for emergency surgery."

She withdrew her tools and motioned for Alex to get dressed.

"Call me on Friday, we'll get you in here on Monday to check your stitches, and if you've made a
decision about termination, we can discuss the options then. Okay?” Alex nodded. "Take care, Ms. Cabot."

Alex took a long, meandering walk through the park towards the café, remembering how she used to enjoy long walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with her mother, on weekend afternoons before Velez. After Velez, outside of New York, she had been too afraid to go out in public for extended periods of time, and rarely ventured out except for short trips to the grocery store and to work. Even with Connors and Velez gone and the US Marshall Service's assurances that she was safe again, she still felt like long walks alone outside of her comfort zone were not wise. And with her mother gone, and Robert being not such great company for her private thoughts, Alex hadn't resumed the habit after her return. Now, though, she was too numb to feel afraid for her life as she walked through the park alone for the first time. She just felt lonely. Empty. Lost.

It was almost 2:30 when she arrived at the café where she'd planned to meet Laura, and Alex settled into a booth, ordered a coffee, and took out her laptop to begin working on ideas for an opening statement. Her lips moved as she typed, and though she faced the door, a habit borne from her time in Witness Protection, she failed to notice a familiar face approaching her from the back of the restaurant.

"Alexandra!” he said, smiling, as he placed a hand on her shoulder. Alex jumped a mile out of her chair at the contact, and turned to face him.

"Judge Moredock,” she gasped out, catching her breath. "Hasn't anyone ever told you not to sneak up on someone who spent 3 years in Witness Protection?” He chuckled and apologized. "Aren't you supposed to be in court, anyway?"

"I could say the same to you, Alex. I was with my wife at her doctor's appointment today. But I wanted to say that I'm sorry about Robert."

Alex blushed. "How did you hear?"

"I was on the phone with Lena Petrovsky yesterday afternoon when he violated the restraining order. I didn't ask about the details, and I don't think it's spread around the courthouse yet, if that's what you're worried about. She told me because I'm on arraignments this week, and she expects the case to move swiftly."

Alex exhaled, relieved that her attack wasn't yet fodder for courthouse gossip. Just then, a young girl approached the table shyly, hesitating to approach Alex while she was engaged in conversation. Alex turned her head and gave her a warm smile.

"Laura, please," she said, indicating the bench across from her. Laura sat down tentatively and placed a dollar bill on the table. "Judge Moredock, this is Laura Simmons, a high school student who is hiring me for some confidential legal advice. Laura, Judge Moredock, one of my professors from law school who is now a judge."

Judge Moredock smiled and held out his hand to shake Laura's. "Pleased to meet you, Ms. Simmons. Alexandra, will you be gracing my courtroom with your presence this week?"

"I'm off this week and probably next week as well to take care of some personal affairs, but I'll have an arraignment whenever Homicide tracks down my perp. And I expect to be present for Robert's arraignment as well."
"There's physical evidence?" Alex nodded. "Well, then he better have a damn good lawyer if he's going up against the three most formidable women in the DA's office. I'd say he doesn't have much of a chance of making bail, especially if he's already violated a temporary order of protection." He winked.

"I hope he doesn't, although I guess we'll have to wait to see if he gets anyone good to represent him, won't we?" Alex smiled at him, understanding his implied meaning.

"Just remember that for Robert's case, you're the victim, not the prosecutor." Moredock smiled at her, and Alex rolled her eyes.

"Liz and Casey keep reminding me," she groaned.

"I mean that as the prosecutor, you don't get to tell the story until trial. As the high-profile, very photogenic, already-martyred-for-the-cause victim, you have an opportunity. Once it's out, you can't control the gossip, but you can control the narrative."

"I'll keep that in mind. Thank you, Judge."

He touched her shoulder again. "Well, I'll let you get to your consultation. Ms. Simmons, Alexandra, good afternoon." He nodded at each of them and left the two women at the table.

Alex closed her laptop and placed it back into her bag, exchanging it for a yellow legal pad and her favorite pen, and placed them on the table. Folding her arms, she tilted her head and looked across at the timid young girl in front of her, trying to keep her expression calm and kind. She motioned to the waitress.

"Laura, it's nice to see you. Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, soda?" Laura quietly asked for a hot chocolate, and Alex requested a refill on her coffee.

Laura sunk back into the booth and crossed her arms, avoiding eye contact with Alex. She was petite, with frightened green eyes and mousy brown hair, and she wrapped herself up in a baggy gray hoodie. When the girl didn't speak, Alex took the dollar, put it in her bag, and scribbled something on a piece of paper, which she signed and slid across the table.

"This is a receipt, with my signature, for the fee you just paid me. It means that I'm your lawyer, and nothing you tell me here can be revealed to anyone without your consent. Okay?"

Laura shifted uncomfortably and lifted her eyes for a moment to make contact with Alex's, taking a sip of her hot chocolate to hide her trembling mouth. Alex looked around to ensure that the tables around them had cleared out with the lunch rush, and reached across to touch Laura's arm. This girl is terrified of something, Alex thought to herself. Channel Olivia.

"Look, Laura, nobody is around to listen to what we say, and everything you tell me is private. Can we start with you telling me why you called me?"

Laura bit her lip. "I knew you were a lawyer because I saw your picture in the paper last week. I go to school with Nicole's daughter, and after I couldn't talk to you yesterday, I asked her to get me your number."

"I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to talk yesterday, but I have plenty of time for you right now," Alex reassured her.

"That man who got arrested yesterday, did he do something to you?"
"He violated a restraining order. Is someone hurting you?" Alex asked gently, studying the girl's face. Laura shook her head. "I need you to tell me why we're here, Laura."

Laura looked down at her hands on the table and whispered the words. "I'm pregnant."

"Do you know what all of your options are?"

"I can't have this baby. They'd kill me if they found out I'm not a virgin. They told me they'd disown me if I had sex before I got married."

"Laura, maybe they were just saying that to protect you. Lots of people have sex before they get married, and it's not the end of the world. Your boyfriend… he didn't force you, did he?"

"He's not my boyfriend. But no, he didn't force me. It only happened once. We didn't plan to. I didn't think… I just didn't want him to…" Laura stopped as tears started to roll down her cheeks, and Alex reached out to take her hand.

"Okay, Laura, lesson number one from sex ed: always use condoms, because you can get pregnant or get an STD, even the first time." Given her own blindsiding on pregnancy and infidelity, Alex thought it best to omit the part about foregoing condoms in committed, monogamous relationships. "You said you 'just didn't want him to' do something. What was it?"

Laura looked everywhere except Alex's face, and wrapped the sweatshirt around herself tighter, trying to hide her shame and embarrassment. "He saw me kiss a girl and I didn't want him to tell anyone."

"Laura, if he blackmailed you into having sex with him so he wouldn't tell, that's rape."

"It wasn't like that," she explained, looking briefly into Alex's kind eyes. "He was my friend. When she kissed me, I kissed back. I had never kissed a girl or a boy before. He saw and said he didn't know I was a lesbian."

"And I take it your parents aren't exactly members of PFLAG?"

Laura shook her head sadly. "They hate gays, and think gay marriage is causing global warming and the failing economy." She rolled her eyes at Alex, who gave her a weak smile. "When I was younger, my mom's sister used to come over all the time. Sometimes she'd bring her friend. Then, when I was 8, she stopped coming over and my mom never let me talk about her again. I only figured it out recently when I heard my parents talking about 'fags' that I think she came out to them and thought it would change their minds. Instead they disowned her and it only made it worse."

"So you didn't want your parents to find out you'd kissed a girl. Laura, kissing a girl doesn't necessarily mean you're a lesbian or that you're not at all attracted to boys. And your sexuality isn't anybody's business but your own." Alex's heart broke for the scared girl in front of her.

"No. They'd kill me if they found out about that, too. They'd kick me out of the house, I wouldn't be able to go to college. My life would be over. I told my parents he was my boyfriend, and they were really happy. He was really sweet to me. I just wanted to prove that I'm not gay."

"Then what happened?" Alex pried.

"I… I had sex with him. It was awful. It hurt a lot. I didn't like it."

"Maybe that just means you weren't physically or emotionally ready, or he wasn't the right person for you," Alex had had her share of awful sex, and even painful sex, but that didn't mean she was a
lesbian.

"Maybe. But then... a few weeks later... I slept with her. The girl I'd kissed. And it was totally different. After that I'm sure I'm a lesbian. But nobody can find out. Ever."

"Laura, take it from me. It's really hard to pretend to be somebody you're not. To pretend to love someone you don't love, or not love someone you do love."

"You're gay?"

Alex shook her head. "No. But I have had to keep a lot of secrets, and I was pretending to love a man who attacked me and cheated on me because I thought that's what my family wanted."

"What happened?"

"I don't know yet. I just ended it with him on Friday and now he's sitting in a jail cell. But I took a long walk today, and I don't think I'm going to be compromising my own happiness to please anyone else anymore. I know I'm older than you, and it took me a long time to figure that out, so you've got time. But it's an important thing to learn."

Laura finished her hot chocolate and looked intently at the bottom of the cup.

"So you slept with him once, and got pregnant?" Alex suspected that the pregnancy, and not the coming out, was the reason for Laura's consultation.

"I never had sex ed," Laura admitted softly. "My parents wouldn't sign the consent form. I asked my friends, but we lived in Texas until six months ago, and they said the lesson was basically about not having sex. They didn't learn very much. I tried to go online to get information, but my parents saw the search history and wouldn't let me use the computer for a month. Now I can only use it if they're in the room."

Alex rolled her eyes inwardly. Her own puritanical mother had never given her the sex talk either, other than to tell her not to 'give it up' too easily and to imply that a woman's role in the bedroom was to find sex mostly distasteful and unrefined, but to satisfy her husband as often as he wanted. Sex was a necessary evil for having children and keeping a man faithful. Cabot women, she'd said, were above seeking physical pleasure. But while Alex hadn't had the internet, she'd practically lived in the library, and found what she'd needed to know from a battered copy of Our Bodies, Ourselves that she'd checked out and hidden under her mattress.

"Laura, am I to understand that you're hiring me as a lawyer to teach you sex ed?" Alex blushed at the thought and withdrew her hand from Laura's. Discussing sex acts in clinical terms in court had been hard enough, and she'd spent hours practicing in front of the mirror when she'd first joined SVU, hoping to hide her embarrassment and train herself not to turn bright pink. Olivia had teased her lightly when she'd turned red to the tip of her ears during their first case, before reassuring her that she'd get used to it. But this was a different situation entirely, one she doubted she could handle.

"No," Laura said quickly. "I need your help getting an abortion. I went to a place that I found in the phone book a few weeks ago, and they made me get an ultrasound and hear them talk about adoption and how they could help me during my pregnancy. Then they told me that I couldn't get an abortion without my parents or a judge, and that they couldn't get me in for an appointment for a few weeks. So I need your help to find a judge that will let me do this on my own, without my parents knowing."

"Laura, I think you went to a crisis pregnancy center, not an abortion clinic. They try to convince
women not to have abortions and give out false information. In Texas, you do have to have permission from a parent or judge to get an abortion if you're a minor, but in New York, you don't. The law doesn't require a mandatory waiting period, or a condescending speech to see if you really know what you're doing, and you don't have to get an ultrasound unless you want one."

"So what do I need to do?"

"Do you know how many weeks pregnant you are?"

"12 weeks, I think."

"Okay, that means you'll have to have a surgical abortion. I can help you get an appointment with a reputable doctor, but you'll need to do the consultation on your own. It's not up to me to influence your decision in any way. This is your choice, and you need to be sure of what you want."

"I've already made my decision. I can't have a baby, and my parents can't know about the abortion."

"Under New York state law, if you did have the baby, you could give it up for adoption and have 90 days to change your mind. Or, if you decided to keep the baby, your parents would be legally responsible for your care and your child's care until you turn 18," Alex explained. "It's your decision, but you should know all the facts."

"If my parents find out about any of this - that I've had sex, that I'm even thinking about an abortion, that I might be gay - they're going to kill me. The only hope I have of them not finding out is to do the abortion."

"Okay. If that's really what you want, I'll call a doctor friend of mine to make an appointment for you and let you know. Do you have someone who will go with you to hold your hand and take you home after the procedure?"

Laura looked at the table again, and spoke softly. "Actually, I was kind of hoping you'd come with me."

Alex looked took a sip of her coffee and rubbed her temple. Despite her usual ability to think on her feet, for once, she was at a total loss of what to say.

"Laura, I'm not sure that's such a good idea," she began slowly.

"Why not?" The shy, frightened young girl in front of her suddenly turned into sullen teenager.

Alex ignored the accusatory tone. "For one thing, you're probably going to need a day or two of recovery time afterwards, and it would be good to stay with someone who knows what happened and who can give you an alibi for staying home from school." For another thing, what if helping you changes my mind about my own pregnancy? And what if someone finds out that not only have I had an abortion, I've helped a minor get one without her parents' knowledge? My political career would be toast, even in New York.

"My parents are leaving tomorrow on a mission trip, and they won't be back until the weekend. They wouldn't even know I wasn't in school."

"Who takes care of you when they leave town?"

"Jesus," Laura replied. Alex snorted, and Laura smirked back at her. "I'm totally serious. They leave me alone and tell me Jesus will look out for me. When I was little, my aunt watched me, and then when she got disowned, it was friends from church. But my parents have a way of driving even their
church friends away, so…"

"Laura, I'm staying with a friend right now, so I don't even have a place you could stay after the procedure." Not to mention the reason I'm off work this week.

"What if I get a friend's parents to say I can stay with them if I'm 'not feeling well' while my parents are gone? Will you take me and bring me to a friend's house after? You're the only one I trust not to tell my parents."

Alex folded her arms on the table, and her heart broke a little as she watched the girl begin to cry. Sixteen is too young to have grown-up problems and selfish parents, she thought, remembering all the ones she hadn't been able to save. Sam Cavanaugh. Cheryl Avery. Ashley Copeland. Sarah Williams, in Portland.

"If I'm going to help you do this," she began carefully, "I have three conditions. The first is that you tell my friend Olivia the reason I'm having you stay with us, if she agrees that it's okay. You can trust her to keep your secrets, and if I'm going to ask her to open her small apartment to you for a night or two, I need you to be honest with her." Laura hesitated, and nodded slowly. "Number two is that when I take you, you do the consultation alone with the doctor and discuss everything with her without me there. This is your decision, and I don't want to be accused later of pressuring you in any way. Once that part's taken care of, I'll come in and hold your hand if you want me to."

Alex waited for Laura to nod again. "Condition number three is that if you do tell anyone about this, you keep my role confidential. Like it or not, I'm a public servant, and my bosses are not going to be happy if voters find out that district attorneys are undermining their parental rights, and I don't want a reputation among high school students as someone who will bail them out of trouble. When we go into that doctor's office, whatever happens will be protected by doctor-patient confidentiality and by attorney-client privilege. I need to know that you won't betray my trust like I won't betray yours. Are we clear? Do we have a deal?"

"I understand. I know you're doing me a big favor by helping me out, and don't want to get you in trouble. Believe me, I really appreciate it. We have a deal."

"And you'll get all of your assignments in advance so you won't be behind if you miss school."

"Fine."

Alex paid the bill and asked Laura to come with her to introduce herself to Olivia. After sending her a text message to say they were headed back to the apartment, she checked her voicemail. One message from Jim Steele, informing her that the sexual sadist and murderer she'd be prosecuting had been apprehended and would be ready for her to arraign in the morning. Another message from Casey, that the rape kit had come back and Robert had been officially arrested as well. She jotted down the notes in her day planner and sent texts of thanks to both attorneys, before scrolling through her contacts for the phone number of an old friend, and setting up a lunch date for the following day.

Laura hung back shyly as they entered Olivia's apartment.

"Lex, is that you?" Olivia called from the bedroom as soon as the door opened. "There's a package for you on the table. I'm just putting away some laundry, and cleaning out a drawer for your stuff while you're staying here." She entered the living room, wearing jeans and an old tee-shirt, her hair wrapped up in a towel, holding the small, empty suitcase Alex had brought with her from the penthouse. Remembering the personal effects she had brought with her intending to discard, Alex flushed bright red and opened her mouth in shock at her friend.
"Oh, hi," Olivia said, holding out her hand to Laura. "I'm Olivia. You must be a friend of Alex's?"

Alex managed to close her mouth and breathe without Laura noticing, since the young girl was still apprehensive about the reason for her visit. "Did you get my text? This is Laura. She'd like our help with something, and since you would be implicated as well, I told her she had to ask you before I'd agree."

"That was awfully cryptic," Olivia smiled at Laura, who was still standing partially behind Alex. "Why don't we sit down and you can tell me what we can do to help you."

Alex encouraged Laura to sit down with Olivia and went into the kitchen, seeing the bouquet of flowers on the table. She opened the card to find a neatly written message in a hand she recognized as Jessica Rossi's. Best wishes for healing and love, from your friends at the DA's office. Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized all of her baby ADAs had signed the card. How sweet of them, she thought, touched by the gesture.

She poured three glasses of water and went back out to the living room, where Olivia and Laura were finishing their discussion. When Olivia gestured to her, she followed her back into the bedroom to discuss the situation.

"Lex, aren't you the one who's always telling me we aren't social workers?" Olivia asked gently once the door was closed. "I know you want to help this girl, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

Alex nodded. "Look, I know I've always said that, but she's not one of our victims, she's someone from my church who trusts me. This isn't professional, it's personal."

"I know, and I think that at the moment, it might be a little too personal, don't you think?"

Alex sighed. "Are you saying you don't want me to help her?"

"Lex, what I'm saying is that you're in a vulnerable place right now, and I'm not sure adding a teenager to the mix for a few days is a good idea. Especially if you plan on having an abortion yourself next week. It might be too painful for you, and you wouldn't have much privacy while she's here. Have you told her?"

Alex shook her head and tried to push down the tears that were welling up in her eyes. Olivia pulled her into a hug and wrapped her arms around her, and stroked the back of her head. "Shh, Lex. We can help her if you want us to. I just want to make sure you're going to be okay if we do."

"Liv, she doesn't have anyone else," Alex whispered. "And her parents sound awful."

"And you promise me that the only thing this is about is helping this girl?"

"What do you mean?" Alex asked.

"I mean, you're sure that you don't have other reasons for helping her?" Olivia asked gently. Alex took a step back and fixed her with an angry gaze.

"If you're implying that I've influenced her decision in any way, you're wrong. She came to me specifically for legal help getting an abortion, and she doesn't know anything about what happened with Robert or the fact that I'm pregnant. And she won't. I told her that she had to meet with the doctor alone before the procedure."

"That's not really what I meant. I know you'd let her make her own choice, like the girl with Down's syndrome you helped all those years ago. I mean reasons not related to this girl at all."
"She reminds me of a girl in Portland that I couldn't save," Alex whispered into Olivia's shoulder. "I tried to help her, and then I had to leave when Hammond found out. I think I just made it worse. She trusted me to help her and then I died on her."

Olivia rubbed Alex's back. "We'll help her, Lex. There's a fold up twin bed in my office. I'll clean the case files off so she can stay in there and have some privacy, and you can keep the bedroom. I just want you to promise me that if you need time alone or if it gets to be too much, you'll leave her with me and go to Liz's or Casey's, okay?"

"Thanks, Liv. I don't know what I'd be doing without you. I just… I need to focus on something outside of myself, and I don't know if I'm capable of making good decisions right now. Now I've just got to worry about seeing Robert in arraignment tomorrow and getting my murderer remanded and waiting for the results of my STD test and figuring out how I'm going to apply antibiotic ointment in places I can't see." Alex immediately regretted that for once, she wasn't in control of her mouth. Must be a side effect of the grief eating up her heart.

"Lex, take a deep breath. You know Liz and Casey will take care of Robert, and you've always been able to get scumbags remanded when it matters, too. Did you go back to the hospital today by yourself? What's the deal with the antibiotic ointment?"

"Liv..." Alex shook her head and buried her red face deeper into her shoulder.

"Lex... it's okay. What is it?"

"I went back today for a blood test but I haven't gotten the results yet. Dr. Logan looked at my stitches and said they were still inflamed and sore because I haven't been applying the antibiotic ointment properly. Which I can't, because I can't see, and I obviously can't have anyone do it for me, so..."

"Alex, you know how serious anal fissures can be and how easily they get infected. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's embarrassing! And it's not like you're going to be the one putting ointment in my ass."

"Lex, it doesn't have to be a big deal, but you do need to use it. We'll talk about this later, okay? Who are the flowers from?"

"The DA's office. I went there this morning to pick up some stuff and give the very basic version of why I'm out this week and my ex-fiancé is in lockup. I wanted to get ahead of the rumor mill and warn them of the consequences of gossiping about my personal life."

"Do you think it worked?"

"Don't know. But I saw Barry Moredock today, and he told me to 'control the narrative.' I'm not sure what that means, exactly, but it sounded like he wanted me to go to the press."

"It's probably true that you're going to have a hard time keeping this private. You know we'll protect you as much as we can, but once it's out there, we can't do anything about it."

"I know. But I think it's going to be out there anyway. Maybe I should be the one to put it out there. If a wealthy, Ivy League educated former sex crimes prosecutor can be the victim of rape, anybody can. Maybe it will encourage other women to come forward, to not be ashamed."

"Maybe," Olivia conceded, still rubbing her hand up and down Alex's back. "But you can share your story at any time. You don't have to do it right away, you know."
"Liv, I haven't had control of my life in almost 4 years."

"I know, sweetie. That's why it may not be the best time to be making these kinds of decisions." Alex didn't respond, and Olivia held her tight. "Listen, Lex, we have some things to talk about tonight, okay? Some things I need to tell you about when you were away. But right now, we need to go out there and talk to Laura and tell her what we've agreed, okay? Are you going to be alright?" She pulled away to look at Alex's face, and wiped tears from her cheeks with her thumbs.

"Just give me a minute, okay? Can you go talk to her?" Alex murmured.

Olivia nodded, pressing a light kiss to Alex's forehead before she left the room and closed the door. She found Laura still sitting on the couch with her glass of water, thumbing through a magazine Olivia had left on the coffee table.

"Alex will be out in a minute," she explained. "I'm going to clean off the pull out bed in my office before Wednesday. You can stay here Wednesday night, but it would be good if you have a backup plan for later in the week in case Alex is out and I get called out to work. Is that okay?" Olivia didn't expect the girl to throw her arms around her and squeeze her tight.

"Thank you so much," she whispered, almost crying. "You have no idea how scared I was that my parents would find out and that they'd hate me. Thank you for helping me. And thank Alex." Olivia returned the hug.

"Okay, Alex is going to make an appointment for you for Wednesday morning, and she'll call you to let you know the details. I guess that means I'll see you on Wednesday afternoon, alright?" Laura nodded. "Now, go do some schoolwork so you don't get behind, alright?" She held open the door for Laura to leave.

"Is Alex coming back out so I can say goodbye?"

"Alex is calling a doctor for you. She'll call you later," Olivia reassured Laura, wanting to give her friend the chance to relax. She followed the young girl to the door, and spoke quietly. "Listen, Laura, before you go," she paused, waiting for the girl to look at her. "I know you're feeling vulnerable and scared right now, and I'm glad you have Alex to help you. But just keep in mind that Alex is a little hurt and vulnerable and scared about some things right now, too. Be gentle with her, okay?"

Laura looked directly at her, examining her, searching deep into her eyes. "I will, Olivia. Thank you."

After she locked the door, Olivia crept back into the bedroom, where Alex was lying curled up on top of the covers in the dark. "Long day, Lex?" She touched her hand gently to Alex's arm, and Alex nodded, almost unable to speak.

"I go out there, and I try to act like myself - how I think I should act - and I do fine, except I feel totally empty, like it's not me out there. And then I come back here, and I let myself feel something, and it hurts so much I can't breathe." Olivia climbed behind her and wrapped her arms around Alex.

"I've got you here, okay? Let it hurt as much as it needs to, and I'll make sure you're okay," she whispered into her ear. "I promise."

Olivia held her tight as she shook, and after a few minutes, gently pulled Alex's body around to face her, wiping tears with her thumbs for the second time. "You know, Lex," she murmured, running her fingers up and down Alex's arm. "You're supposed to be out of work this week to take care of yourself, not to run around to work and to find other victims to take care of."
"I know, but she needs me. And I need something to fight for other than myself. I'm tired of feeling like a fucking victim."

"Lex, you're a survivor. I know Witsec was hard on you—" 

"You don't know anything. My mother died thinking her only daughter was dead. I slept with some guy who didn't even know my real name. My niece was born and named after me while I was dead. I couldn't get pregnant, and now I am and I don't want to be. I tried to help a rape victim and ended up making it worse and having to be relocated…” Olivia held her close as she started crying again.

"Alex, listen to me. Your mom knew." Tear-filled blue eyes locked on brown. "I talked to her at your funeral and then saw her a few times when I visited your grave. I used to go there to talk to you, leave flowers in case anyone was watching, you know." Olivia blushed at the admission. "We went to lunch a few times, and I told her about the cases you'd worked on, and how much of a badass you were, and how you went from being a green ADA with political ambitions to really caring for the victims and fighting for justice and putting yourself on the line for them and for us. I talked to your brother, too, and Elliot and I went up to Boston for your niece's christening. We told him he was asking for trouble bringing another Alexandra Cabot into the world…” Alex snorted at the joke.

"I knew your mom wasn't doing well, and I asked your brother to call me if anything happened. After they put her on morphine in hospice, I went to visit, and asked for a minute alone with her, and I told her the truth: that you were alive, and being kept safe, and that we were doing everything we could to bring you home, and that I knew you'd want to be with her if you could. If anyone had asked, I would've said it was just the pain meds talking. She smiled when I told her, and cried a little, and then she made me promise I'd tell you that she loved you, and she was so proud of you for standing up for what you believe in and for risking your life to help people, and for never compromising on being exactly who you are, and she was sorry she never told you that herself. Then she made me promise that I'd look out for you when you came back and make sure you didn't get yourself killed for real. And I promised her, and I held her hand until she fell asleep and your brother and your father got back, and she died peacefully in her sleep that night. But she knew. That's what I needed to tell you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"She knew…” Alex whispered it over and over. "She knew I was alive and she said she was proud of me."

"Of course she was proud of you, Lex. She told me so every time I saw her."

"She never told me. She always called me Alexandra and refused to call me Alex because it wasn't feminine enough. She didn't want me to be a lawyer because it was too aggressive. And she couldn't tell her friends I prosecuted sex crimes. Too dirty and unrefined. And Cabots don't acknowledge the existence of sex, much less vile things like rape and murder. And what man would ever want to marry me if I insisted on being smarter than him and beating him in an argument when I disagreed?”

The floodgates of unresolved grief opened up, and Olivia rolled onto her back, pulling Alex on top of her and rocking her gently back and forth as she cried, trying to forgive herself for everyone she had hurt when she'd gotten shot and gone into hiding. Olivia cradled Alex, rubbing her back, stroking her hair, and murmuring soothing phrases in her ear until she calmed down.

Alex held onto Olivia even after she stopped crying. "I don't know why you're doing all of this for me, Liv. Talking to my mom, taking me in, holding me together like this… I don't deserve it, but thank you,” she murmured. Olivia's skin prickled at the vibrations against her neck.

"Lex, you're my friend, and I care about you, and you absolutely do deserve it, and so much more. And really, I'm just looking out for the People of New York. How are they going to sleep at night
Alex giggled into Olivia's neck, and she shifted out from under her. Alex sat up on the bed and caught a glimpse of herself in Olivia's mirror, horrified at her smudged makeup and red, puffy eyes. "Liv, I'm sorry… With the exception of one time when my mom died, I've never cried in front of anyone before, and it seems that all I do around you now is cry."

Olivia sat up next to her and touched Alex's cheek gently. "You don't have to apologize for crying, Lex. You've been through a lot the past few days… hell, the past few years. And I'm glad you can let your guard down in front of me. You've been keeping it up long enough. I told you I've got you, okay?"

She looked at the clock next to the bed. "It's almost 5. Why don't you make that call to the doctor before she leaves for the day, and I'll draw you a bath so you can relax a bit before dinner. How about some tea?"

Alex bit her lip, looking away from Olivia, unwilling to admit that the idea of a bath made her feel just a little too vulnerable. "I think I'll just have a shower, actually. But I'll take you up on the tea afterwards. And then I'm going to stop being a selfish bitch and ask you about your day, yesterday and today."

When Alex emerged from the bathroom, dressed casually, she was considerably more relaxed, and her eyes were less puffy. Olivia was sitting on the couch, looking over a cold case file, and handed Alex her cup of tea.

"Feel better?" she asked as Alex sat down next to her.

"A bit. Thanks." Alex took a sip of her tea. "So, want to tell me about your day?"

"Nothing much to tell. I did the laundry and grocery shopping I meant to do yesterday, then I caught up on some paperwork. Cleaned out some space for you in case you want to get some more stuff from the apartment. I hadn't expected you to be out all day."

"I didn't expect to be out all day either. Laura called me just as I was leaving the hospital, so I took a walk in the park and then went to a café to work on a case. Ended up talking to Moredock instead. What about yesterday?"

"Alex, I don't want to talk about yesterday. Let's just say that I did something I shouldn't have and I regret it."

"Something like Jenna?"

"Alex, drop it, please."

Alex went to the door to grab her attaché bag, and pulled out the file she'd be arraigning in the morning, spreading out the crime scene photos in front of her, and taking notes on her legal pad. She was lost in thought when the doorbell rang, until Olivia answered and came back ushering in Nicole and her daughter.

Alex jumped up to greet her friends and offer a kiss on the cheek, forgetting the graphic images splayed over the table until she noticed the girl's pale face and shocked expression.

"Shit, I'm sorry," she offered, picking up the images as quickly as she could. "I was getting some work done on a case. I wasn't expecting company."
Nicole brushed off the apology and held out an aluminium food tray and a bottle of wine. "I called Olivia earlier and thought I'd stop by with some lasagna. We thought you might be up for a nice meal after yesterday's drama."

"Thank you; that's so kind. Will you stay and eat with us?"

"We don't want to impose…"

"You're not imposing; you brought us dinner. The least we could do is share. And really, thank you. it would have been take-out for us otherwise. The lasagna smells delicious." Alex smiled and motioned towards the couch, inviting their guests to sit. "You're Elena, right?"

Alex made small talk with her guests while Olivia poured wine for herself and Nicole and heated up the lasagna in the kitchen until she could casually bring up the topic she'd been waiting to ask about. "So, Elena, I hear you're friends with Laura Simmons?"

Elena nodded. "Did she call you today?" Nicole asked. "She wanted your phone number, but I told her that she should wait until the end of the week to call you. I figured I'd tell you on Thursday at bells, and you'd have time to deal with… you know. I hope that's okay."

"She did call me today, and it's okay. We talked," Alex explained. "I was wondering if you know anything about her parents."

Mother and daughter looked at each other. "Well," Nicole began, "I don't like to speak ill of people, and I don't know them that well, but let's say that I'm not sure why they ever came to our church. They're so much more conservative than anyone else there."

"Laura says they like to go to different 'heathen' churches and try to convince people to go to their more conservative church," Elena said. "She said they think of it like going on missions."

Alex nodded. "From what she told me, they sound pretty extreme. I just want to make sure nobody's hurting her."

Elena shifted in her seat, uncomfortably. "When we were changing for gym class once, I accidentally saw that her back was covered in welts. She told me to back off when I asked her about it. I told a guidance counselor, but I don't know if they did anything about it. Now she changes in the bathroom, so I don't know… but sometimes she looks really stiff or like it hurts to sit down."

Alex winced. "Elena, you did the right thing by telling the guidance counselor. Normally they should have called Child Protective Services to report suspected abuse, and they would have done a home inspection. Did she ever say anything to you about injuries she's gotten?"

"Not really. She keeps to herself, and she's hard to get to know. I had to try hard to get her to talk to me even at lunch. I think her parents don't like her having very many friends or going out very much. But she did tell me one time that her parents were upset with her because they caught her holding her boyfriend's hand. And another time because she wanted to wear a little makeup to a school dance, and they didn't want her to go. Now she keeps the makeup in her locker at school."

"What did she want to talk to you about?"

"Laura asked me to be her lawyer, so I can't tell you what she talked about. But I'm glad she has a friend like you looking out for her." Alex paused. "Please don't tell her we had this conversation, but if she talks about her parents again, encourage her to come talk to me, okay? I may be able to help her."

"Sure, Alex. I'm trying to get her to join the theater guild or the debate team with me so she has some
activities outside of church, but so far she hasn't wanted to."

"Well, she just moved here, so maybe now that she's getting settled in she'll want to join something. You're on the debate team? I taught high school English for a year in Portland and coached the debate team. What's the topic?"

"Resolved: The United States ought to prioritize the pursuit of national security objectives above the digital privacy of its citizens."

Alex and Olivia laughed, and said simultaneously, "She should talk to Munch."

"He's a detective I work with," Olivia explained. "He's been paranoid about Big Brother watching him for as long as I've known him. Since before 9/11, even."

"When did you teach high school? I thought you've always worked for the DA's office," Nicole inquired.

Alex looked at Olivia for reassurance. She didn't like talking about her time in Witsec, and preferred to avoid the topic with casual acquaintances. But she liked Nicole, and her daughter, and they had been thoughtful enough to bring her dinner, after all. She definitely wanted them as friends.

"I left New York for just over 3 years. I tried to prosecute a lieutenant in a Colombian drug cartel for raping and murdering an undercover police officer, got shot, and went into Witness Protection until the people with the hit out on me were rounded up and extradited. I got back about a year ago. Portland is one of the cities I lived in while I was gone."

Their look of surprise was interrupted by a knock at the door from Casey, carrying a bag of take-out.

"I brought you guys some Chinese food," she began, noticing that they had already eaten. "But it looks like someone beat me to the punch."

"Thanks, Casey. This is Nicole and her daughter Elena, who brought dinner after they saw the entertainment at the church yesterday," Alex said, introducing her friends. "Casey, have some lasagna and some wine. It's delicious. You can save the Chinese for lunch tomorrow."

"I'll put it in Liv's fridge so you don't have to worry about food tomorrow. I came over to tell you about some interesting things that happened today, but they can wait."

"It's okay, Casey. I haven't told them, but I'm sure they've already figured it out. And I could use some good news."

"Well, it seems there was a mix-up in central booking today," Casey said slyly. "It seems that Robert was sharing a cell with your friend Mr. Manning, and somebody let it slip that Robert was your husband." She swallowed a sip of wine, her eyes laughing. "A heated 'discussion' about you ensued, and both of them ended up in the infirmary. Manning was too smart to confess and spoke only hypothetically, but we've as good as got Robert's confession on tape."

Alex laughed. "I knew he wasn't a criminal mastermind," she acknowledged. "As for Mr. Manning, I had the pleasure of meeting him in interrogation last week. We didn't have enough to hold him at the time, but based on that conversation, I can imagine what he said to provoke Robert. But even if I do get a confession from him, I have a feeling he'll go for an affirmative defense. I may have told him last week that I thought he was lacking in creativity, given his shortcomings in other areas. Of course, I'm sure Robert's version of events will give him enough fantasies to last him through death row."
"What kind of affirmative defense is there for raping, torturing, and murdering four women?" Casey shook her head. "He's going for extreme emotional disturbance?"

"Lex, I thought we agreed that emasculating violent criminals in interrogation was not a good life choice?" Olivia laughed, imagining Alex telling a perp that he wasn't even a competent rapist.

"Probably. And I thought that only applied to Colombian drug lords. But yeah, it appears Mr. Manning likes to rape and kill women because of suffering caused by his micropenis. That's why it was straight homicide and not an SVU case. Detectives didn't find evidence of sexual assault until they found his stash of tapes on Thursday, which is what finally got us the arrest warrant. Fourth victim was his fiancée, and she was a virgin. CSU found a video of him raping her, but Warner says her hymen was still intact when they recovered the body."

Alex looked up at Nicole. "Nicole, I'm sorry. We shouldn't be discussing this over dinner. We're used to it, but I've probably made you lose your appetite." She didn't add that it was probably inappropriate to be discussing violent crimes graphically in front of a sixteen year old.

Elena looked at her mother, then at Alex. "Don't worry about me. I've seen worse on TV. He's going to jail though, right?"

"Um, don't worry about it." Nicole shook her head. "I guess I just didn't realize how much violence you have to deal with all the time."

"I've got more than enough evidence to get him the death penalty. He's not getting a deal. And if he claims EED, even better for me. His lawyer will have to put him on the stand, and I'll get to cross examine him in court." She reached over to pull out photos of the victims from her case file, showing Casey pictures of four tall, beautiful women with blonde hair and blue eyes. "And who better to provoke him on the stand than me?" She put the pictures back. "Any chance you want to sit second chair on this, Casey? It should have been your case, after all. No chance I'm giving SVU cases to Peluso, and I'm not sure Finn or Rossi could handle it just yet."

Casey nodded. "Let's see when it's going to trial and how my caseload is."

"Did Robert get representation?"

"Yeah, Lionel Granger." Casey answered. Alex choked on her water, and shared a shocked look with Olivia. Casey looked back and forth between the two women. "Am I missing something? Granger's not that great."

"Granger represented Rafael Zapata," Alex whispered. "The man who had me killed." Casey's only reaction was to swallow more wine.

"Do you think he knows?" Olivia asked gently.

"Robert doesn't know. I never talked about it with him. But I'd bet my life again that Granger does."

The conversation lulled for a few minutes, with Casey not wanting to bring up the real reason for her visit, the prospect of offering Robert a deal, and Nicole and Elena uncomfortable with the violent images they now imagined.

"Alex, we've got to get going, as Mark and Julie will be home soon. Will we be seeing you at yoga tomorrow?" Nicole finally asked

"I won't be physically able to do yoga for at least a few weeks, unfortunately," Alex said. She had been able to do modified yoga despite her shoulder injury, but she didn't want to share her more
intimate injuries that would prevent her from exercising. "But I'll see you in bells on Thursday."

Alex sighed and leaned against the door after she closed it, before going back to collapse on the couch. Casey had been planning to stay to discuss the possibility of pleading Robert out, but given the circumstances, simply squeezed Alex's hand and told her they'd talk after arraignment the next morning.

Alex went straight into the bedroom to put on her pyjamas, and flopped down on the bed without saying a word to Olivia, who brought her a cup of tea a few minutes later, and sat down next to her on the bed, rubbing her back gently.

She put down the latex glove and cotton swabs she had carried in from the bathroom on the side table, along with the ointment she had dug out from Alex's attaché bag. She put a hand on Alex's shoulder to turn her over, and tears immediately welled in her eyes when she realized what Olivia meant to do.

"Lex, I need to let me do this so you don't get an infection, okay?" She held up the cotton swabs. "I'm going to be as gentle and fast as possible, and I'll use these instead of my fingers so I don't have to touch you as much."

Olivia turned the light on next to the bed, put on the glove, and applied the ointment to the swab. Alex reluctantly pulled down her pants, begrudgingly accepting that she wasn't able to do this herself. "Alright, Lex, I'm going to put one finger in, very gently, so I can feel where the ointment to go, and then I'm going to slide in the cotton swab. I know it's uncomfortable for you to have me touching you like this, and it might hurt a bit." She waited for Alex to nod her consent before gently sliding in her finger, soliciting soft whimpers. "Lex, open your eyes so you know it's just me, and I'm not going to hurt you."

She continued speaking as she turned the blonde around to apply the ointment to the other set of stitches. "Alright, Lex, this time I'm just going to get a look inside so I can put the swab in with the ointment, okay?" When she was done, she removed the glove and threw it away, along with the swabs. Alex quickly pulled her pants back on, and hid her face in the pillow to hide her tears and embarrassment.

"That wasn't so bad, was it? You okay, Lex?" she asked softly, when she returned to the bed after washing her hands and began rubbing Alex's back again to soothe her.

"Just a little embarrassed," Alex admitted.

"It's normal to be a bit jumpy," Olivia soothed. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"It's just too much."

"What is, sweetie?"

"All… this. Trying to figure out how the hell I got myself in a relationship where I was raped. Thinking about Witsec and everything that happened to me while I was away that I couldn't control. Feeling responsible for a pregnant, lesbian sixteen year old whom I have to protect from her abusive parents… It's just all too much."

"Shh, Lex. It's going to be okay. We're going to work on the Witsec stuff together. And you're not responsible for Laura, you're just helping her, and it's something to be proud of. You're standing up for victims again, like in SVU, right?"

"Except I'm a victim now. I know you didn't want to say it earlier, but that's what I am." They were
both quiet for a few minutes, with Olivia continuing to rub Alex's back and stroke her hair. "Liv? About the stuff you found in my bag..."

"Lex, I just stuck everything in the back of your drawer. That's none of my business."

"I just didn't want Robert to find it after I left..."

"I understand, Lex."

"I don't know why I started reading that stuff to begin with."

"You don't owe me an explanation. Or anybody else."

"I want an explanation for myself."

"An explanation for why you enjoy reading an erotic novel?"

"An erotic lesbian novel." Alex cringed.

"Lex, I told you, nobody, including me, is going to accuse you of being a lesbian based on your reading material. But if you're wondering why it turns you on, I don't know if anyone can answer that question, including you. But you don't have anything to be embarrassed about."

"Liv, I'm straight. I've always been straight."

"I'm not disputing that." Olivia paused. "People have fantasies about all sorts of things, from rape to threesomes to fetishes to kink and BDSM. Doesn't mean they always want to act on them. Just like you enjoying lesbian erotica doesn't mean you want to act out those fantasies. Only you can decide that."

"Why doesn't straight erotica turn me on, then?" Alex regretted the admission as soon as it came out of her mouth, and blushed profusely.

"I don't know, sweetie. For the record, it doesn't do anything for me either, and I've slept with men."

"But have you enjoyed sleeping with men as much as sleeping with women?"

Olivia thought for a minute. "No. Overall, I've been more satisfied with women."

"I rest my case."

"Your case only proves that I happen to like women more than men and lesbian porn more than straight porn. It doesn't set any precedents for your sexuality. Correlation is not causation, counselor. Especially when your sample size is one." Olivia pointed out.

"Do you at least know why you like it more?"

"Sex with women, or lesbian erotica?"

"Yes."

Olivia sighed. "I prefer both for the same reason. In sex with men, it's always all about the penis and whether or not the man has an orgasm. Sometimes, whether or not the woman has an orgasm is almost irrelevant. But with women, it's different. Women usually take the time to pleasure each other, because it's not as obvious. They're equals. Lesbian erotica usually reflects that: women kiss, and touch, and caress each other. What two women do together, a man would consider 'foreplay,' and it'd
be over in 2 minutes when he was ready for the main attraction. It's about the emotional connection, not just the physical release. Does that make sense?"

Alex nodded and grunted, keeping her face buried in the pillow.

"Lex, you told me the other night that Robert was mostly interested in getting himself off, and would sometimes even hurt you during sex by not making sure you were aroused first. I don't know how your previous lovers were in bed, but I think it makes sense that you would want to read about women giving and receiving pleasure, gently and lovingly, if that's what you were lacking." She paused, lowering herself onto the bed to make eye contact with Alex. "If you are questioning your sexuality and want to experiment, I can bring you to a safe space to do that, where people are very discrete, once you're ready. And if you're not questioning, that's fine too. Either way, the next person you invite into your bed should be someone you trust and someone who will focus on your comfort and pleasure above his or her own. But you have nothing to be embarrassed about, okay?"

Alex nodded, still red from blushing and with tears in her eyes. "Thanks, Liv."

Olivia tucked her under the covers and kissed her temple, spooning her from the back. "You're welcome, sweetie. I'll stay here until you go to sleep, and we'll solve the mystery of your sexuality later."
Alex felt surprisingly safe when she woke up in the morning with Olivia's arms still wrapped around her. She looked over her shoulder to see that Olivia had fallen asleep in her clothes, on top of the covers, behind her, and had kept her arm wrapped firmly across Alex's waist. She was grateful for Olivia's affectionate nature. She had seen before how Olivia freely offered hugs and gentle, reassuring touches on the arm to victims who accepted being touched and to frightened children. The first time Olivia had comforted her was after Sam Cavanaugh's attempted suicide, and again after the Cheryl Avery case.

When Alex had come back for the Connors trial, Olivia had seemed to know exactly what she'd needed. She'd let her talk about Wisconsin, and the pain of sleeping with someone who didn't even know her real name. She'd given her the Connors file, so Alex could provoke him on the stand. And then she'd held her both nights as she cried about missing New York and her mom and her old life and about being so afraid all the time. Olivia had never once made Alex feel ashamed or offered platitudes about 'acceptance' and 'moving on' like the agents and her Witsec shrink had.

And now, after a few years with no physical contact at all, followed by 6 months of Robert groping her and only touching her for his own pleasure, when he'd wanted sex, never just with affection, she thought it was nice to be around her best friend, whose hugs somehow made her feel safe, and who didn't demand anything in return. The thought of anyone else touching her made her cringe, but Olivia always asked permission, and always sensed what would make Alex comfortable without having to ask.

She turned over in Olivia's arms when she heard her groan and shift behind her.

"Good morning," Alex said, suppressing a laugh as Olivia stretched out and rubbed her eyes. She pulled her arm out from under Alex and propped herself up on her elbow.

"Certainly is. It's not every morning I get to wake up with a beautiful woman in my arms." Alex blushed, and Olivia reached over to tuck a strand of hair behind Alex's ear. "How are you doing this morning, Lex? You sleep okay?"

Alex nodded. "Better than I have in a while," she admitted. "A little nervous about seeing Robert at arraignment, though. I'm on the docket right before Casey."

"You'll be okay," Olivia reassured her. "You know he can't do anything. There'll be a courtroom full of guards. Do you want me to come, just in case?"

"Would you mind?"

"Of course not, Lex. Let's go get dressed and get some coffee so we'll be ready to go."

Alex had no trouble getting remand for Manning on four counts each of kidnapping, rape, and murder, and afterwards, she went and took a seat next to Olivia in the gallery while Robert's case was presented.

"Docket ending 4-0-1-5, The People versus Robert Sheldon. Charges are Rape 1 and Sexual Misconduct 4. How does the defendant plead?" Moredock read.

"Not guilty, Your Honor," Robert spoke forcefully, and turned around to look at Alex, who remained stoic and stared him down. Olivia touched her hand, and Alex gripped it tight.
"Can I hear the People on bail?"

"Your Honor, the defendant is a wealthy businessman with unlimited financial resources. He is accused of committing a violent crime against an officer of the court, and has already violated the temporary order of protection issued against him. The People request remand." Casey argued.

"Your Honor, my client is a respected member of the community who is deeply hurt by his fiancée’s allegations of violence and eager to prove his innocence. The People's accusation that he violated an order of protection was merely a misunderstanding, as Mr. Sheldon is not as well-versed in the legal system as his fiancée. He will voluntarily surrender his passport, but remand is excessive. It places an undue burden on an innocent man, who has an important, high-level job on Wall Street, and puts him in danger. You can see evidence of the violent attack he sustained in jail from a murder suspect currently being prosecuted by my client's fiancée. Her high profile puts my client at risk for violence. We request ROR and my client will agree to abide by the TOP in the future."

"Your Honor, the defendant's injuries were sustained during a fight he initiated with a fellow inmate in lockup during which both men were fighting over perverse sexual fantasies involving the victim. If Mr. Sheldon is released, we believe she would be in imminent danger of harm. Due to the violent nature of the attack, the continued harassment of the victim in her own church, the ample physical evidence, and a confession taped in the holding cell yesterday…"

"You've got remand, Ms. Novak. The defendant will be a guest of the state until the trial."

"Your Honor, my client wishes to exercise his right to a speedy trial to clear himself of these spurious, vengeful charges."

"So noted. Take it up with the trial judge. Next case." Moredock banged his gavel, looked at Alex, and winked as Granger and Robert walked away.

Casey, Alex, and Olivia exited the courtroom together, and Casey rolled her eyes as she saw Lionel Granger approach. "Did you notice how he kept referring to you as 'his client's fiancée'?' Casey asked Alex. "Seems like he still hasn't quite gotten the hint that you don't belong to him."

Alex shook her head, and called out to Granger, who had just entered earshot and was approaching the women. "So, Mr. Granger, should I take it personally that you seem to enjoy representing my enemies? First Zapata, now Robert… and for the record, I'm your client's ex-fiancée. Unless that was a slip of your tongue."

"Ms. Cabot, everyone deserves a defense. And I'm not sure Mr. Sheldon will be able to get a fair trial in Manhattan, with half of the judiciary in your pocket. I'm going to appeal the bail hearing. Usually remand is only permissible in murder cases."

"Except when the defendant has violated an order of protection and is harassing the victim," Casey snapped. "Remand is entirely appropriate. Besides, I doubt Mr. Sheldon will want to go to trial on this after he sees how extensive our evidence is. Would you like to meet and see for yourself, so you can properly advise your client? We may be willing to deal."

"This afternoon? 2:30?"

"Fine. Just keep in mind that the only way to get an acquittal with a case this strong is to put the victim on trial. And I think you'll find Ms. Cabot is impeccable."

"Casey, you shouldn't taunt him like that. Not that there's anything to dig up on me, but still, he can try," Alex said.
"Alex, they can't put your sex life on trial. I don't care if you were having orgies and practicing bondage in college - he can't bring it up."

"I know. And for the record, I wasn't. My sex life has always been very boring."

"For the record, that's none of my business, and I wasn't asking," Casey reassured her.

"I'd like to watch the meeting, if you don't mind." Alex said.

"I don't mind, but are you sure it's a good idea?"

"No, I'm not sure," she answered. "But I think I need to do it anyway." She looked at her watch, then back to Olivia and Casey. "I'm meeting a friend from the Times for lunch. I'll see you in the squad room this afternoon."

"Sexual misconduct, 18 months probation, Mr. Sheldon keeps his job on Wall Street." Lionel Granger offered. Alex had just arrived to watch the interview with Olivia, and it was already underway.

"Rape 1, 10-15, and sexual misconduct for the birth control tampering, 2 years, sentences served concurrently. We don't prosecute your client for additional state and federal drug charges related to purchasing counterfeit prescription medications online. Your client makes a sizeable donation to a charity of Ms. Cabot's choosing for victims of rape and sexual assault. Finally, in the event that your client's actions resulted in an unexpected pregnancy and Ms. Cabot chooses to keep the child, Mr. Sheldon signs away all parental rights and sets up a trust fund in the child's name. He gets out in 8 with good behavior and we protect him from Ms. Cabot's many friends in Rikers. Take it or leave it." Liz offered coldly.

"I'll leave it." Robert smirked. "She's my fiancée. I didn't rape her. And if she's having a baby, it's mine."

"That's not what a jury will say when they hear this." Casey pushed the tape recorder into the middle of the table and pressed play. "We have you on tape telling Mr. Manning exactly what you did."

"So, Alexandra Cabot is going to marry you, huh? Too bad. I bet she's a frigid bitch. I could sure teach her a thing or two." Alex recognized the voice as Karl Manning's, the man she would be prosecuting for rape and murder. She instinctively reached over and took Olivia's hand.

"Not at all. I have her begging me every single day. I own her. She never tells me no."

"You? I don't believe it. I just met her last week. Bitch could use a good lay, so you're clearly doing something wrong."

"She was having 'female problems' last week. Lucky for me I've got something on the side for when she's unavailable. Or lots of somethings, if you know what I mean. But by Friday she was begging for it." He lowered his voice. "You know how I know she wanted it? I called her office on Friday to tell her I was staying out late so she'd come home. I knew I'd find her taking a bath. She was touching herself, all for me. Usually she's a prude - likes me to fuck her under the covers with the lights out because she has this huge ugly scar, and tiny breasts, and her stomach sticks out too much. I keep telling her to get plastic surgery and go on a diet, but… she wanted me so bad. She was so wet when I brought her to the bed, and I tied her up with a tie she had given me so she could enjoy it without being shy. She kept telling me she didn't want to have sex, that she used to prosecute sex crimes and that I was raping her, but she came over and over when I was inside her. She had sex with me every day, so how could I be raping her?"
Robert's expression was inscrutable as he heard his words play back for him through the tape recorder. He hadn't realized that he'd been under surveillance once he'd been processed. At worst, he'd figured that an accused murderer wouldn't make a very good witness against him.

"Bitches say that shit to control you with sex, and because they don't want to admit how much they want you to fuck them."

"Seriously. She tried to pull that when we first got engaged." Robert made a squeaky, high-pitched voice. "'Not tonight, honey. I've got a headache. I have court tomorrow. I'm too tired.' But once they know you need it every day, they come around. I just had to make her understand that it was easier to say yes than to say no."

Casey stopped the tape. "You take the deal, and we also agree not to investigate additional counts of rape or sexual abuse for coercing Ms. Cabot on other occasions. Let's be very clear, Mr. Sheldon. This tape, along with the rape kit, the DNA from the tie corroborating Ms. Cabot's story of being restrained, and the extensive bruising and injuries to her genitals, will get you convicted of Rape 1. And no judge is going to give you anything less than the max, regardless of your connections. You have until the end of the week, or the deal's off the table."

Liz stared him down. "Mr. Sheldon, I'd like to point out that the only reason we're offering a deal at all with this much evidence is as a courtesy to Ms. Cabot, who prefers not to have this tape played in open court and published in every media outlet in New York. Might I remind you of the damage you'll be doing to your whole family's reputation in this state if this case is made public."

Without waiting for him to respond, Casey and Liz both got up and left the interrogation room.

Olivia reached out to squeeze Alex's hand, but Alex remained stoic as Casey and Liz entered the observation room.

"If he knows what's good for him, he'll take the deal," Liz said quietly, reaching out to touch Alex's shoulder.

"He grew up on Park Avenue spending summers at the Hamptons and was earning $12 million a year on Wall Street. He's not going to do well in prison." Alex commented, still staring through the window. Robert and Lionel Granger appeared to be having a lively discussion, but the sound had been turned off when the interview had ended.

"Even the Roberts of the world take deals when they know there's no other option. If he gets out in 8 years he'll at least have the option of having a life afterwards. He knows that." Liz said.

"And what, find some other woman to cater to his every need and have his babies?" Alex asked bitterly.

"Hey, at least it will be a matter of public record. He'll have to register. With a criminal record he'll never be able to work on Wall Street again. And anyone who googles him will know what he's done, forever. Some other woman can look him up and make her own choices." Casey said.

"You shouldn't have told him you were extending the offer as a courtesy to me. If he thinks I've screwed him by falsely accusing him, he might want to go to court just for the chance to humiliate me more. And especially if he thinks I might be pregnant with his child… When I tried the spousal rape case, the judge wouldn't convict based mostly on the fact that their relationship was, by definition, sexual. If he goes to trial, and Granger tries to argue that it was consensual, rough sex and not rape because he had sex with me almost every day when we were living together, we could very well lose. And even with laws preventing him from bringing up my sex life, Granger knows that you
open the door to that argument if you play the tape in court, because Robert talks about how it was 'easier for me to say yes than to say no.'"

"Alex, if he does that, we add additional charges for sexual abuse and use the tape to show a pattern of coercion, plus we can get him on the drug charges, which, to be honest, aren't worth our effort otherwise," Liz said.

"Also, Alex, the spousal rape case was a really tough one. It was a bench trial in front of a notoriously conservative judge. The defendant was a cop, so there were no domestic violence calls on record even though there had been multiple calls to the residence. There was no physical evidence because she didn't do a rape kit, and she kept physically attacking him and throwing heavy objects at him in front of multiple witnesses, including me and Elliot. Not to mention the fact that they got back together immediately after the trial ended. That case was a lot less clear-cut than this one." Olivia said.

"Still, the fact that I was living with him for 4 months muddies the waters." Alex said.

"Not as much as you'd think. Especially since you reported the attack promptly, got physical evidence, and left right away. And a lot has changed in almost 8 years, too, Alex. I still think he'll take the deal." Liz reassured her.

"Maybe. I know if I were the prosecutor on this one, I'd feel good about the evidence. But as a victim… I don't know."

Liz gave her a quick hug. "It's not easy being on that side, I know. But you did great at the Connors trial, and there was virtually no evidence on that one. I doubt Casey will argue if I say that you're the one who got a conviction by provoking him. And I'm sure that if this does go to trial, you'd do just as well."

"With the added bonus of everyone in the DA's office and the judiciary knowing the intimate details of my attack and my sex life, or lack thereof." Alex shifted away from Liz and put on her coat. "I need to go for a walk to clear my head. Liv, I'll see you back at the apartment."

Alex walked for several hours, with a quick and determined city pace she had all but abandoned when she'd lived in cities that weren't New York during witness protection. Outside of New York and Boston, people hadn't walked as fast, or seemed as stressed or ambitious. She'd quickly learned that fitting in outside of the Northeast meant adopting a slower pace and a less caustic sense of humor. She had recovered the habit of fast walking out of necessity when she'd returned to the city, but still had trouble being as abrasive and tough in court and interrogations as she'd been before. She wasn't sure if that was because she was less inclined to belittle and emasculate defendants after Zapata, or if it was because she'd lost that part of herself when she'd had to be Emily from Tulsa in Wisconsin, then Kristin from Gainesville in Portland.

Had she lost her edge? She found herself sitting in her church, in the same pew where Robert had approached her on Sunday morning, wondering whether or not it was worth it. As a prosecutor, she had never questioned whether the cost of 'getting justice' for victims was too high, and she was sure she'd push to go to trial and get the max for an entitled ass like Robert - someone who had everything and thought he could take whatever he wanted. Was it hypocritical of her to desperately want him to take the deal, even with all of the evidence against him, now that she was the one who would have to relive her attack in court, in front of friends and colleagues? And if Robert did take the deal, one that included terminating his parental rights to the fetus he didn't yet know was growing inside of her, would that change her decision about continuing the pregnancy?

Alex arrived back at Olivia's apartment having called Laura to confirm the appointment for the next
day, but without having found any answers. She found Olivia sitting on the couch, reading a magazine.

"I was going to give you another 20 minutes before I called to check out you and sent out a search party."

Alex smiled weakly. "I just had some thinking to do."

"About Robert?"

"About everything. About why I want him to take the deal so badly when I'd insist on taking this to trial as a prosecutor. About why I'm bringing a 16 year old to get an abortion tomorrow. About why I can't figure out what I'm going to do about my own pregnancy. About whether anybody will buy anything Robert says." She winced slightly as she fell back on the couch next to Olivia. As much as she didn't want to admit it, the pain in her stitches had lessened considerably now that she was following orders and having Olivia apply the antibiotic ointment once a day.

"Alex, nobody in that room thinks that you 'asked for it' because you had sex with Robert prior to him raping you. I doubt even Robert thinks that." Olivia reached out to touch Alex, but she flinched and turned away.

"Logically, I know that. And I've never blamed a victim even a little bit, even in that admittedly tough spousal rape case."

"But…"

"But… when I came back to New York, I was a lot less tough than when I left. And he had a lot of opportunity to exploit my weaknesses… and to make me feel like he was as good as it was going to get for me. And I can't help but feel like if I hadn't allowed myself to be so vulnerable, none of this would have happened."

"Alex, the way he was in interrogation today - and on that tape - We both know he wasn't like that when you met him. I've told you this before, and I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it to believe it. You know how these guys operate. They're charming and smart and funny to the whole world, and they change slowly. You've been dealing with a major trauma that you probably didn't fully heal from in Witsec, the loss of your identity, and your mom, and then coming back to it all suddenly. It's understandable that with all the stress you've been under, it would have taken a while to notice the changes. You did nothing wrong, Alex. And you know that nothing he said in there was true."

Alex closed her mouth and looked down, unconsciously examining her breasts and stomach as she absentmindedly reached up to rub the scar on her right shoulder. She generally preferred to keep her scar covered up, a habit from her time in Witsec, but had resisted when Robert wanted her to get it fixed by a plastic surgeon. He'd only relented when she had mentioned getting it taken care of sometime before the wedding, so she could wear a sleeveless dress. Of course, in private he'd been furious when she'd worn a strapless red dress to their engagement party, and only half-heartedly attempted to cover the ugliest part on her back with makeup. Nobody had dared to comment to her directly, but she hadn't felt comfortable showing her scar to anyone before or since.

"And you most certainly do not need plastic surgery or a diet. You're beautiful. Really, Lex." Olivia leaned over to kiss her on the cheek, and put her hand over Alex's on her injured shoulder. She was rewarded with a faint smile.

"Thanks. I'm just feeling a little insecure, I guess."
"How about we eat, then? Do you want leftover lasagna or the Chinese food Casey brought by last night?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

They ate mostly in silence after Olivia brought warmed up plates into the living room and set them on the coffee table. Olivia knew that Alex had had lunch with a journalist friend from the Times, and that she knew Olivia knew, and would presumably mention it if she wanted to talk about it. And Olivia wanted to avoid the topic of the deal, which she knew was weighing on her friend's mind during her long walk, at least until Alex wanted to talk about it.

"I got some movies from the library and got the first two seasons of How I Met Your Mother on DVD. I'm not sure how Laura will feel tomorrow, but if she's uncomfortable, she can relax. I also got some tea and hot chocolate and put the hot water bottle on my dresser. What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"That's really thoughtful, Liv. I'm sure she'll appreciate it. I called her on my way home and told her I'd meet her at 8. Her appointment's at 9, and Dr. Logan said it won't take very long. She'll have to wait until the anaesthesia wears off, but we should be back here by mid day."

"Okay. I'm just going to clean some stuff out of the office in the morning and then read some old case files. I might go for a run. But I'll be around."

After dinner, they sat next to each other reading, until Alex got up to shower, followed by Olivia. When Olivia entered the bedroom after getting dressed, she found Alex laying on her back on top of the covers, staring at the ceiling, with the lights off.

"Lex? You okay?" Olivia sat down on the side of the bed, and Alex rolled on her side, away from her. She took the ointment from the nightstand and put on a glove. "Let's do this quick, okay, then you can go to sleep."

Alex rolled onto her back, allowing Olivia to apply the medication, then dressed herself quickly and curled up under the covers.

"Do you want me to stay, at least for a bit, or sleep on the couch?"

"Stay, please," Alex said quietly. Olivia curled up facing her on the bed and took her hand.

"Thanks, Liv," Alex murmured after a while. "For not making me talk about it - the tape - what happened today. I still need some time to process everything."

"You don't have to talk if you don't want to, Lex. But you know I'm here for you if you do, right?"

"I know. That's why I'm glad I'm not staying with Liz… she'd've gone on and on about the tape, and how awful it was, and how could he not jump on the deal, and she'd want to analyze everything. The woman doesn't know when to shut up."

"Sounds like someone I know." Olivia winked, which earned her a slap on the arm.

"I am analyzing everything. I'm just doing it in my head for now."

"It hasn't even been a week. You don't have to have everything figured out just yet. And I'm here as your friend, not your shrink, so I promise not to judge any ramblings that may occur." When Alex didn't respond, Olivia decided to change the subject. "Lex, how much does Laura know about Robert and why you're staying with me?"
"Just that he violated a restraining order and was arrested. I… when I was out on Monday, talking to her, I thought I was going to be able to get back to normal. To not… want to fall apart after being around people if I had something else to focus on. I didn't think I'd have to tell her, but I'm not sure I'm going to be able to keep it together the whole time she's here."

"I can talk to her if you want. But I meant what I said about going to stay with Liz or Casey if it's too much. Or take a walk, or hide out in here. As long as there aren't any complications, I don't think first-trimester abortions are very painful or have very long recovery times. I'm sure she won't need that much attention. So take care of yourself, and if you're not here, I'll make sure she gets taken care of. Okay?"

"We'll see how I feel tomorrow. But I told you about Liz… and Casey… I like her, but I'm just not as comfortable with her as I am with you. So I'd rather stay here. And I'll still probably want you to stay with me. I feel better when you're here."

"You don't think she'll get the wrong idea?" Olivia asked. She had no qualms about Laura assuming they were sleeping together, but thought Alex might, since she had adamantly insisted that she wasn't gay several times already.

"I don't think anyone who knows I just broke up with my male fiancé is going to read too much into me staying with you or being… needy. And since she doesn't want anyone to know about why she's here, she won't be telling anyone. Finally, she told me she's gay, so she wouldn't be in a position to judge, anyway."

"Okay. Whatever you want, Lex. Just let me know." She leaned over and kissed Alex gently on the forehead and squeezed her hand. "Goodnight, Lex."
The ride to the hospital the next morning was quiet. Laura had brought her school bag and an overnight bag with pyjamas and a change of clothes, and barely spoke to Alex as she put them in the trunk and climbed in the front seat.

Alex turned to look at her before starting up the car. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked gently. She noticed Laura was shaking slightly and her chin was quivering, but the girl nodded determinedly.

They rode in silence. It was still rush hour, so it took a while to get to the hospital parking lot even though the distance was short.

"Do you think it'll hurt?" she asked quietly as they pulled into the garage.

Alex turned off the ignition and leaned back in her seat. "I'm not sure," she answered truthfully, turning to look at Laura. "They'll give you some kind of anesthetic, but you'll have to ask the doctor about pain. And I'll hold your hand if you want me to. If you don't want me to, I'll stay in the waiting room. It's totally up to you."

Alex waited for Laura to give the cue to go, and when the young girl took a deep breath and opened the car door to get out, she followed.

They arrived up in the waiting room with ten minutes to spare, and when they sat down, Laura gripped the hand Alex had silently offered.

"Nervous? It's okay to be nervous or a bit unsure," Alex offered.


Dr. Logan came out promptly and greeted Alex with a warm smile. "Ms. Cabot, I've seen entirely too much of you this week. What can I do for you?"

Alex blushed and nodded towards Laura. "I'm here with Laura Simmons this time, not myself. May I speak to you for a moment, though?"

The two women followed the doctor, and the doctor closed the door to the examination room after instructing Laura to change into a hospital gown.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Cabot?"

"Ms. Simmons asked for my help - legal help - getting an abortion, which is why I brought her. She
was pretty determined when she came to me, so I don't think I've influenced her decision one way or the other, but I'd like you to talk to her to make sure she's sure of what she wants without me there. I told her that in exchange for my help, I wanted her to talk to you privately first. I also know she's concerned about pain."

"Fine. Whenever pregnant women come to see me, I always like to discuss the options privately to make sure nobody's coercing them one way or the other. Is she aware of your pregnancy?"

"No, and I'd prefer to keep it that way. I still plan on terminating next week, and I'm trying to keep it as private as possible. There's always a chance my ex might try some legal maneuver to cause problems for me if he finds out, and I might still run for office someday, and I don't want it to come back to haunt me. New York voters support a woman's right to choose, but that doesn't mean anyone's comfortable with women who have had abortions."

"I understand. I won't say anything. Is there anything else?" Dr. Logan asked.

"One more thing. I'd like to pay the bill, but I don't want her to know. I can more than afford it, and there's no reason she should have to spend her birthday money or allowance or whatever on this. Can you direct me to Billing and make up something to tell her?"

"I can do that. Some clinics have a sliding scale, so we'll go with that. I'm going to get started with her, and I'll come get you in the waiting room if she wants you to come in. It'll be about 30 minutes."

Alex thanked the doctor and returned to take a seat, pulling a novel out of her purse to read. She'd had tons of time to read and watch television in witness protection, and now, she relished any chance she got to take a break and read something other than a law journal. Of course, she'd fallen three years behind reading those when she'd left, and still had a stack piled as high as her waist next to her desk in her - Robert's - apartment.

Today's reading, though, was completely trashy. A romance novel. A heterosexual romance novel. She wanted to see if she found this story as appealing as some of her other choices, or at least figure out what she found appealing in the more erotic entertainment she enjoyed. Just to be safe, she'd covered the book's jacket with a brown paper bag, like she'd done in high school, to avoid being caught with the incriminating evidence.

She'd read the same page three times when she realized the reason she couldn't concentrate. If she was going to help a girl she barely knew in New York get an abortion, she had to assume responsibility for what had happened in Portland. Part of healing herself from witness protection had to be making amends to those she'd hurt by dying multiple times without saying goodbye. And Sarah Williams deserved justice, too.

Alex picked up her phone and scrolled through her contact list, finally selecting the number of a person she'd hoped she'd never have to speak to again. When the voicemail picked up, she pretended she was calm and collected. "Jack, this is Alexandra Cabot. I need your help resolving some unfinished business in Portland. Can you check to see if the Sarah Williams rape case was ever prosecuted, and get back to me? I need to make things right."

When she hung up the phone, feeling relieved, Dr. Logan had just appeared in the hallway to summon her back to Laura's room.

Alex had to consciously remind herself that she was in New York to stop herself from flashing back to Portland, when she'd brought a similarly frightened teenager to the hospital in the middle of a school dance. Laura is not Sarah, she reminded herself. She sat down on the chair next to the examination table.
"Okay, Ms. Simmons, the first thing I'm going to do is a quick ultrasound to make sure that your pregnancy is in your uterus and not ectopic. Normally you'd have already been brought in if you'd had an ectopic pregnancy, but I just like to be sure. You don't have to look or listen unless you want to."

Laura shook her head, and Dr. Logan turned off the sound and faced the monitor away from the girl, before slathering the cold gel onto her abdomen and taking a look. Alex got up to stand behind the doctor and take a look, and she covered her mouth with her hand, then sat down and took Laura's hand as the doctor put away the machine.

"Now I'm going to insert a suppository that will soften your cervix. I'm also going to give you a Vicodin, for pain. It'll take about 45 minutes for your cervix to be ready. I'll come back in 30 minutes to give you a shot of Novocain. Between the two pain medications, you should only feel a bit of pressure, and you should be up and walking about half an hour after the procedure. You might have some cramping or nausea this afternoon, but I can let you go home as soon as you can walk. Okay?"

Laura nodded her consent and the doctor handed her a small pill and a glass of water, then took another pill and pushed it into her gently, with one finger. Laura squirmed on the table at the unexpected contact.

"You can take your feet out of the stirrups until I come back, but I'm warning you: no squirming during the procedure. It'll be dangerous if you move, because I might puncture something. The drugs will stop you from feeling pain, but you'll still feel pressure down there. Are you going to be able to handle that?" Laura bit her lip and nodded. "Okay. I'll be back in a little while."

As soon as the doctor left the room, Laura crossed her legs and scooted back on the table. Alex recognized the protective movement as something she always did whenever she had to be examined. Laura fidgeted on the table, and Alex tried to distract her with questions about school and what she was reading in English class, but got only one-word answers. To be honest, Alex was nervous too. Laura may not know it, but Alex felt like she was looking a few days into the future, although she was fairly certain she'd opt for the less invasive medical abortion. She'd rather take a few pills and have a heavier-than-normal period than have a doctor scraping in her uterus. But that wasn't an option for Laura, who was further along.

The doctor came back into the room after the thirty minutes slowly ticked by, carrying a covered tray, which she set down at the business end of the table. She encouraged Laura to lie back and put her feet back up in the stirrups, and Alex swallowed hard when she saw the rather large needle uncovered on the tray. She scooted in to take Laura's hands in hers.

"Alright, I need you to hold Alex's hands and stay perfectly still. First I'm going to insert the speculum." Laura let out a quiet gasp and gripped Alex as the cold implement stretched her.

"It's alright, Laura. You're doing great." Alex reassured her. She realized that as uncomfortable as she usually was at the doctor's office, she'd at least had pelvic exams before. She doubted Laura's mother had ever brought her to a gynecologist if she'd denied the girl sex ed.

"Now, I'm going to numb you with a shot of novocain to your cervix. It's the same stuff you get at the dentist's office when you get a cavity filled," Dr. Logan explained. "It will sting a little, and it'll last a few seconds, so you need to be very careful not to move. Can you do that?"

Laura nodded, and whimpered as the needle entered her. She'd never had a cavity filled before, and it felt like her whole body was burning up from the inside. Alex tried to channel Olivia by leaning over and encouraging Laura to breathe, and reassure the girl that she was okay, until she glared when the doctor pulled out the needle with an "All done. That wasn't so bad, was it?"
The procedure itself lasted less than ten minutes, and Alex was glad that Laura seemed to recover fairly quickly. The doctor warned them both about the common after-effects: cramping, nausea, light bleeding, and created a diversion so Alex could pay the bill.

It was barely 11 and Olivia was still out for her run when they got back to the apartment, and Alex got Laura settled into her roll-out bed in Olivia's office and then showed her the hot water bottle, the movie selection, and the couch. Once the girl was settled with her movies and a cup of tea, Alex took a bookstore bag out of her briefcase and went to sit down next to her.

"How do you feel?" she asked gently. Laura looked a little pale, and still moved like she was in some pain.

"Honestly? Relieved." Alex masked her look of surprise. "I know I'm probably supposed to feel guilty or something, but I'm just really glad it's over. It feels like a big weight has been lifted."

"Then it sounds like you made the right choice," Alex reassured her. "There are plenty of people who would disagree, including your parents, but I don't think you have anything to feel guilty about." Alex paused. "And physically?"

"I'm still a bit numb. Starting to feel some cramps. But so far I'm okay."

"Alright. You'll let me know if you need anything or if we need to call Dr. Logan, right?" Laura nodded. Alex handed her the bag, and Laura pulled out a copy of Our Bodies, Ourselves. "I got you some light reading for while you're here," Alex explained. "Let's just say my mother wasn't too keen on giving the sex talk either, and I didn't have internet growing up, so... this is how I got my information. Read it, hide it in your locker, pass it on to someone else who needs it later, whatever. Just... be careful and be safe, okay?"

Laura nodded. "Thanks. I told you I'm a lesbian, though, right?"

Alex laughed. "Yes, but it's still useful to know basic biology. Besides, plenty of people are bisexual. Maybe you'll end up dating a man at some point too, and it'll come in handy." She paused awkwardly. "Laura, when did you realize you're gay, if you don't mind me asking?"

Laura shrugged. "I always thought the guys I went to school with were lame. Liked girls better. Had crushes on girls. Never played 'mommy and daddy with babies' when I had dolls. It was always 'mommy and her friends and babies'. Then I kissed a bunch of guys, and it was... it didn't appeal to me. And then I slept with one, and we know how that turned out."

"Most people's first sexual experience isn't that great, Laura. If they tell you that it was, they're usually lying." Alex commented. Her own first time had been awkward and unpleasant at best, and she'd been embarrassed that she'd waited as long as she had. She'd never had the intention of waiting until marriage, but the longer she'd stayed a virgin, the more nervous and self-conscious she'd become about sex.

"It wasn't that... I mean, he was really sweet about everything. It's just... how do I explain it? He had all of the qualities of someone I'd want to date, and we have great chemistry as friends, but I didn't like having sex with him. Not because he wasn't good, or attentive, because he was, but because I don't think I want to have sex with any guy. I mean, my parents buy into that whole 'sex is only for procreation and if you're not making babies you shouldn't be doing it' crap, but you are supposed to like it, right? Isn't that the point?"

"That is the point," Alex confirmed. At least, she thought so. Now she was racking her brain, trying to figure out if she'd ever had sex because she wanted to and wanted to enjoy it. At first, she'd
blamed her lack of enjoyment on lack of experience. In Witsec, she'd blamed her emotional pain and the fact that her lover hadn't even known her real name. And with Robert… he wasn't particularly gifted, and sex had quickly turned into an obligation.

"And then I kissed a girl, and slept with her and we… We didn't have sex but we touched each other, and it was different. It felt… right, I guess. I felt safe, cared for, you know?"

"Is she your girlfriend?" Alex asked.

"Sort of. She's not 'out' either, although her parents will probably be nicer about it than mine. But we agreed that we're just going to hang out and not go beyond kissing for now."

"That's probably a good idea. But what are you going to do about your parents?"

Laura shrugged. "Well, aside from my girlfriend, you're the only one who knows, and I trust you not to tell anyone. So, my plan is to stay in the closet until I graduate college, then cut ties with them. If I'm financially independent, they won't be able to do anything about it."

"That sounds hard," Alex commented.

"It is what it is. If I get put in foster care, I'm not going to get to go to college. At least if I can get a degree, I'll have a shot. Neither of my parents went to college, and I think that's why they're so extreme and religious."

"If you're legally emancipated from your parents, you don't have to declare their income on your financial aid declaration. You could get a need-based scholarship. And I don't know how your grades are, but you might be able to get an academic scholarship too. But it can be an ugly battle in court."

"I don't know. I mean, they're still my parents, you know?"

"I know. All parents have their flaws, and I don't even know if there'd be enough to get you emancipated, but we can talk about it another time if you want." She smiled at a memory. "You know, from the time I graduated college my mother was harping on me to settle down and get married because 'my biological clock was ticking' and she wasn't able to get pregnant again after 30, and I hated it. It was probably the thing I hated most about her. We were finally starting to get along when I had to leave New York… and now that she's gone, I miss those fights that we had. Of course, her nagging might be why I ended up engaged to a man I didn't love, but that's another issue entirely."

"Elena told me what happened." Laura said. Alex looked away. "I'm sorry… I know she didn't tell anyone else, but she told me she'd come over with her mom, and that you had been asking about my parents, and then she told me what he did to you."

"He's in jail. And hopefully he'll be staying there for a very long time." Alex examined her own cup of tea. "And I meant to tell you… at least to explain why I'm staying here with Olivia instead of in my own place, at least temporarily. I just figured you had enough to deal with and I really don't want to talk about it anyway."

"Then we won't talk about it. I just thought you should know that I know. And look, I know this is really selfish of me, but I'm grateful that you were off of work this week so you could help me. Of course I'm not glad about what happened to you, but I know you're busy, and if he hadn't done what he did, you'd be working, and you wouldn't have been able to meet with me on Monday or take me today, and… I'm sorry, this is awful of me to say, and I'm going to stop talking now."
"Laura, it's okay. I know what you mean. I know you're not glad I was raped. And in spite of
everything, I'm glad I'm able to help you too. I'm still in pain and I'm not in a great place emotionally,
but I acknowledge that some good things have already come from it. I was able to get out of a really
bad relationship that I was having trouble leaving. I reconnected with Olivia and some other friends,
whom I hadn't contacted since I'd gotten back to New York. There's some advocacy I'm going to do
now, that I wouldn't have been doing otherwise. And of course, I was available to help you, which I
definitely don't regret. Of course I would prefer that it had never happened, but at least I'll make the
best of it."

Alex took the now empty teacups and stood up to end the conversation. "I'm going to do a little bit of
work, so I'll leave you with the remote and the DVDs. Let me know if you need anything."

She went into the kitchen and rinsed the dishes, just as she heard Olivia's key in the door. Alex
automatically reached for a glass and filled it with ice water.

"How'd it go this morning?" Olivia asked, taking the glass of water Alex offered her to cool down
from her run.

"Fine. I think she's doing okay. We talked a bit and now she's going to watch something while I get
some work done."

"Okay. I'm going to hop in the shower and then do a bit of paperwork." Olivia said.

"At some point I'll run out to the grocery store so I can make dinner tonight," Alex said. "It's about
time I showed you what I learned to cook in Witsec."

"Should I call the fire department in advance? Or Poison Control?" Olivia teased, and Alex hit her
on the arm.

"I'll have you know that I haven't started any fires in years. And you will eat your words when you
taste my lemon chicken."

"Whatever you say, Lex."

Olivia walked off to the bathroom and Alex settled down at the table with a new cup of tea, carefully
angling her laptop's screen so that Laura and Olivia wouldn't be able to see it. She put on her glasses,
pulled out her legal pad and drew two columns, jotting down some notes in each, before opening up
an incognito window in her browser and googling 'how do I know if I'm a lesbian?'

After an hour of reading articles of varying quality on many websites, and answering questions on
the "Are you a lesbian?" quiz that basically asked different incarnations of 'Do you like girls?' and
'Do you want to kiss girls?', Alex felt like she was further away from an answer than she'd been
when she'd started. No, she'd never been tempted to kiss a woman before. She'd never really given it
much thought at all. But maybe she'd wanted to and hadn't recognized the feeling because she hadn't
been looking for it. And as for whether she liked girls or like liked them, well, that was what she was
trying to figure out, wasn't it?

After page 5 of the search results yielded nothing new of interest, she closed her laptop and sighed.
Normally, between Google and LexisNexus, she was able to find any answer she was looking for in
a matter of minutes. The internet, she'd thought, was supposed to be both omnipresent and
omniscient. And yet, it could not tell her whether or not she was gay.

Alex decided to cut right to the chase. She thought back to when she'd discovered she enjoyed
lesbian erotica. It was a few months after the Connors trial, and she'd just settled in to Portland. This
time, she'd decided against seeking out a warm body for physical gratification, like she'd done in Wisconsin. The sex with her insurance claims adjuster had been rough and intense, sometimes bordering on painful. It wasn't what Alex would have preferred, but it was what Emily had needed. To feel. He hadn't asked any questions she wouldn't have been able to answer, and hadn't even attempted to figure out whether he was pleasuring her, aside from assuming that the grunts and moans she made at varying intervals meant that she was enjoying herself. She'd gotten good at faking orgasm with Alan.

Emily from Tulsa had been able to do casual sex, but Kristin from Gainesville was determined not to. Since September, two of the young male teachers from her school had been vying for her attention. Soft rejection had only made them increase their efforts, and in her loneliness, Alex thought she'd need to learn to satisfy herself to keep from falling into another unhealthy relationship. She liked Portland, but she didn't know how long she'd be able to stay, anyway.

So, one Saturday afternoon, Alex had gone into a chain bookstore in the mall two towns over from where she lived to browse the romance section, selecting a few books and bringing them over to the easy chairs in a more neutral location to make her selection. The last thing she wanted was to run into her students while reading trashy novels. She'd picked three books the same way she'd picked her wine in college: mostly by the pretty, abstract covers, which, she'd thought later, should have been her biggest clue. She threw a few more highbrow selections into her basket, again in case any of her students saw her and wondered what reading material their English teacher had purchased, and paid.

The small vibrator she'd ordered online had arrived in a discreet package in her mailbox the day before, and, having never used one before, she was eager to try it out. Alex had never been big on pleasuring herself, but alone at 31, she figured it was time to learn.

The beginning of the story - the part she'd skimmed in the bookstore - progressed normally, and it wasn't until she'd gotten to the third chapter that she realized she'd picked up the wrong genre. Jamie, it turned out, was not a man, but another woman.

Alex turned the book over, now noticing the 'lesbian erotica' genre marking near the barcode. She'd almost stopped reading, but her curiosity got the better of her, and she decided to at least try to enjoy herself. When she'd shifted in bed, unconsciously trying to relieve some of the pressure building between her legs, she'd realized she was more aroused than she'd been with either Alan or her claims adjustor. Between the book, her fingers, and the vibrator, she brought herself to several powerful orgasms that evening.

The next night, Alex realized that one of the books she'd bought had, in fact, featured straight characters, and she'd been disappointed that it didn't have quite the same effect on her. Maybe that should have been a clue.

"Earth to Alex…"

Alex was pulled abruptly out of her reverie by Olivia, who was standing in front of her holding a cup of coffee.

"Am I pulling you out of a nice daydream?" Olivia asked, smiling. "I made some coffee after I got out of the shower, and came to see if you wanted any while you were 'working'."

"Sorry, just thinking," Alex answered, blushing. "But I'd love some coffee. These cross-examinations don't write themselves, you know." She turned over her legal pad to hide her work and followed Olivia into the kitchen.

"Really, counselor? That's what you're going with? That was most definitely not your predatory
courtroom smile, so I don't know what you were thinking about, but I'd bet my pension that it wasn't a cross-examination." Olivia took another mug out of the cabinet and made her coffee just how she liked it.

Alex sighed. She'd forgotten it was damn near impossible to lie to the detective. Olivia was a good interrogator, but her ability to read Alex was uncanny. Alex's time away obviously hadn't changed that.

"In that case, I'm going to invoke my fifth amendment right against self-incrimination."

"The law protects you from rights violations by the government, not by private individuals. And since I'm not on duty… but you know what? I think with that smile, I actually don't want to know whatever it is you're plotting."

"How do you know I'm plotting something?" Alex asked.

"Lucky guess. And the fact that you're almost always plotting something."

"Well, you're wrong. At the moment, the only thing I'm plotting is a grocery list so I can make dinner tonight."

She was interrupted by the ring of her cell phone. "Alexandra Cabot," she answered, unsure about who would be calling from an unidentified number.

"If it isn't my favorite pain-in-the-ass witness," came the voice on the other line.

"Hi Jack. Good to hear from you." Alex smiled warmly. Jack Hammond had been one of her least favorite people from the moment she'd met him, but she'd grown to appreciate him during the three years when he was the only person who knew her true identity. And he had managed to keep her safe until Velez and company had bit the dust, so she was grateful to him for that, too. "Were you able to find out anything for me?"

"Yeah. The Williams rape case didn't even make it to the grand jury. When you - when Kristin Walker - died, it was just her word against his, and without evidence—"

"— they didn't want to prosecute. Except there was evidence. She had bruises and tearing, just no fluids. For crying out loud, I've won harder cases with less evidence."

"Well, not everyone is Alexandra Cabot. But the DA seemed open to reopening the case if a new witness came forward."

"Jack, I'll need you to corroborate my story. Probably at trial. I was very careful not to state my name, but to only provide my driver's licence as proof of ID, so that nobody could accuse me of making a false statement to police. But any defense attorney worth his salt will latch on to that to try to discredit my testimony."

"I'm aware of that. You've told me about plenty of cases the feds have ruined for you - I'll be there for this one, and you can consider it payback."

"That means a lot, Jack. I'm not ready to go back quite yet. To be honest, I still feel terribly guilty about abandoning her. But I'll probably go before the end of the school year. I'll let you know when I'm making the trip."

"Fine. You know where to reach me. How are you doing, Alex? Settling back into life in New York and trying high profile cases?"
"I'm doing alright. Coming back… hasn't been as smooth a transition as I'd hoped. I jumped into an engagement, which just ended… rather abruptly, but I'm starting to get back to my old self. It took me a while to get in touch with everyone, but I'm getting there."

"Like your detective?"

"My detectives? Benson, Stabler, Munch, and Fin?"

"I meant Detective Benson. I thought you and she were close. She is the one you insisted on seeing after you were shot."

"We were - we are close. We worked together very closely for three years. I wanted to see her because I didn't want her to blame herself for my death. She saved my life while I was bleeding out on the sidewalk. Actually, we just got back in touch this week. She's been a wonderful friend. Very supportive after the unexpected end of my engagement. I'm staying with her for a bit until I find a new place to live."

"Oh… I thought… I didn't realize," Hammond sputtered. "Well, give her my regards, and please do keep me posted on your travel plans. And Alex, do me a favor and try to stay out of trouble, will you?"

Alex laughed. "I'll try, but it seems to find me anyway."

"I know. I still have you on Google Alerts, and it seems like every week I'm getting something about your ADAs getting held hostage in a courthouse or something."

"What can I say? I guess being dead for three years means I like to live on the edge. I don't go looking for trouble, but it does seem to find me quite easily."

"Take care, Alex."

"Thanks, Jack. You too," Olivia looked at her curiously when she hung up the phone. "Jack Hammond," she explained. "He sends his regards. Apparently he thought you and I were 'close.'"

"I gathered that," Olivia said. She certainly hadn't forgotten the tearful goodbye they'd exchanged before Alex had been whisked away, or the fact that Alex had wanted her to spend the night in the safe house when she'd come back briefly for the Connors trial.

"I have some unfinished business in Portland," she began. "It's why I had to leave after less than a year. But I'll tell you about that later." She nodded towards Laura, who was stirring on the couch. "I'm going to run to the store so I can get dinner started. Do we need anything?"

"Nothing I can think of."

After making sure her laptop was on top of her legal pad before going into the living room to check on Laura, who was just waking up from a nap. "How are you feeling?" she asked quietly, touching the girl's forehead gently to make sure she hadn't developed a fever.

"Okay. A little sore."

"You can take some more pain meds now if you want. It's been a few hours. And you should go to the bathroom to make sure you're not bleeding too much. Can you get up on your own, or do you need some help?" Alex offered her hand, and Laura pushed up off the couch and wobbled on her feet. Alex steadied her and walked her towards the bathroom. "I'm going to run to the store to get stuff for dinner. Do you think you'll be able to eat something? Do you want me to get you anything?"
"Saltines? Juice? Ginger ale?"

"Maybe some ginger ale. I think I'll be able to eat in a little while, though. I feel a bit sick but I am starting to get hungry."

"Okay. I'm going to make some rice to go with dinner, so you can at least try to eat that if nothing else. Call Olivia if you need help, okay? I'll be back in a little bit."

As soon as Alex closed the door behind her, Olivia began waging an internal battle. She would never violate Alex's trust by going into her purse or her briefcase without permission, but Alex had left the legal pad on the dining room table. Albeit under her laptop, but still. She was dying to know what her friend had been 'researching' with the practically lecherous smile she'd had on her face. She knew it wasn't case law.

After allowing the debate to continue for a respectable amount of time, she checked to make sure Laura was settled back into the couch and watching an episode of something before she snuck a peak at the list Alex had been writing. True to methodical Cabot form, Alex had divided her page into two columns and written "Am I a lesbian?" across the top.

The left column was filled with bullet points in Alex's tiny, neat handwriting. Turned on by lesbian erotica more than straight erotica. 'Girl crushes' on teachers in high school, Tina Fey, etc. Prefer one-on-one 'intimate' friendships with women to going out with large groups of friends. Few guy crushes and not munch interest in kissing guys. Not much interest in sex until age 21. Very few sex partners (3) and little desire to seek out sex. Don't find male bodies particularly attractive or think they smell good. Occasionally admire beautiful women, but never thought of them sexually? And doesn't everyone? Unsatisfying and painful sexual experiences with men. Sex in relationships often felt like an obligation. Called 'inhibited' and 'cold' in bed; unwilling to experiment sexually. Trouble getting aroused. Never able to orgasm with a man until rape. Supposed to enjoy sex - and I don't.

In the left column, labeled "Straight," Alex had listed only a few counterarguments. Never questioned my sexuality until age 33 - why wouldn't I have known / suspected earlier? Never envisioned / imagined kissing or having sex with a woman - would I like it? Arguments 'for' being a lesbian could also be explained by a poor choice of sex partners (men I'm not attracted to rather than men in general, men not skilled in arousing / pleasuring me), puritanical sex-negative upbringing, working at SVU. Explains why I haven't liked sex with men, but not why I might enjoy sex with a woman.

Finally, under all of her arguments, Alex had drawn two horizontal lines, and written two questions across the page. Was my grief for Anna so strong because I felt more than friendship for her? Do I see myself participating enthusiastically in a sexual relationship with a woman?

When Olivia got to the end of the page, she carefully placed the notepad and laptop back exactly as Alex had left them, and retreated to the couch with her cup of coffee and a case file. The long list certainly explained why Alex had been lost in dreamland earlier, but she wasn't sure which part of the mostly negative list had evoked the smile. She had known about Robert, of course, and the claims adjustor, and Alex had mentioned her college and law school boyfriend, Alan Messinger, a few times. Alex had admitted to not having had many partners or any good sex, but was that really it for her? Olivia suddenly felt guilty for betraying her friend's trust, and worse that she could hardly imagine getting to be 33 without a single positive sexual experience.

Alex returned a few minutes later, and plopped the bag of groceries down on the dining room table to put her laptop and legal pad back in her briefcase. Once in the kitchen, she began chopping vegetables and taking pans out of Olivia's cabinets, cursing the fact that they were practically growing cobwebs.
Olivia brought her case file into the kitchen and sat down on a stool. "I decided I have to see this for myself," she teased, watching Alex drizzle oil and spices into a pan.

"Oh, shut up," Alex scolded her. She slapped Olivia's hand as she reached out to grab a slice of carrot. "Liz called when I on my way to the store," she said. "Apparently Granger filed motions up the wazoo today. Motion to suppress the evidence from the rape kit, because you were there and now I'm staying with you. Motion to suppress the evidence from the apartment on the grounds that I couldn't authorize CSU to search because I don't own the apartment. Motion to suppress the recording from the tombs on the grounds that my serial rapist and murder defendant was 'acting as an agent of the police' when he 'interrogated' Robert. Appeal to instate bail due to 'emotional distress' and the fact that remand is usually only granted in murder trials."

"And?"

"And Moredock had them all thrown out. Apparently he's the trial judge if Robert doesn't take the deal. Granger had no grounds for any of them and he knows it, but Robert's paying him, so he might as well milk him for what he's worth. The only one that has any legal merit is the appeal on bail, which he could actually win. But I think if all the evidence is in, Granger's going to see the writing on the wall. I hope, anyway. And the appeal wouldn't be heard before next week."

"And are you doing okay?" Olivia asked softly, now interpreting Alex's dedication to cooking as frenzied movement. She reached out to touch Alex's arm and hold her still for a second, studying her face for clues. "Hey, it's just me. If you need a few minutes, take them. Dinner's not going anywhere, okay?"

"I'm fine," Alex insisted, pulling out of Olivia's reach. "Some guy just leaned in too close to me at the store, and I freaked out a little. I'm okay, I promise."

"You'd tell me if you weren't?"

"Yes, mom." Alex went back to adding vegetables to her side dish on the stove. "What are you reading? I thought you were supposed to be off."

"Yeah, but I've got an open serial who targets young teenage girls, and something about it is off. I can't figure out what it is, yet, but I think there's something in there that I'm missing."

"Ouf. Sounds horrible."

"It is. He's really violent, Lex, and he's escalating. I'm worried that if we don't get him, the next one isn't going to make it."

When dinner was ready, they decided to eat around the coffee table to avoid forcing Laura to move. Although she was mostly recovered, she still complained of some pain and cramps, and only picked at her dinner.

Olivia apologized immediately upon tasting Alex's meal. "I'm sorry, Lex. This is delicious. I take back everything I said. You can cook for me anytime you want."

Alex laughed. "Who says I want to cook for you after all your teasing about the fire department and poison control? I made this for Laura, not for you," she teased. "I shouldn't have even let you have any."

"Oh, come on. You'll get rusty pretty fast if you don't practice. And who are you going to cook for besides me? Munch? Elliot?"
"Nah, if I cook for Elliot I have to cook for his wife and eight kids, too. So yeah, I suppose you win." Alex smiled at the banter they were just starting to regain. Not everything had to be so serious with Olivia. She could be supportive and enjoy a laugh. "Speaking of which, I asked my realtor to give the tenants in my old apartment their 90 days notice to quit."

"Are you trying to tell me, counselor, that I'm stuck with you for 90 days and you're going to bribe me with your cooking to get me to agree that you can stay that long?" Olivia teased.

"Well, if you don't like it, I can always go stay with Liz. She'll bring me cupcakes. Although we might actually kill each other. But seriously, Liv, if it's too much I can get a hotel for a few weeks. I just figure it'll be easier than finding a new place to live when I already have a perfectly good apartment."

"You can stay here as long as you want, Lex. Once I go back to work I'll hardly be here anyway. I *might* come home to eat once or twice a week and do laundry."

"True. And I'll hardly be here either. Those ADAs keep me on my toes."

Laura mostly picked at her dinner and ate some rice and plain yogurt, but she enjoyed watching the easy banter between the two women. It was nice to be in a place where people were nice to each other, and respected her decisions as a person. Her own parents babied her, and her father even treated her mother like a child sometimes.

Olivia jumped up when her phone rang. "Benson," she answered breathlessly when she'd dug it out of her jacket pocket. Her face dropped as she realized she was getting called out. She went to get her badge and gun out of the lockbox in her bedroom as Elliot finished the rundown of the scene. "El, I'm just finishing up dinner. I'll be there in like 20 minutes, 30 max, k?"

"Dinner? Or takeout?"

"Dinner. Alex cooked. It was delicious."

"Cabot cooks? I don't believe it."

"Believe it, El. Or I'll tell her you said that." She winked at Alex as she put on her leather jacket. "See you in a few." She hung up and sighed. "It's my serial. Vic's up at Mercy. Elliot said she's in rough shape, so I'm not sure I'll get to talk to her tonight, and I don't know how long I'll be. Will you put my pillow on the couch when you go to sleep so I don't wake you when I come in?"

Alex nodded and followed her over to the door.

"You going to be okay, Lex?" Olivia asked quietly when they got away from the table. Alex nodded. "Remember she's a big girl. You can get some space and go into the room if you need to."

"I know, Liv. I'm a big girl too."

Olivia reached out to touch her arm. "I'll send you a text when I know how long I'll be gone. Don't wait up for me. Get some sleep."

"Will you let me know when you get home? Even if it's late? I know you don't want to wake me up, but... I'll feel better knowing you're back." Olivia nodded. "Stay safe, detective."

"You bet. I'll be back soon."

As Olivia closed the door, Alex went back to the table and began gathering up the dinner dishes to
bring to the kitchen. When she finished cleaning up, she pulled a law journal out of her briefcase and sat on the couch opposite Laura.

"She really loves you, you know," Laura said, after a while, studying Alex. Alex put down the journal and looked intently at Laura through her glasses. "I know you said you aren't gay, and I don't know if she is or not, but I can tell she loves you a lot."

"What makes you say that?" Alex asked cautiously, unwilling to give away anything about Olivia's sexuality or her own doubts.

"The way she looks at you, how she teases you but is always kind to you, how she's always watching you or checking in to make sure you're okay… lots of different things. People don't do that stuff with people they don't love. And most people aren't like that with their friends."

"Olivia and I worked together very closely for years. Then I was shot, and she saved my life by applying pressure to the wound. I had to leave New York, and she was one of only two people who knew I was alive for almost three years. We… not many people have that bond."

"But you were back for a year before you called her, and only then because you needed her help? Sorry… I overheard you on the phone earlier."

"I had a bit of trouble coming back to my old life. Feeling like my old self." Alex explained. Laura took a breath. "Look, I'm not judging you. You and Olivia have been very kind to me, and I'm grateful to you, really. It just sounds like you were hiding from something. Maybe from her."

"A lot changed while I was gone. I changed a lot while I was gone."

"Well, I didn't know you before, so I can't say. But if you didn't call her for a year, and she just drops everything to let you move in for 3 months… Most friends, even really good friends, don't do stuff like that."

"How old are you? 16 or 65?" Alex teased, wanted to put an end to the serious part of the conversation, at least with regard to her own personal life. Sure, she cared about Olivia, loved her even, as a friend. Was it possible that Olivia was hiding deeper feelings for her? Or that her own unresolved feelings about her sexuality were actually masking an attraction to her friend? Yikes.

"I've just seen a lot. But my parents don't look at each other the way she looks at you. My aunt looked at her girlfriend that way, though."

"How do your parents look at each other?" Alex asked gently.

"My dad… he's always watching my mom to make sure she doesn't mess up and do something 'unladylike.' He always wants her to call him 'sir,' and he gets mad if the chores aren't done a certain way, or if he thinks dinner doesn't taste right. She never looks directly at him."

"And what happens if he gets angry?"

"He makes her stand in the corner, and apologize for what she's done, and then sometimes I hear her crying in their room but I don't know what he does. I think he hits her. Sometimes she has trouble walking afterwards."

"And does he hit you when he's angry with you?"

Laura looked away, her face turning red in shame. "Sometimes. He hit me when he saw me with a
boy from school. Said I wasn't allowed to have a boyfriend." She scoffed. "It wasn't even the guy I slept with, it was just some guy who was helping me with my math homework. Another time it was because my grades weren't good. And once because he caught me with makeup. But he hits my mom a lot more than he hits me."

"That's not normal, Laura. You shouldn't have been exposed to that."

"No, but my mom can't leave. She didn't go to college and she's never worked, so what's she going to do? And I can't leave without her."

"Laura, I can't help either of you unless you agree, but Olivia's unit at the police department deals with cases of abuse. She can help you. And I can help you get a restraining order to protect both of you."

"I just think that it's only two more years… then I'm in college. And then what happens to my mom?"

"Your mom is responsible for herself. It takes a lot for them to leave, and a lot of them keep going back until they're ready to leave for real. How long has she been married to your dad?"

"18 years. She was 16 when they got married."

"Let me ask you this. Do you know girls at school who have boyfriends who cheat on them?"

"Yeah."

"And they stay with them anyway, because their boyfriends keep promising they'll change, that it was a mistake, or a misunderstanding, and then it happens again and again?"

"Yeah."

"And you probably think they're idiots for going back to the same guy, right?" She waited for Laura to nod. "Well, from their point of view, they're in love, and love is going to solve all their problems, and it's just temporary. It's the same thing when women are abused. It starts off as a one-time thing. An accident. The man buys flowers, he apologizes, he's very sweet, he makes it up to her, and he promises never ever to do it again. And then it happens again a few weeks later. And a third time. And then when she gets pregnant, it gets worse, because now she can't leave. And every time, she forgives him, thinking he'll realize he loves her and he's hurting her, and it never happens. And she gets used to it, and a lot of times she's financially dependant on him, and it's very hard for a woman to leave after that. And legally, it's gotten easier for women to get protection, but harder for them to get financial support. Your mom probably didn't know where to go. She probably still doesn't."

Laura considered this for a moment, and Alex continued. "Listen, I've helped a lot of women in your mom's situation, but they have to want to help themselves first. And I want you to know how important it is that if anyone hurts you in a relationship, you don't allow her to make excuses or apologies. You leave. Domestic violence is even harder to stop and prosecute when it's a same-sex couple. And children who grow up in abusive homes are more likely to become victims or perpetrators of violence. So you need to recognize the signs, and if you find yourself in an abusive relationship, you need to get out."

"And if I'm the violent one… can I get help?"

"Therapy could help. It's just something to keep in mind. You're not doomed to be violent by your genes or anything like that. I have no idea what your temper is like, so I can't say if you're violent or not. But just be aware and make sure you have better tools to control yourself than your father does."
Alex got up and grabbed her journal and her briefcase. "I'm going to take a shower and do a little reading before I go to sleep. Feel free to take a shower if you want, but Olivia will sleep on the couch when she gets home, so don't fall asleep out here, okay?"

Laura nodded. "If you feel sick, knock on my door, okay? And feel free to have Elena over tomorrow after school if you're feeling better. She can bring you some homework, and a visit from your girlfriend will probably help you to feel better."

Laura blushed. "How did you know?"

"I didn't, until just now. Lucky guess. But not to worry. Your secret's safe with me."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Please review, if you can.
Chapter 16

Alex rinsed off quickly in the shower and put on her pyjamas before climbing into bed, deciding to take advantage of Olivia’s absence by addressing one of the questions on her list. Could she actually imagine having sex with a woman, or did she just enjoy reading about it?

To start, she dug out her paperback from the back of the dresser, and read one of the erotic passages. Alex had always wondered what good oral sex would be like, and she enjoyed reading about the two women pleasuring each other, but had never imagined herself as a participant. Though Alan had only once made a cursory, fumbled attempt, and Robert had tried, roughly, without her permission, she’d wondered if the earth-shattering oral sex in her romance novels was exaggerated, or whether it actually was supposed to be that good.

Somewhere between her reading on the Kinsey scale (reassuring her that almost 4 in 10 women scored on the bisexual-to-lesbian side of things) and taking the "Are you a lesbian?" quiz, Alex had read something about how, unlike men, women were often turned on by sex acts they didn’t personally want to participate in. This seemed to confirm what Olivia had said: straight women could be turned on by gay or lesbian porn, practitioners of vanilla sex could be turned on by kink, and nobody would be able to judge her sexuality based solely on the novel she read.

For Alex, though, the test was determining whether her own participation in sex with a woman turned her on, or whether her interest was purely speculative. If the thought of performing oral sex on another woman appealed to her, rather than repulsed her, Alex thought she could be pretty sure she was at least strongly bisexual.

She went through a short list of her girl crushes from over the years, starting with her sixth grade English teacher and ending with her favorite actress, imagining what it would be like to touch her breasts, to slip a finger inside of her, and to taste her arousal. She realized she had a problem when she imagined completing the act: every time she imagined a woman orgasming underneath her or making love to her, the only face she saw was Olivia's.

She instantly felt guilty for picturing her friend so intimately. True, Olivia had been affectionate with her ever since the Roy Barnett case, offering a hug or a reassuring touch. She’d held her at night during the Connors trial, when Alex had confided in her about being on antidepressants and sleeping with some guy from her office and about losing hope that she’d ever get to be herself again. But even when she’d touched her more intimately, or offered a kiss on the cheek, Alex had never felt uncomfortable. If Olivia felt that way about her, she'd never suspected. Not to mention the fact that Alex knew she was still reeling from her own assault and whatever had happened with Jenna.

Just for the sake of argument, when she finished her daydream, she imagined the same scene with some of the male celebrities she’d admired over the years, and felt her arousal immediately cool. I guess that answers that question, then, she thought, tucking the book back behind her clothes in the drawer. So, I guess I'm a lesbian. What am I going to do now?

Alex began compiling a list of questions in her head, trying to figure out what she was supposed to do next with this new self-discovery. **Do I come out? Do I care if people know? Is it going to affect a political career? Is meeting women going to be a lot harder than meeting men? Who pays?**

**Does the three-date standard for sex still apply?** Alex rarely went on any third dates as a straight woman when she thought she'd 'owe' her date, but she'd have to be aware in case the rules changed.

Fortunately, Alex's practical side took over before the train of thought could swerve out of control.
Cabot… you're getting ahead of yourself. It's probably going to be months before you're ready to go on a date, let alone…

Alex tried to go back to picturing herself with another woman, to imagining feeling safe and loved during sex instead of empty and alone. When the questions that plagued her mind quieted and she finally drifted off to sleep, it wasn't long before she saw another face.

"Oh, don't you worry, sweetie. We'll still use your toys. You're in for one hell of a night… Baby, by the time I'm done, you'll be begging for more. Now let's go to bed… Alexandra, you are so hot right now. I came home to my beautiful fiancée, aroused and ready for me to take her any way I want to, all night long."

Her whole body stiffened as she felt his mouth on her, then his fingers inside of her, taunting her as he brought her closer and closer to the edge.

"You're all mine, Alexandra. Nobody can have you but me. I'm the one you'll see every time you come. Come for me, Alexandra," she could see him leering at her as he sucked hard on her clit and pushed her over the edge.

"I'll see you in a bit, Alexandra. We'll continue this later."

Alex woke up panting and with tears in her eyes, and she immediately reached down to her panties to see if what she had just felt was real. Her heart sank when she felt wet and sensitive and realized it was. She looked around the room. Olivia's room. Olivia wasn't there; she'd gotten called out. The clock read 3:42 AM.

Her stomach lurched and she stumbled out of bed towards the bathroom, making it just in time to empty the contents of her stomach into the toilet.

She didn't know how long she had been there, dry-heaving into the toilet and crying, before she heard a soft knock on the door. "Lex? You okay in there?" Alex responded by retching again.

Olivia opened the bathroom door and slid in behind Alex, pulling back her hair and feeling her forehead. Alex's skin didn't feel warm, but she grabbed a washcloth and wet it in the sink, pressing it to her face and then to the back of her neck. Alex flinched slightly at Olivia's touch.

"How long have you been in here, Lex?" Olivia asked gently, running her fingers through Alex's hair. Alex stiffened, so Olivia twisted her hair and pulled her hand back, careful not to touch without permission.

"Don't know. What time is it?" Alex moaned, clutching her stomach and dry-heaving again.

"Almost quarter after four. I just got home."

"Half an hour, maybe."

"You've been sick this whole time?" Alex nodded. "Well, it doesn't look like your cooking is to blame, since neither Laura nor I got sick," Olivia offered. Alex whacked her weakly in the arm, and her faint laugh turned into dry-heaving again over the toilet bowl. "Sorry, sweetie. I'll get out the thermometer so we can take your temperature, but you don't feel warm. Did something happen while I was gone?"

"Bad dream. He was there… inside me. He made me…" Alex retched again.

"Oh, sweetie," Olivia soothed. "He's not here. You're safe right now, Lex. I'm going to get you some
new pyjamas while you're taking your temp, and some saltines and ginger ale to try to settle your stomach, okay? I'll be right back."

Olivia moved as quickly as she could to get back to the bathroom, and noticed her office door open a crack. She peaked her head in.

"Is Alex okay?" Laura asked timidly. She had a desk lamp on and was reading in bed.

Olivia nodded. "She'll be fine, she's just not feeling well right now. But I'm going to close this door so she has some privacy, okay? Can you hear what we're saying when we talk in there?"

Laura shook her head. "I hear noise but not words."

"Okay. Try to get some sleep. We'll try not to keep you awake." Olivia slipped back into the bathroom, where Alex had progressed to leaning back against the bathtub, and sat down next to her with the crackers and soda. "Here, Lex, try this to see if it settles your stomach a bit."

Alex ate a few of the crackers and had a few sips of the soda, pleased that she didn't immediately lose them. When a few minutes had gone by without being sick, Olivia proposed that she try to stand up, and offered her a hand. "Why don't you rinse off in the shower real quick and put on your new pyjamas, and I'm going to change the sheets on the bed. Then we can talk if you want, okay?"

Alex put her hand on her stomach, as if willing it to stay settled, and turned on the water, while Olivia stripped the sheets that were soaked with Alex's sweat. Olivia helped her into a sitting-up position and put a lined trashcan next to the bed, before sliding in next to her.

"Feeling a bit better?" Olivia finally asked, and Alex nodded. "Do you need a hug? Or a hand to hold? It looked like you didn't want to be touched, but if you need something, I'm here, okay?"

Alex shook her head. "I don't want to be touched right now, Liv. I just… I feel really dirty."

"Lex, you're not dirty. What makes you say that?"

Alex made eye contact briefly before looking away in shame. "In my dream… my nightmare… he made me. He told me that I was his… that I'd see his face every time I…"

"He made you have an orgasm in your dream?" Olivia clarified gently. Alex nodded, crying silently again.

"He made you have an orgasm in your dream?" Olivia clarified gently. Alex nodded, crying silently again.

"It was real. I felt it. And in the police report… I told you it happened, but I didn't tell you it happened more than once. I lied in my report, Liv."

"Shh, Lex, it's okay. First of all, we know that all victims lie about some aspect of their assault, usually because they're embarrassed, and it's perfectly understandable that you wouldn't want to talk about it. Second of all, omitting the number of times it happened isn't the same thing as lying. Nobody is going to be able to ask you how many orgasms you had and use it to discredit you. And as for why you had them, you know that it's a natural response and it doesn't mean you wanted it. Have you ever decided not to believe a victim or declined to prosecute a rapist because the victim's body reacted involuntarily during the assault?"

Alex shook her head. "But it never happened for me before, with anyone… I've never felt comfortable enough. Or had someone who tried hard enough. And what if he's right? What if his face is the only thing I see? What if I can never… with anyone? And maybe it was my body's response during the rape, but what about during the dream? There was no reason for me to… It's not like I was…"
"Lex, come here, okay?" Olivia held out her arms and Alex leaned into her, allowing herself to be held and her back to be rubbed. "I don't know why it happened. It may not be the only nightmare you ever have like that. And it may be true that when you start having sex again, it will be hard because you might see him. But he's going to go to jail for a long time for what he did to you. And you're not dirty. You're one of the strongest women I know. So you're going to get through this, even though it'll be hard, and you'll go on to have many satisfying orgasms with someone who loves you and who makes you forget that he ever existed."

"I don't know, Liv."

"I do. Trust me on this one, okay?" Alex nodded. "Think you can go back to sleep for a bit? It's still too early to get up."

"I don't think I'm going to be able to sleep. I think I'll get up in a few minutes and try to get some work done."

"Okay, then let's just sit here for a few minutes first, okay?"

Alex nodded. "By the way, just because you're being sweet to me doesn't mean you're off the hook for reading my list."

Olivia feigned ignorance. "What list?"

"The list I left hidden under my laptop when I went to the grocery store, detective. Once I got downstairs I realized I should have locked it in my briefcase."

"I'm sorry, Lex. I just wanted to know what had made you smile. I didn't realize I'd be snooping on something so personal. I shouldn't have looked."

"I just... I'm not ready to talk about it yet, okay?"

"Okay. You don't have to talk about it with me at all, if you don't want to." Olivia said.

"I will. Just, not yet."

"What's your plan for today?"

"I'm going to do some work for a bit. Then I think I need to go visit my mom. I haven't gone since I've been back because my own headstone was still there and it freaked me out. I told Laura that if she wanted Elena to come over after school to visit, it would be okay. Apparently Elena's her girlfriend, but they're not out. I only know because I guessed. And tonight I have bell rehearsal at church. What about you?"

"I need to sleep for a few hours, but I'll be up by mid-morning. At some point I need to go back to the hospital to talk to the vic. Elliot's going to call when she's awake and come by to pick me up. She was in bad shape, so I couldn't talk to her. I waited with her until her parents got there. She was just a kid, Lex. 11 years old." Alex shook her head. They all hated when it was a kid. "Lex, do you want company to go see your mom? Or is that something you want to do alone?"

"I think I need to go alone."

After a few minutes, Alex decided that 5:30 was a perfectly acceptable time to get out of bed, and she shifted out of Olivia's arms. Olivia was exhausted and fading fast, so Alex pulled the covers up around her and surprised herself by leaning over to kiss her temple. "Sleep tight, Liv," she whispered before padding quietly out of the bedroom to go make coffee.
Alex sat on the couch to check her email while drinking her coffee, rolling her eyes at the video Liz had sent her of a hamster eating a piece of broccoli and kicking his feet in excitement, and scrolling through the numerous spam messages. She replied to Rossi to confirm a meeting on Friday afternoon to go over her case, before scrolling down and finding an email from Jack Hammond.

Alex —

After I talked to you, I did some more digging into the Sarah Williams case. Turns out that the student she accused, Chris Keating, was on the football team and there's no mark on his school record at all. His father works for the governor and has made big donations to the school, which is probably why it was swept under the rug. He's been accepted early decision to Harvard and is going to be the valedictorian. I thought you should know.

Jack

Alex fired off a quick and angry reply.

Jack —

Oh HELL no. Raping a student at a school event with a faculty member as an eyewitness, and not so much as a suspension? That violates so many federal laws I can't even… Needless to say, I'll be making travel arrangements as soon as possible and filing for admission to the Oregon bar. I'll contact the Portland DA's office this morning to set up a meeting so they can bring Sarah in when I go. She'll be angry - she trusted me - but I hope we can make this right.

Makes me wonder if there are other incidents that the school is hiding - these guys rarely stop at one victim. Fortunately, I have connections in the Harvard admissions office. I'm sure they'll be very interested to hear about the charges once they're filed.

Thanks for keeping me in the loop.

Alex

By the time Olivia woke at 10:30, Alex had filed an application online to be admitted to the Oregon bar through their reciprocity agreement with New York, and done several hours of research on Title IX, the Clery Act, and various federal laws concerning equal opportunity to education. Even though no criminal trial had taken place, her own eyewitness statement and the rape kit should have met the standard for "a preponderance of evidence" required for the school to take action against the alleged rapist in the absence of a conviction. Alex wasn't naïve - she knew that more affluent rapists got off easier, but it sickened her to think that this was her fault. If she hadn't left, she would have been able to push for justice.

"Morning Liv," Alex called, waiting for Olivia to get her coffee and join her on the couch. "How do you feel about going to Portland?"

"Portland? Why? When?"

"When? In a couple of weeks. End of the month, probably, after Easter. And we're going to put a rapist in jail."

"Is this about the girl you said you weren't able to help?" Olivia asked.

Alex nodded. "This time two years ago, I volunteered to chaperone the Spring Fling at the school where I was working. I figured I didn't have much of a social life, I liked the kids, it was almost time for the AP exam… it was basically prom, but for the whole school and held in the gym. I went to use
the restroom when this girl came by and told me that a guy had gone into the girls' bathroom. So of course, I went to investigate, and one of my sophomores - real jerk - had one of my freshman girls from the debate team up against the wall, raping her. I pulled him off, checked her out and brought her to the hospital for a rape kit, despite protests from administrators. I gave a statement to police as a witness, and had to hand over my driver's license instead of stating my Witsec name and making a false statement."

Alex's voice shook as she relayed what had happened next. "Hammond was furious that I'd had contact with law enforcement, risked compromising my identity, and my integrity as a witness. He made it very clear that I couldn't be interviewed further. He wanted to move me right away, but I begged him to let me stay until after the AP exam ten days later. And I didn't want Sarah to be traumatized when someone she trusted to help her died two days after she was raped, although I'm not sure two weeks made a difference. Anyway, turns out, the kid was never prosecuted and had zero repercussions at school."

"And you want to step forward as a witness and cajole them into prosecuting?"

"Well, I don't want him going to Harvard on a football scholarship!"

"Me neither. Let's do it." Olivia said.

As Olivia went back into the bedroom to get dressed for a run, Alex opened a new tab in her browser and logged into Kristen Walker's email for the first time in two years. She scrolled through and deleted dozens of spam emails, looking for her debate team mailing list to identify Sarah's email. She hoped the girl's email address hadn't changed so she could send an introduction and an apology before showing up, returned from the dead, in Oregon.

She didn't need to look. Aside from a few emails from the school administration, which had kept her on the faculty email list through the end of the year despite her 'death,' she found over a hundred emails, all written after she had died. Alex opened the first one, written three day after Kristen Walker had been killed in a car accident, five days after the AP English exam, and Alex Cabot had been relocated to Bloomington, Indiana under a new identity.

Subject: Thank you for helping me

Dear Ms. Walker,

I know you'll never get this email now and I wish I had gotten the chance to tell you in person. Thank you for helping me, and for believing me. Since you're not here anymore, nobody else does.

The school finished their "investigation" of my rape and concluded that we both broke school policy by having sex on school grounds during a school function. Chris got a month of Saturday school suspensions, which won't go on his record. People have been saying that his dad is going to try to get the school to give him an alternative punishment, since he has sports practice on Saturday mornings.

I got suspended from school for a week because my dress didn't fit the dress code and I deserve a harsher punishment because 'boys will be boys.' How the hell is that fair?! That will go on my transcript, and now I'll never get into a good college or law school like I wanted.

I know if you were still here you'd believe me and help me fight them, but you're not, and I don't know what I'm going to do. Everyone at school has been calling me a slut, and my guidance counselor says that if I can't be in the same class as him, I have to change my schedule to switch my history class, and I can't take AP Government next year because there's only one section.
Not even my own parents believe me; they've grounded me for a month. Although I don't want to go to any school activities, and I can't go to parties or out with my friends because he's always there. And I don't have a boyfriend anymore. He broke up with me for 'cheating' on him, and because he was angry that I wouldn't have sex with him but he thinks I wanted to lose my virginity in a bathroom stall at a dance.

I wish you were still here and could help me figure out what to do. I don't know how I'm going to get through three more years of this school, especially if he's still here and Mr. Popular for two of them. If you're listening, wherever you are, please help me get through high school.

Love,

Sarah

Alex began reading and printing the emails, page after page chronicling how the school issued new dress code guidelines for dances to prevent girls from 'unwittingly' having a bad influence on male students, how Sarah was dragged into 'reconciliation' in the guidance counselor's office when she was unwilling to be around Chris, and how Chris bragged to all his friends about 'hitting a home run' with her at the dance until 'that bitch teacher - I'm glad she's dead' caught him in the act, and how the prosecutor told her that without the corroborating witness, he couldn't bring a 'he-said-she-said' case to trial. Alex's sadness turned to horror as Sarah reported feeling better when she was drinking, and skipping school a lot, and contemplating whether anyone would miss her if she died.

A hundred and twenty-seven pages, a few kleenex, and a vow to buy Olivia a new print cartridge and ream of paper later, Alex opened her own email and tried to figure out how to apologize to a girl who had suffered so much without her there to advocate for her.

Subject: Veritatem dies aperit. (Time reveals the truth)

Dear Sarah,

I am probably the last person you would expect to hear from, or even want to hear from, after everything you've been through over the last two years.

You knew me as Kristen Walker, your AP English teacher and debate coach from Gainesville, Florida; in reality, my name is Alexandra Cabot, and I was a prosecutor in New York City before I went into the Witness Protection Program after an attempt on my life. I spent 15 months as Emily Robins from Tulsa in Madison, Wisconsin, before moving to Portland for 9 months. I had two other identities before I was able to return to New York as myself six months ago, when the man who wanted me dead was extradited to Colombia.

I am so sorry that I wasn't there to support you and help you in the aftermath of your rape. Before I left New York, I worked with many rape victims and was assigned to prosecute sex crimes (now I'm in homicide). I am very familiar with the challenges women face when seeking justice for rape and sexual assault, and I wish I could have done more. Knowing that criminal prosecution was unlikely without DNA evidence and without my witness testimony, I fought tooth and nail to stay in Portland, but they wouldn't allow me to stay after the AP exam. If I had stayed, I would not have been able to testify as a witness at a criminal trial - I wouldn't have been able to use my real name, and identifying myself as Kristen Walker would have been committing perjury, which would have jeopardized the trial, my career, the careers of several FBI handlers and US Federal Marshals, and quite possibly my life.

I understand that it's been a long time, but I have contacted the Portland District Attorney's office as a witness, and they have agreed to revisit the case and bring charges against Mr. Keating if you're
still willing to testify. I will make every effort to help the prosecution, and my FBI handler has also agreed to corroborate my story and my police statement in open court. We will be meeting with the prosecutor at the end of the month, and they will probably call you in for a meeting as well.

I also intend to investigate whether any charges or a civil lawsuit can be filed against school administrators for violating Title IX and the Cleary Act for not protecting you from Chris. Schools are required to protect students from rapists, and the standard is ‘a preponderance of evidence,’ lower than ‘beyond a reasonable doubt’ which is required to convict him. Your statement and my witness statement as a faculty member should have been more than enough for the school to have taken action without a criminal conviction, and the fact that they did nothing - and punished you more than him - demonstrates gross negligence.

I hesitated before reading the emails you sent after I ‘died,’ because I didn't want to invade your privacy. Obviously, you never thought I - or anyone else - would read them. Ultimately, though, they document the school’s actions, or rather, its failure to act, and will be crucial to proving our case should we file a suit. I have already applied to the Oregon Bar in order to be able to do this on your behalf; however, we can discuss it in detail when I visit at the end of the month.

I understand if you're angry with me - because I lied to you, because I left, because I read your private emails, because I wasn't there to help before, for any number of reasons. I won't blame you if you want nothing to do with me given the circumstances. But if you agree to give me a chance to explain and to make things right, I'd like to take you out to lunch when I come to Portland so we can discuss the school, the case, and anything I can do to help you to feel safe and to stay on track personally and academically.

I won't push you, but please feel free to email or call if there's anything I can do in the meantime. My cell phone number is in my email signature.

Sincerely,

Alex (aka Ms. Walker)

Alex let out the breath she didn't know she was still holding as she entered the email address and clicked send. At least Hammond had organized her return from the dead in New York, and most people had known she was alive after the Connors trial. Reappearing in someone’s life as abruptly as she had left it made Alex a bit uneasy, and she hoped she wouldn’t further traumatize Sarah.

Closing her laptop, she sighed and got up to make another cup of coffee, already tired from not sleeping well and getting up far too early in the morning. She checked on Laura, who was still asleep at almost noon, and went back to the couch to lay down.

Alex woke up not much later to Olivia sitting in front of her with her hand on her arm. "Are you feeling okay, Alex?" she asked gently, warm brown eyes filled with concern. Olivia's hair was damp and she had changed out of her running clothes, so Alex deduced that she had just gotten out of the shower after her run. It had to be at least 1 o'clock.

"I'm okay," Alex murmured into her pillow. "Just tired. I did get up early, you know."

"I know. But you usually get up early for work, and you don't usually take naps in the middle of the day."

"It's just that this week is kicking my butt," Alex explained. Being emotional was exhausting.

Olivia nodded in understanding and smiled mischievously. "I brought you something," she said,
reaching behind her.

"Oh yeah?" Alex raised an eyebrow, and snorted as Olivia brought the clear plastic box containing a vanilla cupcake with white frosting covered in rainbow sprinkles into sight. "Really, Olivia? Seriously?! You jerk. I'm glad you find my confusion so amusing." she exclaimed, reaching to swat Olivia on the arm.

"I bring you a cupcake with no hidden meaning whatsoever and I'm a jerk? What about 'Oh, thank you Olivia. You're such a good friend to bring me this delicious cupcake after the hard week I've had.' You know, maybe I'll just eat it myself. Besides, I just went on a five mile run, and you've just been here napping this whole time."

Alex rolled her eyes and sat up. "You know, I actually worked very hard this morning while everyone was sleeping and then you were out gallivanting around the city." She took the cupcake box and the fork and took a bite, then held out the manila file folder where she had stored her morning research and Sarah's emails out to Olivia. "Take a look at these."

Alex took another bite of cupcake and got up to get two more forks and put water on for tea in the kitchen. She offered the forks to Laura, who was reading her new copy of Our Bodies, Ourselves voraciously in bed, and to Olivia, whose eyes widened with every page of emails she read.

"This is horrible," she murmured, leaning back as Alex sat down next to her and offered her a bite of cake. Olivia opened her mouth, allowing Alex to feed her.

"I know," Alex sighed. "I hope it's not too late for me to do something for her. If I had contacted her when I got out…"

"Alex, you had to take care of yourself, too. No reasonable person would expect you to do this first thing." Olivia paused. "The best way you're good for this girl is to be totally, completely, 100% kick-ass Alexandra Cabot. And she's almost back. That's who needs to go to Portland this month. That's how you're going to help her: by going there and telling the Portland DA and the school what's what and making them see things your way."

Alex nodded and put down her fork and her cup of tea. "I think I need to go visit my mom now," she said, putting on her coat and reaching for her purse and her car keys. "I'll be back in a bit."

Laura finished her bite of cupcake and took a spot on the couch. "Is Alex okay?"

Olivia put down her fork and looked at the girl. "She'll be alright. She's had a spectacularly difficult week. How are you feeling?"

"I'm still a little sore and nauseous, but I can go home this afternoon and get out of your hair. I think Alex will probably be glad for me to leave."

"I'll talk to her, but if you're still not feeling well, we might want you to stay one more night, just to be sure you're okay. Alex wouldn't have offered to let you stay here if she didn't think it was important. And you shouldn't have to be alone in this."

"I'm okay now, really. It just feels like bad PMS, and I'll probably go back to school tomorrow. I wouldn't have even asked if I had known what she'd been through… I just didn't know what else to do."

"Well, I'll see what she says when she gets back. But you worry about yourself, and I'll worry about her, okay?"
Laura nodded. "You love her, don't you?"

Olivia looked thoughtful. "She's been my friend for years, I care for her a lot, and she needs a place to stay and some TLC right now. I'm trying to be a supportive friend."

"She loves you. She didn't say so, but I could tell."

"Laura, I appreciate your concern, but that's between me and Alex, and it's not something I want to discuss with you."

Alex drove out of the city, turning up the classical music station and thinking about what she was going to say to her mother. She'd mostly avoided visiting the gravesite since her return, as her own headstone had stayed for a few months before she got the cemetery to remove it, and seeing it there had always creeped her out.

She picked up a bunch of daisies and irises, her mother's favorites, at the florist before turning down the narrow path to park the car and sitting down on the ground, leaning back into the stone with the bouquet in her lap.

"Mom, I don't know if you can hear me, but I miss you and I could really use you right about now... I know we didn't have the best relationship, and I never thought I was living up to your standards, but I don't know if I can. Mom, I know you wanted me to get married to some guy from a good family and have a prenup and a huge society page wedding and lots of blond babies, but I don't think I can do that. No man has ever made me happy - made me feel the way I should feel if I'm in love. And I know you'd think that's terribly romantic and hopelessly impractical, but I've spent too much time trying to be someone I'm not, literally, that I think it's time for me to start figuring out who I really am. I know you loved Daddy in spite of everything, and I hope you want the same thing for me.

"Mom, it hurts too much to keep giving my body without getting anything in return - emotionally or physically - and I can't - I won't do it anymore. I think I'm gay, Mom. And with Robert and trying to fix everything I screwed up during and after Witsec and trying to figure out what I really want, I'm so confused, but I think I have feelings for someone, and I don't know what to do. Everything hurts, Mom, and I don't know if I have feelings because I don't want to hurt anymore, or because I'm confused, or if this might be something real - something I haven't felt before. And I know you probably wouldn't approve and you'd be disappointed and trying to set me up with some guy and acting like this is something I'm doing to you instead of something I'm trying to figure out for myself... but I hope you understand, wherever you are. I hope I can believe what Olivia said about you being proud of me and loving me, even though we only got along sporadically. I probably wouldn't be telling you this if you were here, but I need your support, your help figuring all this out and trying not to screw it up when I can't even think clearly. So I hope you're listening, and that you still love me even if I'm with a woman. And if it wouldn't be too much trouble, I'd really appreciate some kind of sign."

Alex cried for a while, leaning back against the headstone, and didn't move, even as it started to drizzle and then to rain. When the brief shower finally passed, she placed the bouquet in front of the tombstone. Just as she wiped the tears and the rain from her face, before she stood up to turn towards the car, a ladybug came and landed on the iris in the middle of the bouquet. "Thanks, Mom," Alex whispered, pulling out her car keys. "I love you."
When Olivia heard a second cry come from the bedroom that night, she got up from her makeshift bed on the couch and slowly opened the door, finding Alex tossing and turning in bed. Alex was having another nightmare.

Olivia turned on the lamp on the bedside table and murmured to Alex, encouraging her to wake up. Finally, her eyes flew open, and she whimpered in fear.

"Lex, sweetie, you were having a nightmare. Do you know where you are?"

Alex closed her eyes and nodded, tears filling her eyes and streaming down her cheeks, while Olivia reached out to stroke her hair and to wipe the tears away with her thumb.

"Can you tell me about your dream?" Olivia soothed. "You're safe now, I promise."

"Granger got him off. I got shot again, but this time, when everyone thought I was dead, instead of being in witness protection, I was with him, somewhere dark. He told me nobody would ever find me because they all thought I had died. And he made me… over and over… and I couldn't…" Alex dissolved into sobs as Olivia scooped her into her arms and rocked her back and forth.

"Sweetie, you're safe. That's not going to happen. I'm not going to let anything happen to you, and Robert's going to jail for a very long time. You're here with me, and you're safe."

"What if he doesn't take the deal?" Alex whispered.

"If he doesn't take the deal, then you, and Liz, and Casey are going to kick his ass in court, and Moredock's going to put him away for a very long time. I know you know how hard it will be to testify, but we'll all be there for you, and you'll be great, and with all the evidence we've got, it would be impossible not to get a conviction."

"Liv, don't say that. You know as well as I do how quickly these cases can go to hell."

"Okay, I take it back. But if he knows what's good for him, he'll take the deal."

"If he knew what was good for him, he wouldn't have done it in the first place."

"Touché." Olivia ran her fingers through Alex's hair and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. "Lex, why don't you go rinse off and put on some clean pyjamas, and I'll make us some tea, and then we can sit here for a bit until you're ready to go back to sleep."

Alex nodded and sighed. "You must think I'm pathetic. 33 years old and I can't sleep through the night alone and I wake up soaking wet and crying."

Olivia touched Alex's chin and forced her to make eye contact, looking into tear-filled blue eyes with love and compassion. "Alexandra Cabot, you are anything but pathetic. I don't think that at all. I think that what you are is brave, and strong, and beautiful, and that you're hurting right now for lots of reasons, and you need a friend. And I'm glad that you trust me enough to let me be here for you when you're vulnerable, because I know you hate feeling this way. That's what I think. But you, pathetic? Never. And I'll tell you as many times as you need to hear it."
That afternoon, Alex met Jessica Rossi at a coffee shop for lunch, far enough away from the DA's office and the courthouse that she thought she could avoid running into anyone she knew.

"Thanks for meeting me here," Alex said, smiling as Jessica sat down across from her in the booth. Alex had debated whether to face the entrance, as she'd always done since entering witness protection, or conceal her presence by facing the back of the café, but ultimately, her witsec habits had won out. "I didn't want to run the risk of anyone wanting me to, you know, work if they saw me in my office."

Jessica laughed. "How are you holding up?"

Alex shifted in her seat and looked down at her coffee. "I'm doing okay. I've got some good friends helping me out and keeping my head on straight. Another week though, and I'll be itching to get back to work and have something to keep me busy, I think."

"I bet." Jessica nodded, and thought she caught a fleeting look of vulnerability pass over her boss's face. "It'll give you something to focus on; that'll help."

"Jessica, how much do people in the office know about what happened?" Alex asked quietly.

Jessica paused. "Know? Only what he was charged with, after he was arraigned. Liz has the file in her office, nothing's been entered into the system, and she's been barking at anyone she's heard speculating about it. I thought she was going to bite Jim's head off the other day."

Alex chuckled. "That's Liz. Dare I ask what people are 'speculating' about?"

Jessica shook her head. "Probably better you don't know. But I was down in Central Booking with Jim the other day and heard part of the show. I'm sure Casey or Liz told you about that?"

Alex blanched and studied her cuticles.

"Look, Alex, nobody believes anything he said. He was just playing a game of 'mine is bigger than yours' with a serial killer. We all know that. And I certainly haven't said anything to anyone, and I think Jim's too afraid you'll make good on your threat to transfer him to traffic court, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"Right. Well, it was bound to get out sooner or later. Either he takes the deal and allocutes, or it goes to trial and I testify. It goes on the public record either way. Anyway, Jessica, thank you for the flowers."

"They were from everyone. No need to thank me."

"Well, I doubt it was Brian or Nick's idea. And I know Liz and Casey know better than to give my current address to Jim." Jessica laughed. "And it was your handwriting on the card. In any case, I appreciate the thought."

"I just..." Jessica reached out and touched her arm. "I know your personal life is none of my business, and I don't know much about it aside from you getting shot and then coming back to New York after three years, but I imagine it can't have been easy, even without this whole mess with your ex. I just thought you should know you have friends in the office. And... I know from personal experience how hard it can be to leave someone who hurts you."

Alex raised her eyebrow, and Jessica continued. "Not me, my mom. 32 years of marriage. They fight, he hits her, she swears that this time, she's going to leave, my brother defends him, he brings her flowers and apologizes, and it starts all over. I've stopped believing her and I'll only see her when..."
he's not there, and she can't understand why."

"I saw a lot of that in SVU, and before, when I interned at women's shelters. Part of it is our parents were from a different generation. Divorce wasn't really an option, at least it wouldn't have been for my parents. Even breaking off an engagement... I'm sure my mother rolled over in her grave. She had very traditional ideas about marriage, and if she were still alive, I'm sure I'd be hearing about how I'm an old maid, and my biological clock is ticking, and I'd better hurry or all of the eligible bachelors would be snatched up. My parents loved each other in their own way, but she was definitely not a romantic. And when I told my father what happened, he asked me if I was sure I wanted to 'sully our family names' by reporting the 'misunderstanding,' because our families have known each other for years. I hung up on him, of course."

"Well, there are certainly plenty of people who think you did the right thing."

Alex nodded and smiled. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

Jessica looked down at the meal she had almost finished. "Alex, can I ask you a personal question?"

Alex nodded. "I reserve the right not to answer, but you can ask."

"Was there ever anything between you and Jim?"

Alex snorted and burst into laughter. "Only in his dreams!"

"It's just... there were rumors last year," Jessica said.

She rolled her eyes. "Which he started, I'm sure. Jim has been trying to get in my pants since I started at the DA's office 8 years ago. Nothing has ever - or will ever - happen between us. Not for his lack of trying. But he's definitely not my type, so don't worry - I won't steal him from you."

Jessica choked on her water.

"Don't look so shocked. I know you've been sleeping with him. Just like I know Christina's been sleeping with Brian. I have eyes and ears too, you know. And big glass windows in my office, through which I can see all the flirting." Alex winked.

"So if Jim's not your type, who is?" Jessica asked, hoping she could get away with another personal question.

Alex leaned back in the booth and smiled enigmatically as she contemplated the woman in front of her. I've spent enough time pretending to be someone I'm not. And even if I don't start dating right away, it's not like I'm going to stay in the closet. "A woman, actually," she said quietly. A raised eyebrow was the only indication Jessica had heard. "I may have had an epiphany this week. But please keep this between us for now... I'm not keeping it a secret, but it's going to be a while before I'm ready to be dating anyone again."

Jessica nodded. "Of course. But I want to be there when Jim finds out. I want to see his face."

Alex laughed. "Deal. Now, let's see what you've got on the Montgomery case."

They stayed for another hour, drinking coffee and going over the case file, with Alex giving Jessica some tips on cross-examining the defense's witnesses and getting the defendant riled up if he decided to take the stand.

"You're going to be really good at this, you know. You're almost there. You'll have defense
attorneys shaking in their boots in no time," Alex commented, and Jessica smiled as she made some final notes in the case file. Her boss apparently wasn't as cold and detached as she'd been led to believe. As they finished up, Alex checked her messages. "Guess I'm going back to the office anyway. Apparently Liz wants to see me when I'm done with you."

"Maybe he's decided to take the deal."

"I hope so. Deadline's this afternoon." Alex signed the credit card receipt, waving Jessica's money away. "It's on me."

"Thank you," Jessica said, putting her wallet away.

They exchanged some idle gossip on the short walk back to the office, and Alex stopped and turned to face Jessica just as they arrived at the building. "Listen, Jessica, I know what they call me around the office—" she waived her hand when Jessica opened her mouth to protest. "I've been called worse, believe me. I… When I was away… Let's just say it's hard to make friends when you can't even tell people your real name. And I've pretty much sucked at being friendly since I've gotten back, too. So, what I mean to say, is thank you for your kindness. I really do appreciate it.

Jessica reached out and squeezed Alex's hand. "Really, Alex, no thanks necessary. And just so you know, I never bought the 'Ice Princess' thing, and neither did Christina. Anyway, thanks for lunch, and I hope it goes your way this afternoon.

Alex smiled politely and gave her a quick nod before they got on the elevator and she pressed the button for Liz's floor. She found Casey was already there, and Liz motioned for her to sit down in one of the comfortable guest chairs, putting down her pen and folding her arms to look directly at Alex across the desk.

"Robert has agreed to take the deal, but only if he can speak with you alone," Liz stated, looking back and forth between Casey and Alex.

"Okay. Let's go," Alex said, standing up and picking up her purse from the floor.

"Are you sure?" Liz asked.

Alex nodded. "He'll be restrained and he'll go to jail afterwards. He can't hurt me anymore. If me going there will get him to take the deal and put this behind us, I'm going to do it."

"Alright. Let's go, then." Liz gathered up the paperwork and called Lionel Granger to meet them at the SVU squadroom, while Casey sent a text to Olivia.

Alex waited in the observation room with Liz and Casey while Munch brought in Robert and cuffed him to the table.

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"Alright. Let's go, then." Liz gathered up the paperwork and called Lionel Granger to meet them at the SVU squadroom, while Casey sent a text to Olivia.

Alex waited in the observation room with Liz and Casey while Munch brought in Robert and cuffed him to the table.

"I'm going in with you," Liz said, leaving no room for debate. "He can talk to you alone if you want after he signs the paperwork. I don't want him pulling a fast one on us."

Alex nodded. "But Liz, once I'm alone with him, turn off the speaker, okay? Whatever it is he has to say is between him and me."

Robert smiled as they walked in the door, Liz first, with Alex in tow. "Alexandra," he exhaled. "I missed you."

"Save it, Robert." Alex motioned towards Liz. "Sign the papers for the deal, then you've got 2 minutes to say whatever it is you want to say to me."
"My lawyer tells me there's no way I'll be acquitted in trial and this is my only chance for getting out of jail. I'm sorry you feel like you have to do this to me, Alexandra."

"You did this to yourself, Robert. Now you can sign the papers and take the 8 years, or we'll leave and you'll get 25 after you're convicted."

"Mr. Sheldon, I suggest you sign the papers. Alex has agreed to subject herself to you privately after you finish." Liz glared at him.

"Alexandra, I'll sign the documents. I'll even sign the part about giving up my rights if you're pregnant. I just want you to promise me that you won't abort my child. That you won't kill an innocent child for my mistakes."

"First of all, rape is hardly a mistake. It's a Class A felony. Second of all, the law doesn't allow me to make a deal that imposes conditions on the victim of a crime," Liz snapped.

Alex put up her hand in a 'stop' gesture. "Robert, there is no child. It's entirely possible that I could be pregnant and not yet know it. If I were pregnant as a result of the rape, it would be a blastocyst. Even if I had gotten pregnant several days before the rape, it might be a zygote. Either way, it wouldn't be a child, it would be a blob of cells." Alex explained.

"A living blob of cells with a heartbeat that would become my child. Are you carrying my child, Alexandra?"

"No, I'm not carrying any child. And who do you think you are to think I would share any information about my health with you?"

"Someone who loves you. Someone you used to love."

"I didn't love you, Robert. And you don't love me, either. I heard the tape. You want to own me. You think I belong to you, that I'm something pretty to look at, to have hanging on your arm at a cocktail party and to give you blow jobs and sex and have as many babies as you wanted. That's not me, Robert. Women are not toys to take to work events and to bed. We get to say no to sex when we're tired or not in the mood and to getting pregnant when we're not ready. We're people, Robert. I'm a person, with thoughts, and feelings, and desires that I bet you know absolutely nothing about.

"I thought you were better than this, Robert, but the truth is, we don't know each other at all. I didn't know you were capable of wanting to control me. I didn't know that what you cared about most was money, and status, and easy access to sex. I'm sorry I didn't know these things, because if I had known, this never would have happened - I never would have gotten involved with you, and you never would have raped me. But I'm not sorry that I reported it, like I've encouraged so many women to do throughout the years, or that it got me out of your life and back in touch with my friends.

"Robert, you've dug your own hole. Now do the right thing, and sign the papers, so you can go to allocution and put this behind us." Alex folded her hands on the table and looked across at her former fiancé, her hard stare softening as he took the pen and signed the forms.

Liz took the pen and the papers back and put them in her briefcase, motioning at Lionel for them to get up and leave Alex alone for the promised two minutes of privacy.

"I'm sorry, Alexandra," Robert said, frowning at her. "I truly am. I never meant to hurt you."

She studied him intently for a minute. "You're not sorry, Robert. You're sorry that I reported it, and that there's enough evidence to land you in jail, and that you ruined your life. But you're not sorry about what you did. I've put hundreds of rapists in jail, and none of them ever think they've done
anything except take something that was owed to them. Rape is about power and control, which you thought you had over me. You don't. And you'll spend the next 8 years having no power or control over your own life. If the boys at Rikers think you're pretty enough, you might even find out what it's like not to have control over your own body. You just lost it, and I'm just getting it back."

Alex stood up and looked at Robert defiantly, before stalking out the door without turning around.

"Alexandra..." he called after her. "I didn't get to say what I wanted! You have to listen to me! You promised!" but she was already in the observation room, and Granger was back with his client.

Alex was relieved to find Olivia had joined Liz and Casey in the observation room, and grinned at her when she walked in. Liz and Casey offered brief hugs, but it was Olivia who wrapped her arms around Alex and held her tight.

"That was amazing, Lex," she whispered in Alex's ear. "I'm so proud of you."

"Were you here the whole time?" Alex asked, pulling away.

"I got here right around 'blastocyst.' You're such a lawyer, you know that?" Olivia pushed Alex lightly on the arm.

Alex shrugged. "Hey, I didn't lie to him. He didn't ask me if I was pregnant, he asked me if I was 'carrying his child.' And since it's not a child... Although I wouldn't have been bound to tell him the truth if he'd asked me outright. There's nothing in the evidence to confirm or deny the contents of my uterus. And he has no right to know."

"I called Moredock and he's waiting in his chambers for allocution. He agreed to do it there and seal the file rather than in open court." Casey said. "We can go as soon as everyone's ready."

Munch and Fin took that as their cue to escort the prisoner, and the women went to the elevator to get a head start.

They were already seated in Judge Moredock's chambers when Munch and Fin escorted Robert and Lionel Granger in. Alex gripped Olivia's hand as they sat on the couch in the back of the office. Normally, their presence wouldn't be required, but Alex wanted to see it through sentencing.

Moredock smiled at Alex and winked as he took the file from Liz and began to read the plea agreement.

"Objection!" Lionel Granger practically jumped out of his seat. "I request Your Honor recuse himself from this proceeding. You clearly have a personal relationship with the victim, and are incapable of being impartial in this matter."

"Save it, Counselor," Moredock glared at him. "You'd be hard-pressed to find any judge in New York who doesn't know and like Ms. Cabot. However, it is my understanding that my role is simply to validate a plea agreement that has already been signed by the defendant. Therefore, even if I admitted to not being impartial, my bias would not influence this proceeding. Your objection is overruled."

Alex turned her head away from Granger and smirked.

"Mr. Sheldon, you have agreed to plead Guilty on one count each of Rape 1 and Sexual Misconduct. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Robert answered, looking at his feet.
"As part of the plea agreement, you must allocute to your crimes. Can you please explain the events that led to you being charged with Rape?" Moredock asked.

Alex entwined her fingers with Olivia's and gripped her hand as tightly as she could, while Olivia discreetly rubbed small circles on her back. "Breathe, sweetie," Olivia whispered in her ear when she realized Alex was holding her breath.

"Last Friday night, I called my fiancée, Alexandra Cabot, to tell her that I was staying late at a work dinner, so she would come home early. I did have a dinner meeting, but planned to go home first. It was my intention to make love to my fiancée before the meeting, and again when I returned. About 15 minutes after I called her, I called the office again to ensure that she'd left. When I arrived home, she was in the bathtub, listening to music and drinking a glass of wine. She didn't hear me come in, and I watched for about 10 minutes as she read what I later found to be an erotic novel. She was using a vibrator on herself.

"I became aroused while watching her and told her she was hot, then went over to pull her out of the tub and kiss her. Her wine glass fell, and so did her vibrator and her book, and I took them and brought her to bed. We always made love in the dark, under the covers, and I put her on top of the covers and tied her to the headboard with my tie so she wouldn't be shy. She told me she didn't want to have sex with me and that I shouldn't force her. I told her I wanted to make love to her all night. She was more aroused than she'd ever been, and I pried her legs apart and pleasured her over and over, which she hadn't let me do before. I was angry when she told me she'd been faking orgasms throughout our whole relationship.

"After I pleasured her, we had sex. When I was finished, I had to get dressed to go back out to dinner, but I wanted to get her excited for when I came back. I read to her from her book of lesbian porn, and used her vibrator on her. Then I untied her, and I noticed she was crying. I kissed her, and told her I was looking forward to making love again when I got back.

"I left, and when I got back, I found her ring and a note saying that she'd pick up her stuff later in the week. I was confused about why she left after good sex and called her and her family to locate her."

"And you admit that you forced Ms. Cabot to have sex against her will?" Moredock asked.

"Yes, Your Honor," Robert stated.

"Are the People satisfied with the defendant's allocution on this charge?"

"Yes, Your Honor," Liz replied. "The People would now like to hear the defendant allocute to the charge of Sexual Misconduct, for reproductive coercion."

"During our engagement, Alexandra and I discussed the possibility of having children, and she was reluctant to discuss a timeline, but seemed open to the idea. My mother suggested to me that an unexpected pregnancy might encourage her. So I did some research, and found a company that made sugar pills that looked like the brand of birth control pills she took. I verified that the pills contained no dangerous ingredients that might affect an unborn child, ordered some, and replaced the packets in her medicine cabinet. I hid the actual packets in my sock drawer, where they were uncovered by the police. She took the sugar pills instead of the actual pills, believing them to be real."

"How long ago did this begin?"

"About 6 months ago, not long after our engagement." Robert stated.

"And did pregnancy result?" Moredock asked.
"The People are not aware of any pregnancy at this time; however, the defendant has signed an agreement forfeiting his rights to any child Ms. Cabot may have conceived as a result of his actions." Liz stated.

"Are the People satisfied by the defendant's allocution?"

"We are, Your Honor."

Moredock reviewed the plea agreement before him. "This court finds the violence and deception perpetrated by the defendant in the context of what was supposed to be a loving relationship based on mutual trust and respect to be reprehensible. On multiple occasions, the defendant knowingly and purposefully violated the victim's body autonomy; once through physical violence, and repeatedly by obfuscating her knowledge of the medicine and chemicals she consumed. Rape in itself is a violent crime; deliberately removing a person's right to control the medical treatment she receives may not be physically violent, but is a dangerous manifestation of control and of sexual abuse.

"The plea agreement sentences you to 10-15 years for the count of Rape 1, and 2 years for the count of Sexual Misconduct. I hereby sentence the defendant to no less than 15 years on the count of rape, and no less than 2 years on the count of sexual misconduct, sentences to be served consecutively.

"In addition, the plea specifies that Mr. Sheldon will make a donation to the rape crisis charity of the victim's choice. Having reviewed the defendant's financial documents, I order him to direct his accountant to make a donation of no less than $10 million within 30 days of the victim selecting a charity. The court further orders that the defendant's parental rights be severed and a trust with no less than $10 million be established for the minor child if the victim bears the defendant's child, pending a paternity test.

"Finally, the court orders the contents of the investigation and the defendant's allocution sealed to the public record, to preserve the privacy and identity of the victim, who is a public figure. The defendant is hereby remanded to the custody of the Department of Corrections, which will return him to Rikers Island to carry out the remainder of his sentence."

Moredock banged his gavel, and Munch and Fin escorted Robert and his attorney out.

Alex let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding, and collapsed back into Olivia. "It's over, Lex," Olivia soothed, still rubbing her back. "It's over. You never have to see him again."

Moredock looked out the door to verify that Granger wasn't lurking around, and brought a cup of water over to Alex. "Drink this," he offered, and Alex took it with a shaking hand.

"Thank you, Your Honor," Alex sputtered once she had taken a few sips of water.

"No need to thank me, Alex. Just go home, relax this weekend, and figure out something good to do with that $10 million." He smiled kindly at her and Olivia. "Now, you don't have to go home, but you can't stay here. It's after 4 and I've got to get home to my wife." Moredock put on his coat and Olivia helped Alex up and threw the plastic cup in the trash.

Casey and Liz were waiting on a bench in the hall, and Alex hugged both of them tightly. "Thank you, both of you, for everything," Alex said enthusiastically.

"C'mon, Alex, let me take you girls out for a celebratory drink… or cupcake?" Liz offered, and Alex nodded.

Olivia and Casey begged off to go to the bathroom, and Liz smiled knowingly at Alex, leaning in to whisper conspiratorially, "So, what exactly is going on with you and Detective Benson?"
Alex was taken aback. "Nothing's going on between us," she sputtered quickly, rolling her eyes at Liz. "She's my friend. She's very supportive."

"I see." Liz brought her thumb to her chin to force a pensive look. "Well, in case you were wondering, I approve. I think she may actually be good enough for you." Liz picked up her briefcase and started walking towards the exit.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

And, without further ado, the moment you've all been waiting for... drumroll, please...

"She looks like you," Olivia commented as they started episode 3 of their 30 Rock marathon. After a quick celebratory cupcake with Liz, Casey, and Munch and Fin, they had decided to get takeout and call it an early night. "Not as pretty as you, but the hair and glasses are similar."

"Because she's a lesbian?" Alex grumbled, taking another bite of her pad thai.

"Um, no, that's not what I meant. I was commenting on the physical resemblance. And the character's a lesbian, but I don't think the actress is. I'm pretty sure she's married to some TV chef."

Alex sighed. "I'm sorry, Liv. I'm just touchy right now. Long day."

"Of course. Don't worry about it. I'm sorry I wasn't clear." Olivia continued eating, not wanting to push Alex into talking if she didn't want to. "Do you want to talk about today?"

"Not really. I'm relieved, mostly. Especially that I've only been humiliated in front of some of my coworkers, not all of them." Alex pushed her half-empty dish into the middle of the table, sighed deeply, and leaned back on the couch.

"Alex, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Nobody - not a single one of us - thinks you were humiliated today. We've all heard stories just as bad as yours before, and we've never let the details of the crime impact our opinion of the victim. I'm glad Moredock sealed the records so the details are private, but everyone except Robert knows he's the only one who has anything to be embarrassed about." Olivia nudged Alex to lean her head down onto a pillow in her lap, and stroked her hair gently. "In fact, I think you should be really proud of how you handled yourself today. You shut him down and you told him off. He didn't have any power over you; you took it back from him."

Alex nodded. "I don't feel any better, though."

"I think that's still going to take some time, sweetie. We know survivors don't feel some sudden sense of closure once their rapists are convicted. And even more so because this happened so quickly compared to most of the cases we investigate and try." Olivia brushed back Alex's hair from her face and noticed tears forming under closed eyes. "Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked softly.

Alex shook her head and pulled her knees up tighter into fetal position facing towards the back of the couch. "Just let me stay like this for a while?" she whispered.

Olivia nodded and pulled a blanket on top of her from the back of the couch, wrapping it around Alex, and took her glasses. She placed a hand gently on Alex's upper arm, and stoked Alex's hair with the other. "As long as you want, Lex. I'm not going anywhere."

Alex dozed off, and woke up a while later feeling very aware that Olivia's hands were still touching her gently. Intimately, even. Her face was practically nestled against Olivia's stomach, and the curve of Olivia's breast was just in her peripheral vision. She stiffened and sat up abruptly.
"You okay, Lex?" Olivia asked, looking away from the TV show she hadn't really been watching.

"Liv, is this weird?" Alex asked tentatively.

"Is what weird? Cuddling?" Alex nodded. "I don't think so; we've been cuddling all week. Why? Are you uncomfortable?"

Alex shrugged.

"Okay, well, if you're uncomfortable, we'll stop."

"I just don't want you to be uncomfortable," Alex said quietly.

Olivia looked confused. "Why wouldn't I be comfortable? I don't mind cuddling with you. I kind of like it, actually. If you want cuddles, we'll cuddle. If you don't..." Suddenly, she understood. "Alex, what is this really about?"

"Nothing. Nevermind. Just, it's nothing."

Olivia reached out and nudged Alex back down into her lap, facing outwards this time. "Lex, nothing changes between us, okay? You're still the same person you were three days ago. I'm not uncomfortable with you, and I'm certainly not worried I'm going to catch lesbian cooties or something. I've got them already, remember?"

Alex giggled. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about. Just relax, okay?" Olivia paused, running her fingers through Alex's hair again. "Are you worried about what people are going to think?"

"Not really. The guys are all supportive of you, so there's no reason they wouldn't be supportive of me. Liz and my brother won't care. Hell, my brother will probably get a rainbow flag and sign us up to walk in the gay pride parade. My father might object a bit, but he's the one who encouraged me to date Robert, so I'm thinking he doesn't really get a vote. And at work, I'm the boss, so what are they going to do?"

"And politically?"

Alex shrugged. "Gay marriage is legal in 3 states. New York is the first state in the country to recognize same-sex marriages performed out of state, and I bet we won't be that far behind in legalizing it. Give it 3 years. Aside from that, I think the more people who are 'out', the more it's normalized, the less people object over time. If I were ever to run for office, I'd hope that other parts of my story would be more... compelling than being a lesbian. And if you can't be a lesbian public figure in Manhattan, then where?"

"And you're okay with it? Just the other day you were insisting that your book didn't mean you were gay."

"You saw the summation. You tell me."

"What's the standard?" Olivia asked.

"Preponderance of evidence. 'Beyond a reasonable doubt' seems too high."

"Well, counselor, all your evidence is circumstantial. What's your gut telling you?"

"That I was an idiot not to realize it before. Once I started reviewing the evidence... I couldn't unsee
"You don't have to label yourself, you know. You could just decide you're open to a relationship with a woman and see what happens." Olivia said.

"Honestly? It's a relief. I thought there was something wrong with me. Dating felt like a chore. Sex felt like a chore, and not just with Robert. On Monday, when I was talking to Laura, she told me that she slept with a guy to prove to herself that she wasn't gay, and it was awful, and then she slept with her girlfriend and she knew. And she said, 'You're supposed to like it, right? Isn't that the point?' I started thinking about it on the way home, and I guess you could say I had an epiphany."

"You realized, at age 33, that the point of sex is to like it?" Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow. "What did you think the point was?"

"Well, according to my mother, the point is to make babies, satisfy my husband, and keep him from cheating on me. In that order."

"That's very… 1950s of her." Olivia commented.

"I think she thought I was a virgin when I died." "At 29, in Manhattan, working sex crimes?"

"Well, to be honest, I wasn't having sex when I was working sex crimes. I couldn't get past it, and I can count the number of dates I went on in those years on one hand. It was just Alan in law school, then my coworker in Wisconsin, then Robert."

"What happened with Alan?"

"We started dating my last year at Columbia, and then we both went to Harvard together. We had been friends for two years first. After I got back from my semester abroad, he asked me out. I was 21 and embarrassed about still being a virgin. He was actually really sweet, and we always went on really fun dates, to museums, concerts, historical sites, political events. But the longer we were together, the more he wanted sexually. He never pressured me, and it's not even like he wanted anything kinky or weird, he just thought I was inhibited. It eventually broke us up, but there was no bad blood between us. My mother kept inviting him to Thanksgiving and other family events, though. She thought we were going to get married."

Olivia nodded. "Can I ask who Anna was?" she asked gently. "There was something about an Anna on your list."

Alex got up and went to her purse, where she pulled a worn photo out of her wallet and handed it to Olivia. It was two teenage girls, a tall, lanky blonde with blue eyes and braces that had to be Alex, and a shorter brunette with curly hair and green eyes. Both girls were wearing bikinis and were hugging each other on the beach, making funny faces and giggling. The photo was creased and the ink was fading on the edges, and Olivia guessed that it had been in Alex's wallet for years. She sat back down next to Olivia, turning to face her, studying her eyes before she opened up about one of the most painful parts of her past.

"They wouldn't let me have this when I was in witness protection." Alex swallowed. "Anna was my best friend from kindergarten. She lived down the street, and we played together after school almost every day, and we slept over each other's houses on the weekend. Our parents basically considered us sisters. When we were 15, she was hit by a drunk driver walking home from school in the middle of the afternoon. I would have been with her, except that I had stayed after school for a few minutes"
to ask a question about an assignment, and I hadn't quite caught up to her yet. I got there about the same time as the ambulance did and saw them loading her in. I knew it was her because I recognized the keychains she had hanging on her backpack. We went to Boston Latin, so we were right around the corner from the best hospitals in the world, but there was only so much they could do for her. The driver got a slap on the wrist, and she was in a coma for six months before her parents pulled life support. That's why the Sam Cavanaugh case hit me so hard…"

Alex sniffled and wiped a tear from her eye, and Olivia reached out to hold her hand. "I was devastated. I didn't eat or sleep. I went to the hospital every chance I got. I went to church and prayed for a miracle. I wondered why it was her instead of me, and why I hadn't been with her. If she hadn't waited for me at my locker, she would've already crossed the street. If we'd been together, we might've stopped to get coffee on the way home or gone a different way. I wanted to take it from her, to stop her suffering… A few months after she died, my other friends basically told me that I was 'too sad' to hang out with because I couldn't just 'get over it,' and I couldn't understand how they could.

"I told her I loved her, even before she got hit, and then all the time when she was in the coma, and she said it to me too, but it's not like we thought of each other as girlfriends or anything. But I was thinking about her the other day when I went to go visit my mother, and it makes sense. I grieved so much longer and harder than any of our other friends, even the close ones. I wanted to die for two years. After she died, I was very… cold, closed off. I didn't want to get hurt again. That's when I learned how to hide my emotions, which, oddly enough, has made me a good lawyer. I had trouble making friends, and I thought that the pain was part of why I never opened up more to Alan. I think… I realized that my feelings for her were probably more than just friendship."

"Oh, sweetie," Olivia murmured, pulling Alex into a hug and holding her tight. "I'm so sorry that happened to you. I can't imagine how painful that must have been for you."

"Nobody understood. Everyone just wanted me to 'get over it,' including my parents," Alex said bitterly.

"I don't think you ever 'get over' losing someone you love," Olivia murmured, still holding Alex and rubbing her back. "You're my best friend, and the two days I thought you were dead were the worst of my life," she admitted. "I can't imagine how awful it would have been if we'd lost you for real, or if we hadn't known you were being kept safe."

"That's why I couldn't let them take me away without seeing you. I knew you would feel responsible, like I felt responsible for Anna."

"It wasn't your fault, Lex. Sometimes those things just happen."

"I know. It took me a long time to accept that I couldn't have done anything, and that even if I had been there, it would have been both of us in the hospital instead of just her."

"Tell me about her," Olivia said.

Alex pulled out of the hug and took the photo back in her hands. "She was an amazing person. So smart. Probably smarter than me. And kind, and funny, with a huge heart, and all this energy. She always had a project. I mean, I did some charity work with my mom, and took music lessons, but Anna… She pulled me into all these different schemes. She… we organized gift drives for Children's Hospital, put on concerts there where she would sing and I'd play the piano, go do art projects with the kids. She'd always be writing stories or plays or poems, and we'd record radio shows about current events or politics on the tape recorder. She would always do things like have a lemonade stand or sell her art projects and give all the money to some cause. Totally selfless. You remind me a
bit of her in that way."

"Sounds like she was pretty special."

"She was. She didn't have a lot of friends because most kids our age were playing sports, or hanging out and going to the mall or the movies, and she had no interest in stuff like that. She wanted to create. And make a difference."

"She was lucky to have you, then." Olivia said gently.

Alex shrugged. "I was lucky to have her. You know my parents. How… exacting they can be. I just… I never felt like I had to pretend with her. I never had to be anyone I wasn't, or pretend to care about things I didn't. I never had to explain myself to her. She just got me. She just accepted me, unconditionally, without ever judging me." Alex paused. "Liv, the only other person to do that - to just accept me - is you."

Olivia smiled. "Well, you're pretty special yourself."

Alex put the photo back in her wallet. "Thanks, Liv," Alex said quietly. "Thanks for letting me talk about her. For not making it awkward. People usually get really uncomfortable when you talk about dead people. I don't usually share this with anyone."

"Lex, you know you can talk to me about anything," Olivia said. "I'm sorry people don't get it. I can see that it's still very painful for you even all these years later."

"18," Alex said, nodding. "Almost 18 years later. That's twice as long as we were friends. More than half my life. And I'm just figuring this all out now."

"You can't put a timeline on grief, Alex. Especially if you were in love with her."

"I wonder if we would've figured it out back then if she hadn't died," Alex said quietly. "There's no way to know that, sweetie. But at least it sounds like she died knowing how you felt about her. Knowing how important she was to you."

Alex nodded. "I hope so. It - Anna, and then Witsec - made me realize how important it is to tell people how you feel about them."

Olivia reached out to touch her arm. "Lex, you know how I feel about you, right?"

Alex looked up, her eyes searching Olivia's for permission to say it. "You love me. You're in love with me."

Olivia smiled, her eyes not leaving Alex's. "What makes you say that?" she asked gently, not ready to divulge that Alex's answer was not at all what she'd been expecting.

Alex looked away. "I figured that out this week, too. Liv, I feel safe when I'm with you. I trust you. I tell you things I can't tell anyone else, and you don't judge me. I can cry in front of you. I don't mind - in fact, I like it when you touch me or hug me or kiss me, even after - especially after what Robert did. I missed you so much when I was gone; I thought about you all the time when I was away. I was afraid to call you when I got back because I thought you'd be disappointed in me, in how broken I was. When I talked to victims, or their families, or my students in Portland, I asked myself what you would do, how you would show compassion, because you make me want to be like you. You make me want to be a better person when I'm around you."
Alex exhaled and looked back up at Olivia, expecting her to deny or downplay everything she'd just said. Instead, all she saw was warm brown eyes and an enigmatic smile.

"I'd review your evidence again, counselor. It sounds to me like those are all the ways you know you're in love with me." Olivia smirked.

Alex opened her mouth to argue, but found she had nothing to refute Olivia's analysis. "Liv, I…"

"Shh, Lex, it's okay. It's more than okay. Come here," she offered, pulling Alex onto her lap, until the blonde was straddling her. She looked into uncertain blue eyes, and ran her fingers lightly up and down Alex's arms to reassure her. "Is this alright? I'm not hurting you?" Olivia was aware that even though the stitches were supposed to have dissolved, Alex may still be in a bit of pain.

Alex nodded, and Olivia pressed their foreheads together and spoke softly. "You know that nothing I've done for you has been with any strings attached, right? That regardless of whether or not you're straight, or of whom you choose to be with, or of your feelings for me, I would still open my home to you, and take care of you when you're not feeling well, and talk, and hold you after a nightmare, and be your friend when you need one?"

"Yes," Alex said quietly.

"And you know that up until two days ago, I would never have allowed myself to think about you romantically because I thought you were hopelessly straight."

"Liv, up until about five days ago I thought I was hopelessly straight."

"Then you understand why we have to take it really slow if anything's going to happen between us," Olivia whispered. "I would hate to take it too fast and scare you off or hurt you, and lose you as a friend, too. I care about you a lot, Alex, probably more than I've cared about anyone before. And the last thing I want is to screw this up. If we do this, I want to do it right. I want it to last forever."

"Me too, Liv. We're both healing from some stuff, and I'm still getting used to my sexuality…"

"I don't want to be an experiment, Lex, or a secret."

"You won't be. I promise."

"And you have to promise that you'll talk to me about things, especially once we get physical, and tell me if I ever go too fast, or do something that makes you uncomfortable. I know you said you weren't used to talking about sex, and that may be a while off for us, we're going to have to talk about it when the time comes."

Alex held her breath at the thought of sex with the kind, gentle, compassionate woman who was holding her, and nodded in agreement. "I promise," she whispered.

"Okay. You've had a long, hard day, so why don't we get ready for bed, okay?" Olivia asked. "Can I cuddle with you before we go to sleep, or is that too fast?"

"We've been cuddling all week, Liv, and we cuddled before. We don't have to take a step backwards, you know," Alex replied, pushing herself off of Olivia and heading towards the bathroom.

Olivia smiled as she put on her pyjamas and brushed her teeth. She had never imagined that Alex felt anything beyond friendship for her, but finding out that she did only confirmed Olivia's deep feelings for her friend.
They got into Olivia's bed facing each other, and Olivia pressed a gentle kiss to Alex's forehead and wrapping her arms around her. When Alex leaned in for a kiss on the mouth, she pressed a finger to Alex's lips, stopping her.

"Not yet, sweetie. I want it to be perfect," she whispered, tucking some hair behind Alex's ear. "And Lex?" she said quietly, waiting for blue eyes to meet hers. "I love you, too."

They slept soundly, in each other's arms, and Alex didn't have a single nightmare.
"I've hurt so many people, Liv," Alex croaked when she was finally able to speak again.

"Not on purpose, Lex. You never intended to hurt anyone, just to do the right thing. Tell me what happened, sweetie," Olivia prodded, and Alex told her, about the accusations, the sadness, the attempted suicide. "And which part is your fault, exactly?"

"That they didn't press charges because they didn't have a witness? That nobody believed her? That the school didn't do anything?"

"Lex, listen to me. Is it your fault you had to leave?"

"No," Alex breathed.

"What about the fact that nobody believed her? Is that your fault?"

"If I had been there to corroborate her story…"

"You did corroborate her story, before you left. What about the school? If you had stayed their as an English teacher, not as a prosecutor, what could you realistically have done to make them act?"

"I don't know, but I would have thought of something."

"We're going to help her as best we can, Lex, but you're not responsible for other people not knowing how to deal with rape." Olivia pulled Alex in closer and rubbed her back, soothing her. "Sweetie, getting shot and going into Witsec was not your fault. Having a hard time adjusting and having to move a few times was not your fault. Being raped and getting pregnant were not your fault. The only things you're responsible for now are taking care of yourself and healing, physically, emotionally, spiritually… If that means making amends for some Witsec stuff, I fully support you. But trying to follow the rules of the program and stay alive are not things you have to apologize for."

—

Alex gripped Olivia's hand as they went back to the doctor's office on Monday morning. She had hardly spoken a word since Olivia tried to reassure her on Sunday night that everything would be okay, regardless of which option she chose.

Olivia rubbed her thumb over Alex's knuckles as they sat in the waiting room. "Sweetie," she said gently. "Are you nervous about the procedure, or about your choice?"

"I just want it to be over with," Alex murmured. "Once it's out of me, I'll be able to move on."

"Lex, the only problem this is going to solve is your pregnancy. I'm sure that's causing you stress too, but this isn't going to resolve all of your feelings about everything else that's happened to you. That will still take time. And even if you're sure, that doesn't mean that this won't bring up other feelings."

"I know, Liv," Alex said curtly. She pulled her hand away and stared off into space.

Alex hesitated when the nurse called her into the exam room, waiting for Olivia to follow.

"Talk to the doctor alone first, Lex. Then if you want, I'll come in and hold your hand for the rest. I'll wait right outside the door. I love you." Olivia leaned over and kissed her forehead as she went in and sat down on the table.
"How are you feeling today, Ms. Cabot?" Dr. Logan asked, entering the room and opening Alex's file.

"A bit nervous, but physically fine," Alex answered.

"Is anyone influencing your decision or pressuring you in any way?"

Alex shook her head. "No, the only one who knows is Olivia."

"And you've considered all of your options: having the baby, adoption, and abortion, and you're sure this is what you want?"

"Yes, I've thought about all my options, and I'm sure."

"Fine. I'm going to briefly explain how RU-486, the abortion pill, works, and then you can decide if you'd prefer that method or a surgical abortion like you saw the other day. RU-486 comes in the form of two pills. The first, which you'd take today, blocks progesterone, and stops the pregnancy from progressing. The second, which you'd take tomorrow, 24 hours after the first pill, is misoprostol, which will cause a miscarriage, normally within 4-5 hours. You may start spotting after the first pill, but most women experience bleeding and cramping after the second pill, along with some dizziness or mild nausea. You'll likely bleed for several days, and it will be a bit heavier than a normal period. According to the test results, the embryo is about 4 weeks old, meaning your last real period was about 6 weeks ago. We'll check on the ultrasound in a few minutes, but it should be about the size of a kernel of corn. At this stage, the bleeding shouldn't be too severe. Do you have any questions about either procedure?" Dr. Logan asked.

"No, but I think I'd prefer to do the pill. It's less invasive and I'd rather be in the privacy of my own home - or to be in private, anyway."

"Okay. Fortunately, it looks like your STD test from Monday came back clean, so I'm just going to check your stitches briefly for signs of infection, make sure you don't have a fever, and then, we'll do a brief ultrasound to make sure the pregnancy isn't ectopic. Then you can take the first pill, and I'll send you home with the other one to take tomorrow."

"Can Olivia come in now?" Alex asked.

"Sure. Why don't you change into your gown while I run to the pharmacy to get the prescription? I'll let her know to knock in a few minutes."

Alex nodded, and once she put on the gown, she opened the door a crack and peeked out for Olivia, who came in and sat down next to the exam table, taking Alex's hand.

"I'm going with the medical abortion," Alex explained quietly, looking at the painting on the wall, a still life of seashells this time. "She said most of the bleeding will happen tomorrow, after the second pill."

"Okay, Lex," Olivia said, squeezing Alex's hand. "I took tomorrow off, too, and told them I wasn't sure about Wednesday. I don't want you to be alone in case something happens."

"What did you tell them?" Alex jerked her head to look at Olivia, suddenly panicked. It wasn't so much that she was embarrassed about the abortion or feared judgment by the staunchly Catholic Elliot so much as she viewed it as intensely personal, and didn't want people to know in general.

"Just that you were still off and I thought you could use a few more days of moral support. I was pretty vague. They didn't really ask, and the Captain owes me the time. If they ask, I'll just say you're
not feeling well."

Dr. Logan entered with a small box and a new set of latex gloves, asking Alex to turn on her stomach to inspect one set of stitches, then to put her feet in the stirrups and scoot forward on the table to take a look at the other set, changing her gloves in between. Alex breathed unevenly and flinched at the touch, relaxing only slightly when the doctor told her that everything looked good. She was relieved to put her legs down from the stirrups and sit up so the doctor could take her temperature.

"Alright, Ms. Cabot, everything looks good. No infections. It does look like you do have a bit of mild scarring that's already healed, however, which means you're probably not lubricated enough during sex. It could be a side effect of hormonal birth control, but I recommend you use lubricant in the future, especially if you've experience discomfort. Let me just take a quick ultrasound, and you'll be all set. Do you want to look?" Alex shook her head, flushing red from the embarrassment of the doctor acknowledging her problem. "Okay, then, just put your feet back in the stirrups for me, and we'll make this quick."

Alex froze as the doctor wheeled over a small machine and detached a small instrument about the width of a Sharpie marker, which she covered with a thin plastic sheath. "Where's the ultrasound?" she asked, hoping she was wrong that the marker-shaped object was meant to go inside her.

"It's too early in your pregnancy to do a transabdominal ultrasound, so I have to do a transvaginal one. It'll be quick, I promise."

Olivia looked from Alex to the implement and back, understanding the reason for Alex's discomfort that she wasn't quite able to articulate. "Dr. Logan, is that really necessary?" she asked softly, absentmindedly rubbing her thumb over Alex's knuckles to reassure her. "You know she was raped ten days ago, and forcibly penetrated with a vibrator; I think she might be apprehensive about..." she nodded in the direction of the ultrasound, "having anything inside her."

Dr. Logan smiled kindly at Alex. "I understand, but unfortunately, it's the only way to confirm that the pregnancy isn't ectopic before I give you the pills. I could use my fingers as well, but that would probably feel more invasive. Even though there's only a small chance, if it is ectopic, the medication could cause you to bleed internally, and we don't want that." She held the implement out to Alex. "Here, touch it first, and get a feel for it. It's very narrow, so you'll hardly feel it, and I'll be as gentle and as fast as possible. Or you can come back another day. You still have a few weeks to do this, you know."

Alex reached out to touch the ultrasound implement, pressing her fingers around the bulbous end, the size of a small grape, and the narrow neck.

"Lex?" Olivia asked, standing up next to her and putting her hand on Alex's back. "Sweetie, I'll hold your hand, okay?"

Alex nodded and swallowed thickly. "No, I'm here. I want to do it now."

Olivia held her hand as she leaned back slowly, and stood next to the table, facing Alex. She wiped a tear from Alex's cheek with her thumb and tucked some hair behind her ears, giving her a small smile. "You ready, sweetie? Legs up. You're safe, okay? Nobody's going to hurt you," she soothed.

Alex put her legs back in the stirrups and held her breath as the doctor turned on the machine.

"Breathe, Lex. You're okay. Just relax, and breathe. It'll be over before you know it."
"Alright, here we go," the doctor said.

She had just begun probing Alex's entrance when she stiffened suddenly, pulling her legs towards her and whimpering as she pressed them together tightly.

Olivia put her arm around Alex as she sat up, shaking, and rubbed her back. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Alex muttered. "I didn't mean to…"

"Shh, Lex, it's okay. You're okay."

"Ms. Cabot, the reaction you just had is called vaginismus. It can vary in severity, but basically, it's a condition in which vaginal penetration is painful, or when a woman's vaginal muscles tighten to prevent penetration." The doctor put down the ultrasound and pushed the machine away.

"Was it caused by the rape?" Alex asked, still shaking against Olivia.

"It could have been, but not necessarily. Has penetration been painful for you before?"

Alex turned red and hid her face in Olivia's shirt.

"Lex, it's okay. Do you want me to go outside while you talk about this?" Olivia asked gently. Alex shook her head.

"Sex has always been uncomfortable for me, sometimes painful. I haven't had the most attentive partners, and I recently came to the conclusion that I'm a lesbian… I just always attributed it to not having a very high sex drive or not being aroused enough. And to working as a sex crimes prosecutor."

"All of those things could be contributing factors, although usually libido isn't a factor. There are lots of different possible causes, but stress, anxiety, undiscovered sexual identity, an upbringing that teaches that sex is painful or shameful, experiencing or witnessing sexual abuse or domestic violence…"

"Check, check, check, check… Does prosecuting sexual abuse and domestic violence every day count?"

"Definitely. I'm sure you've seen some of the worst humanity has to offer, if that's your job. And any physical trauma, like being shot, could have exacerbated it. Have you had a reaction this severe before?"

"Not that I can think of, except maybe when I was raped. I was aroused, and I had an orgasm, but it was still very painful when he penetrated me. I couldn't get away, though…" Alex started to cry.

"Okay. There are some physical and psychological treatment options available, so I'd recommend you see a psychologist who specializes in rape and sexual trauma, and mention the vaginismus so you get someone who can help you treat it."

Alex nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes, loosening her grip on Olivia, who was still soothing her. "Does this mean you can't…?" she gestured to the ultrasound machine.

"It's up to you. If you wait a few weeks to do a transabdominal ultrasound, you'll have to do a surgical abortion, which means dilating your cervix, a shot of novocaine, and the suction device you saw the other day. It's unlikely that the vaginismus issue would be resolved by then, even if you began treatment now. If you do the transvaginal ultrasound now, even if it's a bit painful for you, it will be over in a minute or two, and you can go ahead with the medical abortion today. Do you want
a few minutes to decide what to do?" Dr. Logan asked.

"I'd rather do it now." Alex whispered. She sniffled and slowly lowered herself back onto the table, and begrudgingly put her legs back into position.

"I'll talk you through it, Lex, okay? Just hold my hand, and talk to me, and it'll be over before you know it. Have you talked to your niece recently?"

"She called me to tell me that she wants a Pretty Pretty Princess game, because she played with a friend from daycare." Alex bit her lip and stifled a cry as she felt the ultrasound implement slowly enter her. She furrowed her brow as she made a conscious effort not to move her body away.

"You're doing great, Lex. It's almost over. Is her birthday soon? I thought it was in winter. Are you going to go up to visit?"

"Her birthday's in December, right before Christmas. Michelle was six months pregnant when I got shot. But I'll see her soon, and I always bring her something when I go. I'll probably go up... oooh," Alex felt another jolt of pain as it moved in her.

"Sorry, I had to get a better angle. Just a few more seconds, I promise." Dr. Logan apologized.

"I'll probably go up and meet them at the house on Martha's Vineyard for the weekend. Let Bill and Michelle go out on a date while I spoil Lexie..." her breath caught as she felt it being pulled out.

"Okay, you're all done. You did great, and it's not ectopic, so you're all set."

Alex let out the breath she didn't know she was holding, and Olivia helped her sit up, wiping tears away with her thumb again. She pulled Alex into a hug and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I'm proud of you, sweetie. I know that was really hard."

"I'm going to let you get dressed while I get you a glass of water for the first pill, and then we'll talk briefly before you take it." Dr. Logan exited the room, and Alex held onto Olivia as she went to follow her out.

"Stay, please? Just turn around while I get dressed?" Alex pleaded. Olivia nodded and complied, until a fully-dressed Alex folded herself into Olivia's embrace. She sat down as the doctor came back.

"Alright, it's just after 10:30, so you'll be able to take the misoprostol no earlier than 10:30 tomorrow morning. I recommend wearing panty liners today, just in case you begin spotting, and then getting some thick pads for the next few days. I also recommend wearing old clothes and possibly sitting on towels or blankets, just so you don't ruin anything important like furniture. If you fill up more than four pads in two hours, you'll want to call me and come back in so I can make sure you're not bleeding too much. You should also look out for the embryonic sac, which should be about the size of a grape or a cherry. If you don't see it within two days, come back in so I can do another ultrasound; it may mean that the abortion hasn't taken.

"Most of the cramping and bleeding should occur in the first two days, but you may bleed lightly for up to a week, and you can spot for up to a month. It will take a few months for your periods to get back on a regular schedule, so you'll have to be careful. And while this first pill that you're taking now will stop the pregnancy from progressing any further, it may still be a few days before everything gets out of your system. So if you've been experiencing any pregnancy symptoms, like morning sickness or breast tenderness, it may continue for a few more days. Do you have any questions?"
"I don't think so," Alex said.

"Okay. Drink lots of water, and eat your spinach, so you won't become anemic, and no aspirin until the bleeding stops. Ibuprofen only. And other than that, just take it easy for a few days."

"I'll make sure she follows orders," Olivia said.

The doctor opened the pill box and took out two foil packets and the insert, opening one of them. "Here's the progesterone blocker, which you can take now," she said, handing Alex the open packet and the glass of water. Alex swallowed the pill in one gulp.

"And this one's for tomorrow." The doctor gave Alex the other packet and informational packet. "After your first period, come back to see me so we can discuss contraception."

"I think I'll be trying an alternative method of birth control," Alex said drily. The doctor raised her eyebrow. "Sleeping with women," she explained.

"I see. Well, you'll still need to practice safe sex, even if there's no risk of pregnancy." The doctor admonished her.

Alex held up the medication. "This isn't going in my file, right?" she asked the doctor pointedly.

"No, it's under Emily Perkins, with the address on the Wisconsin driver's licence you gave me. You can go down to billing on your way out and pay in cash. I'm also giving you two business cards for psychologists who have experience with treating both rape victims and women with vaginismus. Don't let it go too long; it won't get better on its own."

Alex reached out to shake the doctor's hand. "Thank you," she said sincerely, her eyes still puffy with tears.

"I don't want to see you again any time soon, Ms. Cabot," Dr. Logan quipped.

"Likewise," Alex replied, still holding Olivia's hand as they left the building.

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Olivia insisted on dropping Alex at home and fixing her up on the couch with a blanket and a cup of tea before running out to Duane Reade to get supplies for Alex. She picked up more ibuprofen, some candy she knew Alex liked, and some popcorn in addition to various sizes of maxipads and an intriguing packet of something called disposable underwear, which was positioned as a convenient item for women who had recently given birth.

She picked up a couple of coffees and bagels from the bakery before heading back upstairs, hoping the food would make up for the other things she'd had to buy for Alex.

The pain struck hard about an hour after Alex took the second pill on Tuesday morning, and she cried out, doubling over in pain while waiting for the water to boil in the kitchen. Olivia immediately rushed to her side, soothing her as she got Alex tucked in on the couch with the heating pad and some ibuprofen.

"How do you feel?" Olivia asked, bringing some more ibuprofen and water to the listless blonde. "Can I do anything to help?"

"I feel like I'm getting every single period of my life at the exact same time. Will you just sit with me for a bit, please?"
Olivia sat on the couch next to Alex and they made small talk between Alex's trips to the bathroom. Olivia told Alex about how she'd found her half-brother and shared some of her own stories about being an undercover commune-living hippie for the two months she'd spent near Portland. Alex told her about the adventures of working in the library of the University of Indiana and then in an art museum in Charleston, and how she'd once forgotten her cover story when a date had asked her about her family, and she'd spilled wine on her dress to change the subject.

Before long, Alex was sitting between Olivia's legs, leaning back into her as they cuddled, and Olivia tentatively hovered her hands over Alex's lower abdomen. "May I?" she asked, waiting for Alex to nod before she began gently massaging the area just under the waistline of her pyjama pants. "Is this okay? Does it help at all?" she murmured in Alex's ear. Alex nodded and leaned back. "Just close your eyes, sweetie, and try to rest."

They dozed off for a bit, Olivia's hands warming the skin just below Alex's navel, when they were startled by the buzzer. Olivia gently extracted herself from the couch to see who it was.

"It's Elliot," the voice replied. "Let me up? Kathy made some soup."

Olivia buzzed him up and shook Alex's shoulder. "Lex, sweetie, Elliot's here. I told him you weren't feeling well and I guess Kathy made soup. If you want to go hide out in the bedroom, I'll tell him you're asleep, but you've only got about a minute before he's up here."

Alex groaned as she got up and went to the bathroom, and Olivia folded the blankets and towels on the couch. She heard the water in the bathroom turn on just as Elliot knocked on the door.

"Hey," she said, opening the door. Elliot was standing outside holding two grocery bags.

"Hey, Liv. When you said Alex wasn't feeling well yesterday, Kathy made some chicken noodle soup and some vegetable soup for me to bring over." He pulled out two tupperware containers and opened the fridge. "Where is she?"

"She's in the bathroom. I'm not sure she's up for company; she was sleeping when you buzzed up. And you don't want to hang around in case it's contagious. Don't want to make Eli sick."

Elliot shrugged. "I have a feeling that whatever she has isn't contagious," he commented. Olivia opened her mouth to disagree, and Elliot waved his hand. "Look, he was charged with tampering with her birth control, I doubt the plea agreement would have included stipulations about relinquishing parental rights without a reason, she's had soda instead of beer the few times I've seen her… I'm not an idiot."

"El…" Olivia warned.

"Look, Kathy's been pregnant four times. I know what it looks like. And if the morning sickness is bad, the soups will help keep her hydrated."

"El…"

"I know it's none of my business, but…" Elliot began, but Alex cut him off.

"You're right, it's not. Thank you for the soups, though. I'm sure it will help settle my stomach." Alex walked slowly to the couch, waddling a bit awkwardly because of the thick pads she wasn't used to wearing, and pulled down the blankets and towels. Elliot noticed a spot of blood on the underside of her pyjama pants and put two and two more together.

"Alex, I'm sorry… I thought… You know what? It doesn't matter what I thought. But Alex, no
matter what, you're family. I know you probably have assumptions about what I think about…
certain things, but family comes first, and I don't... I would never judge family... anyone... for
decisions made in difficult situations. The thing about he who has not sinned casting the first stone,
and all that. What I'm trying to say is that now I'm going to go, before I risk never being able to
remove my foot from my mouth."

"Good idea, Stabler. But for what it's worth, thanks." Alex said, smiling slightly at Elliot's extreme
awkwardness and standing up to accept a hug.

"Feel better, Cabot. And call me if you need anything, either of you."

Olivia sighed as she closed the door behind him. "That man just doesn't know when to shut his
mouth sometimes. I don't know how Kathy puts up with him. I don't know how I put up with him."

Alex laughed. "Well, it could have been worse. I was half expecting a Catholic lecture."

Olivia shook her head. "He's never been judgmental about that sort of thing. I know Kathy didn't do
prenatal testing for Eli, presumably because they wouldn't have terminated regardless. But I've never
heard him say anything judgmental to a victim. Or to me, about a victim."

"He only implied that it was a sin."

"He... he knows that's between you and your god. He's just a bit dense. I don't know why I'm
sticking up for him."

"It's not so much that I'm worried about my friends judging me. I just prefer my medical information
to stay private, and especially if I were to ever run for office... I wouldn't want it that public."

"Well, we can probably assume that Munch, Fin, Liz, and Casey have at least inferred that you were
pregnant, even if you didn't confirm it. But they won't say anything. Robert's the only one in a
position to make allegations, and he has zero credibility after being sentenced for raping you. So I
think you're okay. Do you want me to warm you up some soup? Kathy's soups are really good, and
you should eat something."

Alex nodded and made her way to the bathroom again, this time, returning with tears in her eyes and
her hand cupped.

Olivia placed the bowls of soup on the table and held out her arms for Alex. "What's the matter,
sweetie?"

"It's over," she croaked, displaying the contents of her hand. They both examined the translucent
blueberry-sized object, which contained a pinkish blob, shaped like a tiny kidney bean. "That's it. It's
over." Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex as she started to cry.

"It's okay, sweetie. You're going to be okay." Olivia soothed her, rubbing her back.

"I know. I'm just... relieved."
Chapter 20

After another night curled up in Olivia's arms, Alex awoke the next morning at 8 AM to the shrill ring of her phone. When the caller rang a second time, she rolled over, groaning, to answer.

"I was very comfortable until you woke me up, so this better be good, Liz," Alex barked, recognizing the number on her caller ID.

"Have you seen this morning's paper?" Liz asked sharply.

"No, why?" Alex asked. She had a feeling she knew. It was April, sexual assault awareness month, and she had met with a journalist the week before.

"Did you plan this? Front page of the Times: Manhattan Bureau Chief Alexandra Cabot: Anyone Can Be a Victim of Sexual Violence, page 2, with a full-size picture of you. Then in small print, over your shoulder: Manhattan Socialite Robert Sheldon, Ex-Fiancé of Alexandra Cabot, Sentenced to 15 Years for Rape, see page 6.

"In an exclusive interview with the Times on Tuesday, Manhattan District Attorney's Bureau Chief and former prosecutor for the Special Victims Unit Alexandra Cabot discussed the legal definition of consent and confirmed that anyone can be a victim of sexual violence or rape. 'We have this image in the media of the stranger rapist, who violates women in a dark alley or a park at night, but the reality is that far more women are victims of their family members, acquaintances, and intimate partners... Women (and men) can be victims of sexual violence even if they've had a previous sexual relationship with the alleged rapist, including cohabitation, engagement, or marriage... While rape cases can be difficult to prosecute, each woman who comes forward and each conviction makes seeking justice easier for future victims.' Nationwide, the case closure rate for rape cases hovers around 4%, and fewer than 10% of accused rapists currently see any jail time. Statistics in Manhattan are slightly better, with 44% of SVU cases resulting in a criminal conviction, thanks in no small part to Ms. Cabot's tenure in Special Victims."

Alex groaned. "I gave an interview to a journalist friend of mine last week about sexual assault awareness month, and mentioned off-the-record that I had also been raped. I thought people would probably infer it, and that maybe, if they thought a former SVU prosecutor could be a victim, that it would be okay to come forward. You'll see that I specifically avoided mentioning any details or Robert's name, because without a criminal conviction, it would have been prejudicial and possibly libellous. But publishing the story about sentencing right on the same page is just bad timing. Or good timing. It's too early in the morning for me to be sure."

"You realize that you've just outed yourself as a rape victim," Liz said.

"Yes, I figured that would happen. Or at least, I suspected that people would put two and two together when they read the article. But all of the DA's office and most of the judiciary know what happened already, not to mention all of the defense attorneys Robert called before he got Granger to represent him. So it's not a secret. I fail to see the problem."

"The problem is that if you ever want to go back to SVU, it'll be seen as a conflict of interest."

"How so? It's not a conflict of interest for me to try murder cases after having been shot. I already got immense personal satisfaction from putting rapists in jail; this hardly changes my personal feelings about rape. I didn't hate rape less before I was a victim of it, I just understand it better now. If anything, it might make it easier for victims to connect with me. Convince more women to testify."
And we both know the system is stacked against rape victims already and that rapists are rarely convicted for date and acquaintance rape, especially if they're affluent. I thought this through, Liz, the more publicity the issue gets, the more high-profile cases that get convictions and press time, the better things will get for victims, and the more victims will come forward."

"I'm just worried that putting this out there so soon looks like a grab for publicity; like you're trying to benefit from being raped." Liz continued over Alex's objections. "I'm not saying that you are, I'm just saying that's what it could look like."

"Then it's a good thing he's already in Rikers and my press coverage won't impact his sentencing. I'm just doing what all rape victims do: trying to regain some control over my life, after almost four years of having very little control. I happen to be in a position to help people at the same time. And besides, it was pretty much Moredock's idea to go to the press; he told me to 'control the narrative."

Alex explained.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Liz cautioned.

"Not really," Alex admitted. "But it's done."

"Politics aside, it's actually a really good article. Are you angling to get back to Special Victims?"

"Casey's doing a good job there. I don't know if I want to stay Bureau Chief, though. Too much paperwork and politics; not enough time in a courtroom. And if I were to transfer, I wouldn't want to stay in Homicide and be under Jim Steele. Major Case does too many drug cartel cases for my taste, and quite frankly, I don't want to risk it, and White Collar would bore me to tears. So that doesn't leave a whole lot of options, and SVU does feel like home."

"See? Do you have more appreciation for me now that you know how rough I had it when I was your boss?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "You loved every minute of it."

"I most definitely did not. You were a pain in my ass. Probably the biggest one of the lot of you. You're lucky you're my goddaughter, so I had to be nice to you and love you anyway."

"You call that 'being nice and loving me anyway'? I'd hate to find out what happened to the people you didn't like." Alex retorted.

"They'll never find the bodies," Liz smirked. "Alright, sweetheart, I just got to the courthouse, so I've got to go. But I'll keep my ear to the ground for gossip, because I'm sure everyone will be talking about you today."

"Thanks Liz. And please don't call me this early on my day off again."

After she hung up her phone, Alex went back into the bedroom to try to curl back up in Olivia's arms, but Olivia stirred and opened her eyes as Alex pressed a kiss to her forehead.

"Good morning, beautiful," Olivia murmured, gliding her thumb across Alex's cheek. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Alex groaned. "A bit better. Now it only feels like most of my periods at the same time."

Olivia smiled sympathetically and kissed her cheek. "Who was that on the phone?"

"Liz. Apparently I'm front page news. That journalist I talked with last week did a story on me for
sexual assault awareness month, and printed Robert's sentencing on the same page. I haven't seen it yet."

"We'll have to go pick one up. I only had a subscription to the Ledger, and I canceled it when I broke up with Kurt."

"Would you mind? I don't want to go out to buy a paper with my own face on the cover."

"Sure, sweetie. I'll pick up some coffee and muffins for breakfast on the way back."

Olivia returned twenty minutes later with breakfast and the paper, and after placing them on the counter, she swept Alex into a hug. "You're amazing, you know that?" she murmured into Alex's ear.

"What does it say?"

Olivia brought her arms down around Alex's waist and pressed their foreheads together. "Just that you're so brave for speaking out about something awful that happened to you to help other women."

"I'm not brave, Liv," Alex replied, bringing her hands down along Olivia's back until they rested at her hips.

"Yes, you are. You're incredible."

Olivia tucked Alex's hair behind her ear, and Alex felt her breath hitch as their eyes locked. Olivia's body felt so soft against hers, and she was suddenly very aware that her breasts were brushing against Olivia's. Alex felt her lips part involuntarily and held her breath as Olivia moved forward, slowly, their eyes closing as their mouths pressed gently together.

The kiss was slow, and Olivia tasted soft and sweet, and for the first time, Alex felt like the person she was kissing had no ulterior motives, no designs of getting her into bed. She liked that Olivia held her close, and that her skin was soft, and that her hands on Alex's back pressed their bodies together gently, and that they fit in all the right places. For a moment, all Alex could focus on was how good she felt in Olivia's arms and how perfect the kiss was. Olivia hadn't kissed her to take her body, she had kissed her to touch her soul, to slip some of the broken pieces back into place.

Olivia reached her hand up to cup Alex's jaw, and kept it there as they both pulled away, needing air. They kept their bodies pressed together as their mouths parted, and Olivia looked nervously at Alex. Alex took a moment to react, and finally settled on exhaling a heartfelt "Wow." Still trembling with the energy from the kiss, she finally looked up to meet Olivia's eyes. "That was… wow."

Olivia let go of the breath she had been holding. "Me too… I… wow," she sputtered. "I haven't… It's never been like that for me before."

"Me neither," Alex whispered. Her body tingled, and she slowly became aware of more than just Olivia's hands and lips. Her breasts were sensitive, her skin was flushed, and she felt a tightness and shortness of breath she hadn't felt since the last time she had… Suddenly, frozen, Alex whimpered, freezing, before she pushed Olivia away and fled to the bedroom.

Shit, Olivia cursed herself, leaning against the counter. That was way too fast. Amazing, but way too fast.

She waited a few minutes before knocking on the bedroom door. "Go away!" Alex cried from inside.
"Please, Alex? I'm sorry. This is my fault... I shouldn't have done that so soon." Olivia turned the knob on the door and waited for Alex to protest. When she didn't, Olivia entered slowly and sat down on the bed, careful not to touch Alex. "Lex, I'm so sorry. That was too fast and I wasn't thinking... I should have waited until you were ready. I said we'd go at your pace, and then I push this on you. It wasn't fair of me."

"Liv, you didn't push anything on me. I wanted it too, and it was amazing, and then, I just... I don't know what happened. I felt... I don't know what I felt, but all of a sudden, all I could think about was Robert kissing me, putting his hands on me... It's my fault. I ruined the moment."

"It's not your fault, Lex. You had a flashback. It happens. It'll probably happen again, and it'll suck, but we'll get through it. Okay?" Olivia held out her hand for Alex to take, and Alex moved towards the center of the bed, allowing Olivia to lie down facing her. "Sweetie, we're going to take it really slow, and we won't do anything you're not ready for, I promise. I love you."

"Does that mean I have to wait for another amazing kiss?" Alex smiled through her tears.

"That was a pretty amazing kiss, wasn't it?" Olivia agreed. She reached over with her free hand to wipe the tears from Alex's cheek, then leaned in for a gentle kiss on the mouth, pulling away after just a second. "Let's just stick to the basics for now. We'll have plenty of time for more intense kissing later."

Alex curled in closer to Olivia and entwined her fingers in soft brown hair. Olivia smiled, noting that although Alex had allowed herself to be touched that intimately, it was the first time she was initiating the contact herself. Olivia watched as her eyes darkened and her brow furrowed, and suddenly, lost in deep thought, she pulled her hand away and turned to face the wall.

"What's going on in that big, scary brain of yours, Lex?" Olivia murmured, reaching out to touch her back. She realized Alex had begun to cry again, silently, and was shaking slightly. "Are you in pain?"

Alex shook her head, and Olivia spooned her, pulling her gently onto her back in Olivia's arms. "Talk to me, sweetie."

Alex wiped a tear away and swallowed thickly. "Liv, I'm not going to be enough for you."

Olivia kissed her forehead and her cheek, smiling gently at Alex, eyes filled with love. "I get to be the judge of that, Lex. I told you how I felt the other day. I've never felt like this about anyone before, and that kiss... Let's just say there's not a doubt in my mind that this is it for me."

Alex looked away. "I mean sexually. I'm not going to be able to give you what you need, sexually."

"How do you know what I need sexually?" Olivia asked gently, cupping Alex's cheek and turning her back so they were face to face. "Alex, I mean it when I say I want to take it as slow as you need. I expect nothing from you, sexually or otherwise. I do want to make love to you, and kiss you all over, and feel your skin against mine, and show you how good sex can be. I want to take away your pain, and show you how beautiful and amazing you are. It hurts me to know that you've been used, and taken for granted, and made to feel ashamed, and that nobody's loved you like you deserve. And I want to be the one to give you all of that, no matter how long I have to wait to do it. Even if we didn't have to take it slow, I'd still want to wait and make it special for you."

"And that sounds... I want all that too, and I think about it, imagine it, and then I feel guilty, or sick, like how can I even think about sex when I've been violated and it physically hurts me? I'm physically incapable of having sex, even if I wanted to." Alex gave a self-deprecating laugh.
"Figures that the first time in my life that I actually care about sex, and all I can think of is him and how he told me in my dream that his face was the one I'd see every time I...

"Lex, it's not sick to want sex with someone you love, even after being raped. Robert used you for his own gratification, with coercion and with force. I promise you that when we make love, it will be nothing like that. It will just be me and you. No Robert, no Lowell Harris, no anybody else."

"And what if I'm 'cold' and 'inhibited'? If I'm afraid to try something that you want? If I can't get aroused?"

"Who said those things to you, Lex? I'll kick his ass." Olivia murmured, kissing Alex's forehead.

"Alan. We fought about it a lot before we broke up."

"Maybe he just wasn't a good lover. Maybe he didn't make you feel safe enough to do those things with him. Maybe you weren't really attracted to him." Alex shrugged. "What about Mr. Claims Adjustor?"

"That was just fucking. I'm not proud of it. He was an okay guy. I needed to feel something. It hurt just enough to make me feel alive."

"Oh, Lex." Olivia held Alex close to her chest. "Sweetie, I will never pressure you to do anything you don't want to do, or make you feel bad about something you don't want or you're not ready for. If you're nervous about something, we won't do it, or we'll talk about it and work up until you feel comfortable. And it's very possible that you'll have trouble getting aroused, or being penetrated, or having an orgasm, because lots of women do after being raped. But you'll see a therapist, and talk to her about it, and then we'll work on it together, and take it as slow as we need to."

"I believe you, I'm just scared, Liv," Alex whispered.

"I know, baby. I know." Olivia soothed. "But I love you, and nothing's going to change that."

"How long?"

"How long what, Lex?"

"How long until I stop feeling like this?"

"Lex, it's only been two weeks. You've got to give yourself some time to process it and acknowledge it." Olivia took a deep breath. "Lex, 3 months after my assault, I held a gun to a suspect's head during a flashback. Turned out that he was innocent - and a Marine, with experience with PTSD. I could have killed an innocent man, and all he did was talk me down and give me the name of a good therapist for sexual assault and PTSD in cops and the military."

Alex kissed Olivia's forehead and brought her fingers back up to play with her hair. "After I started seeing her, and acknowledging what had happened to me even though I wasn't raped, the flashbacks and the nightmares got less frequent. They still haven't gone away entirely, but usually now it's only after a really bad case. I've only had one since you've been here; the night we went to O'Malley's and Casey stayed over.

"She - the therapist - recommended that I... touch myself. Took me almost a month to try it, and another month before I was able to give myself an orgasm. I started dating Jenna a few weeks after that. I didn't kiss her for more than a month, and we barely made it past second before we broke up. The point I'm trying to make is that I wasn't raped, and it still took me 5 months to be able to pleasure myself, and I still haven't been able to have anyone touch me. So when I say I'm willing to wait as
long as it takes, I fully expect it to take at least 9 months, if not longer. And I promise, I'm not going anywhere."

"Liv, what happened after you broke up with Jenna?" Alex asked gently. Olivia's eyes filled with tears and she tried to turn away, but Alex gently pulled her back and wiped her eyes, kissing a wet cheek. "It's just me, Liv. It's okay." "I told her I wanted to talk, and she invited me over to her apartment. I was going to tell her more about my job and Sealview, and explain that I didn't think she liked to talk about serious subjects, and that if I was going to be in a relationship, it would have to be with someone who could comfort me after a tough case.

"After I told her about the job thing and how I sometimes need to cry when we don't get a pedophile in time, she thought that was the end, and started kissing me, and I kissed her back. Then I told her I was assaulted - not the details, I think I just said that I was working undercover and a man tried to force himself into my mouth - and do you know what she said to me?"

Alex shook her head.

"She said, 'Well, it's a good thing I'm not a man,' as if the only thing that would affect me would be her trying to shove a penis down my throat." Olivia sniffled.

"Oh, sweetheart," Alex soothed. "What an idiot." "And then the conversation's over, and she's kissing me, and touching me, and before I know it, her clothes are off and she's telling me she doesn't want to wait anymore. And I start… pleasuring her, and realize that I'm not enjoying it and I'm just doing it to prove that I can instead of because I want to. And then she… starts touching me, and I freak out, and tell her I'm not ready, and she tells me to just relax, and that's when I stopped her and jumped up to get dressed and to run out on her." Olivia was crying openly now.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry," Alex murmured, rubbing Olivia's back and pressing soft kisses to her forehead and cheek. "So sorry." "I didn't want to do that to her," Olivia explained through her tears. "Neither of us wanted a one-night stand. I told her I didn't want to have sex and then break up. And she was really angry that I ran out on her like that."

"Why didn't you tell me before?" Alex asked softly.

"You had enough to deal with. Still do. Don't worry about me, please."

"Nonsense. If I'm going to dump all my shit on you, I expect you to dump on me too. That's how it works," Alex said firmly. "If we're going to be together, you need to trust me too. And your problems are more important to me than Laura's, or Sarah's, or Jessica Rossi's."

"I was embarrassed," Olivia offered, still crying softly.

"Of course you were," Alex soothed. "But it'll be okay." "I don't want to do that to you," Olivia blurted out. "Hurt you and make you run away from me."

"You won't," Alex reassured her. "You've respected my boundaries so far. You always make sure it's okay before you touch me, or... it's like you can read me, even if you don't ask out loud. You've never made me feel uncomfortable. And as much as I hate the idea of anyone else touching me right
now, I like it when you do. Jenna didn't do any of those things for you, or even know that she should, and she didn't listen when you told her about your assault. She had literally the worst reaction that I've ever heard. So you know what? Screw her. But I know you won't do any of those things, and that's why I trust you.”

Alex tucked some of Olivia's hair behind her ear, and kissed the tear stains on her cheeks. "Liv, I promise I'll be gentle with you, too. I don't want to hurt you, either."

Olivia smiled softly, and they wrapped their arms around each other and pressed their lips together gently, slowly, over and over, until it hurt a little bit less.
"You know," Olivia murmured, kissing Alex gently as she woke up. "When I told you there were places I could bring you if you were questioning your sexuality or wanted to experiment, this isn't exactly what I had in mind. Just so we're clear."

Alex giggled. "I figured as much. But it's sure working for me."

"Me too," Olivia smiled and ran her fingers through Alex's hair. "What are you going to do today? Are you going to be okay on your own?"

"I don't need a babysitter, Liv," Alex admonished. "I'm feeling better, mostly, so I'll probably try to get out of the house today. Bring my laptop down to a coffee shop to get some work done. Maybe take a walk. I've got bells tonight, but I'll make dinner first if you're going to be home."

"Okay. You'll call me if you need anything?"

"I'm not going to need anything in 8 hours, and you've already taken enough time to deal with me. I'll be fine. Now, go, before you're late."

Alex stayed in bed for more than an hour after Olivia left, reliving the kissing as she held Olivia's pillow, breathing in her scent. She thought about what Olivia had said, about kissing her all over, making love to her, showing her how good sex could be. She imagined what Olivia's skin would feel like against hers, and how her lips would feel on other parts of her body. After her first time, when he had been gentle and slow, Alan's idea of foreplay had been to slip his hand under her bra and take off her panties, and Mr. Claims Adjustor and Robert had been even worse. Alex suspected that Olivia would be far more attentive, that she would make her feel things she'd always thought she should feel during sex. Things she felt even when Olivia held her or kissed her.

Alex stopped when she realized she was crying, and reluctantly got out of bed and dragged herself to the shower. She was bleeding and cramping far less now, but she still felt decidedly unclean as she washed her intimate parts. Trying to refocus on that morning, she ran a finger gently over her clit. Nothing. Kissing Olivia, holding her, thinking about making love... she should feel something, right? She brought her hand down lower and immediately tensed up as she tried to slip the tip of her finger inside herself, just to see if she could, but she teared up, repulsed. She barely even wanted to wash her genitals, or acknowledge them at all. Frustrated, she turned off the water and got dressed.

She sat down at the counter, holding her cup of coffee, for a long time, staring at her cell phone and the two business cards she pulled out of her purse. After a while, she pulled out her laptop, and googled the names. She read their websites. Compared lists of their publications in peer reviewed journals. Looked at client reviews. Calculated the distance from her office and from Olivia's apartment. And when she couldn't think of any more criteria, she turned the cards upside down, shuffled them a few times, and turned one over and dialed the number.

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Olivia walked into the squadroom with coffee, donuts, and five minutes to spare, and groaned when she saw the huge stack of paperwork on her desk that had accumulated in the past ten days.

"Welcome back, here's your paperwork," Fin joked, grabbing a donut. "How's Cabot doing?"

"About as well as can be expected, I think," Olivia sighed.
"When's she back to work and her apartment?" Elliot asked, sitting down at his desk.

"She's back to work on Monday. As for her apartment, she gave her tenants 90 days' notice to quit her old place, so she's with me until they move out."

"She's staying with you in your place for 3 months? Liv, 2 weeks is one thing, but that's a long time to have another person in that small space." Elliot said.

"Well, now that I'm back to work, I'll hardly be there. If it gets too tight, I can sleep in the crib, or she can go stay with Liz or somebody. But I fail to see how this is any of your concern."

"So, what, you're just going to put your life on hold for 3 months?" Elliot asked. "What about the woman you're seeing?"

"I'm not seeing her anymore. Look, Elliot, Alex is my friend, and she needs someone right now, and I'm going to be there for her. It's as simple as that."

"And this has nothing to do with her deciding she's a lesbian now?"

"Elliot, don't be an ass. Of course not. I had nothing to do with that, other than talking about it with her and telling her I supported her when she told me."

"I just don't want you to put your life on hold and do things for her, and develop… expectations…"

Olivia cut him off. "Elliot, is that the kind of person you think I am? That I would only help her because I'm expecting something in return later? First of all, her coming out to me does nothing to change our friendship, just like nothing changed when I came out to her. Second of all, just because two women are both attracted to other women, it doesn't mean they'll be attracted to each other, just like not all men are attracted to all women and all women are certainly not attracted to all men. Finally, even if those things weren't true, she's a rape victim. It's going to be a long time before she's ready for any kind of relationship, and she knows that. And I'm not really relationship material right now, either. Does that clear things up for you? Can I get started on this mountain of paperwork now?"

Elliot nodded. "Sorry, Liv. I didn't mean it like that. I just meant that you need to take care of yourself, too. You haven't had an easy year either, so don't put all your energy into taking care of her and neglecting yourself. You'll burn out."

Olivia waved her hand, signaling the end to the conversation. "Don't worry, El. I've got it under control."

When they heard the click of Casey's heels, Olivia was still up to her ears in paperwork.

"Got some good news for us, Counselor?" Munch asked.

"Sigelman asked for $500,000 bail for Clark, so he's not going anywhere. What about you guys?"

"That was Warner. DNA just came back; it's a match to Erikson," Elliot said, hanging up the phone.

"The guy who's been raping little girls?" Olivia asked.

"That's the one." Elliot confirmed.

"Okay, get me the DNA report and I'll get your warrant before lunch. Liv, can I talk to you for a sec?" Casey pulled her into the interview room. "How's Alex?"
"She's okay. Grateful it's over. Trying to figure out what happens next, I think."

Casey nodded. "Well, if there's anything more I can do, let me know. Did she take care of…?"

"Loose ends? Yeah, I went with her on Monday. But listen, she figures that you guys know, but she doesn't want it getting out."

"Of course not. I'm just asking as a friend. I haven't said anything to anyone, and I'm certainly not judgmental." Casey said. "But actually, I wanted to ask you a favor. I went out with some of the girls from White Collar the other night and met this really cute corporate lawyer who works for some tech company out of SoHo. We kind of hit it off, and I have a date tomorrow night."

"So you need me to call after an hour asking for a warrant in case he's boring you to tears?"

"Exactly," Casey grinned.

"On one condition," Olivia explained. "You have to come over afterwards to dish about how it went. Or on Saturday morning if he goes home with you." She winked.

"Deal." Casey opened the door. "Now I've got to go get that warrant."

Olivia opened the door to her apartment just after 6:30, and found it suspiciously dark. Alex was curled up in bed, the covers over her head, and she groaned when Olivia sat down next to her and pulled them back.

"You're back already? What time is it?"

"It's quarter to seven," Olivia said, leaning down to kiss Alex's temple. "Are you not feeling well? What time did you go to sleep?"

"I don't know. I decided to lay down for a nap this afternoon. I was so tired. Maybe 3?"

"Did you get out of the house at all today?" Olivia reached over to turn on the bedside lamp.

"I went down to the coffee shop around lunchtime, but it was too crowded. I sat down and was watching the entrance, but there were too many people. I couldn't relax. I couldn't even sit there with a cup of coffee, because every time someone came near me, I freaked out. So I came back here, and tried to do some reading, and I was so tired that I had to rest."

Olivia held her arms out so Alex could lean into them, but she shook her head slightly. "I'm sorry, sweetie. It's pretty normal to feel hypervigilant. Maybe next time we can go together. I'll bring my gun."

"You shouldn't have to do that," Alex said.

"You shouldn't have to feel unsafe," Olivia replied.

"How am I going to go back to work if I can't even sit in a coffee shop? I can't go to court and freak out if someone sneaks up behind me outside of arraignments. Or if I'm in an interview room with a suspect and he lunges at me. I've always been able to keep my cool, Liv. What if I can't do that anymore?"

"It might take time, Lex. I didn't deal with suspects for a few weeks after Sealview because I couldn't. And I told you what happened when I did try to deal with one. I stuck to victims for a while
after that. I know you don't like that this job is more paperwork and mentoring and less courtroom time, but maybe that can work to your advantage. Let the kids deal with the cases for a bit, until you're ready to deal with the perps and the defense attorneys again."

"What if people think I can't handle it? Or that I'm weak?"

"Sweetie, nobody will think you're weak for needing a bit of time to recover. Even if you took the next few weeks off, until Portland, I'm sure nobody would think any less of you. You could make something up. You have a bunch of continuing ed credits to do for your law license, right?"

"Yeah. The Bar Association wasn't quite sure what to do with me when I came back from Witsec, so they told me I had to make up credits for 2 of the 3 years I was gone, and I have 2 years to do those credits plus this year's. I finished about half of them while I was waiting to start the Bureau Chief job, though."

"Who knows that besides Liz and Branch? You could say you're taking time off or not taking any cases for a bit so you can focus on that." Olivia suggested.

"Maybe. But I need to go to work. I told you, in Wisconsin all I had was a boring job I hated and time to wallow, and it almost killed me. If I stay home for the next month, bad things could happen."

"Are you going to tell me what happened in Wisconsin besides 'just fucking' Mr. Claims Adjustor?"
Alex shook her head. "Not right now. I will sometime, but I'm not ready."

"Well, you know, this time, you have me around to make sure it doesn't kill you. And you wouldn't have to wallow; you could cook me dinner and clean my apartment in all your spare time. Earn your keep." Olivia winked.

"Oh, shit! I'm sorry. I was going to make dinner tonight."

"Lex, it's okay. I don't expect you to make dinner. We can pick up something." She looked at her watch. "Are you still planning on going to bells? You should probably get moving."

Alex shrugged. "Lex, if you don't want to go, it's okay, but I think it'll take your mind off things for a bit. How about I walk with you, we pick something up to eat on the way, and I'll bring a book or something so I can read until it's over. Will you feel better about going with a protective detail?"

"You're not going to escort me everywhere forever."

"No, I'm not. But it's only been a few weeks, and it's nighttime, and you had a rough day. So consider me on duty. Now freshen up, and then let's get moving." She leaned in to kiss Alex on the mouth, but she pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Liv. Just, not right now, okay?"

"Hey, you never have to apologize."

Alex put on a pair of jeans and a teeshirt, and freshened up her makeup, and they were soon on their way.

"Did you eat at all today? What do you want to get on the way over? We don't have a lot of time."
Olivia asked as they walked down the block.

"I'm not very hungry. Why don't you just go grab something during the rehearsal?"
"Lex, you need to eat something, even if it's just a piece of fruit and some yogurt." She pulled Alex into a deli. "Come on, pick something out."

"Yes, Jack."

"Hammond? Ouch, that's cold."

"He liked to play Mom, too. Always made me eat." Alex complained.

"Uh, his job was to keep you alive. Wouldn't have been too good if he'd let you waste away, now would it've?"

Alex snorted in response, and slipped her hand into Olivia's as they exited the deli. "I made an appointment for tomorrow afternoon," she said quietly.

"With one of the people Dr. Logan recommended?" Alex nodded. "That's good. What time? Do you want me to come and wait outside for you?"

"It's at 4:30. You don't have to come. It's only 20 blocks from your apartment. I'll probably walk back alone if I need space afterwards. It'll still be light out then."

"Okay. As long as you feel safe." Olivia squeezed her hand. "Casey has a date tomorrow. She asked me to call her an hour in needing a warrant in case she needs to bail." Alex chuckled. "I told her she has to come by and dish afterwards. Or on Saturday."

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Maybe I should have called the other doctor, Alex thought, shifting uncomfortably in her seat in the doctor's waiting room at 4:27 the following afternoon. She had two more publications in the American Journal of Psychology than this one did. And her office is 3 minutes closer to work. And if I leave now, before she knows I'm here…

Alex's thoughts were interrupted by the ding of her cell phone.

'Thinking of you. Be brave, like always. xo - Liv' 

She smiled, and turned her phone's buzzer off just as the office door opened, and another woman exited with puffy eyes and a tissue over her nose, and hurried out the door.

Alex braced herself against the chair as a small-framed woman with white hair and wire-rimmed glasses came out of the back office.

"You must be Ms. Cabot," the woman said, smiling at her. "Please go back and take a seat. I'm just going to get us some water, and I'll be right back. You're the last appointment of the day, so we have as much time as we need."

Alex felt like a giant standing next to the diminutive woman, who couldn't be more than five feet tall. She had dressed professionally for the occasion, even wearing heels, although she had foregone the suitcoat. She wasn't sure why, but she suspected it had something to do with feeling confident. Her court clothes always helped her to feel less vulnerable.

She stood in the center of the office, glancing around at the mahogany desk and bookshelves filled with medical journals and popular psychology books. A degree from Harvard Graduate School hung on the wall behind her desk. Alex looked at the plush armchair she assumed was for her when she heard heels clicking down the hallway and the door creak open.
The doctor smiled gently when she noticed Alex's relief as she opened the door. "I always wear heels so my patients can hear me coming. Many of them don't like being snuck up on," she said carefully. "I never fixed the floorboards or the creaky door hinge for the same reason." Alex smiled gratefully.

"I'm Caroline March," she said, extending her hand for Alex to shake.

"Alexandra Cabot," Alex offered, shaking the woman's hand. "Nice to meet you. And thank you for meeting with me on such short notice."

"It's my pleasure. Dr. Logan told me you might be calling. Please, have a seat." She motioned towards the armchair.

"Actually, do you mind if I turn it a bit? I like to be able to see the door," Alex explained, embarrassed at being so difficult already.

"Of course," the doctor agreed, getting up to help Alex drag the chair into a less prone position.

"Thank you," Alex said, sitting down and crossing her legs. She motioned towards the degree on the wall. "My brother went to Harvard Medical School. He's in the Burn Unit at Mass General. And I'm Harvard Law, Class of '99."

Dr. March placed a glass of water on the table between them. "Family, then. I'd say it's always good to see family, but in my line of work, unfortunately, that isn't usually true. In yours either, I imagine."

Alex nodded.

"Ms. Cabot, you're welcome to call me Caroline, or Dr. March, whatever feels comfortable for you. What would you like me to call you?"

Alex forced a smile. "Well, we're going to be talking about my sex life, so I think you should probably call me Alex."

"Okay, Alex. As I mentioned, this is my last appointment of the day, and our first visit, so you take as much time as you need. I've been here until after ten with patients before, and I'm in no rush. There's no clock for you to see, but I'll let you know after two hours, and if you want to continue, we can take a break to get more water or so you can let someone know you're still here if you need to do that.

"If you don't feel like this is a good fit for you, I'd be happy to recommend colleagues who can help you. Please don't feel like you have to spare my feelings. This isn't about me, it's about you and your recovery, and if I'm not the best person to help you, then you need to find someone who is. And finally, if you're not comfortable talking about something for whatever reason, don't force yourself to. We can always make a note to come back to it on another day. This is going to be difficult, and you can't force yourself to do things before you're ready. The goal of these sessions is for you to work through traumatic experiences and your feelings in a place that's safe. Does all of that sound alright to you?"

Alex nodded. "That sounds fine."

"Okay. Why don't we start with you telling me what brings you here today?"

Alex smiled at the doctor and blew air out through her teeth, and pressed her hand to her right temple. "Where to begin?
"About eight years ago, just out of law school, I got a job working for the DA's office and was assigned to prosecute sex crimes. Four years in, we caught a rape case that led back to a Colombia drug lord. I prosecuted him. The federal agent who was our informant was blown up in a car bomb in front of me, and threats were made on my life and my mother's life. I got a protective detail, the DA's office dropped the case, we went out to drinks, I was shot on the sidewalk when we left the bar.

"I woke up three days later in the bowels of Mercy Hospital and was told that I was dead, officially, and that I was being put into Witness Protection and moved to a new identity in Wisconsin. While I was there, my mother died, my niece was born, I started drinking too much and fucking a coworker. A year and a half later, I came back to New York to testify against the hitman who'd shot me, then went back to a new identity in Portland, where I saw a student get raped and couldn't testify about it. I got moved to two other identities before I finally came back about a year ago.

"When I got back, I was a total mess, trying to learn my real identity like I had learned the fabricated Witsec identities. I didn't get back in touch with any of my old friends, took a promotion in the DA's office and got engaged to a man I didn't love. One of my ADAs was assassinated in another drug case, four of my ADAs were held hostage in a courtroom shooting, and I moved in with my fiancé, who used me for sex, cheated on me, and tampered with my birth control so I'd get pregnant 'unexpectedly.' Two weeks ago, he raped me. I left him, called up my best friend from before the shooting who's an SVU detective to report it, found out I was three weeks pregnant, came out as a lesbian, had Robert put in jail, declared my love to my best friend when we realized we've had feelings for each other for years, and had an abortion, which is when I discovered that I'm suffering from vaginismus, and probably have been since I started having sex.

"All of which is quite unfortunate, because ever since I realized I love Olivia, I haven't been able to stop thinking about what it would be like to make love to her, and I feel like a teenage boy, except that my body either doesn't react, or it does react, and I flash back to the rape. I think that pretty much covers it."
Chapter 22

The older woman took a sip of her water and paused in her note taking. "You've certainly been through a lot in the past few years."

Alex laughed. "You know, for a while, when I was at SVU, I thought I couldn't possibly see cases that were any worse than what I was working on. And yet, they always seemed to keep getting more depraved. You won't be able to tell me I'm not giving you enough material to work with."

Caroline smiled. "No, I don't think I could accuse you of that. Now tell me, have you had counseling before?"

Alex nodded. "I had mandatory counseling with an FBI psychiatrist pretty much every week when I was in the program, mostly around my identity, how I was coping. I had PTSD after the shooting, and they worked on reducing my triggers - loud noises like gunshots, fireworks, and cars backfiring, that sort of thing. They gave me a bit of grief counseling when my mom died, because I couldn't come back for the funeral. And while Alex Cabot from New York who has a law licence isn't on any medication and doesn't have any psychiatric diagnosis, Emily Robins from Wisconsin is on a low dose of antidepressants and sometimes takes Ativan for anxiety or Ambien for trouble sleeping. I haven't had any counseling since being back in New York, though."

"I understand. We'll see after a few sessions if I need to recommend you to someone who can adjust Emily's dose at all. Do you see Emily as someone different from you?"

Alex nodded. "I had mandatory counseling with an FBI psychiatrist pretty much every week when I was in the program, mostly around my identity, how I was coping. I had PTSD after the shooting, and they worked on reducing my triggers - loud noises like gunshots, fireworks, and cars backfiring, that sort of thing. They gave me a bit of grief counseling when my mom died, because I couldn't come back for the funeral. And while Alex Cabot from New York who has a law licence isn't on any medication and doesn't have any psychiatric diagnosis, Emily Robins from Wisconsin is on a low dose of antidepressants and sometimes takes Ativan for anxiety or Ambien for trouble sleeping. I haven't had any counseling since being back in New York, though."

"I wasn't asking about dissociating," Caroline reassured her. "I'm just wondering what you mean when you say that you weren't yourself when you were Emily."

"Emily was my first identity in Witsec. I was in the middle of nowhere, Wisconsin. It was winter, and it was cold and dark, but not like New York. It was too quiet. I hated my job as an insurance adjuster; it was so tedious. I had some trouble adjusting, and I wasn't allowed to be myself. Emily couldn't even like the same flavor of ice cream that I like."

"That must have been hard for you." Caroline said sympathetically.

"I had only been there for two months when my mom died, and of course I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral. A month later my niece was born, and named after me because my brother thought I was dead. Before long, I was drinking a bit too much and sleeping with a guy from work that I barely knew and had no feelings for. I wasn't eating and I lost weight. I started calling in sick to work and sleeping all the time, but I had nightmares about the shooting. I didn't think I was ever going to get to come home. I wasn't suicidal, but I was wondering if it was even worth it to be in Witsec."

"Any of those things would have been hard to deal with on their own, and it's normal that you were feeling depressed. How did you finally start to feel better?"

"Jack, my FBI handler. I had to meet with him every week to get updates on the case and to inform him if I had been identified or if anything had changed. He noticed that I wasn't doing well, and basically read me the riot act. That the federal government wasn't protecting me from drug dealers so I could drink myself to death. He got me into the counseling sessions with an FBI psychologist. He called me every morning for more than a month to get me out of bed and give me a pep talk about
the limited life expectancies of drug lords and how I'd be home before I knew it. Then the man who shot me was arrested, and I came back to testify. It must have given me a little hope when he went to prison, because I didn't have the same problems when I went to Portland. No meaningless sex, no drinking. It helped that I liked my job there, teaching English and debate, and I could be a bit more myself around the kids. The nightmares didn't go away, but they got less and less frequent. I stayed on the meds; maybe that helped too."

"So most of the difficulties you had during witness protection you associate with Emily?" Alex nodded. "What about Alex? Is it okay for you to have 'trouble adjusting' to everything that's happened in the last few years?"

Alex shrugged. "If anybody found out I was on antidepressants or that I had PTSD, it could jeopardize my law license, my career… everything I came back for. I love my job. I can't risk it."

"Can you tell me about your job?"

"I put rapists and murders in jail. I speak for the victims. I'm Homicide Bureau Chief in the DA’s office. It's two steps up from the job I had before as an ADA, and I stepped on a lot of toes when I came back and got promoted. It's more paperwork and politics, and less courtroom time, but I can pick the cases I want to try. I've only been to work for a few brief meetings since it happened. I go back on Monday."

"Tell me about your concerns about going back to work. Do you think you're ready?"

Alex nodded. "Everybody knows what happened to me. Not the details, because the file was sealed, but they know what he was convicted of. When I came back from being shot, I was a martyr. This is different. I'm strong at work, and here… I was weak. And I'm worried I'm not going to be professional."

"How do you think your colleagues will blame you for what happened? See you differently for it?"

"My colleagues are used to dealing with dead bodies, not rapes. I don't know if they'll treat me differently, but they know. It feels like having them know how I was violated will humiliate me all over again."

"You worked with Special Victims for a few years, and you know how to talk to victims. If another woman in your office had been raped, do you think you would you feel differently about her or treat her differently?"

Alex shook her head. "Of course not."

"What would you do?"

"I'd ask if she wanted to be put on arraignments for a while, or have her plead out small cases, or research case law for other attorneys. But I'm the boss. I could maybe get away with doing paperwork for a few days or even a week, but I can't avoid dealing with my bureau and their cases."

"Do you have to go back to work right away?"

Alex shrugged. "I have an open case that I really don't want to hand off to anyone else in my bureau. And the longer I put off going back… won't that just make it worse? Won't it just make me feel like they'll know I couldn't deal and that I was afraid to come back and face work?"

"Do you think they're giving that much thought to what happened to you?" Caroline asked.
Alex shrugged. "Probably not. I threatened them with traffic court if they gossiped, and I'm sure it's old news by now. But they might if I have a flashback or start crying for no reason. I can't cry at work. I've always been able to control my feelings, and my mind, and focus... and now, I'm afraid all the time. I can't concentrate. I'm jumpy. I know I can be vulnerable with Olivia, but what happens if I go back to work, and I lose it in front of a perp, or a judge? Other people aren't necessarily going to be as forgiving, and I have to stay professional."

"What if you brought some work home and only went in for meetings, or for a few hours in the morning, for another week, maybe? You could work on holding yourself together for short amounts of time and getting acclimated again, and see how it goes. I can see you more than once next week, if you want, and we can talk about things that happen at work that are difficult for you, and start working on identifying your triggers and coming up with some strategies for coping when you have flashbacks."

"I'm not sure being home alone for long periods of time is good for me either. Olivia's back at work now, and if it's just me in her apartment..." Alex trailed off.

"Are you worried you might do something harmful?" Caroline asked carefully.

"No! Nothing like that. I'd never... but I don't want to be around people, and I don't really want to be alone, either. When I was alone yesterday, I ended up taking a really long nap instead. I need short amounts of time alone, to process, but too much time... I don't need to wallow in self-pity."

"Would a friend let you sit with her in her office to work for a bit? You could be at work, but not alone in your office all the time."

Alex nodded slowly, thinking. "I could ask Casey, or Liz. That might work. It would make it harder for people to find me or sneak up on me. I might be able to focus better if someone else is working next to me."

"Why don't you try that, then, and we'll see how it goes?"

Alex nodded. "I will. Thank you."

"Can we talk for a few minutes about your living situation?" Caroline asked.

"My apartment was rented out and I was living with Robert. Olivia's been letting me stay with her since it happened. She said I can stay until I get my apartment back, but I can go stay with my godmother if I need to."

"Olivia is the woman you love?" Alex nodded. "Does she know how you feel about her?"

Alex played with the glass of water in her hands. "We talked about it."

"What prompted that conversation?"

"I was trying to figure out whether or not I'm gay. I had never even considered it before, and a friend said something to me about Olivia, the way we interacted, that she though Olivia loved me, and suddenly it made sense."

"What made sense?"

"That I never cared much for dating, that my sexual experiences with men were limited and... lacking, that all the things I thought I'd feel when I fell in love... I've felt them with Olivia."
"What do you feel with her?"

"Safe. Like I don't have to be someone I'm not. The first few nights she let me have the bedroom and she slept on the couch, but a few times I had nightmares and she came and stayed with me until I fell asleep, or slept beside me. A few times she held me when I was crying. Since we talked about our feelings for each other, she's stayed with me in the bed. I've been sleeping with her arms around me, but she's very respectful of my boundaries. She always makes sure it's okay to touch me, and respects when I don't want her to. She's used to working with rape victims, so she's very good about knowing what to do and trying to make me comfortable."

"Have you had any other physical contact with her?"

"She held my hand through the whole rape kit and talked me through it. She's held me when I cried. Rubbed my back. Put cool washcloths on me when I got sick, and even dressed me without looking a couple times. Touched my hair, and kissed me on the forehead or cheek or temple, wiped my tears away. She even... I had 13 stitches, and I couldn't put the antibiotic ointment on myself. She just did it, without me asking her to, and made it seem like it was the most natural thing in the world. I was still embarrassed, but... getting an infection would've been worse."

"Why do you think you felt embarrassed?"

Alex shrugged and looked away, turning red. "I'm not used to being touched there, like that, is all."

"And you didn't have a reaction to her touching you intimately? Have you had any sexual contact?"

"Not when she touched me there. She was more gentle than the doctor, but it didn't... But we... kissed the other day, and it was perfect, and then our bodies were touching, and I felt... and I had a flashback. I pushed her away and ran to the bedroom."

"What did you feel?"

Alex looked away and turned bright red. "I felt... aroused," she admitted quietly. "It was the first time... no, the second time since it happened. The other time was in a nightmare, and I got sick afterwards."

"And what did she do?"

"She waited a few minutes, and then she came and apologized for kissing me and for going to fast, and we talked."

"Alex, you keep saying 'since it happened,'" Caroline commented. "Can you be specific?"

Alex opened and closed her mouth a few times, trying to get the words out as tears started streaming down her face. Caroline held out a tissue box, and she took one, wiping her eyes and holding it in front of her mouth with a trembling hand.

"It's okay. Take your time," Caroline soothed.

"The first time since he raped me. Since I was raped." Alex choked out.

"Alex, what I'm about to suggest isn't something you have to do if you don't think it will be helpful to you, but I'd like you to tell me what happened, in as much detail as you're comfortable with. You may find that exposing yourself to the memories will help us identify things that could trigger you, and should lessen the fear you feel when you remember the rape."
"You mean reliving it?" Alex asked, still shaking.

Caroline nodded. "Yes. Not all women find it helpful, so it's up to you whether or not you want to try this approach. If you can't share all the details now, or if you need to stop at any point, that's okay. The goal is to go over what happened in a safe place. If you find that it works for you, we'll do it a few times each session until remembering doesn't trigger a panic attack or a flashback. For now, just tell me what you're comfortable with, and we'll go from there. I want you to try not to detach when you're telling me, though, okay?"

Alex nodded and took a deep breath as she began, explaining how Robert had called her at work, how she had gone home to relax, how she very rarely took care of her own needs, and only decided to that night because she thought Robert would be out late. She cried and took another tissue, telling Caroline how humiliated she'd been when he'd tied her up and touched her, and the moment that she felt herself detach from her own body, waiting for the unknown number of orgasms to be over. She'd laid there in shock, not even conscious of the fact that she'd called Olivia until her friend had showed up to take care of her.

"I'm a victim," she finally choked out. "He turned me into a rape victim."

Alex cried for several long minutes before Caroline gently asked the next question. "Do you think of yourself as a victim?"

"No… yes… maybe… I don't know."

Caroline nodded and smiled slightly, waiting for Alex to explain. Alex looked away.

"I mean, I know, logically, intellectually, that I'm a victim, but I just feel… I knew what Robert was like. I mean, I know it's not my fault, but I guess I blame myself for getting into a relationship with someone who didn't respect me as a person. I was just starting to get my life back under control after I came back to New York, you know? When I was shot… I didn't have control over my life, but I had control over my body and my mind. I still… in spite of having to pretend to be someone else, I always knew who I was.

"And now… even before Robert raped me, I didn't really have control over my body. He got me pregnant without me even knowing… and the bit I never gave him, he took, when he tied me up and…" Alex took a deep breath. "I know it's going to take a while to get back to normal, but I just want to figure out what that even means. I want to stop doing things because my mother told me it's what a Cabot would do or because it's what I think that I should do, and start figuring out what I actually want."

"We can certainly work on that." Caroline nodded and smiled. "It's after 7. I think that's good for today. Do you want to come back on Tuesday?"

Alex agreed and took out her checkbook to pay. "I'm just going to call Olivia to see if she'll come pick me up. I was going to walk home, but it's getting dark, and…"

"Of course. You're welcome to wait with me until she gets here." Caroline went to her desk and filed some paperwork until Olivia knocked on the door.

"You ready?" Olivia smiled gently at Alex, who was folding her arms tightly across her chest, and held out an arm.

Alex thanked the doctor and followed Olivia without talking or touching her.

"Lex, do you want to take a cab or walk?" Olivia asked as they got into the elevator. Olivia pressed
the button for the ground floor and put her hands in her coat pocket.

"I need some air. I want to walk," Alex said. She wiped a tear from her eye and pressed herself against Olivia, who pulled her arms around Alex and kissed her forehead.

"You're going to be okay, Lex."

Olivia followed Alex closely as they walked the twenty blocks back to the apartment. She made sure to stay within Alex's line of sight so she would feel safe, but she knew Alex wanted some time and space to process what had happened in therapy. She could tell Alex was crying from the way her arms wrapped around her ribcage and her shoulders shook slightly, and as much as she wanted to take her in her arms and hold her, Olivia knew she had to let Alex set the pace. Finally, about 5 blocks before they got to Olivia's place, Alex walked beside her and took her hand.

"What are you in the mood for, Chinese? Thai? Pizza?" Olivia asked once they got into the elevator. "I barely had time for lunch today; I'm starving."

"Whatever you want is fine, Liv. I'm not that hungry," Alex murmured, still lost in her thoughts.

"Chinese, then. I'll get your favorite so you have to eat some."

"Okay," Alex sighed. "I'm going to take a shower. Is Casey coming over?"

Olivia looked at her watch. "It's just after 8, and her date was at 7, so I told her I'd call between 8 and 8:30. Do you want me to tell her we'll see her tomorrow, or are you okay if she comes? I mean, it's possible that her date was good and she won't want to."

"She can come, if she wants to. I just need a few minutes in the shower to clear my head, and then I think hearing about Casey's date will be a welcome distraction."

Olivia called to order the Chinese food and made some tea, and checked her watch again. 8:20.

Casey answered on the first ring. "Novak."

"How's tall, dark, and handsome? Do you need me to need a warrant?"

"A search warrant? Do we have enough evidence for probable cause?"

"Plenty. And Chinese food on its way, too, in case you didn't get enough to eat. I'll pour you a glass of wine."

"Sounds like enough to me, Detective. I'll hop in a cab and be down at the precinct in 15-20 minutes."

"See you soon, Case."

Casey arrived at the same time as the food, wearing heels and an emerald green cocktail dress. She smiled and kicked off her shoes by the door, flopping down on the couch just as Alex came out of the bedroom wearing pyjamas.

"So, how was Mr. Corporate Attorney?" Alex teased, sitting down in the armchair.

Casey let out a sigh. "You know, it's really too bad I'm allergic to cats," she deadpanned.

Olivia laughed. "That bad, huh?" She brought plates and wine glasses to the table. "Do you want to change into something more comfortable? I can get you some pyjamas if you want."
Casey settled back down into the couch next to Olivia once she had changed, and began attacking her food. "Sorry," she said between mouthfuls of lemon chicken and rice. "I barely had time for an apple and a granola bar at lunch today, so I'm starving."

"You didn't even get a good meal out of your date?" Olivia asked.

Casey shook her head. "He was 15 minutes late, and he didn't make a reservation, so we didn't sit down until almost 7:45. We had drinks at the bar while we were waiting. Then they took their time getting to us, and Craig had to ask about everything on the menu before we ordered our appetizer. We were just about to order the entrees when you called. It would have been fine, if he hadn't been exceedingly dull and kind of a tool."

They laughed. "So what was so awful about him?" Alex asked, pushing the food around on her plate.

"So, for starters, I think he expected me to be impressed by all the money he makes, and I don't think he quite knew what to do with himself when I wasn't very interested in his stock options or his real estate investments. He asked about my retirement package and I told him that on my salary, I'm lucky if I can afford rent in Manhattan, much less extra IRA contributions."

Alex nodded sympathetically. "A lot of Robert's friends were like that. They all wanted to talk about their sports car collections and their high-tech gadgets. One time, I pointed out how many children could be vaccinated and get access to clean water in developing countries with the amount they spent on one vintage car. It killed the mood for a while, and they didn't like me very much after that. I think one of them made a donation to UNICEF, though."

Casey and Olivia rolled their eyes. "Yeah, so after he got done telling me about the types of investments I should be making, he talked for a while about his job defending this herbal supplements company and helping them word their advertisements so consumers can't claim that they're making false statements about the efficacy of their products."

"Sounds fascinating," Olivia said drily.

"Oh, but wait, I haven't even gotten to the best part yet," Casey said, drinking a sip of wine. "So he spent the first, say, half an hour talking about himself and how successful he is and how well his company dupes consumers. Then, he asks me about what I do."

"Let me guess. He wanted to know about the most perverted cases you've tried." Olivia said.

"Well, he asked about the most 'interesting' cases, but yeah, I got the impression that's what he was going for. I told him about one that was really interesting from a legal perspective and not very much from a 'perverted' perspective. Then he started asking me what I thought about false rape reports and how he thinks it's a big problem, and how lots of male students are supposedly being kicked out of college because women make false allegations against them, and it almost happened to one of his frat brothers. He asked me how guys can protect themselves from false allegations, and he didn't seem too satisfied when I told him that they can make sure they always have consent and that their partner isn't drunk or drugged up. He had just started in on whether men should administer breathalyzers if they wanted to get laid when you called."

"I guess I had good timing then," Olivia laughed, shaking her head as she poured more wine for her and Casey. "Is the wine okay, Alex? You haven't touched your glass. It's just a cheap bottle, but I think it tastes pretty good."

Alex frowned. "No, it's okay. It's not that. I'm just… I think I'm just going to have some water."
As Alex went off to the kitchen to get a glass, Casey looked at Olivia and lowered her voice. "Is she doing okay? She seems a bit… off tonight. Like she's trying too hard."

Olivia shrugged and looked over her shoulder to make sure Alex hadn't come back. "She had her first therapy appointment today. It was at 4:30, and I picked her up after 7. Hasn't said a word to me about how it went, but I think it took a lot out of her. I asked her if it was okay if you came over, and she said it was fine."

Casey's phone dinged just as Alex came back with her glass. "Ugh," Casey said, looking at the message. "Can you even read this? I mean, seriously. Can we please all agree that we're on smartphones with unlimited texting now, not keypads, and we can spell properly and use complete sentences when we text?" She leaned over to show the phone to Olivia.

Her face contorted as she tried to decipher the message. "Okay, I think it says, 'Had great time tonight. Sorry cut short. FML. Drink at mine when you're done? LOL. Then there's an emoticon that looks like it's winking. Or maybe wiggling its eyebrows. And I don't have any clue what this other one means, but I'd bet my pension it's vulgar.'" She passed the phone to Alex, who took one look and giggled.

"Yeah, that's definitely vulgar," Alex confirmed. "And I agree with you completely on the texting nonsense. It's really out of control. I got one completely unreadable message from Nick one time, right after he was hired. I told all my people in no uncertain terms that if they were going to text me, the least they could do was make sure I could interpret the message."

"I should text him back." She took back her phone and started typing. "Sorry, we caught a break in the case. It's going to be a long night. Thank you for dinner and sorry again that I had to leave."

"I wonder what he considers a bad date if he thought tonight's was great? Sounds like he just talked about himself and then disputed the seriousness of rape," Alex mused.

"Who knows? Maybe he thought I thought he was fascinating and intellectual. Or maybe he needs to get laid as badly as I do." Casey leaned back into the couch with her glass of wine. "I might have gone home with him, if I hadn't thought he'd be as self-centered in bed as he was at dinner."

Olivia smiled sympathetically. "Well, there are places you can go in the Village where you can purchase items to satisfy your needs."

Casey laughed. "This is 2008, Liv. Online is better. Customer reviews, free shipping, and they come right to your mailbox in discreet packages." She looked at her phone as it dinged again. "'Maybe ull be free l-8-r? later? this week for some fun.' What's 'ull'?"

"I think that's supposed to be 'you'll'," Olivia laughed. "Geez, he's certainly persistent, I'll give him that."

Casey typed. "'I've got court. I think I'll be too busy this week.'"

"Good, non-committal answer." Alex said. She absentmindedly reached for her wine glass and took a sip, and immediately froze.

Casey's phone dinged back immediately. "'Looking forward to it.' I'm not," she groaned. "Take a hint."

Olivia chuckled and caught sight of Alex, sitting bolt upright in the armchair and gripping the glass of wine in her shaking, outstretched hand. Her eyes were glassy, and darted around without seeing what was in front of her, and her breathing was fast and shallow.
"Lex?" Olivia asked gently, moving slowly to Alex's side. "Can you hear me? I'm going to take the wine away," she said, slowly extracting the glass from Alex's hand and placing it on the table. She turned to Casey. "Case, can you go grab me an ice cube from the freezer?"

Olivia sat on the coffee table across from Alex and talked to her softly. "Alex, it's Olivia. You're in my apartment, and you're safe. Can you hear me? Tell me what you see." Casey returned, holding out the ice cube, and Olivia took it and gently pressed it into Alex's hand. "Do you feel that, sweetie? Focus on the cold. 5 things you can see. 4 things you can smell. 3 things you can hear. Focus on the cold and come back to us," she soothed.

Alex dropped the ice cube as her eyes flew open and she gasped for breath, and Olivia quickly reached for the paper bag from the Chinese food and held it to her mouth. "Deep breaths, Lex. Deep breaths."

Alex's breathing slowly returned to normal, and she jumped up and ran to the bathroom, where she lost what little food she had eaten.

"What just happened?" Casey asked quietly.

"PTSD," Olivia said. "I think she had it from the shooting, and she's starting to show symptoms from the rape, too. That's not the first flashback she's had."

"How did you know what to do?"

Olivia looked down and blushed, slightly embarrassed. "I, uh, I had it after Sealview. I saw someone, and it's mostly better now. Part of the therapy was learning how to get myself out of an episode, and the ice cube thing is one technique."

Alex splashed water on her face and came back to sit down, taking a long sip of water from the glass Olivia held out for her.

"You okay, Lex?" Alex nodded and blushed. "What happened, the wine?"

She nodded again. "I think so."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really." She turned to Casey. "But, uh, actually, this brings up something I need to ask you about. I'm supposed to go back to work on Monday, and, uh, I'm not sure... I was wondering if..."

"Alex, relax. I'm sure nobody would blame you if you weren't ready to go back to work yet, but tell me what you need," Casey reassured her. She never imagined seeing Alex Cabot flustered.

"I don't know what your court schedule is like next week, but I was wondering if you'd let me hide out in your office for a bit, maybe. Not the whole time... I'm just nervous about being alone in my fishbowl of an office all day."

"So you need a place to hide out? Sure. I wouldn't mind the company."

Alex breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks. I'm going to ask Liz, too. And of course, if I'm bothering you, or you have meetings, or court, feel free to kick me out. I don't want to overstay my welcome, but I think I might be able to concentrate more easily if I have company."

"I understand." Casey said. "It took me a long time to be comfortable alone in my office after I was attacked, especially at night."
Alex looked surprised. "I didn't know you were attacked. What happened?"

"Rich guy was raping poor immigrant women and giving them huge amounts of cash, but most of them were in the country illegally, so nobody wanted to talk. The one who finally came forward was a Muslim woman from Bosnia, and her brother came and beat me up in my office one night because she was 'dishonored' because everyone knew she wasn't a virgin anymore. Ended up with a broken ankle, a concussion, a few bruised ribs, and an arm in a sling, and spent a week in the hospital."

"It was a few weeks after the Connors trial," Olivia added.

"That's horrible," Alex murmured. "I'm so sorry."

"It's okay now. I was fine after a while, but it took some time. Alex, don't push yourself to go back if you're not ready"

Alex nodded. "I know I'll be okay, and I want to go back to work. Besides, the longer I let Jim think he's in charge…"

Casey laughed. "Yeah, he is kinda starting to strut around over there. You'd better watch it."

After reassuring Casey that Alex didn't mind sharing a bed with Olivia if she stayed on the couch, they settled in for the night.

As soon as the bedroom door was closed, Olivia put her arms around Alex and kissed her gently, then ran her fingers through Alex's hair as she rested her head on Olivia's shoulder. "How'd it go today? Did you like her?" Olivia whispered, comforting Alex.

"It was hard," Alex murmured, tears coming to her eyes again. "I think she missed her calling as a prosecutor. I know I need help, but don't know if I can do it."

"Sure you can, Lex. Taking that first step is the hardest part." She ran her hands up Alex's back. "Are you going back?"

"Tuesday and Friday next week. She wants to make sure I can cope at work."

Olivia kissed Alex's forehead and they crawled into bed and curled up into each other. "That's probably a good idea, sweetie. I know you want to go back, but it's possible it's too soon. Just do what you need to do, Lex, no more, no less."

They lay holding each other and kissing softly for a few long minutes, when Alex tugged gently at the hem of Olivia's shirt.

"Liv, I… I want to feel you," she said hesitantly, looking nervously into Olivia's eyes.

"You want me to take my shirt off? Lex, are you sure you're ready for that already?" Olivia asked.

"No!" Alex blushed furiously. "I don't want to take anything off. I just want to touch your skin under your shirt. Your side or your back. Is that okay?"

Olivia pressed a reassuring kiss to Alex's lips and looked into her eyes. "That sounds nice," she whispered, cooing as she felt Alex's fingertips slip under the side of her shirt very tentatively to touch the sensitive skin on the side of her waist, right above the waistband of her pyjama pants. She kissed Alex again and smiled as Alex's breath hitched and her fingers spread out to hold her more possessively.
"You're soft," Alex murmured between kisses.

"Can I feel you too?" Olivia asked softly, her hand hovering at the same place on Alex's body. Alex nodded slowly, and Olivia watched her face for any sign of discomfort as she placed her hand on Alex's bare side and kissed her again. She felt Alex's skin quiver as she ran her thumb over her stomach. "Is this okay?"

"This is perfect," Alex said, tears coming to her eyes again. "You're so gentle with me."

"Always," Olivia replied, wiping a tear away with her other thumb. "I love you." She kissed Alex again, and felt her breath shorten and nipples tighten as Alex ran her fingers over her stomach and back.

After a few seconds, Alex pulled her hand away and began to cry. Olivia pulled her hand away, too. "What's the matter, sweetie? Did I do something wrong?"

Alex shook her head. "I don't feel anything," she whimpered. "The other day, when we kissed, I was turned on. And right now, I feel nothing."

Olivia took Alex's hand and kissed it, then looked into cloudy blue eyes. "It's okay, sweetie. It's normal to have some trouble. We don't need to be aroused right now, we just need to enjoy touching each other. Were you enjoying it? Did you feel safe?"

Alex nodded. "I always feel safe with you." She paused. "You were getting aroused."

Olivia nodded, blushing. "A little bit," she admitted. "But don't worry, I can control myself," she said, winking. "Do you want to stop?"

Alex looked away and nodded. "I'm sorry, Liv."

Olivia put her finger on Alex's chin and waited until she made eye contact. "Don't be sorry, Lex. You have nothing to be sorry for. I never want you to do anything you're uncomfortable with, and I certainly don't want you to push yourself into doing anything just because you think I want it, okay? Whatever we do, we have to both want it together."

Alex buried her head in Olivia's shoulder and murmured her agreement. "I hate this. I hate feeling like this."

"I know you do, sweetie. But it won't last forever."

"He made me a victim, Liv," Alex murmured, almost inaudibly, in Olivia's ear.

Olivia held her close and ran her fingers through Alex's hair. "I know," she murmured. "But you know what happens to women after they become victims?"

Olivia felt Alex's head shake no.

She pressed a kiss into Alex's temple and whispered in her ear, "They turn into survivors."
On Monday, Alex managed to make it until almost 11 in her office by herself, going over case files that had been left on her desk and checking her email. She'd made sure to arrive at the office early, as much to avoid having to take a crowded elevator as to get in her office and close the door before too many people arrived to stop her and ask how she was doing. Once she had made sure enough people had seen her as to be aware that she was present, she'd closed the blinds to have some privacy, and was pleased that she'd actually been able to get some work done before she decided she needed a change of scenery.

She opted to take the stairs up one flight to Liz's office; there were too many people now, and she dreaded being squished into the elevator. Liz smiled at her when she knocked on the door.

"Hi sweetheart, how are you doing?" Liz asked, motioning for her to sit and closing the door. She looked out the window to make sure nobody was watching, and leaned in to give Alex a brief hug.

Alex forced a smile. "Careful, neither of us wants anyone to hear you calling me sweetheart," she chided. "I'm doing okay so far. Would you believe I've gotten through almost an entire morning without letting anyone ask me that?"

Liz chuckled. "Using the infamous Cabot glare for personal gain, again?"

Alex shook her head. "Just the blinds in my office and my reputation as the Ice Princess." She shifted in her seat. "Liz, I, uh, started seeing someone on Friday."

"A therapist?" Alex nodded. "Good for you, Alex."

"We talked about me coming back to work, and we… decided it might be easier for me if I don't have to be alone in my office all the time. Do you mind if I spend a little time up here this week, just to work on a case file?"

"Of course, Alex. You know, you have plenty of time if you're not ready to come back yet. It might be hard for you to be as stoic as usual in meetings."

"I'm meeting with Langan this afternoon about a plea for Karl Manning. The only thing I'm offering is a pass on the death penalty if he takes 4 consecutive life sentences, and I'm only giving him 5 minutes to think about it. He'll be my test. If I have trouble, I may ask to step back from the courtroom side, just for a few weeks, until I get back to normal."

Liz nodded. "That's fair. I'm glad you're being smart about this."

"Winning the cases and putting the perps in jail is more important than me being able to do it. I know I'll get there eventually, but I don't want to jeopardize any cases with my… emotional instability."

"Sweetheart, now I know you're not yourself. That doesn't sound like my Alex."

Alex smiled weakly. "I'm not myself right now."

Liz cleared some papers off her desk and changed the subject. "How's Olivia? You know you can always come stay with me if her place is getting too small."

Alex tried to keep her expression neutral, but a small smile and a flicker in her eye gave her away. "She's good."
"Just good?" Liz studied Alex's expression carefully. Alex may have thought she was good at concealing her emotions, but Liz had known her since she was born.

"I don't know what I'd be doing without her," Alex confessed quietly, biting her lip. "To be honest, she's the only person I can stand for any length of time right now. No offense."

Liz smiled. "None taken. I love you like a daughter, but we've always butted heads almost as much as you did with your own mom. Olivia clearly cares very deeply about you."

Alex looked away, debating whether or not to admit to the potential relationship.

"She was devastated at your funeral, you know. More than a colleague or even a good friend would have been."

"What are you implying, Liz?"

"I'm just saying that you didn't really have chemistry with Alan, you made it a point to work hard and not date much, and I don't know what happened in Witness Protection, but I suspected Robert wasn't… satisfying you or making you happy before he turned into a rapist. I'm saying that I want you to be with someone who loves you and makes you happy, regardless of who that person is."

Alex folded her arms protectively across her chest. "Do you think anyone will care?" she asked quietly.

"Future tense and not conditional?" Alex nodded slowly. "I think if anyone has earned the right to live life on her own terms, it's you. You're the only one who matters in that equation. And Olivia, of course."

"When did you know?"

"Sweetheart, I've known you since the day you were born. I had a hunch about Olivia after your funeral. But I suspected you were gay when you were in high school."

"How come you never said anything?"

"I did, a few times. I asked if there were any boys you liked, and you said no, so I asked if there were any girls you liked, and you gave me this funny look and told me that you were just too busy with school to think about boys. At 14 and 15, I bought it. By 20, not so much. And then when you brought Alan home I told you and your mother that I thought he wasn't your type. By that point, though, I can only imagine the kind of stuff she'd filled your head with about your biological clock and her… rather negative attitude towards sex. She thought you two were going to get married."

"Oh."

"Alex, if I had pushed it, you would have pulled away from me, and you might have done something stupid or unsafe out of shame or to get back at your mother." Alex nodded. "Olivia will be a lucky woman. But are you sure it's wise to be living with her if you plan on starting a relationship with her? In that small apartment? She doesn't even have a second bedroom."

Alex blushed. "We've been… sharing." Liz raised her eyebrow. "And it's fine. We've talked, and I trust her, and she knows it'll be a while before anything can happen between us."

"Just take your time. There's no rush, you know. Now what do you say I buy you lunch?"
Alex arrived to her meeting with Langan and Karl Manning exactly ten minutes late. When the perps asked for a deal, she liked to keep them waiting, guessing at what she'd offer, or worrying that she'd tell them to go to hell. Even though she had known Langan since they lived down the hall from each other in law school, she knew her waiting game still made him nervous, especially when he knew he had no case.

And between the physical evidence, the videos of the crime found in Manning's apartment, and the 730 exam showing his client to be mentally competent and aware that what he had done was wrong, Langan definitely knew he had no case.

"Mr. Manning," Alex began, hardening her cold façade as she entered the conference room and fixing him with a glare. "The only deal I'm prepared to offer is one that will keep you breathing and thereby spare the People the cost of a trial and years of lengthy appeals. I'm sure the city's jury pool will also appreciate not losing their appetites over hearing about your crimes. You plead guilty to four counts of first degree rape and murder, and serve consecutive life sentences with no chance of parole, and you can avoid a needle in your arm." She looked at her watch in a theatrical gesture. "You have five minutes to consider my offer, starting now; otherwise, we go to trial, I bury you, and I mix the cocktail myself."

Manning tapped his foot on the ground and smiled hungrily at Alex. "Will I get to allocute to my crimes?" he asked, grinning. "I can tell you all about how I made love to my girls, for days, and made it hurt just enough so they'd come, hard, over and over."

"That's enough," Trevor warned. "You're not doing yourself any favors, here."

"I still have 4 minutes and 20 seconds left to think about the deal, and I like to think out loud. Besides, that's what you like, too, Ms. Cabot, isn't it? To be tied up, like my girls, and forced to come until you can't take it any more? Maybe you like it better when it hurts a little, too? Was it four times, or five? It's too bad… you're so much prettier than my other girls, and I'd love to show you a good time…"

Alex gripped her briefcase with one hand and flexed her other into a fist under the table, trying not to show her rage, praying not to have a flashback. She mustered up her iciest voice. "All that time you spent raping her, and you couldn't even take your girlfriend's virginity," she spat. "You're pathetic. How would you expect to please any woman? You're going to be very popular in prison, though, I can assure you that."

"Oh, but Alexandra," Manning licked his lips. "Robert told me all about how to please you. It's too bad you like to put us enthusiastic lovers in jail."

Alex got up and stared at him coldly. "You have four minutes left to discuss the deal with your attorney. After that, I'm going to trial. And if you think it'll take any jury more than 30 seconds to vote for the needle, you're sadly mistaken."

She turned on her heels and exited the conference room, bolting into the adjacent observation room. She put her hands on the edge of the table and bent over, breathing heavily, until she heard the door open behind her.

"Trevor, now's not a good time," she choked out, tears in her eyes, but Trevor just pulled out a chair and handed her a plastic cup full of water, motioning for her to sit, before taking a seat across from her.

"I'm sorry, Alex, I didn't know he was going to do that. I don't know if he ever intended to take the deal or if he just wanted to get you riled up."
"Shouldn't you be in there talking to him about the deal and convincing him that it's the only way for him to stay alive?"

"I already told him that, before you got here. I thought checking up on a friend might be more important than repeating myself ad nauseum to someone who's clearly a psychopath. Between me and you, he deserves a needle."

Alex smiled weakly. "Thanks, but I'm okay."

"Are you?"

Alex pressed her fingers to her right temple to ward off a headache and shook her head slightly. "You listened to the tape," she said quietly.

"Casey had to turn it over in discovery, even though Manning didn't really incriminate himself on it. I didn't have much of a choice," he admitted. "But nobody else in my office heard it and it stayed locked in my desk. And I threw up when I listened to it. I was pissed. A waste of perfectly good Pad Thai on a late night in a deserted office." He smiled at her.

"Sorry about your food," Alex smirked. "I didn't realize you had such a delicate constitution. I'll make sure my perps are more considerate next time."

"Alex, what he did to you…" Alex shook her head to stop him from going any further. "I'm sorry it happened. I still consider you a friend, and I hope you consider me one, too. If you ever need anything…"

Alex nodded and waved him away. "Thank you. Now, go back to your client and give me a minute, please?"

Trevor nodded and went to the door, then turned and held out his arms. "Can I give you a hug?"

Alex shook her head. "I... I really don't want to be touched right now. I'm sorry," she offered. "But I appreciate the sentiment. I really do," she added quickly, noticing the brief look of embarrassment crossing Trevor's face. "Thanks for asking. And in general." she said, smiling genuinely at him as he opened the door. "I mean it."

He nodded and went back into the interrogation room, and a short while later, Alex had dropped off the signed papers for the deal, composed herself in the bathroom, and was heading back towards her office.

Jim stopped her by the elevator. "Al, there's some woman here to see you."

"I don't have any meetings scheduled. Did she say who she is or what she wanted?"

"No. She came in last week and I told her you wouldn't be back until today. She's been here for like, an hour. I gave her some coffee when she said she'd wait for you."

Alex frowned. "Well, send her in, I guess. I'm just going to grab some coffee too."

She went over to the coffee pot, craning her neck to look over at the woman sitting nervously on a bench, her knee bouncing up and down. Jim went over to talk to the woman briefly, and Alex noticed the woman shift slightly away from him before following him to her office.

Alex closed the door behind her and shut the blinds. The woman was slightly shorter than her, and not as thin, but with long blond hair and blue eyes. Her eyes darted around the room as she seemed
to size Alex up, before she sighed and sat down across from Alex.

Alex watched her with curiosity, removing her glasses and taking a slow sip of coffee while she waited for the woman to introduce herself. When no explanation was forthcoming, Alex decided to take the lead. "What can I do for you, Ms…?"

"Nadia," the woman said, her voice shaking. She opened her purse and pulled out the newspaper with Alex's article from the week before. "I saw you in the paper, and I wanted to come to say thank you."

Alex looked confused. "For…?"

"For putting him in jail." Nadia looked up at her and swallowed. "I was engaged to Robert five years ago."

Alex swallowed hard. "Are you here to report a crime? You should really go to the police; I have friends in the Special Victims Unit you can talk to…"

Nadia shook her head. "I went to the police last week, and they told me the statute of limitations had expired. After I left him, I went to live with my parents in Ohio for a while. I couldn't make it in the city on my own. We met in college, and I never really worked once I graduated. I'm a writer, so I writing novels, but that doesn't pay the bills…"

Alex nodded sympathetically. "I knew he was in a long-term relationship before and that it hadn't worked out, but he never really told me anything about you."

"We were in college together. I thought we were in love. He went to work on Wall Street, and I was writing 12, 14 hours a day with him mostly supporting me. We had a healthy, active sex life… until it got boring for him, I guess. After about a year of living together, he started to get more… demanding. And when I objected to certain things he wanted to try, he made me do them anyway."

"He hurt you?" Alex asked, not sure if she really wanted to know the answer.

"Nothing that left a mark. But some of the stuff he wanted to do I wouldn't have… Bondage. S&M-type stuff."

"Nadia, did he rape you?" Alex asked gently.

She looked away and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I consented to sex, but not to… Does it matter?"

Alex got up from her chair as calmly as possible, willing the bile to stay down. "Will you excuse me for just a minute, please?" she asked politely, inching her way out the door.

Once she closed the door behind her, she looked left and right, realizing that she wasn't going to make it all the way to the bathroom. Jim had someone in his office, so she quickly chose left, Jessica Rossi's office, barging in and vomiting into her trashcan.

"I'm so sorry," Alex sputtered to an open-mouthed Jessica as soon as she was sure she was done. "Must have been something I ate at lunch. I'm going to go… take care of this." She took the trash bag out of the can and fled to the bathroom to rinse out her mouth.

Alex went back to her office with two glasses of water. "I'm sorry about that. I thought you might like a glass of water," she offered.
Nadia hurriedly picked up her purse. "No, I'm sorry… I should go. I shouldn't have come here…"

"Sit, please," Alex said. "Tell me why you came to see me," she added gently.

"To say thank you for doing what I wasn't strong enough to do. And I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

Nadia met Alex's eyes for the first time since she'd entered her office. "If I had been stronger, this wouldn't have happened to you."

Alex bit her lip and reached out to take Nadia's hand, but the woman flinched away. It was true that from the moment Nadia had said she had been engaged to Robert, she had felt an inexplicable sense of anger towards the woman. She knew better than to blame the victim, but wasn't it her fault? If she had come forward about the violence she'd suffered…

Alex shook her head forcefully. "No, what happened to me is not your fault, Nadia. It's Robert's fault. And to be honest, I was prosecuting sex crimes in Manhattan five years ago. It would have been very difficult to get a conviction for what you described. Juries already have trouble with the idea that you can consent to sex sometimes but not other times. Unfortunately, I doubt they'd be able to make the distinction between consenting to some kink but not all kink. But I promise you, what happened to you is not your fault, and neither is what happened to me."

Nadia squeezed Alex's hand and then reached into her purse to pull out a photo of a young boy. "He's the reason I left," she said. "I found out I was pregnant and I couldn't stay there anymore. He's 4 and a half."

Alex took the photo and forced a smile, refusing to acknowledge that this could have been her. "You have a beautiful son," she said. "If it's not impertinent of me to ask, does Robert know about him?"

Nadia shook her head. "I didn't want him to sue for custody, so that's why I went to Ohio. I changed my last name so he couldn't find me, but I don't think he looked."

Alex handed her back the photo and folded her hands, a conspiratorial smile forming on her lips. "Robert's in jail for the next 15 years. And your son is entitled to his money."

"No," Nadia said adamantly. "I don't want him to know Charlie exists."

"Robert has at least $50 million in the bank, plus his penthouse, plus God knows how many vintage cars and vacation homes. I could get a summary of his assets from the draft of our prenup. Any judge in the state will sever his paternal rights based on his violent criminal conviction and the fact that he's never been a part of the child's life and will be spending the next 15 years in prison. And you and Charlie would be entitled to a big chunk of that money, as child support and as a trust."

"But when he grew up, he would know what his father did."

Alex smiled. "And you could teach him that his father's actions have no bearing on his own value as a human being. I think the several million dollars you stand to gain could pay for a good therapist to help with that. For him and for you."

Nadia pulled away. "I don't need therapy."

Alex straightened in her chair. "I certainly do." She waited for Nadia's reaction before she continued. "Nadia, I worked Special Victims for almost 4 years. When you came in, you had signs of Rape Trauma Syndrome. Hypervigilance, flinching away from my male colleague, and you told me you
weren't sure about what happened to you. Did you ever see anyone after you left Robert?"

Nadia shook her head. "I was pregnant and unemployed and had no health insurance, so I was on Medicare…"

Alex nodded. "I understand." She pulled a file folder out from her top drawer and flipped through until she found a photocopied sheet of names and phone numbers. "This is a list of psychologists and rape crisis counselors we recommend. Some of them have a sliding scale for their fees. Unfortunately, since we couldn't press charges for any crimes, Victims' Services won't cover anything for you. But if you'd like my help filing a paternity suit and getting child support for Charlie, I'd be happy to file the paperwork for you."

"I can't afford a lawyer…"

"Well, it's a good thing I wouldn't charge you, then."

Alex opened the door to her office as Nadia got up, and escorted her out to the elevator. She held out her hand, and Nadia took it, squeezing tentatively and pulling Alex into a hug before she had time to realize what was happening.

"Thank you," Nadia whispered. "And I'm so sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for," Alex said, shaking slightly from the unexpected physical contact. "Just think about what I said. And you have my card and my phone number if you need anything."
"I'm angry. I know she's a victim, and it's not her fault, but if she had done something five years ago... I would have been the prosecutor. It would've been my case."

"And even if you hadn't won the case, you would have known to avoid Robert," Caroline finished for her. Alex nodded. "Do you blame her for what happened to you?"

"I just don't understand why someone wouldn't want to report a crime. We can't get justice for people if they don't report what happened."

"And getting justice is important to you?"

"When I can't put someone in jail and he goes on to have other victims, I blame myself."

"Do you think you would have been able to put him in jail five years ago, based on what she told you?"

Alex thought for a minute. "Probably not," she admitted. "She basically admitted he never left a mark, so it would have been he said she said. The fact that she stayed with him for two years after the abuse started would hurt her case. She would have been shaky on the stand if it even got past a grand jury, and the jury probably would have thought she was just after his money, even though that clearly wasn't true. That's what he would have argued, anyway. He couldn't make that argument with me, since I have a lot more money than he does, and I was never dependent on him."

"What were you thinking about when you were talking to her?" Caroline asked.

"That it's been five years and she's... broken. I don't want to become that. And I was thinking that it could have been so much worse for me if I hadn't left right away. The things he did to her... She didn't tell me all of it, but I heard enough to know that I didn't get it nearly as bad as I could have. These guys always escalate. She made me think that what he did to me was just him getting started."

"And how did you feel about that?"

"I had nightmares both nights. That he blindfolded and gagged me too, and used... other things on me. I woke Olivia up crying both nights."

"What did she do?"

"She made me some tea and sat with me until I felt okay to be touched, and then she held me until I fell asleep. But I worry... I'm not being fair to her, expecting her to do all this for me this early in our relationship. I'm relying on her too much."

"Do you know how she feels about supporting you? Do you think she thinks it's not fair?"

Alex shook her head. "She would never say if she did... She's too kind for that. But I want to give her things and I don't know if I'm ever going to be ready."

"What kinds of things?" Alex blushed and looked away. "Sexual things? Do you think that's what she wants from you?"

"It's not the only thing... I mean, I know she loves me. I think I've known that for years. I'm not even sure she's ready for sex, either. She told me she was assaulted on the job not too long ago and has
had a few… failed attempts since. But I want sex, for the first time in my life. I'm 33 and I've never felt like this before. And I don't know if it's about taking back control, or about feeling like her touching me would… override the disgust I feel when I think about him touching me. Or maybe I've just read too many lesbian romance novels and I feel like I finally have an opportunity for it to be good…" Alex trailed off.

"So, having good sex with Olivia would erase what happened to you?"

Alex bit her lip. "No, it wouldn't," she said, finally.

"It's pretty normal to want sex, no matter how old you are. And even though rape is a sexual violation, it's very different from having sex for pleasure with someone you have feelings for."

Caroline let Alex think for a moment. "What do you mean when you say you've 'never felt like this before'? Love? Lust? Sexual desire? Feeling horny?"

Alex choked on a sip of her water as the woman who looked like somebody's grandma said the word, but Caroline's face remained completely serious.

"E. All of the above?" Alex asked, looking down at her hands in her lap. "I mean, I always went into sex expecting it to be satisfying and was always disappointed. With my first boyfriend, I just figured it was lack of experience and being shy. I expected it to hurt a little at the beginning, but I didn't expect it to keep hurting. I was basically celibate for five years after we broke up, and it never bothered me. I never went looking for sex, I almost never initiated sex - that was one of the main reasons I broke up with my first boyfriend - I was pretty indifferent."

"And what about now?" Caroline asked.

"Now… I want Olivia to touch me all the time. I imagine her doing things to me, and I think about me doing things to her… I've never thought that way, sexually, about anyone before. And I'm afraid that I won't be able to for a long time."

Caroline nodded, holding her chin with her thumb and forefinger, allowing Alex a minute to gather her thoughts. "Alex, do you believe you're allowed to have good sex? To want good sex?"

"What do you mean?" Alex replied immediately. "I'm an adult. Of course I'm allowed to..."

Caroline shook her head. "That's not what I asked, Alex," she pushed. "Are you entitled to have good sex? Good sex with another woman?"

Alex bit her lip again, and looked past the doctor at a spot on the wall, contemplating. "Lots of people - lots of women don't," she said, finally, quietly, before she swallowed.

"So you can't, or you shouldn't, enjoy it?" Caroline clarified. "Because some women don't, or because of what happened to you?"

Alex looked down at her folded hands for a long minute, thinking.

"That woman I saw yesterday - she flinched when anyone got near her five years later. What if that happens to me?"

"Well, for starters, you're acknowledging what happened to you and that you need help, which counts for a lot. I'm sure after 4 years in Special Victims I don't have to tell you that women who get counseling do a lot better than those who don't," Caroline began. "Before the next time we meet, I'd like you to journal on whether you deserve to have good sex, and what that means."
Alex nodded, and jotted the question down in her planner.

"What worries you most right now? How long it's going to take you to be ready for sex? Having difficulty with becoming aroused or climaxing? Experiencing pain?"

Alex looked panicked for a minute. "Do you think it'll still hurt?" she asked. "I was mostly worried about being ready… not wanting to think about him when it finally happens, and being able to… enjoy myself. But oh, God, it never occurred to me that it might still hurt."

"Alex, you mentioned last time that Dr. Logan thought you might have vaginismus. I'm sure she told you that latent sexuality can be one of the factors and that rape can aggrivate it, but that doesn't necessarily mean that 'switching teams,' so to speak, is the cure. It's completely treatable, but it'll take some work. I've helped lots of women with this issue, and I'm sure you can overcome it." Caroline smiled at her reassuringly. "Now, you told me about always experiencing some pain during sex."

Alex nodded. "Always. Like… I was too tight. At first I thought it would go away with time, but it never did. Sometimes I also wasn't aroused enough, but that wasn't always a problem."

"That sounds about right. Physical trauma, like being shot, can make it worse too. Then you had some injuries during the rape, and had to get stitches, which I imagine was rather painful."

Alex winced at the memory. "The numbing spray didn't really work."

"What caused Dr. Logan to mention vaginismus to you?"

"She had to do a transvaginal ultrasound before I terminated my pregnancy. I practically jumped off the table when she tried to insert it. She told me that that's what my reaction was called. I didn't want to wait, so Olivia held my hand while she did it and I tried to relax, but it was very painful. She… had to force it in."

"Was she able to perform a pelvic exam during the rape kit?"

Alex nodded. "Yes, and that's when I got the stitches. It hurt, but I was injured from the rape, so I assumed the pain was from that and not the exam."

"So your reaction got worse. Have you tried any penetration since?"

Alex blushed. "I tried the tip of my finger in the shower the other day. I couldn't… it hurt. I've never hurt myself before. And I can't put tampons in anymore. It's really frustrating."

"Okay, so you went from just pain to no penetration at all, then." She pulled out a packet of papers with anatomical diagrams from a folder on her table and handed it to Alex, pointing something out with her pen. "This is the muscle that contracts involuntarily and causes you to experience pain. Sometimes women experience pain one time, because they aren't aroused enough, or they have an infection, and then the pain gets worse until they can't have intercourse at all. Usually, the pain and the muscle contractions are a psychological response, and there's no physical problem. Fortunately, Dr. Logan is knowledgeable about the condition, but some doctors send their patients to get unnecessary surgery that does absolutely nothing to resolve the issue."

Alex grimaced.

She flipped to another page in the packet. "This is the product I recommend to my patients with vaginismus. All of the pages I'm giving you are copied from the first book, and it works very well. The first step is to learn about your anatomy and understand what's happening in your body, to help alleviate your fear of pain. Then, there are some relaxing and touching exercises you can do alone or
with Olivia. They overlap a lot with the exercises we use to help rape victims experience sexual pleasure again, so they'll help you work on both. And finally, there's a set of five vaginal dilators that you can use progressively to get comfortable with penetration. It usually takes women 8-12 weeks to go through the program, but your situation may be a bit more complicated since you're recovering from the rape at the same time, and we don't want to rush things. But having a supportive partner will be helpful."

Alex put the packet in her briefcase. "I think I saw that site when I was doing research. But I googled 'vaginismus in lesbians' and didn't come up with a lot of results. I mostly found sites that said it wasn't a problem for lesbians because they don't have penetrative sex."

Caroline sighed. "Unfortunately, psychology and gynecology are still male-dominated fields, and it's hard to get female sexual dysfunction taken seriously. But I don't personally subscribe to the notion that the only reason a woman should want to avoid pain during penetration should be in order to have sex with a man. Aside from tampons and pelvic exams, many women enjoy penetration with fingers or toys, either by themselves or with a partner. Lesbian sex isn't penetrative by default, but it certainly can be. It's not up to me to evaluate a woman's reasons for seeking treatment."

Alex nodded and smiled. "That annoyed me, too. We haven't really gotten past Freud in a lot of ways, have we?"

"To hear some of my colleagues talk, not really. Don't even get me started on 'but the female orgasm is just an unnecessary evolutionary byproduct of ejaculation.' But that's my feminist rant for the day. Can I give you some more homework?"

Alex nodded. "Sure. I need to feel like I'm making progress." She pulled out her Moleskein agenda and started getting ready to take notes.

"You are, already. You're able to articulate what happened to you and some of your concerns about the recovery process. You've done fine at work despite some setbacks and some nervousness, which are completely normal. I know you have some fears about your relationship and your sexuality, but you're smart and you seem to have a healthy attitude about confronting them. We have a lot of work to do, but you're a lot better off than a lot of women who come to my office."

"Ahead of the curve. That's moderately reassuring."

"It doesn't mean you won't have setbacks later, but it's a good start. Now, there are a few things you can do before we meet again, aside from ordering the kit. The first is to get a handheld mirror, and spend some time in the bathroom or the bedroom, alone, familiarizing yourself with your anatomy. As women, our anatomy isn't very accessible or visible to us, and I think a lot of women could use a refresher. Don't try to masturbate or excite yourself, just look.

"The second thing you can try is some Kegel exercises. I know it probably seems counterintuitive to strengthen the muscles that are causing you pain, but it will help you control and relax them later. Don't overdo it; just a few a day. If you think you're up for it, you can get some lubricant and try penetrating yourself with a cotton swab. If you can't, don't worry about it - we'll get to it later. But if it works, you can try with the tip of your pinky finger.

"The last thing is a sheet of exercises for Sensate Focusing. You can read through all of them, but only try the first one for now. You can try it by yourself, and with Olivia if she's willing, and it basically involves each of you taking turns touching the other gently, through your clothes, for 15 minutes on each side, and communicating what feels good. In the first exercise, you avoid touching the breasts and genitals - that'll come later - and of course you stop if either one of you becomes uncomfortable. I always recommend establishing some safe words first, and talking about how you
both feel afterwards. The purpose of the exercise isn't to excite, it's to become comfortable with intimate touch. You may not get through the whole 15 minutes the first time you try it, and that's okay; you can work up to it over a few weeks. There's no rush."

Alex nodded. "Okay. I think I can handle all of that."

"It's important not to push yourself too hard with any of these exercises. Don't do anything that feels uncomfortable to you, or you'll set yourself back. And if you have any difficulties, we'll talk about them on Friday."

It was still light out when Alex left the office, and she decided to walk rather than calling Olivia to pick her up so she could collect her thoughts and figure out what she was going to say. The more difficult, emotional part of the session had come first, when she had talked about the details that haunted her and Karl Manning's taunts from the interview room. Afterwards, when they talked about Olivia, and the future, at least she was able to feel like she was taking back control, like she would eventually be okay. Having a plan of attack reassured her.

Walking the twenty blocks back to Olivia's apartment would take thirty minutes if she walked slowly, weaving away from people passing her on the crowded Manhattan sidewalks. Rush hour was almost over, so Alex was grateful that the sidewalks contained enough people to make her feel safe, but not so many that she couldn't avoid them getting too close. After a few minutes of walking, though, she realized that all of her energy was focused on evaluating potential threats, and scooting away from passersby unaware of her need for personal space, instead of processing her thoughts from her session.

A few blocks from Olivia's apartment, she ducked into a pharmacy she never frequented to buy a small bottle of the lube she'd been instructed to get, figuring she'd lose her nerve if she didn't do it right away. Eyeing a display near the register, she picked up a keyring pepperspray bottle and added it to her purchase. Alex hadn't carried a weapon of any kind since she had returned to New York, where concealed carry was illegal, but maybe the pepperspray would help her feel safe.

She tucked the small pharmacy bag into her purse before taking the elevator up to Olivia's apartment.

"Hi, sweetie," Olivia greeted her as she dropped her briefcase to the floor with a thud and took off her heels. Olivia kept her distance, waiting to see if Alex would want comfort or time alone after her appointment.

"Hi, Liv," Alex sighed, grateful that Olivia wasn't stuck at work, but at the same time apprehensive about the conversation they needed to have.

"Did you take a cab home? I was waiting to come meet you." Alex pressed herself into Olivia's body and felt relief when strong arms wrapped tightly around her.

"I walked," she murmured into Olivia. "Wanted time to think about things."

"Did you get enough time?"

"No, too many people. I was nervous." Alex sniffled. She hadn't felt like crying before, but now that she felt safe again, the floodgates started to open. She pushed her tears down.

"Oh, sweetie," Olivia soothed. "Next time, I'll walk with you and keep you safe, I promise. Do you want to shower and relax while I go pick up some dinner?"

They had finished the Indian food Olivia had gone to pick up and Alex, who had been relatively withdrawn since returning home, had inched a bit closer to Olivia on the couch.
"I have homework," she blurted out, blushing when she realized that she had meant to bring it up more delicately than that.

Olivia turned to face her and raised an eyebrow. "For therapy?" she asked, and Alex nodded. "You know you don't have to talk about what happens there if you don't want to, Lex."

"I know, but this… it involves you. If you're willing, that is. I don't want to… put pressure on you. On us." Olivia reached out to take the flustered woman's hand.

"Sweetie, there's no pressure. I'll do whatever I can to help you. Why don't you tell me what it is, and we'll talk about it."

"Caroline wants me…us… to do some exercises. Touching exercises." She jumped up and opened her briefcase, rifling through for the right page, which she handed over. She bit her lip as Olivia read the instructions.

"Sweetie, are you sure you're ready for this?"

"No," Alex admitted quietly. "But I want to try. Maybe we won't get through the whole thing the first time, but I want to be able to have you touch me."

Olivia nodded and leaned over to kiss Alex on the cheek.

"Are you ready for this, Liv?" Alex asked gently. "I know you've had trouble with physical contact, too, and I don't want to push you into something you're not ready for either."

Olivia's chin quivered. "I can't promise I'll get through the whole thing either, but I want to try, too."

Alex lay down on her stomach in the middle of the bed, and took a deep breath as Olivia set the timer for 15 minutes and took her hand. Both of them had agreed to wear long pants and long sleeves for the first time, aware that the exercise was to be repeated over the course of several weeks or months with progressively less clothing and more intimate touching.

"Okay, so just to be clear on the instructions, I'm going to touch you in different ways, and you're going to tell me if it feels good, okay, or not so good, or if you want my touch to be harder or softer. You tell me 'wait' if you want to take a break, and 'stop' if you want me to stop, at any point. Don't force yourself to continue if something is uncomfortable. For now, we stay away from breasts and genitals. I think butt, too? And I probably won't go higher than about halfway up your inner thighs. Does that work?"

Alex nodded. "Yes. And I think we should keep our eyes open, too, and look at each other. It might help us both stay in the moment."

Olivia agreed. "Are you ready? Do you feel safe?" Alex nodded on both counts, and Olivia kissed her forehead and set the timer to begin.

She started by taking each of Alex's hands and gently massaging her fingers and wrists, before rubbing and caressing different spots on each arm. The inside of her elbow, her bicep. Even though it wasn't technically allowed, she pressed a kiss to Alex's right shoulder blade where she knew there was a scar she hadn't yet seen, and massaged the other shoulder and her neck before rubbing her hands down Alex's back.

Alex kept her eyes trained on Olivia, breathing deeply and willing herself to stay focused on the gentle touches and caresses. Nobody had ever touched her like that before, and as unaccustomed as she was to expressing her appreciation for physical pleasure, she made a concerted effort to let Olivia
know which of her soft, deliberate touches she liked most with the occasional 'that feels nice' or an 'ooh.' She breathed steadily, this time relieved after only a brief flash of panic when she felt a twinge of arousal in her abdomen.

She only had to ask Olivia to 'wait' for a moment during the second part, lying on her back, when Olivia ran her fingers gently down Alex's neck to her collarbone - Robert had often touched or kissed her neck - but she closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and refocused on Olivia. Olivia, who made her feel so safe and would never hurt her. When the timer went off for a second time, she pulled Olivia down on top of her and wrapped her arms around her, kissing her gently.

"You were right," she whispered, tears in her eyes. "He wasn't here. That was nothing like anything Robert did to me. Thank you for doing that with me. I love you."

They cuddled for a few minutes before Alex moved Olivia into position, repeating the instructions and asking if she was ready.

Alex's touch was much more tentative and delicate than Olivia's as she followed the same basic pattern of movements Olivia had used. Never having touched another woman's body before, she kept bringing her eyes to Olivia's for reassurance that she was doing the right thing. Olivia, sensing her discomfort and wanting to put her at ease, smiled at her and murmured, "You're doing great, sweetie."

It wasn't until Olivia turned over that Alex began to notice her tense up as she hit certain spots, potentially the more sensitive ones, though Alex couldn't be sure. She slowed her movements and pulled her hands away to touch Olivia's face.

"Are you sure you're okay, Liv? I can stop if you want me to. Don't push yourself for me, remember." Alex asked softly, but Olivia took a deep breath and reassured her that she could keep going.

She pressed a tender kiss to Olivia's forehead and watched her eyes for permission to start again, and it wasn't until she swiped her fingers gently across Olivia's stomach muscles that she tensed up, tears escaping her eyes as she cried out, "Wait. Stop. No."

Alex withdrew her hands, and before she could react, Olivia had clamored off the bed and into the bathroom, locking the door. Alex was at a loss; she had anticipated her own poor reaction, but not Olivia's.

She waited a few minutes before she went to knock on the bathroom door. "Liv? Can I come in?" She strained to hear crying, but Olivia didn't respond. "Liv? How many times have you seen me cry in the past few weeks? Will you at least let me in so I can sit with you? You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

The lock clicked, and Alex opened the door to find Olivia on the floor, leaning back against the washing machine with her head in her hands, crying. Sitting down next to her, she crossed her legs and pulled Olivia down into her lap, stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort like Olivia had done so many times for her.

"I thought that if you could do that, I could," Olivia offered by way of explanation after a few minutes. "It's been 9 fucking months. Almost 10. And it wasn't nearly as bad as what —"

Alex cut her off. "As what happened to me? Let's not play 'Who's More Broken,' Liv, because we'll both lose. You know you can't compare what happened to us, and you'd be the first to tell a victim that she can't discount what happened to her because someone else may have gotten it 'worse'. As for
me, I told you that nobody's ever touched me like you just did. I was a clean slate, and I also talked
through what might happen and prepared for it in therapy. But that's not true for you, is it? I triggered
something."

"It wasn't just the assault," Olivia admitted quietly after a few minutes. "It was constant strip
searches, cavity searches, pat-downs. And they're supposed to be done by women, but they hardly
ever were. Not to mention I had no privacy. I couldn't even pee or shower without an audience."

"How long?"

"Just under 3 weeks. It was every day, Lex."

"Are you still seeing someone?"

Olivia shook her head. "I stopped a while ago. Around the time I started seeing Jenna."

"Will you go back? Maybe even come to a session with me sometime?"

Olivia shrugged.

Alex took a deep breath. "Look, Liv, I know I have a lot of work to do in therapy and that I need
help preparing for this aspect of our relationship. I also know that it's probably going to get a lot
harder before it gets easier, and I'm going to need all the love and support you can give me. And I
promise to give you the same thing, as much as I can, but we're both going to need some guidance in
how to help each other, I think."

Olivia nodded. "I'll make an appointment for when we get back from Portland."

Olivia got up off the floor and pulled Alex up into an embrace. "Thank you," she whispered. "For
not running away. For not letting me run away. I love you."

"Thank you for letting me in. For trusting me. And for doing the exercises with me," Alex replied. "I
love you, too."

They laid down on the bed, wrapped up in each other, Alex still soothing Olivia when her body
shook with tears.
Olivia knocked on Alex’s door on Thursday afternoon, and was surprised to get no answer despite the note on the whiteboard saying she was in.

After she knocked twice and had stood there for a few minutes, Jim poked his head out of his office. "Uh, I don't think she wants visitors right now," he explained. "But I'm sure if you leave a message with her assistant, she'll call you."

"You must be Jim Steele," Olivia said, recognizing the lanky lawyer from Alex's descriptions. "Did something happen? I'm a friend of Alex's. Detective Olivia Benson, SVU." She held out her hand to shake.

Jim shrugged his shoulders. "Just a bit of a scene a little while ago. She freaked out at Nick Potter for no reason."

"What do you mean she 'freaked out'?' Olivia asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't see the whole thing. She was in the kitchenette getting some coffee and he went to give her some paperwork. All of a sudden we hear the coffee pot shatter and she's shaking and repeating 'No' over and over. I tried to get her attention and she pushed me away. It was like she couldn't see me at all."

"She probably couldn't," Olivia commented. "You know she has PTSD, right? Did Nick sneak up on her?"

"I don't know. But that's no excuse —"

"It's not an excuse, Jim, it's an involuntary reaction. She's had it since she got shot, and she's working on it, but it doesn't go away overnight."

"Wasn't that like four years ago? And she's been back for a year and it's certainly never happened before."

"What's your point? It's not on a timeline, and it can be exacerbated by other traumatic events. Believe me, she didn't want to have an episode at work. Now do me a favor, and just tell your people to make sure they don't sneak up on her, and that they don't touch her unless she says it's okay. Make noise when they walk towards her, stay in her line of vision, call her name, whatever. I don't think she knows all her triggers, but it would be nice if you could all make an effort to avoid the ones she does know about."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Olivia waivered her hand. "Just make sure Nick knows it's not his fault and she didn't mean it, okay? I'm going to see if she'll let me in."

"She's been locked in there with the blinds drawn for more than an hour."

"I'll handle it, Jim. Thanks." Olivia went back to Alex's door and knocked gently. "Lex? It's Olivia. Can I come in? Jim told me what happened. Please?"

After a minute, the lock clicked, and Olivia slipped in and closed and locked it behind her. The lights were off, and Alex was curled up in a ball on the leather couch in the corner, still wearing cream
pants with huge coffee stains on the legs. Olivia went to kneel in front of her.

"You okay, Lex? Want to tell me what happened?" Olivia asked, reaching out and waiting for permission to touch Alex's tear-stained face.

"I thought Jim told you," she said bitterly. "I'm completely humiliated."

"No, you're not, sweetie. They'll forget about it soon enough. But I want to hear it from you."

"I didn't hear him coming. I was holding the coffee pot, and then his hand was on my back, and I froze. I don't know how long it lasted, but there was a group of people standing around, and the next thing I know, I'm in here with the door closed, crying."

"I told Jim to make sure nobody sneaks up on you or touches you. That it was PTSD."

"You did what?"

"I thought they knew. You should have told them, Lex. I know it's none of their business, but they need to know what not to do around you."

"Liv, if anyone - especially Jim - starts questioning my ability to do my job —"

"Lex, I know that as well as anyone. But Liz and Branch already know what happened, and I'm sure they'll understand as long as you're taking steps to recover. Pretending that it doesn't affect you at work isn't the solution." Alex nodded. "Do you have something to change into?"

Alex went to her closet and got out the spare suit she kept for unexpected court days, and went into her small, private bathroom to change and wash her face.

"Need a hug?" Alex went to Olivia and let her hold her for a few moments, relaxing as she breathed in Olivia's scent and felt the strong hands on her back.

"So, this wasn't actually a social call," Olivia said as Alex finally sighed and sat back down at her desk, looking a little refreshed. She took out the file folder she had brought and sat down in one of the chairs across from Alex's desk. "I had to drop some DD-5s off with Casey, and I thought I'd take the opportunity to show you some interesting things I found out when I was bored this morning."

She opened the file and slid it across to Alex. "I was thinking about Portland and how Sarah said in one of her emails that her rapist was never punished by the school and that his father, who worked for the governor, was trying to get some kind of special treatment for him. So I did some digging.

"First, I called a contact with the Portland PD from when I was undercover, and told them I was working a serial and asked him to pull the police report. I have your statement, and her statement, and the results from the rape kit, but there were fluids and hairs that were never tested."

"Fluids? They said there weren't any..." Alex said, flipping through the report. She recognized her own statement and signature as Kristen Walker, and read through Sarah's statement, which she had never read. She'd been giving her own at the same time.

Olivia flipped to the next page. "She named Keating in her statement, and there was plenty of evidence to get warrants and go to trial, so I looked up his father. Apparently, Ray Keating is a senior advisor to the Governor of Oregon and widely expected to be the next Senator. He's made lots of appearances with the Portland DA and Police Commissioner, and extensive donations to their election campaigns, as well. This was all on the public record, in the campaign documents they filed with the Campaign Finance Commission."
"So then - and this is where things really get interesting - I pulled the school's public financial records, and three days after the rape, there's a $20,000 donation from Ray Keating to the financial aid fund. I looked at the four years that Chris Keating has been a student there, and there are twelve other $20,000 donations, plus a donation of $100,000 in May 2006. I looked up their school newsletter for that month online, and it turns out that the Chief Fundraising Executive took an 'early retirement' at the end of that year, after you had already left."

"So there were other girls, and Keating's dad is paying off the school so they don't kick him out and the DA's office so they don't take the claims seriously. And the person who figured it out got fired and probably signed a non-disclosure agreement." Alex concluded.

"I think so. Weren't you going to forward the file to Harvard so they'd revoke his acceptance? Maybe a call from the Dean threatening to kick him out if charges were filed would entice Daddy Dearest to make another donation to the DA."

"You're thinking we can catch him in the act?"

"I'm thinking you could even get him on tape."

"Massachusetts and Oregon are both two-party consent states for recorded conversations, which means that we couldn't just ask the Dean to record the conversation; we'd need a wiretapping warrant for Ray Keating's phone. Normally, that would fall under the jurisdiction of the Portland DA, who is obviously not going to implicate himself by seeking a warrant. These records would be more than enough probable cause for any private citizen, but for an advisor to the governor, it'll reek politics…"

"What happens if the Feds take it over?" Olivia asked.

"We'll lose our rape case. I'm a material witness to the rape, and you're just a private citizen with no jurisdiction. If the Feds go after the corruption charges before charges have been filed for the rape, we can forget about it. If you're right, the publicity would prevent Chris from getting a fair trial, and he'd be able to paint himself as a victim of his father's political ambitions. And that's assuming evidence doesn't disappear in the meantime."

"So what do we do, then, nothing?"

Alex's face twitched into a smile. "We sit on it. After the rape charges are filed, I'm going to get in touch with Abbie Carmichael, who's the Assistant US Attorney in charge of investigating Title IX and Clery Act violations. She'll decide whether there are any federal criminal charges to pursue against the school for failing to take action against a known rapist. If there are other girls, it'll launch a lawsuit and a federal investigation, and that's without the potential corruption charges."

"What if you call Abbie now, tell her what we've got on the school, and ask her to let us look into it in an official capacity while we're there? Then, if we go talk to the Finance Executive or find other girls, the evidence will be usable." Olivia proposed.

"I don't like the idea of investigating while I'm a witness, but I'll see what I can do. If this really is bigger than just Sarah, he'd be stupid not to take a deal."

"Doesn't hurt to try. I've got to get back before they send out a search party. Are you going to be okay?"

Alex smiled faintly and nodded. "I think so."
Olivia went over to kiss Alex gently, then headed to the door.

"Can you leave it open, and go ask Nick to come in here, please? He's right on the other side of Jim's office."

Olivia nodded. "Call me if you need anything, sweetie."

"Thanks, Liv."

—

"What's all this?" Olivia asked, surprised, as she entered the apartment just after 7.

"I made dinner," Alex explained. "I wanted to do something nice for you after everything you've done for me. I'm not ready to go out on a date yet, but I thought…"

"What about bells? Don't you have rehearsal tonight?"

Alex shook her head. "Canceled. There's some special service tonight for Maundy Thursday, and we're not ringing until Sunday for Easter."

"Who's Maundy, and why is this his Thursday?"

Alex shrugged. "I didn't ask."

"Well, this is perfect," Olivia said, leaning in to kiss Alex on the mouth. "Thank you."

"I pulled out a bottle of wine if you want to open it," Alex pointed out. "Just a tiny bit for me. I'm not sure if I can…"

"Okay. We don't have to have wine if you don't want to."

"Caroline said that when I figure out what some of my triggers are, I should try to expose myself to them in safe situations, and eventually they'll lose their effect. I called her today after the Nick incident." Alex explained.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

They had just settled in to cuddle on the couch after dinner when Olivia's phone rang.

"I think you better come with me, Lex," Olivia said grimly as she hung up the phone and went to put on her badge and gun. "We've got a vic up at Mercy. Name's Kelly Simmons. Brought in by her 16 year old daughter, Laura."

They rode to the hospital in silence, and when they got to the front desk, Laura ran toward them.

"Olivia! Alex! Are you here about my mom? They took her up to surgery, but the doctors won't tell me what happened or let me see her."

Olivia flashed her badge at the nurse. "I'm here about your mom, sweetie. Why don't you sit with Alex for a few minutes while I find my partner and we'll see if we can find out how your mom's doing?"

"Liv!" she heard Elliot call her as she turned the corner. "Our vic just got out of surgery. Her husband's the perp. Did a real number on her. She's still critical, and I doubt we'll get anything out of her tonight. Munch and Fin went to pick him up. Neighbors heard fighting and called 911, then saw
him leave with a bloody shirt."

"Alex came with me. She knows the vic's daughter from her church, and I met the girl last week. I don't think she has any family around. Has CPS been called?"

Elliot nodded. "Casey's calling them and coming down here. She'll have to go to a facility overnight."

"That's too bad. Poor thing. Mom's in the hospital, dad's in jail, and she goes to an emergency foster care placement. I'm going to check with the doctor to see if we can at least get her in to see Mom."

"I'm going to bring the rape kit to Melinda. Let me know if anything changes." Elliot said.

Olivia nodded and went back to the waiting room, where Laura, in her bloody shirt, was clinging to Alex and shaking with tears.

"Sweetie," she soothed, kneeling down in front of the girl. "I can take you to see your mom now. She's still asleep, and she looks pretty beat up, but we can go in for a few minutes."

"Is she going to be okay?" Laura choked out.

"They don't know yet. It's pretty serious. She's in critical condition, but they're doing everything they can."

"My dad did it, didn't he?"

Olivia bit her lip. As soon as she found out her father had been picked up, she'd know the truth. "That's what the neighbors said. The police are picking him up for questioning, but we're not sure what happened yet. We might not know until your mom wakes up and can tell us." If she wakes up.

Olivia stood up and held out her hand, and she and Alex both held up Laura as they walked toward the ICU.

"Only one person in there at a time!" the nurse admonished, but Olivia flashed her badge.

"She's in shock. Unless you want to have another patient tonight, or for her to vomit on the one you've already got, I suggest you let them in together," Alex fired back. "It will only be a minute."

Olivia brought Laura to a chair by her mother's bed and helped her sit down. "She's going to be okay, right? She has to be okay."

Olivia squeezed her hand. "I'm going to see if the nurse can get you a scrub shirt so you can get cleaned up, okay? Can I leave you hear for a minute?"

She went out to the hallway and met Alex, Casey, and a woman she assumed to be a social worker.

"If she doesn't have any family that can take her in on such short notice, I'm obligated to put her in a facility," the woman was saying.

"I know she has an aunt, but I'll have to ask her where she lives," Alex admitted. She hated the idea of sending the poor girl to be alone in a dorm overnight.

"What if a friend's family is willing to take her for a night or two, and we get the father to award temporary guardianship? She can stay with someone she knows until her mom wakes up, and we convince him by telling him that once she's in foster care, they'd have to fight to get her back." Olivia proposed.
The social worker frowned, but nodded. "I just need to know as soon as possible. I can't be waiting around all night for her. She should already be in bed."

Alex shot her a look. "She's just been through something very traumatic, and she's not sure if her mother is going to live or if her father is responsible. You could try having a little compassion. And I'll serve as her guardian ad litem, but that won't work until at least tomorrow."

"Case, can you call Elliot to see if he can work on the dad, and I'll ask her if there's someone she'd like to stay with?" Olivia went back into the hospital room with a new shirt and a damp washcloth for getting the blood off.

"Laura," Olivia began gently. "There's a social worker here, and legally, we're supposed to send you to stay in a state home until your mom gets out of the hospital or your dad gets out of jail."

Laura started to cry again. "I don't want to leave her. What if she dies?"

"Sweetie, you can't stay here overnight, but I promise to let you know if her condition changes. Now, my partner is going to try to get your dad to agree to let you stay at a friend's house. If he signs a paper, you could stay with someone you know rather than be alone, and I think it would be better for you. Is there someone we can call?"

"Can't I stay with you and Alex again, so I can come right back to the hospital tomorrow?"

Olivia shook her head. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but you can't. For one thing, we're both back at work now, and I'm working on your mom's case. I wouldn't legally be allowed to investigate what happened if you were staying with me. And for another thing, Alex moved all of her belongings out of her old apartment, and they're all stacked up in my little office you stayed in while she's waiting to move back into her own place. So there's no space."

Laura bit her lip and let out another sob. "Can I call my friend Elena? Her mom might let me stay."

"I think maybe Alex should call and explain the situation. Elena's mom would have to come down and sign some legal papers, and your dad has to agree. If he doesn't agree, unfortunately there's nothing we can do until your mom wakes up or you can get a court-appointed guardian, and you'll have to go with the social worker."

Elliot arrived with the notarized transfer of custody around the same time as Nicole and Elena, and the two girls immediately embraced, holding each other tight. "Bastard's lawyered up already, Casey. Hired Langan, too. Munch was in there with him, but they brought him to the tombs when he wouldn't talk."

Casey nodded. "I'll get him on the docket for arraignment first thing in the morning, but I'm in court for a hearing in the afternoon. With the extend of her injuries, we should be able to get an indictment for attempted murder."

Alex, her shirt stained with blood from when Laura had been hugging her, sat down in a corner with Nicole and the still-scowling social worker to explain the legalities of the paperwork. "I'll file a petition to be her guardian ad litem first thing in the morning, but she might not get into family court until next week. If her mother still doesn't wake up, and her father is in jail, we may have to go to court to get temporary custody assigned to you, if you're okay with that."

Nicole nodded. "We have an extra bed in Elena's room, and she can stay as long as she needs to. She shouldn't have to go to foster care."

"Foster care is often the best solution for children with violent homes," the social worker said.
Alex ignored her and rolled her eyes to Nicole. "I'll send over the paperwork for guardianship in the morning," she said, handing her business card over with the signed documents. "I'll only be in the office until 4 tomorrow, but you can reach me at this number all weekend."

Olivia wrote her own cell phone number down on two business cards, which she handed to Nicole and the other to Laura, gently pulling her out of Elena's arms.

"Sweetie, I need you to write down your school for me. After school tomorrow you can give me a list of things you need from your apartment, and I'll go get them. Right now, it's a crime scene, but they should be gone by then. I'm going to be here tomorrow to get a statement from your mom when she wakes up, and I'll let you know if anything happens. If she gets worse, I'll send an officer to the school to pick you up, okay? Do you want to see her one more time before you go?"

Laura shook her head. "I want her to wake up."

"I know, sweetie. Go home and get some rest, and you can come back to visit tomorrow."

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"I assumed she was exaggerating when she said her father would kill her if he found out she'd had sex or an abortion," Alex commented as they climbed into bed. It was after midnight, but the crime scene had been processed and the victim was still sedated, so there had been no need for Olivia to stay at the hospital.

"Laura told Elliot that she got home after her father had left, and she didn't know what they were fighting about this time," Olivia said, wrapping her arms around Alex. "We'll see if CSU found anything interesting, and El and I will go to the crime scene in the morning."

Alex snuggled in closer and ran her hand down Olivia's arm. "Liv, I know it's late, but can we…? Just for a few minutes?"

Olivia nodded and kissed her gently, smiling as she pulled away slightly to free her arms for a brief make-out session. Olivia had fared better when they had completed the exercise on Wednesday, and it was Alex who had needed to stop when arousal had overwhelmed her and she'd begun shaking with fear. She began touching Alex, avoiding her most sensitive spots, surprised that she wanted to start again after the previous night's difficulties.

"Liv, I know what you're doing, and please don't," Alex said softly, realizing that Olivia was deliberately refusing to touch her in certain spots that had been sensitive the night before. "I have to do this. I have to get used to this… to those feelings if I'm ever going to be able to do more."

"You have to make out with me? What a hardship," Olivia teased, kissing Alex on the nose. Her expression turned serious. "Lex, are you sure? I don't want to hurt you. And I don't want you to associate me with the fear you felt last night."

"I won't. I could never."

"Can you please talk about it with Caroline, then, and see what she says? I promise you there's no rush to do anything you're not ready for."

Alex nodded. "I'll talk to her about it tomorrow. But Liv, I need you to trust me." She pressed their bodies closer together, kissing Olivia and bringing her hand to her waist.

—
Laura's mother was still in a medically induced coma in the morning, so Olivia and Elliot met O'Halloran and Warner at the crime scene.

"What have we got?" Elliot asked, surveying the apartment. There was a large bloodstain on the floor, where the victim had been found, but the rest of the apartment looked impeccable. There wasn't so much as a dust bunny under the sofa.

"The table was set for dinner and the plates were filled, but the cutlery hadn't been touched, so we think this fight happened just as they were about to sit down to eat. The perp's chair was still pushed in, so he hadn't sat down yet, but the victim's chair was pushed back at an angle, like he had come over to yank her out of her chair," O'Halloran explained.

"Do we know what caused the fight?" Olivia asked.

"No, but we know where it started. Your perp got angry in the bathroom and punched the mirror, breaking it. We found blood on the glass, and I'm betting it'll come back as the husband's. Then, your guy must have gone into the bedroom to get these, which we think are what he used to beat her." He held up a wooden cane and a belt. "The EMTs also cut this belt off her hands when they took her in, and pulled this scarf out of her mouth. It has saliva on it. And your victim lost control of her bladder when she was being held here — he pointed to the arm of the couch — because there's a fresh urine stain on the side, along with some spots of blood and some semen stains. I think he held her over the arm of the couch to rape and beat her, and then flipped her over there to kick her and make the cuts."

"Did you find the knife he used to make the cuts on her abdomen?" Elliot asked.

"No," Warner chimed in. "I can tell you we're looking for a small pocket knife with a 3 1/2" to 4" blade, but we didn't find anything missing from the kitchen and nothing had blood on it. It's the kind of knife a boy scout would keep in his pocket, so maybe your perp was one."

"Anything else?" Olivia looked around the room.

"Your victim didn't fight back. She's 5'5", so if he was holding her here to beat her — O'Halloran pointed at the spot near the couch where the bloodstain was located. — both the end table and the coffee table would have been within reach of her feet, and she could have kicked them over, or the lamp could have fallen on the floor. They're heavy, and there are no other indents in the rug indicating that they were moved and then moved back." He lifted up the corner of the coffee table to demonstrate.

"One last thing," Warner added. "Both the cane and the belt have blood on them that did not come from yesterday's beating. See this? It's dried and brown, which means it's at least a few days old. I can try to date it in the lab, but I wouldn't be surprised if she was beat regularly with it, even over several years. Normally, leather belts wear out around the holes and the end that goes into the buckle. This one is worn out in the middle, which would happen if it were snapped repeatedly like this —" she demonstrated "over a long period of time."

Olivia and Elliot wandered around the apartment, checking out the kitchen, where pots and pans of food were still on the stove, and the bedroom, where nothing seemed out of the ordinary. They examined the bookshelves, where there were multiple copies of the Bible and almost exclusively conservative Christian-themed books. Papers on the desk included lists of abortion clinics and crisis pregnancy centers in the city and stacks of brochures proclaiming "Abortion is murder!" "God Hates Fags and the Homosexual Agenda!" and "Birth Control is for Sluts."

Olivia walked into the bathroom and noted the broken glass and blood where the mirror had once
been, and then noticed the small T-shaped object on the floor, partially hidden under the sink.

"Hey El?" she called, picking it up with a glove and putting it in a plastic evidence bag. "I think I just figured out why they were fighting."

Warner and O'Halloran promised they'd be done processing the crime scene by the time Laura got out of school and agreed that Olivia could bring her by to pick up a few items.

Olivia sat on Laura's bed and watched her pack a bag with some clothes, schoolbooks, and toiletries. "Laura, do you know where your mom would have kept important papers, like a will or a living will? Right now, your dad has the power to make all of her medical decisions, but it would be good to know what she would want for treatment and who she thought should be your guardian if something happened to her."

Laura's eyes welled up with tears. "You think my mom's gonna die?"

"I don't know, sweetie," Olivia reassured her. "She's still critical, and we're going to go see her in a few minutes, but we don't have to worry about that yet. But sometimes people write down important information, like if they don't want to be kept on life support for too long, or the person they want to take care of their kids if something happens to them. We going to track down your aunt, for example, to see if she might be able to be your guardian long-term if your mom has to stay in the hospital."

Laura nodded and went over to the bookshelf in the living room, where she pulled out a book entitled Fulfilling Your Husband's Every Desire: A Guide for Good Christian Wives off the shelf. She opened it up, revealing a hollow interior and some papers.

"I got curious one day and found it. I guess she figured my dad would never read that book," Laura explained.

Olivia smiled weakly. "I'll give these to Alex. You ready to go?"

After they arrived at the hospital, Olivia let Laura spend a few minutes with her mother while she got an update on the woman's condition and took a folder full of the medical reports and pictures of her wounds. Cracked and broken ribs, punctured lung, ruptured spleen, massive internal bleeding, lacerations on her back and buttocks, bleeding in her brain, and the word SLUT carved across each of her breasts.

"Why don't we go have something to drink in the cafeteria so I can ask you a few questions, and then we can come back and sit with her a bit until visiting hours are over?" Olivia asked when she came into the room. "The nurse doesn't expect her condition to change, but said she'd call me if it did."

"Is Alex coming?" Laura asked as they waited in line for Olivia to buy a coffee and her soda.

"I'm not sure," Olivia said. "She had an appointment after work, and I don't know if she'll go home or come here first. But I'll drop you off at Nicole's when we leave." Laura nodded. "I do know she filed to be your court-appointed guardian first thing this morning, so if the social worker calls you, you should get in touch with her."

Laura took a long sip of her soda and looked down at the table. "She doesn't look like she's going to be okay," she whispered, her eyes filling up with tears again.

Olivia reached out to take her hand. "She's still alive," Olivia replied. "That counts for something."
They sat in silence for a few minutes before Olivia started asking about her parents. "Do you have any idea what they could have been arguing about last night?"

Laura shook her head. "My mom didn't really argue with my dad. He would get angry about stuff and take it out on her, but she usually just listened to whatever he said. It made me so mad. I'd try to tell her that she shouldn't let him treat her like that, but she didn't listen to me. She just told me that when I had kids someday I'd understand. I told her I'd never let my kids see someone hurt me."

Olivia nodded. "You're right about that. What kinds of things did your dad usually get angry about?"

Laura shrugged. "Sometimes it was just something that happened at work, like getting in trouble with his boss or something. He would get upset about politics if he watched MSNBC or the 'lamestream libtard media' as he calls it and there was something about gay marriage."

"The attack on your mom was pretty personal. Can you think of anything that might have made him angry with her?"

Laura thought for a minute. "He always wanted more kids than just me, and they've fought about it a lot over the years, ever since I can remember. My mom always says she goes to the doctor and there's nothing wrong with her, and he always gets angry and says that there's certainly nothing wrong with him and 'how dare she insult him by implying he's infertile,' but I don't know if he's ever been tested. He blames her for not being able to get pregnant after me, I think. I always… nevermind." Laura blushed and looked away.

"You always what?" Olivia prompted.

"I always hear them having sex a lot after they have that fight. It's… loud and I don't know if it's really consensual."

"Okay," Olivia said. "I can ask your mom about that when she wakes up. You've been a big help, but if you think of anything else, you can call me, okay?"

Laura nodded. "Let's go back up and sit with your mom until visiting hours are over, and then I'll take you back to Nicole's."

"I took all of next week off under the guise of doing my continuing ed credits and prepping to go to Portland on Thursday," Alex told Caroline, making herself small in the armchair. "I just… I can't cause another scene like that at work and expect to be taken seriously. And I can't expect them to tiptoe around me, either. I'm supposed to be the 'Ice Princess,' not some shaking ball of nerves who drops the coffee pot and starts shrieking when someone taps me on the shoulder."

"'Ice Princess?" Caroline asked, raising an eyebrow. "Where does that come from?"

Alex shrugged. "When I started at the DA's office I had a reputation for being cold and detached. For being strictly professional and not letting my personal feelings about cases interfere with my legal judgment. Now I can't help but let my personal feelings interfere with my job."

"Do you want people to see you as the Ice Princess?"

"The people who know me and care about me know that that's not really me. My subordinates know that I care about them and want to help them, even if I'm tough on them. And I do show compassion with witnesses and victims that I've worked with. But in the courtroom, or when I'm interrogating suspects, or telling one of my ADAs that there's no way in hell they can offer a deal, there's no room
for weakness.

"What about humanity?" Caroline asked gently.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, in your newspaper article you talked about how anyone can be a victim, and it's nothing to be ashamed of, and how more women should come forward to report their attacks because every case helps make rape prosecutions easier."

Alex nodded. "I'm not ashamed of being a victim. I know it's not my fault. And I did make sure my rapist was prosecuted."

"Aren't you?" Caroline challenged. "Are you ashamed or embarrassed about how you've reacted as a victim in certain situations where you've felt vulnerable?"

Alex's eyes teared up and she reached for a tissue, looking away and covering her mouth to hide her expression.

"What's going through your mind right now?"

"I'm just... I'm not used to being so emotional. I've been affected by a few cases over the years, sure, but I've never had an outburst like that. It's still an old boys' club, you know. Women are either bitches and ball-busters because they're tough or PMSing because they're emotional and weak. I've always been the former."

Caroline nodded. "It's like that in a lot of professions, but it's starting to change. Maybe you can be part of that change. Maybe you can help victims by allowing yourself to be seen as one."

"I did that, with my article," Alex pointed out.

"In a way, yes. But knowing you're a victim and understanding what that means are two different things."

Alex bit her lip and wiped away another tear. "I don't know. I know I'm... Men I work with have been attracted to me, and I don't want anyone thinking about me in a sexual way. Especially about how I've been sexually violated."

"I'm certainly not advocating that you force yourself to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. But when I asked about showing humanity earlier, I was suggesting that maybe it's possible for you to teach your colleagues about interacting with victims by being honest about not being 100% okay. I'm not suggesting you discuss the details of your attack with them or cry in front of them, but being up-front about how they can help you avoid an episode and times when you need to be alone or not work on certain cases might help them see that you can be tough and vulnerable at the same time. Sometimes being strong is also about knowing your own boundaries and limits."

Alex nodded. "Maybe," she said noncommittally.

"Alex, you've been a victim of two very violent crimes in four years. You really would have to be an ice princess not to be affected by that."

"Olivia said she didn't interview perps for a few months after her attack because she pulled a gun on a suspect during an episode."

"Olivia works in a male-dominated profession and has to be tough, too," Caroline commented.
"Have you talked to her about her healing process?"

Alex shook her head. "She told me she saw a counselor for a while, for cops and veterans with PTSD. And the counselor told her to touch herself," Alex blushed and lowered her eyes, "but I'm not sure it helped very much outside of work. She... hasn't been able to let anyone touch her intimately, and when we did the exercise the first night, I felt like she was forcing herself to be comfortable and then she jumped up and ran away from me."

"What did you do?"

"I did what she would've done. I waited for her to let me into the bathroom, and talked to her about what happened, and then I brought her back to bed and we cuddled."

"Did her reaction surprise you?"

"A little. She had a girlfriend until a few weeks ago, and I knew they didn't have sex but... now I'm worried about my own reaction, which is mostly when I get... aroused... and her reaction and not wanting to hurt her, and about her worrying about me and not wanting to get me aroused and make me react... it's all very confusing and complicated."

"Let's sort through it, then. How do you react when you become aroused?"

Alex blushed. "I freeze, and I shake. Sometimes I say 'no' over and over and see flashes from the rape in my head."

"Were you aroused during the rape?" Caroline asked gently.

Alex nodded and reached for another tissue. "I had been... touching myself before he started. So, before it happened."

"Arousal and masturbation are probably triggers we're going to have to work on, then. What did Olivia do when you flashed back during the exercise?"

"She stopped touching me and talked to me until I came out of it. The next night she avoided touching certain spots and told me she wanted me to ask you about whether her causing me to flash back would make her a trigger."

"Normally, no, especially since you've said you don't mind her touching you and you feel safe with her," Caroline said. "But I think, for the time being, you should ask her to stop before you get too aroused, and only stay aroused for a short time, maybe even having her back off as soon as you start to feel arousal. We can gradually increase your stamina as we work through your triggers, but for now, that will help to limit your flashbacks. It will also help you to exercise your 'no,' as I like to call it. When you were raped, your attacker and then your own body didn't heed your 'no,' so practicing it during any of the exercises will help you start to feel safe again, as long as Olivia respects it. The more you both are able to respect your no, the more you'll associate her with feelings of safety, which will help you to heal."

"She will," Alex confirmed. "But how can I help her?"

"As far as the exercises go, all of them should help both of you gradually become more comfortable with sexual contact," Caroline explained. "But it may be that she dealt with the PTSD triggers but not with the assault itself, in which case I'd recommend that she go back to a few sessions with her own counselor. She's also welcome to book a session with me alone, or come to a session with you, if you're comfortable with that. I might like her to come sometime anyway."
When I initially wrote this story, I had mapped out Alex's time in Witness protection as Wisconsin, Connors trial, Portland, Bloomington, Charleston.

However, after rewatching everything, it appears that the Connors trial takes place after Alex has been in WPP for about a year and a half, and it's in February 2005 (she was shot in September 2003). So, the timeline only makes sense if she was in Bloomington after the Connors trial, until August, and then worked in Sarah's school for the 2005-2006 school year. When she had to leave Portland in May 2006, she "died" and was moved to Charleston, where she spent about 7 months before returning to New York. The events of Conviction therefore occur in mid-late 2007 (not 2006 as is canon), and this story begins in February-ish 2008.

Alex was already seated in the café in Portland, Oregon, where she'd agreed to meet Sarah for lunch, tapping her foot nervously and looking at her watch each time she took a sip of her coffee.

She stood up to greet the girl with a nervous smile when she arrived, unsure whether she should offer a hug, but Sarah barely made eye contact before flopping down in the booth across from her. Alex immediately noticed the dark circles under Sarah's eyes, and the short bob haircut that had replaced the long, thick, layered reddish brown hair that Sarah had once mentioned was her favorite physical feature.

"You changed your hair," Alex said softly, without intending that to be her greeting.

Sarah shrugged. "I changed a lot of things."

"I'm sorry," Alex offered. "For how things turned out. For not being able to come back sooner. How are you doing?"

Sarah looked down at her hands on the table and reached into her purse to pull out a folded-up piece of paper, which she unfolded and slid across the table to Alex.

"Is this the reason you came back?" she accused.

Alex found herself looking at a copy of the front page of the Times with the articles about her rape and Robert's sentencing. "No, this isn't why I came back," she said carefully. "I came back because I want you to get justice for what happened to you. And because it was the right thing to do."

"But mostly because it sort of looks bad to get all this publicity speaking out to help rape victims when you've left one hanging on the other side of the country," she spat.

"Sarah, that's not fair," Alex said quietly. "I didn't have a choice."

"I just think it's an awfully big coincidence that you supposedly got your 'real life' back almost a year ago, but you waited all this time to let me know that it was just some big, cruel cosmic joke, and three days later this article comes out." Sarah let out a half-laugh, half-sob. "So which is it: did he rape someone else, and now you're trying to make amends for being in love with a rapist when you
used to put them in jail? Or did he rape you and now you know what it feels like to be a victim?"

Alex looked down at her coffee and bit her lip, the pained expression on her face and the tear in her eye telling Sarah she had gone too far. "That's enough," Alex said firmly. "Are you done?"

Sarah nodded, immediately regretting the vitriol in her voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean…"

Alex held up her hand to stop Sarah, and shook her head. "You have every right to be angry, but I am not your enemy." She looked directly into dark green eyes, taking a breath to steady herself. "Will you stay for lunch so we can talk?"

Sarah nodded and flipped through the menu, and Alex reassured her that she could order whatever she wanted and it was her treat. Alex watched the girl out of the corner of her eye, noticing the differences between the shy, sullen, angry teenager in front of her and the spunky, bright-eyed freshman who had sat in her English class two years before.

Sarah had been one of the only students to take both pre-AP freshman English and two semesters of debate and speech, and she'd eagerly joined the after-school debate team and participated in almost all of the monthly Saturday tournaments. As Kristin, Alex had been happy to share coaching responsibilities with another rookie teacher and spend her afternoons and weekends with a bunch of teenagers, since it gave her a built-in social life and lots of reasons not to fall back into the bad habits she'd developed and then overcome in Wisconsin. Plus, the fact that teaching debate, judging tournaments, and helping her students outline their arguments enabled her to flex her lawyer muscles.

The conversations with her debate team members in between rounds at tournaments had been interesting, and it almost reminded her of late-night ethical debates from her law school days with Alan, Trevor, Abbie, and some of their other friends, albeit without the wine. She thought that if they had met under different circumstances, without the teacher-student relationship, they could have been friends. When Sarah had revealed that she wanted to go to law school, Alex had been secretly thrilled, and simultaneously frustrated that she had to pretend she knew nothing about it and that she couldn't advise her.

"You didn't answer my question earlier," Alex said softly when Sarah closed the menu and looked down at her lap, avoiding eye contact. "How are you doing?"

Sarah swallowed as tears welled up in her eyes. "I thought it was over," she choked out. "I thought it didn't hurt me any more. What he did to me. What everyone else said. Being abandoned by the one person who believed me and whom I thought I could trust."

Alex smiled inwardly at the proper use of 'whom,' and chastised herself. She was the person who had abandoned Sarah. Sarah hadn't come to school for a week after the attack, and hadn't accepted visitors when Alex had stopped by her house one afternoon to make sure she was doing okay. Alex had made one final effort to inquire into her well-being by pulling her aside after class one day, but had been brushed off, and two days later, she had had to 'die.' Kristin Walker had been killed in a car crash, and Alex had been moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to her last identity.

"It's hard to heal and move on when you can't get justice and you have to see your attacker every day," Alex sympathized.

"And when you're ostracized because you went to the police to accuse Mr. Most Likely to Succeed of rape."

Alex nodded. "We're going to get him, you know. We've got a good case."
"And then I'm the one who put the Harvard-bound valedictorian football star in jail," Sarah pointed out.

"He's not going to Harvard," Alex said firmly. "I've got connections. As soon as I send the police report over there, he's out. I'm going to wait until charges are filed so it's official, but there's no way in hell he's going to my school. If I have my way, he'll be expelled from the high school before he finishes, too."

"Can we not talk about this now?" Sarah asked as their food arrived.

Alex nodded. "Do you have any questions for me? I mean, I know my email came as a surprise, but…"

Sarah snorted. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around it."

"Me too," Alex admitted. "Do you at least understand what Witness Protection is and how it works?"

Sarah nodded. "I think so. The FBI said you were dead and gave you a new identity far away?"

"Basically. I was shot during a case we were working on. Federal agents told everyone - my family, my friends, my coworkers - that I lost too much blood during surgery and died. While I was recovering, they moved me out of New York, changed my appearance, and gave me a new identity to learn that had nothing in common with who I actually am. First, they moved me to Wisconsin, where I lived for a year and a half, until the police in New York arrested the man who shot me and charged him with my murder. I had to go back to testify against him, and spent 6 months in Bloomington, Indiana. Then the FBI moved me to a new identity, here."

"And nobody knew where you were?"

Alex shook her head. "Outside of the FBI agents, the only people who knew I was even alive were two of the detectives I worked with who were there when I was shot. You'll meet Olivia later. She's been my friend since we started working together, and she was standing next to me… I refused to go unless I could tell her it wasn't her fault… My parents, my brother, and everyone else I love thought I was dead for over a year. My mom died after two months, and she would have died thinking I was dead if Olivia hadn't told her."

"Oh." Sarah suddenly felt guilty, recognizing the twinge of pain in Alex's voice and realizing that since learning Alex had been in witness protection, she had never considered the impact it would have had on her. "How much of what you told us about yourself was true? None of it?"

"Most of what I said - stories I told about myself in class - those were pretty much all true. I changed the characters, though, since Kristin Walker was an only child and an orphan from Gainesville with no real family to speak of, and I'm from Boston, my father is still alive, I have a brother, sister-in-law, and niece and a bunch of cousins, and the only time I've ever spent in Gainesville was 5 days in an FBI safe house learning how to pretend to be from there before I came here. I do have a degree in English and Philosophy with a concentration in Creative Writing, but it's from Columbia, not UF."

"When we had that party in French class and you sort of… spaced out, or got emotional or something when we played Alexandrie, Alexandra…"

"I told you my grandfather sang that to me when I was little. I think I was about 3 when it came out. He did have a thing for Claude François and bad French disco and pop music, but it makes more sense if my name is Alexandra, doesn't it?" Alex smiled.
Sarah smiled back for the first time since she had sat down. "I guess."

"Sarah, I'm not sure if you realize this, but a lot of people don't get to come back from witness protection. I'm very lucky to have gotten a second chance. And to have gotten it so quickly, relatively speaking. If I had to testify against a drug lord or wait for his trial and appeals to be over, I could have stayed in for many years. I might never have gotten my old life back."

"Why did you wait so long to write to me?"

Alex sighed. "If I had come back six months ago, or a year ago when I first got out, I wouldn't have been any help to you. It took me a while to get back to being myself, and I... I couldn't have helped you the way I want to."

Sarah was just about to ask what she meant when Alex's phone rang, and she answered "Cabot," apologizing for taking the call.

"Oh, hi Liv. Did you talk to her? I see. So, she confirmed what we thought? How many? Shit. Well, if they all happened in the high school, the statute of limitations won't be expired. Normally, that should be enough for a warrant. I'll ask her. Okay, see you soon. Bye."

Alex hung up the phone turned it on silent, and slipped it back into her purse. "Sarah, I'm sorry for the interruption. That was my friend Olivia, who went to talk to someone who used to work at the school because of something to do with Chris's dad." Alex took a deep breath and looked into Sarah's eyes. "Sarah, we think that you weren't Chris's only victim. We think that there were other girls."

Sarah shook her head violently and whimpered. "No. No, no, no. It's not possible. No." Alex reached out to take her hand.

"Why don't you think it's possible?" Alex asked gently.

"Because if it happened to someone else, they would have believed me."

Alex squeezed her hand. "Sarah, you paid a pretty high social price for reporting him, didn't you?"

Sarah nodded.

"Then don't you think it's possible that other girls were afraid to come forward? Or maybe they were afraid to say no to him? Or he threatened them somehow?" Sarah shrugged.

"Lots of grown women sometimes have trouble admitting that what happened to them was rape," Alex continued. "In yours, he surprised you in the bathroom and pinned you to the wall. In other situations, sometimes it's just a matter of the rapist going farther than his victim intended, or coercing her somehow, or getting her drunk so he can take advantage of her. It's a lot harder to get people to recognize some of those situations as rape, and even the women themselves can be confused."

"So not believing me made it easier for them to deny what happened to them?"

"It's possible." Alex nodded slowly. "Sarah, did he take anything from you? A piece of jewelery, a hairclip, anything like that?"

"I had a clip I bought especially for the dance that had little purple sequins on it. Right before you came in, he took it and put it in his pocket. Why?"

"Because guys like him rarely have just one victim, and they usually like to take trophies - something
the victim was wearing to remind them of the attack, to get them excited later." Alex explained. "If he took something from you, the police may be able to find items he took from other victims, which would help us prove you're not the only one, even if they haven't come forward before."

"And what good will that do?" Sarah asked.

"It gets justice for his other victims. If they didn't go to the hospital, didn't report it, and there's no physical evidence, the only way the DA will be able to charge him for more crimes is if they find his trophy collection, the girls agree to testify, and there's enough of a pattern that the charges can be linked. If the charges are linked, then your case - with physical evidence and three corroborating witnesses - will help win their cases. If the charges can't be linked, then you might be the only one who would have enough evidence to go to trial."

"And why should I care about helping them? Nobody helped me," she spat, her anger returning.

"I helped you. I am helping you," Alex pointed out. "And as angry and hurt as I know you've been, they're probably just as angry and hurt too, and scared to come forward."

"What do I need to do?"

"For starters, tell the detectives so they can get a search warrant for his place. He assumes that he's been getting away with it for two years or more, because he doesn't know I'm alive and back here to testify. So we have the element of surprise."

"Once they talk to him, they're not going to believe me either," Sarah said, her eyes tearing up again.

"What makes you say that?"

Sarah shrugged. "You don't know why everyone at school called me names for months afterwards."

Alex shook her head. "No, I don't. But I'm guessing he told people you had sex with him in the bathroom before you got to tell your side of the story?"

Sarah nodded and turned red, looking away. "He told everyone I wanted it. That I'd begged him for it because I wanted to be popular."

"That doesn't mean it's true," Alex reassured her, touching her hand again. "Sarah, I promise I'm not going to judge you for anything. Even if you planned to have sex with him and then changed your mind and he did it anyway, that's still rape."

"No! That's not what happened."

"I didn't think it was. I saw what happened and I believe you, remember? I can't imagine anything you could tell me right now that would change that."

"I didn't even know what was happening at first," she whispered. "I'd never... had that happen before. When he... he had me pinned to the wall, and he touched me, down there, and I..." Alex closed her eyes briefly to push down her own tears and memories as she realized what Sarah was telling her. "Please don't make me say it."

She took Sarah's hand and held it as she started to cry, using her free hand to pull a packet of tissues out of her purse. After a moment, she went over to sit on Sarah's side of the booth, putting an arm around her.

"Sarah, you are not the first woman that's happened to. And it doesn't mean you wanted it, or you
liked it. It means your body had a physiological response that it's supposed to have during sex. His attorney can't bring it up at all in court. Orgasm is not a defense to rape."

"Really? But he told everyone…"

"And we've already established that he's an ass. Listen, sweetheart, I have seen photos of women who were very badly injured during a rape, sometimes to the point of needing reconstructive surgery. I know you're embarrassed, but your body protected you from that."

Alex sat with Sarah until her crying slowed and returned to her own side of the booth. "I'm just going to go wash my face. I'll be right back."

Alex nodded. "Just tell me what you want for dessert so I can order if the waiter comes by. I think I'm going to have the chocolate mousse. I'm going to get coffee, too. Do you want coffee or tea?"

Sarah had just turned the corner towards the back of the café when Olivia arrived and slid in the booth next to Alex, kissing her on the cheek. "How's it going?" she asked gently.

"It's rough. She's angry and hurt, and still pretty traumatized, I think. Do you want something to eat? That's our waiter. I was going to order dessert for us." Alex flagged him over to place their order for dessert and for a sandwich for Olivia, and to place an odd request.

"What do you need that for?" Olivia asked.

"I need it to make a point," Alex explained. "You'll see. Did you find out anything useful this afternoon?"

"Not really," Olivia said. "She signed a confidentiality agreement when she left, so she said she couldn't tell me anything. I told her what we suspected and asked if she thought most of the donations were related to allegations against Keating, and if she thought the school administrators were aware of what was going on, and she implied yes on both counts."

"That's sick." Alex commented. "We've got to get these guys."

"I know. I sent Abbie a text message. We can call her in a bit."

Alex looked up to see Sarah walking back towards the table. "Are you sure you're okay with this?" she asked, studying Olivia's face.

"I'm sure if you're sure, sweetie. It's completely up to you." Olivia squeezed her hand under the table.

"Olivia, this is Sarah Williams, one of my students and debate team members from a couple years ago," Alex introduced her as she sat down. "Sarah, this is my girlfriend, Detective Olivia Benson. She works with the Special Victims Unit in Manhattan, where I used to work."

Olivia smiled and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Sarah."

Sarah shot Alex a confused look and shook Olivia's hand. "Girlfriend? I thought you were just engaged."

"It's… complicated," she replied as Olivia put a hand on her thigh to stop her from getting defensive. They had had a long conversation on the plane ride about what role Alex wanted Olivia to take on, in Portland and in general.

"What are we?" Alex had asked out of the blue, sometime during the second hour of their flight.
"How do you want me to introduce you?"

"Sweetie, it's still pretty new, and none of our friends know yet. If you want to just introduce me as your friend for now, that's fine. We don't have to label it yet, and it's kind of soon for us to say we're in a relationship, don't you think?"

Alex shrugged. "Well, we're living together, sleeping together, making out, going on a trip together... that sounds like a relationship to me. I don't do those things with all my friends, you know."

Olivia smiled and kissed her on the cheek. "And I still haven't taken you out on a proper date. Lex, I love you and I promise I'm not going anywhere. I just don't want to rush you into putting a label on what we are or force you to come out if you're not ready."

"You're not forcing me to do anything, Liv. But I thought Portland might be a good 'test run' of sorts, for me to get used to being public. I don't want to keep you a secret, but that doesn't mean I'm not a little nervous about telling everyone. Is there a reason you don't want to say we're in a relationship?"

Olivia sighed. "Lex, I just... Sometimes I worry that you came to me feeling really vulnerable and that I've taken advantage of you somehow, and that when you're feeling stronger you're either going to realize that you don't actually want to date a woman, or that the woman you want to date isn't me. I —"

"Liv, stop. Believe me, I was plenty alone and vulnerable in Wisconsin and I certainly didn't develop feelings for Mr. Claims Adjustor." She took Olivia's hand and looked into her eyes. "You didn't take advantage of me and I know you never would. All that happened was I realized what my true feelings for you were. If anything, I've been taking advantage of you."

"Lex, you haven't taken advantage of me. I told you that everything I've done I would do no strings attached, regardless of your feelings for me."

"I know that, Liv, and I know what my feelings are. Hell, I've spent enough time in therapy trying to figure them out. So don't suggest that I don't know my own mind, okay? I love you."

"I love you too, Lex. I'm just afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"That this is too good to be true," Olivia whispered.

Alex leaned over and kissed her softly. "Me too," she admitted quietly against Olivia's mouth. "But I know what I feel when we kiss, when you touch me... I have to believe that this is real. And I want to make it real. Let everyone else know it's real. Is that okay?"

"That sounds fair. Just don't pressure yourself, okay?"

"I won't. But I still don't know what I should call you."

"Girlfriend?" Olivia suggested.

"We're not having sex," Alex pointed out. "So only in the seventh grade sense."

Olivia laughed. "Yet. We're not having sex yet." She tucked a piece of hair behind Alex's ear. "And we'll get there, eventually, if that's what you want. Besides, if sex is the defining factor, that means 'lover' is also out. What about 'soul mate'?"
Alex smiled and leaned her head on Olivia's shoulder. "Soul mate," she murmured. "I like that."

Olivia kissed her head. "Besides, I'm not sure they have a word for 'best friend whom I've secretly been in love with for years who recently came back from the dead whom I desperately want to make love to but we both need lots more therapy before that can happen.'"

"There's probably a word for that in German," Alex deadpanned.

"Unfortunately I don't speak German," Olivia replied, laughing. "So maybe we should stick with 'girlfriend'?"

The waiter arrived with Olivia's meal and the desserts, preventing Alex from explaining their relationship further. "Uh, what do you want me to do with this?" the waiter asked awkwardly, holding up the onion Alex had asked for.

"I'll take it," Alex said, holding out her hand. "Thank you." She pushed Sarah's crème brûlée out of the way and placed it in front of her on the paper placemat, and held the knife. "Sarah, can you please cut this onion up for me?"

Sarah looked confused and tentatively picked up the knife. "Uh, okay. What's this about?"

"I'll explain," Alex said, smiling kindly at her. "Just trust me, okay?"

Sarah nodded and began slicing the onion. "Is this good?"

"I'm crying," Alex nodded. "Keep going," she encouraged, waiting for Sarah to sniffle and rub her eyes, and for the first tear to roll down her cheek. She wiped her eye. "Sarah, what's happening right now?"

"Uh, I'm cutting an onion like you asked…" she said, rolling her eyes slightly.

"What's happening to your body right now?"

"I'm crying."

"Are you sad?" Alex asked. Sarah looked confused. "Is cutting the onion making you sad? Did you have feelings for the onion?"

"Uh, no. That's weird. Why?"

"So cutting the onion isn't causing an emotional response of making you sad, but it is causing a physiological response of making you cry. Is that right?"

"I guess. Where are you going with this?"

"So just because your body is having a physiological response to a stimulus - like the onion - it doesn't mean that your feelings match what your body is doing," Alex explained. "And maybe in other situations, your body has had a reaction that hasn't matched the emotions you were feeling at the time."

"I guess so," Sarah admitted, smiling slightly and sniffing again.

"Okay, I think I've made my point. Let me get rid of this so we can all stop crying," Alex said, getting up from the table and wrapping the onion in the paper mat.

"Thanks," Sarah said quietly when Alex sat back down.
"Sarah, that may have helped a little, but I think it would be a good idea if you saw a therapist. Did you go to one at all?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "My parents made me go see some family counselor for my 'behavior problems'. I don't think he was trained in anything. We had ten sessions covered by insurance and all he wanted to talk about was why I didn't want to go to school anymore."

"Did you talk about the rape?" Olivia asked.

Sarah shook her head. "It was a guy. I mentioned it, but he kept bringing up other stuff, like why I didn't want anyone to come near me and why I kept getting into fights with my dad when he wouldn't leave me alone."

"Treat the symptoms, not the disease," Alex commented.

"When we go to talk to the SVU detectives I'll ask them if they have a list of counselors they recommend who specialize in rape counseling," Olivia said. "I wouldn't recommend you see anyone who isn't qualified to work with rape victims. And it can be hard to talk to a man about that. I wouldn't."

"My parents aren't going to go for it. They don't believe me." Sarah said.

"Let me talk to them," Alex offered. "I'll pay for the counseling myself if your insurance won't cover it, but you really should go. And if this goes to trial, you're going to need your parents' support."

"My dad's sick. They have enough to deal with without this. And you don't have to pay for my counseling."

"I can afford it. It's not a big deal. And it'll really help you, I promise." Alex said.

"Sarah, your parents love you, but sometimes parents have a hard time accepting that something bad happened to their child," Olivia said gently. Sarah had been prepared to dislike the woman Alex had shared her story with without her permission, but she found Olivia impossible to hate. "And this Chris kid did a hell of a job convincing everyone that he was the victim, but we're going to prove him wrong and send him to jail where he belongs. Let us talk to your mom and dad first, though, okay?"

Sarah looked down at her empty crème brûlée dish. "Okay."

Olivia and Alex both reached out at the same time to hold Sarah's hand, and they joined in the middle of the table.

"We're going to get him, Sarah," Alex promised quietly. "And then we're going to get the school."

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"Cabot," Alex answered her phone using the rental car's bluetooth system, driving towards Sarah's house from the café.

"Teflon!" the voice on the other end said warmly.

"Abbie," Alex said, smiling. "I'm driving and you're on speaker. How are you? Did you get the stuff I sent you?"

"Down to business already? First things first, Cabot. Is it true that you're playing for my team now?"
"Uh…" Alex sputtered. "Where did you hear that?"

"I read the press release, of course."

"Very funny, Abbie. But seriously. It's not exactly public information. I've only told a few people."

"Casey, via Serena. She wasn't gossiping, though. I think she only mentioned it because she thought we already knew. And to be honest, Cabot, I'm a bit disappointed that I wasn't your first call. I thought we were friends. I have to say I'm very deeply hurt."

"Cut the crap, Abbie. I agree that we have a lot to catch up on, but I've been a bit preoccupied recently."

"So I've heard," Abbie's voice softened. "How are you holding up? If you need to talk…"

"Hanging in there. But listen, Abbie, I've got our 16 year old complaining witness in the car, so can we catch up on the personal stuff later?"

"Oops. Yeah, sorry. Did I just out you?"

"Not exactly. But maybe we can Skype later tonight or sometime this weekend to catch up and so I can fill you in on the case?"

"Actually, I was just getting to the point of my call, which is that my docket's clear for next week, so I thought I'd fly out to Portland over the weekend and go to your meeting with the school on Monday. Help you put the fear of the federal government into these assholes."

"Do you think I've lost my touch?" Alex joked. "I assure you I have not."

"You? Never. But if you're going to head up the lawsuit and I'm going to lead the federal investigation into the Title IX violations, it makes sense for us both to be there. I've already started a very long list of federal charges I'd like to go for, including corruption and bribery charges."

"Good. But Abbie, Sarah and I haven't talked much about the lawsuit yet, but I want to wait to file until this kid takes a deal or is convicted. I'm not the prosecutor in this one, so I don't have a Brady obligation, and I don't want those emails getting into the hands of his defense attorney if we can help it."

"Why? They're not exculpatory. They confirm the story in the police report, over and over."

"They're not exculpatory, but if a defense attorney cross-examines her…"

"I see. Okay. Well, why don't you text me when you're around to Skype tonight and we'll catch up and talk through what we've got, and I'll see about making travel arrangements in the meantime."

"Okay, thanks Abbie. Talk to you later."

"Take care, Teflon. Love ya."

Alex ended the call and studied Sarah from the rearview mirror. "Abbie Carmichael is a friend of mine from law school who worked at the DA's office with me in New York and did SVU before me. She's now the Assistant US Attorney assigned to investigate Title IX and Clery Act violations, so she'll look into whether anyone at the school is criminally or morally responsible for what happened to you. Title IX is a federal law that requires schools that receive federal funding to treat male and female students equally and provide equal access to educational opportunities. The Clery
Act requires schools to file reports on crimes committed on their campuses."

"Oh. And your friend Abbie read my emails too? How many people did you show them to? I never should have fucking sent them," Sarah spat.

"Hey, language. For now, the only people who have read them are me, Olivia, and Abbie. If you file a lawsuit against the school - which I think you should - the school's attorneys would see them, and so might a judge. And if Abbie files charges against administrators at the school who knew what Chris had done and allowed him to stay in school and hurt other girls, their attorneys and the judges at those trials would have access as well."

"I think what Sarah is trying to say," Olivia began tentatively, "is that she wasn't expecting anyone at all to read them, ever, and now, suddenly, they could become very public. So maybe we should explain how they could be used and what the consequences will be."

"What I'm trying to say is that I trusted you and you abandoned me and now you come back and you want to bring this all up again and you're showing those emails to basically the whole world. You have to decide whether you're here to help me or to help yourself. And don't come in to talk to my parents." She got out of the car and slammed the door, running up the walkway of the small house.

Alex didn't talk much on the ride back to the hotel, allowing Olivia to drive as she stared out the window with tears in her eyes.

"She's right, you know," Alex said quietly as Olivia closed the door to the hotel room behind them. Despite Olivia's protests that she should contribute some of the cost for their trip, Alex had insisted that travel accommodations were one of the few things she was snobby about (along with wine and her wardrobe), and booked first-class plane tickets and an upscale room at the Park Plaza in downtown Portland.

"About what?" Olivia asked, reaching out to take Alex's hand as they sat down next to each other on the bed.

"I came back here as an SVU prosecutor, focused on how I can make sure the bad guys go to jail and the victim can get justice. But that's not actually my job here, and I'm not sure that's even what she wants."

"I think that what she wants is to be believed," Olivia said, pulling Alex in to her chest and rubbing her back. "And I think she does want justice, but she still believes she's not going to get it. Talk to her like a person, Lex, not like a prosecutor and not like a lawyer. Pretend you're just her English teacher again. She knows you're on her side. You just have to remind her that it's about her, and not just about the case."

Alex nodded and sniffled.

"By the way, that onion thing was pretty good. I'm going to have to remember that."

Alex shrugged. "That's what expensive therapy gets you, I guess. Chopped onions to make you feel better about unwanted orgasms."

"Does it help?"

"A little, I guess. But it's still… hard to separate everything out."

"That's understandable. It'll take some time," Olivia said.
"She told me he gave her her first orgasm and then told the whole school to prove that she wanted to have sex with him," Alex explained. "When he realized I had taken her to the hospital and she might go to the police, he did a preemptive strike. She said that's why everyone at school was calling her a slut and why nobody believed her."

"That's a new kind of sick and twisted, for a high school sophomore."

"Tell me about it."

"I wonder if he used the same MO to keep the other girls from talking."

"I bet he did. Liv, I really want to get this guy and everyone who's been protecting him."

"We will, sweetie."

They held each other for a while, sitting and then lying back on the bed, kissing and gently touching until they were content to just be in each other's arms.

"Lex, why don't we take a quick nap before we go to dinner and call Abbie? We got up early for our flight, and it looks like this afternoon wore you out. It was pretty exhausting, I bet."

Alex nodded and took a deep breath. "Liv, before we do that, there are some things I need to tell you about Wisconsin. I might talk about some of them with Sarah tomorrow, and I want you to hear them first."

Olivia kissed her and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. "You don't have to share if you're not ready."

"I don't want to tell her before I tell you. And there are some things that aren't going to be easy for you to hear, so I need to you promise me that you're going to let me talk without interruptions and not judge me for what I tell you."

Olivia nodded and looked into Alex's eyes. "You know I'll never judge you," she whispered. "And I promise not to interrupt."

By the time Alex was done, they were both crying, and Olivia held Alex tightly in her arms, whispering 'I love you' over and over until they fell asleep.

Alex awoke a while later, unaware of how much time had passed. As she came to, she quickly realized that her hand had moved while she had been sleeping, and her right hand was cupping Olivia's left breast underneath her bra. She further realized that because Olivia was holding her so closely, she wasn't going to be able to move or pull her hand away without waking her.

She was still so caught up in trying to figure out how she was going to explain the location of her hand that she missed a smile curling on Olivia's lips while her eyes were still closed.

"Do you have a warrant for that search, counselor?" Olivia teased. She tightened her arms around Alex to prevent her from scampering away when she realized Olivia was awake.

Alex panicked briefly. "Liv, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to… I was asleep. I just… woke up and my hand was there."

"So you're claiming a lack of mens rea?" Olivia opened one eye, and then both when she saw how nervous Alex looked. "Lex, sweetie, relax. It's okay."
"Are you sure? I didn't ask and you couldn't consent because you weren't awake, and I shouldn't be touching you like this without talking about it first..."

"Shh, Lex, I promise it's alright. It feels nice. Are you uncomfortable?" she loosened her arms around Alex to allow her to retreat if she wanted to, but Alex didn't move yet.

"Only when I thought I might be doing something you weren't ready for." She had been very careful not to move her hand or her fingers at all since she had realized what she was doing; now, she looked into Olivia's eyes, silently asking for permission to continue. Olivia nodded slightly. "I've never done this before," Alex murmured, spreading her fingers and gently caressing soft skin.

"Touched another woman like this."

"And?" Olivia asked, leaning in for a kiss. "How's it working out for you so far?"

"Quite nicely, I'd say," Alex smiled shyly as her movements got bolder. She ran her thumb over a taut nipple and brought her free hand up to the side of Olivia's face. "How's it working out on your end?"

"It's pretty nice from this side. Although I do have to say, I think the other one is getting jealous."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Is it, now? I guess we'll have to fix that, then." She slipped her other hand under Olivia's shirt.

"Oh, Lex." Olivia's breathing became more shallow as she kept kissing Alex and running her hands along her back, enjoying the sensation of being touched intimately for the first time in many months. A tear came to her eye as she realized that it had been years since anyone had been so gentle, so reverent with her, and she wasn't sure she had ever been touched so lovingly by anyone.

Alex shivered as Olivia ran a finger down her spine and pressed her tongue gently against her lips. "How about yours?" Olivia asked, bringing a hand to rest on Alex's side. "Are they jealous?"

Alex stopped moving abruptly and looked at Olivia. "Liv, I'm not sure I'm ready yet," Alex whispered, trying not to cry. "I'm sorry."

"Okay. Hey, it's okay, sweetie. There's no rush. It's okay. That was amazing. You're amazing." Olivia kissed her forehead and ran her fingers through Alex's hair. "How are you feeling right now?"

"A little tense."

"Aroused?" Alex blushed and nodded, hiding her face in Olivia's shoulder. "What did Caroline say to do?"

"Pause, take deep breaths, wait to see how I feel," she rolled onto her back and breathed deeply, staring up at the ceiling. "I wish I could just enjoy this," Alex sighed.

"Hey, this isn't a big deal. We're making progress, and beating yourself up isn't going to help anything."

"I know." Alex took a few more deep breaths and looked at Olivia.

"Do you want to stop?" Olivia asked. Alex shook her head and took Olivia's hand, bringing it over her chest without breaking eye contact.

"Liv, I want you to touch me."
"Are you sure?" Olivia asked, searching for signs of nervousness. "Don't push yourself if you're not ready."

Alex took a deep breath and nodded. "I'm nervous, but I'm sure. Just… not for very long, probably, but I do want this," she whispered, letting go of Olivia's hand.

Olivia placed her hand on the mattress on the other side of Alex, and pushed herself up, leaning over to give Alex a kiss. Alex held her breath as Olivia brought her hand down to cup her breast over her shirt.

"Breathe, sweetheart," Olivia whispered.

"Olivia…" Alex breathed as a hand slipped under her shirt and began gently stroking and kneading sensitive flesh. Olivia never broke eye contact, watching for any sign of discomfort and enjoying instead expressions of pleasure on Alex's face.

She stopped her massage after a few moments, wanting to end it before Alex got to another point of near-flashback, and pulled Alex into her arms. Both women immediately teared up.

"That was —"

"You were —"

"I've never felt as safe with anyone as I do with you, Lex," Olivia whispered in her ear when she was finally able to speak again. "I need… Thank you for being gentle with me."

"Always," Alex smiled, pulling back to look at Olivia as she repeated Olivia's own reply back to her. She paused, brushing hair out of Olivia's face. "It's not just Sealview, and Kurt, and Jenna, is it?"

Alex asked gently, wiping away a tear that had rolled down Olivia's cheek.

Olivia shook her head.

"Can we talk about it sometime? Doesn't have to be now, but soon?"

Olivia nodded. "Lex, don't leave me again."

"Not planning on it," Alex replied, surprised by Olivia's show of vulnerability. "Why don't we go get something to eat and come back here to call Abbie?"

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"So why does it seem like I'm the last to know that you've seen the light, Cabot?" Abbie teased. "I would have thrown you a hell of a coming out party."

"Do I even want to know how you celebrate becoming a lesbian?" Alex groaned, blushing to the tips of her ears. She was pretty sure she had an idea.

"Depends. Are there young ears around, still?"

"No, but mine'll bleed. Olivia bought me a cupcake with rainbow sprinkles. That was plenty for me."

"Was it frosted in the shape of a —"

"No!"

"Then it doesn't count," Abbie smirked. "I know a guy. Well, a girl, actually. Next time I come to
New York… Oh, and speaking of young ears, how did I 'not exactly' not out you today? Did she even know before me?"

Alex looked above the screen at Olivia, who nodded.

"Abbie, I'll tell you something that you are the first important person to know, officially, but you have to promise to keep it a secret, and swear Serena to secrecy, too."

"It better be good."

"Olivia and I…"

Abbie grinned. "Congratulations, Alex. I mean, that's not a very big surprise, but all the same."

"It's… we're testing it out, while we're here where nobody knows us. Our status is 'girlfriend pending loads of therapy.'"

Abbie giggled. "That sounds like you. You're seeing someone, then?"

Alex nodded. "Started a few weeks ago. Twice a week for now. It's intense, but I think it's helping a bit."

"Good for you. Just don't let it fester, like I did. And you don't have to tell me the details, and I know you've got Olivia, but if you need to talk, I'm here for you, just like you were there for me, okay?"

Alex smiled and teared up. "Thanks, Abbie."

"And I'll start compiling my list of pro tips now for when you're ready to lose your lesbian virginity… Wait, I haven't missed that too, have I?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "No, I haven't… we haven't, yet. I think it'll be a while."

"Good, it'll give me time to work."

"I wouldn't take sex advice from Abbie, Lex," Olivia chimed in from the couch, where she was looking over a case file. "She's like Cosmo for lesbians. Could be dangerous. Half the time I'm pretty sure she's kidding, but it's kind of hard to tell with her."

"I'll keep all of this in mind. Now can we talk about the case?" Alex filled Abbie in on the details, from how the principal had tried to prevent her from taking Sarah to the hospital for 'liability reasons', to the official reprimand that she'd found on her desk the following Monday, to the multiple suspicious donations from the rapist's father to the alumni fund, including one mere days after the rape had taken place.

"Have you identified any other victims?" Abbie asked.

"Not yet. Hopefully when we see the DA tomorrow they'll be able to get a search warrant for any trophies he may have taken. Sarah wasn't too keen on helping other potential victims at first, but I think she'll come around. We can ask her about Keating's girlfriends. It's a small school, so she knows them. They might be able to identify some of the other girls."

"I'm not sure how I feel about handing this off to the Portland DA's office, knowing that they've already refused to prosecute and that he's also getting major campaign donations from the father, but I'm not sure I can justify federal rape charges," Abbie said. "Usually my bosses prefer to leave that to the states."
"Well, I was hoping that bringing the campaign finance documents to the meeting tomorrow and merely suggesting the appearance of impropriety might look bad if the feds are involved would help them to see sense. I'll certainly inform them that the school is going to be under federal investigation for Title IX violations related to the same case, and that since the feds are involved anyway, it wouldn't be too hard for them to look a little deeper at the prosecution side."

"So you're using me to get your rape case prosecuted? You're more evil than I thought, Cabot."

"You could look at it that way. But I mostly use my powers for good. And truth, and justice. And stuff. Besides, I've had the feds use my rape cases to get other stuff prosecuted plenty of times."

"For truth, and justice, and stuff. Good to know." Abbie laughed. "Well, it seems like you've got everything under control on that side of things for now. What about the school?"

"There's the financial officer who 'retired' who knows a lot more than she's saying," Olivia interjected. "She might even know who some of the girls are. I have a feeling that some of them came forward to administrators or guidance counselors, or something, because I doubt the father was just making random donations. We should look at their financials and see if anyone's getting more income than they should be."

"Sounds good to me. I'll see what I can dig up. But what's the motive?" Abbie asked, frustrated. "I know I don't have to prove one for a federal case, but it would be nice to know why all these administrators who are supposed to care about education and kids would sacrifice a bunch of young girls to a sexual predator. There's got to be a reason beyond just the donations to the school."

"Does the school offer bonuses to board members or something for meeting fundraising targets?" Olivia asked.

"These guys are all pretty wealthy, though. Sarah's a scholarship student, but the administrators and even a lot of the faculty are well-to-do. A lot of them try to hide it, but it's harder than it looks. I doubt greed would be that big of a motivator here." Alex explained. "I think there's got to be some kind of quid pro quo going on."

"Do any of them have political connections to the dad or the governor? I started looking into that before we left, but got sidetracked by my actual job," Olivia said. "Or maybe they went to school together? I bet the dad has some serious dirt on somebody at that school. Somebody with the power to pay off or reprimand anyone who gets an inkling of what's going on."

"I'd start with the principal. I didn't really know the guy, but he gave me the creeps. And he's on the board, has serious power over faculty and staff contracts, and would also get performance bonuses for good fundraising. He's also the one who would have suspended Sarah for 'violating the dress code' and 'having sex in the bathroom during a school function' while giving Keating a pass." Alex said.

"Alright. I'll start with that, and let you know what I come up with. Meanwhile, let me know how things go tomorrow. I've got a red-eye on Saturday, so I'll get there mid-Sunday morning. Will you invite Sarah to brunch so I can meet her?" Abbie asked.

"If she agrees. Hopefully things will go better tomorrow, but we didn't end on such a great note today. She's upset that I showed the emails to you and Olivia, and she's not sure she wants to go through with this."

"Well, I think it's a lot bigger than just her. But if this case goes to trial, we would need her testimony on her treatment after the rape. Talk to her, Alex. You'll be able to make her understand how
important this is."

"We'll see. I called her and left her a message to apologize, and told her I wanted to take her out to
breakfast to talk before the meeting. If she lets me, hopefully I'll be able to get through to her."

"Okay. Good luck. I'll see you ladies on Sunday, and in the meantime, get your beauty rest, and
don't do anything I wouldn't do." Abbie smirked.

Alex rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure there's anything you wouldn't do."

Chapter 27

Alex's meeting with the DA wasn't until 11, but she was dressed and sitting in the car in front of Sarah's house by 8, hoping the girl had gotten her message and wasn't too upset to talk to her. At 8:27, Sarah finally stalked down the driveway and opened the car door.

"Can you not take a hint? I don't want to talk to you."

"I can take a hint. I'm just that stubborn," Alex replied calmly. "I've got almost two and a half hours to sit here before my meeting, so I can wait." She took a deep breath. "I need to apologize. I fucked up."

Sarah slid into the front seat and crossed her arms. "So apologize."

"Sarah, I'm not good at this part. My first instinct is to use the legal system to help people. I'm good at being a lawyer and at putting these guys in jail, but I can't tell you how many times I've put my foot in my mouth because I've said something really stupid to a victim because I was too focused on winning." She grimaced, remembering Sam Cavanaugh. "There are a lot of bad guys in this story, Sarah, and I wanted to come do that for you, but I got ahead of myself and I violated your trust. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I should have talked to you about the emails before I showed them to anybody."

"Yeah, you should've."

"I'm sorry."

"I know. And I do want them to go to jail… I just… I thought it finally stopped hurting."

"What do you say we go get breakfast before the meeting? Do you need to get anything or tell your parents where you're going?"

"No, we can just go. I already told them I was going out." Sarah said. She fiddled with the radio as Alex drove, finally settling on a classical music station.

Fortunately they were at a stop light and not in a very busy part of town when Vivaldi's Winter movement began to play. Alex froze and gripped the steering wheel, her eyes fluttering as she was assaulted by memories of Robert tying her up, running his hands over her body, joking as he used his mouth on her. She was vaguely aware of someone saying her name and of cars honking in the background as she whimpered "No, no, please Robert, no", over and over.

Sarah had the presence of mind to put the car into park and press the hazard light button on the middle console. After a few minutes, still not quite sure what to do, she reached over and turned the key, cutting the engine, which in turn turned off the radio. She watched awkwardly, trying not to stare as Alex leaned her head back into the seat, gasping for breath, before opening the door and dry heaving, thankful that she hadn't yet had anything to eat or drink.

Alex took a few deep breaths before turning the knob to turn off the radio, and pulled the car over into a nearby parking lot to catch her breath and drink some water from the bottle she had put in her purse just in case.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"I have PTSD," Alex finally explained. "I've had it since I got shot. You did the right thing, putting
the car into park and turning on the hazard lights."

"And that just happens, randomly, when you're driving or whatever?" Sarah asked.

"No, fortunately. It has to be triggered by something, like fireworks or a car backfiring." Or Vivaldi, she didn't say.

"And Robert is the guy who shot you?"

"No." Alex sighed, figuring Sarah at least deserved to know the truth, but not really wanting to tell her. "Robert is my ex-fiancé."

"Who is in jail for rape." Sarah concluded.

"That's the one." Alex confirmed.

"How long ago?" Sarah asked quietly.

"Five weeks. Technically you're supposed to have symptoms for 2 months before they'll diagnose it as PTSD, but I already had it, and it's just come back."

"Oh." Sarah fiddled with the hem of her shirt. "But you seem... how are you okay so soon?"

"Sarah, in case you missed what just happened, I'm not okay. I'm a mess, actually. Putting him in jail didn't resolve anything, but I have good friends, and a good therapist, and all of that is helping." She looked over at Sarah, who was staring out the window. "Let's get some breakfast, okay? You should eat something before the meeting. And just so we're clear, I know you don't trust me right now, but I promise that anything we say this morning will stay between us, okay?"

Sarah nodded and followed her into the diner, ordering pancakes and hot chocolate to Alex's scrambled eggs and coffee.

"Sarah, there's no timeline for feeling better, you know. I want to just 'get over it' as badly as you do or anyone does, but everyone is different. It's okay to not be okay, but you have to learn to cope in healthy ways, not destructive ones. I was really worried about you when you told me you were skipping school and drinking."

"What do you know about that? You've already got a girlfriend and everything." Sarah said bitterly.

"Things are more complicated than they seem," Alex said, reaching over to touch Sarah's hand. "I told you Olivia is my girlfriend because we care about each other and we plan on dating properly once we're both ready, which I'm not right now. And I'm lucky to have her supporting me, because I've had a destructive habit or two of my own."

"You have?" Sarah pushed bites of pancake around on her plate.

Alex nodded. "Everyone has trouble coping sometimes. I took most of the last month off from work and spent the rest of the time hiding in a friend's office because I didn't want my colleagues to see that I wasn't doing very well. That flashback you saw earlier? I had one at work that was worse and made quite a spectacle of myself when I freaked out at someone for sneaking up on me and dropped a full pot of coffee and shattered it all over the kitchen."

"I didn't want to go to school when he was there, and it just always seems like I can't get away from him. He's there wherever I go, and everybody's friends with him, so I can't even go to parties and stuff without him being there."
"That must be really hard for you. And the drinking?"

"It helped me not feel anything."

"Sarah, I get it, I really do, but none of that is helping you. It may take the pain away for a little while, but it always comes back worse. Not to mention the fact that it's illegal for you to drink, and you could get in serious trouble."

Sarah looked down at her plate as her eyes filled up with tears. "Drinking and sleeping pills are the only ways I can get the nightmares to stop."

Alex squeezed her hand. "Sarah, I'm going to tell you something that only two other people know. One of them is Jack, the FBI agent you'll meet this morning who was responsible for me when I was in Witness Protection, and the other one is Olivia, because I told her last night. I need you to promise this doesn't leave the table, okay?"

Sarah nodded.

"I told you that before I came to Portland, I lived in Wisconsin for a year and a half under the name Emily and nobody knew I was alive. I was shot at the end of September. Around Thanksgiving, my mom died. Just before Christmas, my niece was born. I had a really boring job as an insurance adjustor that I hated. I had to completely change my appearance and even my personality. And on top of all that, I was constantly afraid for my life.

"I started doing a lot of stupid, destructive stuff, like going out with a guy from work that I didn't have feelings for, which is not something I ever would have done as myself. I was on pain medication for my shoulder, sleeping pills for the nightmares about the shooting, and antianxiety meds. And I started drinking, and calling in sick to work. Just a little, at first, then more and more. Sound familiar?"

Sarah nodded again, pushing what was left of her food around on her plate.

"The anniversary of the day I was shot, I took a couple of the pain meds I still had left over. Then I had some wine with dinner. Then I decided I might as well finish the bottle. And by then, I was feeling tired, so I took two sleeping pills. Jack must have come by to check on me when I didn't answer my phone, because I woke up the next day on a 72-hour hold in the psych ward, where they told me that I was very lucky to be alive, and even luckier not to have any apparent brain damage. I told them I didn't do it on purpose, but sometimes I wonder."

"I did mean to."

"I know. But you haven't tried again, have you?" Sarah shook her head. "I'm telling you this because I understand what it feels like to be alone and afraid and in pain, and you will get better, if you want to." She wiped a tear from her eye and looked down at her coffee.

"How did you get better?"

"Jack read me the riot act and told me that they weren't keeping me alive so I could drink myself to death. He got me into counseling with someone from the program, and called me twice a day for months to give me pep talks. I broke it off with the guy I was seeing, and stopped drinking entirely for more than a year. There was a church I had gone to a few times after my mom died, and I started going more regularly. The pastor let me go there to play the piano a couple times a week. And that spring, Jack showed up with Olivia's boss to tell me that they had charged someone with my murder, and that if I wanted, I could go back to testify. So I did, and he was convicted of five counts of
murder and two counts of attempted murder, and then I was relocated. But the healing mostly took
time, and a little hope."

"The counselor I went to see… he thought I was trying to get attention because of my dad's illness.
He has Lou Gehrig's disease and my mom spends most of her time taking care of him. He had my
doctor prescribe me sleeping pills, and I took too many, and washed them down with a glass of
whisky from my parents' liquor cabinet, because I knew it would burn. I just wanted to forget for a
while, you know?"

"I know, sweetheart. But drinking to forget doesn't work."

"What about this?" she choked out. She lifted up the hem of her shirt to reveal dozens of tiny cuts all
over her stomach.

"Oh, sweetheart," Alex breathed.

"I tried to stop. I barely drank at all since I got your email, and then last night…" Sarah started to cry.

"What happened last night?" Alex asked gently.

"I drank and I did this," she said, pointing out a few of the fresher cuts.

"Sarah, if we try to prosecute this case, the defense attorney could find out about the drinking and
use it to make you seem like an unreliable witness."

"I drink because of what he did to me! I…"

"I know. I'm just telling you that if we pursue this, it could be very difficult for you, and it's better if
we help you stop drinking now. You'll have to tell your story to a lot of different people, who will
ask lots of questions and who will try to see if you slip up and if you're lying."

"So you're saying maybe I shouldn't do it?"

Alex shook her head. "I've seen lots of women who regretted not pressing charges against their
attackers. I have never known a single woman who regretted testifying, even for the cases I didn't
win. I won't tell you that it isn't hard, because it is, but it helps you take back some of the power and
control he took from you."

"I want to do it. I want him to go to jail."

Alex smiled. "Okay. Now, I'll come back for the trial, if there is one, but I think we need to make
sure you have a support system. Part of that is letting me talk to your parents so they know what's
going on." She looked at Sarah pointedly through her glasses. When Sarah nodded, she opened her
briefcase and took out some papers. "I got this list of counselors specializing in rape from Victims'
Services, and the city will pay for some counseling sessions for you. I called one close to your school
and set up an appointment for later this afternoon, and if you don't click with her, she said she'd refer
you to someone else. And this —" Alex pulled another flyer out, "is for Ala-teen meetings. It's like
Alcoholics Anonymous for teens. Some of them have parents with drinking problems, and others
have drinking problems themselves. They meet on Sunday afternoons."

"Okay. I'll go."

"Good," Alex said. "I know the funny, smart, spunky Sarah I knew two years ago is still in there,
she just needs a little help coming out of her shell again."
Sarah bit her lip. "I hope so."

"Now, what do you say we go put this kid in jail?" Alex dropped some money on the table and they headed out to the car.

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Alex and Sarah met Jack and Olivia outside at quarter of eleven, and after a brief introduction, headed into the District Attorney's office.

"So, staying out of trouble, Cabot?" Jack asked once they got in the elevator.

Olivia snorted. "I'm trying to keep her out of trouble, but it's harder than it sounds."

"I understand. It was my job for three years. Good luck, Detective."

Alex rolled her eyes as the elevator dinged at their floor. "C'mon, kids."

She put her game face on as she approached the secretary's desk. "Alexandra Cabot and Jack Hammond; we have an appointment with Mr. Rollins at 11."

A look of confusion passed over the secretary's face as she instructed them to sit and called into his office. Alex pulled out the case file and her legal pad to look over her notes one last time before the meeting began, and pushed her glasses up on her nose.

A few minutes later, an older man with a bit of a limp emerged from the back, followed by a young woman Alex thought couldn't be any older than her youngest ADAs. If she wasn't straight out of law school, she certainly couldn't have very much experience.

Alex steeled herself and stood up to extend her hand. "Manhattan Homicide Bureau Chief Alexandra Cabot; this is Supervisory Special Agent Jack Hammond with the FBI, Detective Olivia Benson with Manhattan Special Victims, and of course, Sarah Williams, your complaining witness in the matter of People v. Chris Keating."

"It's nice to meet you, Ms. Cabot," the man said, shaking her hand. "I'm Tray Rollins, and this is ADA Karen Carter, who will be meeting with you today. Unfortunately, I'm booked for a lunch engagement."

Alex reached out to shake the young ADA's hand. "It's nice to meet you, Ms. Carter. How long have you been with Special Victims?"

"Uh, I usually do arraignments, actually," the young woman replied.

Alex raised her eyebrow and looked at the older man, who shifted on his feet. "We don't have a dedicated ADA for Special Victims in Portland, Ms. Cabot. Our budget doesn't allow for it. But I'm sure Ms. Carter will take good care of you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get to my lunch appointment."

"Cancel it." Alex stared him down.

"I'm sorry, that's not possible. I'm truly sorry."

"Get me a Bureau Chief or an EADA, or cancel your lunch," she looked him in the eye as she pulled out her trump card. "I hardly think it would look good for you if there were any indication that your office was prosecuting a rapist - possibly a serial rapist - anything less than zealously because his
father made significant campaign contributions to your reelection fund."

Jack stifled a smirk as Alex held out the campaign finance report from her briefcase. The DA, a lawyer, didn't react, but Olivia thought he looked like a perp Alex had just cornered.

"Just a moment, please," he went over to his secretary's desk and leaned in. "Christine, could you please reschedule my lunch with the Governor and Mr. Keating?"

Alex raised an eyebrow at Olivia, who rolled her eyes. Alex shrugged, and Olivia flashed her a warm smile.

"My secretary didn't tell me you were a prosecutor," Mr. Rollins commented as he showed the group back to his office.

You mean, she didn't tell you I'd have all the details of the case and call you on your bullshit, Alex thought. "Four years in Special Victims, and now a year as Homicide Bureau Chief after a three-year hiatus in Witness Protection. Rape-homicide with a drug twist gone bad," she explained.

"Fortunately for Ms. Williams, that makes me a virtually unimpeachable eyewitness in her rape case. Now, I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt on the campaign contributions, but I am curious as to why your office didn't pursue this kid with a rape kit, fluids, and hairs, and another eyewitness placing him in the girl's bathroom at the time of the attack. Even with a 'dead' eyewitness pulling the kid off of her, you still had plenty of evidence to go to trial."

The DA folded his hands on his desk. "Ms. Cabot, I don't know how you do things in New York, but in Portland, we don't like to ruin a good kid's future on a he-said-she-said case." Olivia reached over to take Sarah's hand so she wouldn't jump out of her seat. "Besides which, the school investigated and found no evidence of wrongdoing."

"In New York, the District Attorney's office puts rapists in prison," Alex spat. "We believe our victims, and we certainly don't protect wealthy campaign donors and their children from the prosecution of violent crimes. In case you've forgotten, Mr. Rollins, our job is to speak for the victims and balance the scales, not swing them in favor of the highest bidder."

The DA sighed, realizing he had been played. "What would you like me to do, Ms. Cabot?"

"First, I'd like to go over our statements. We also have some new information that seems to implicate Mr. Keating in other rapes at the school, which should be enough for a search warrant for his room. Now, I know this kid. Arrogant little prick, I taught him for a year. What I'd really like is five minutes alone with him to get you his confession, but I'll settle for an indictment on multiple counts of Rape in the first degree."

"Let's go over the evidence, then. I'll get my EADA in here to go over everything, since she'll try the case if it gets that far." He called out to his secretary. "Is that alright with you, Ms. Cabot? She has an excellent record; 68%, and she's taken on rape cases before."

Olivia smirked at Alex, reading her thoughts: I suppose 68% could be considered excellent outside of New York. It's not 91%, but since the national average for prosecutors is 44%…

"Excellent."

After the EADA came in and introduced herself, taking a seat, Alex turned to Sarah. "Are you ready? Do you want to go first?"

Sarah swallowed, and Olivia reached out to touch her arm. "Remember what we talked about. If we're going to do this, you're going to have to get used to telling your story in front of people."
Everyone in this room is on your side."

Mr. Rollins cleared his throat, and Alex gave him a threatening look again.

"Okay," Sarah said reluctantly, straightening in her chair.

"Take your time," Alex offered.

"It was at the Spring Fling, the week after April vacation, two years ago. I was there with my boyfriend and some friends from choir. We had been dancing a lot, and I was hot, so I decided to go to the bathroom to splash some water on my face and get some air. It was about 8:30, and I had been there about an hour.

"There was a long line in the girl's bathroom right near the gym, and a group of girls blocking the sinks and the mirror trying to fix their makeup, so I decided to go to the other girl's bathroom at the other end of the hall. We weren't really supposed to go to that part of the school during a dance, but I didn't see anyone around, and I really had to go to the bathroom. I went, and I was standing in front of the sink putting water on my face when he - Chris Keating - came in.

"I told him he was in the girl's bathroom and asked him what he was doing, and he said he wanted to know if I was having fun with my boyfriend and if I'd save a dance for him. He had never even really talked to me before, and I didn't think he was a very nice guy, so I said no, I really just wanted to get back to my boyfriend. I tried to leave, and he blocked the door, and said he wanted to show me a good time. I tried to push him, and I yelled 'No!', but he was a lot stronger than me, and before I knew it, he had me against the wall, and he was kissing my neck. He pulled down the strap of my dress and put his hand… on my breast. He made me put my hand on him… on his penis, and he started touching me under my panties. Then he unbuttoned his pants and pushed inside of me." Alex handed her a tissue as she started to cry.

"I closed my eyes, and I was crying and kept saying 'No, stop,' over and over. He took a clip from my hair - one with pink sequins - and put it in his pocket, and whispered that he wanted it to remember our first time together. The next thing I know, Ms. Walker - Alex - was pulling him off of me and bringing me to the hospital."

"How many times did you say 'no' or 'stop'?' The EADA asked.

"I don't know, I kept saying them over and over, and tried to hit him and scratch him and push him away."

"And what were you wearing?" she asked.

Alex looked at her watch dramatically and then at Olivia. "Oh, it looks like I set my watch a bit ahead," she said sarcastically. "I thought we were in two thousand eight, and I guess in Portland, they prosecute rape cases like it's 1968." She fixed the older EADA with a glare. "She only has to say 'no' or 'stop' once, and it doesn't matter what she was wearing. The dress is in evidence, but frankly, it's irrelevant. She could have been in there naked, and it wouldn't excuse what he did."

"Relax, Ms. Cabot. Point taken." Mr Rollins said. "Ms. Williams, your statement is exactly the same as the police report. Did Ms. Cabot coach you?"

"My statement is exactly the same because it's the truth," Sarah replied coldly. "And because I've seen it in my nightmares every single night for two years."

"How did you end up in that bathroom, Ms. Cabot?" the EADA asked.
"I was chaperoning the dance," Alex said. "I was working as an English teacher, and I taught a couple sections of freshman and sophomore pre-AP English, and a debate and speech class, and coached the debate team after school and on the weekends. I didn't have much of a social life outside of my job when I was in witness protection, so I attended a lot of school events, spent a lot of time correcting papers in my classroom, and coached the debate team. Sarah was in my English class and my debate class, and she was on the team. She was an excellent student. Mr. Keating was in my sophomore class and was... less than an excellent student. He seemed to believe that being on the football team got him out of things like doing the reading for class and writing papers."

"I left the gym around quarter of nine. I remember because I had been cornered by two male teachers who had both been trying to go out with them since the beginning of the year, and they were trying to get me to dance with them. I looked at my watch to see how much longer the dance was going to last, and then I excused myself to go to the restroom. The faculty women's restroom was at the end of the hallway, right next to the bathroom where Sarah was. When I came out, a student - a junior I think, I didn't know her personally - came running up to me and told me she had seen a boy go into the girl's bathroom a few minutes before and she was looking for someone to tell. Based on the fact that she smelled like smoke, I surmised that she had been smoking in the stairwell across the hall and had just finished her cigarette when she saw me.

"I asked her to wait outside the door, and went in, where I saw Mr. Keating pinning Sarah to the wall. She had her eyes closed, and her fists balled up against the wall, and she was crying and saying 'no' over and over. He his left hand pressing her shoulder back against the wall, and he was whispering something about how good she felt in her ear. His right hand was on her left breast. I shrieked and pulled him off of her, and yelled 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' I saw that his penis was out of his pants, and erect, and that there was some blood on the head. He muttered 'Stupid bitch, I was almost finished,' and fled. I stuck my head out to ask the student to go get my coat and my purse and to knock on the door when she got back.

"I asked Sarah what happened, and she said 'he raped me.' She was crying. I told her that I was going to take her to the hospital to get checked out. She wanted to go to the bathroom and I told her it wasn't a good idea because it would wash away evidence that the rape kit would pick up. I needed a way to explain why I knew so much about rape prosecutions and what to do, so I told her I had been a rape crisis counselor in college and that if she agreed to go to the hospital, Chris would go to jail like he deserved.

"The student came back with my coat and my purse, and I wrapped my coat around Sarah and escorted her out to my car. The principal tried to stop me and tell me that the school couldn't have teachers driving students around, and I told him to shove it and that I was taking her to the hospital, and that if anyone wanted to sue me, they could go right ahead. I sat with her while the nurse did a rape kit, and then I gave my statement to the police. I handed over my driver's licence instead of stating my name so that nothing I said would be a false statement."

Jack handed the file he was holding over to the DA. "This is a partially redacted file on Ms. Cabot's time in Witness Protection that has been declassified for the purposes of this investigation. I don't need to tell you how unusual it is for a federally protected witness to participate in criminal proceedings in an unrelated matter, and if Cesar Velez weren't dead, we wouldn't be here. The file includes complete details on Ms. Cabot's locations and identities throughout her time in Witness Protection, and a complete report on her identity as Kristin Walker, including a copy of the statement she made to me immediately following the rape and details on her 'death' and relocation, which were required by procedure when she witnessed this rape."

"And you're willing and able to testify to all of this in open court?"
Alex and Jack both nodded. "Absolutely," Alex said. "I want you to nail this bastard."

The DA grunted, and Alex thought she saw a hint of a smile. "Now, what about the other rapes you mentioned?"

Alex pulled out another financial document. "We pulled the school's finances and found a few interesting things. One is a $20,000 donation made by Ray Keating to the school's alumni fund the Monday after the rape. There are multiple donations of $20k throughout the four years Chris has been a student."

"Mr. Keating is a very generous donor, who has made multiple donations to my campaign as well, as you seem to be aware. What else have you got?"

"There's also a $100,000 donation that corresponds to the 'early retirement' of the Fundraising Executive, Cheryl Pearl, in May 2006," Olivia explained. "I spoke to Ms. Pearl yesterday and asked if she was aware of the allegations against Mr. Keating and if any other girls had come forward. She had signed a confidentiality agreement when she left the school, but she knows something. I told her that a criminal investigation trumped her confidentiality agreement, but I wasn't there officially. She'll talk if you send someone to interview her."

"And do we have anything other than your gut and some circumstantial donations?"

Alex glared. "Sarah's statement that he took her hairclip should be enough for a search warrant for his room. If you word it broadly, to include girl's accessories, I bet you'll find his trophy collection, and we'll find the other girls. Meanwhile, I have an AUSA arriving on Sunday to investigate allegations of Title IX violations against the school, including why Keating was never punished despite the 'preponderance of evidence' in the rape case, and possibly even corruption charges against school administrators. I'm sure she'll be glad to help identify some of the other girls and get statements from them."

The DA grunted again and rubbed his chin. "Alright, Ms. Cabot. Thank you. We'll be in touch." He stood up to shake their hands and dismiss them.

"Lunch?" Alex asked, looking at Jack and Sarah when they got down to the parking lot. Sarah nodded.

"Sure," Jack said. "Although I think I was promised dinner."

"Tonight or tomorrow, your pick. And maybe brunch on Sunday with Abbie, if you like." Alex winked. "I may even spring for a place that's better than what your per diem would cover."

Jack laughed. "I was kidding, Cabot. But all that manipulation made me hungry. You really are something, you know that?" Alex smiled.

"That went a lot better than I thought it would, actually." Alex said. "I thought I was going to play hardball with the corruption charges. And the nerve of that guy to double-book us at the same time as lunch with the father. Seriously."

"Wait, you think that went well? It seemed pretty disastrous to me," Sarah said. "I don't think they believed a word I said."

"Sarah, it's their job to make sure your story is solid before the case goes to court. The questions about what you were wearing and how many times you said 'no' were out of line, but they are going to push you and treat you like a defense attorney would to make sure their case won't fall apart when you testify."
"My story's not going to change."

"I know that, but they don't. If Rollins has been friends with Ray Keating for a long time and knows the son, he's naturally going to be reluctant to believe you over him. It's human nature. But your story is solid, you're a good witness, and you're telling the truth. That counts for a lot."

"And we have potential corruption charges to hang over his head," Olivia smiled.

"That helps, too." Alex confirmed.

Jack looked at his watch as they sat down at a table in a nearby diner. "What's the over-under on the phone call, you think?"

"Half hour for the search warrant," Alex wagered. "Loser buys lunch. You in?"

They were about to shake on it when Alex's phone rang, and Jack pulled his hand away. "Cheater," Alex mouthed. "Cabot."

"Oh, hi Liz… No, sorry, I was expecting someone, fuck. Do you know who the judge is? Can you text me the number? I'll call him. I should have known she'd try to pull something like this. What a bitch. I don't know how she expects to have a hearing without a guardian anyway. Okay, thanks Liz. Bye."

Alex hung up her phone. "It wasn't him, it was work." She turned to Olivia. "Apparently the social worker in the Simmons case got wind that I was out of town for a few days and filed an emergency motion for a custody hearing on Monday. I guess it doesn't matter to her that there's a four-week backlog for court-appointed guardians. Let me just make this call real quick."

She got up from the table to step outside, and came back a few minutes later looking grim. "I called the judge and straightened everything out, so the hearing won't be until late next week. But Casey said Kelly Simmons has an infection, and they don't think she's going to make it. They're scheduling a hearing to take her off of life support on Monday or Tuesday."

"Jesus," Olivia said. "That poor girl. How's Laura taking it?"

"She doesn't know yet," Alex said. "I talked to Casey afterwards. She's going to go talk to her tomorrow."

Olivia shook her head. "SVU case. She just turned 17 and her father assaulted her mother bad enough that she's been in a coma for more than a week," Olivia explained to Jack and Sarah.

The phone rang again, and this time, Alex recognized a Portland area code. "Cabot," she answered. She smiled as she hung up.

"They got the warrant," Alex said, smiling. "And they're on their way to pick him up for questioning now… at vacation weight training at the school."
"You really shouldn't listen to this," Olivia said, touching Sarah's shoulder gently. "Alex will tell you neither of us cares much for following the rules, but this might be upsetting."

"No, going to school with him every day for the past two years has been upsetting," Sarah replied. "I'm still not convinced he'll actually get in trouble, but at least let me watch him sweat."

Olivia shrugged her shoulder at the Portland sergeant, who nodded. "Okay. Just let me know if it gets to be too much and we'll go outside, okay?" Olivia crossed her arms and leaned against the glass window separating them from the interrogation room.

"So, do all the girls cry when you have sex with them, or just the ones you rape in the girl's bathroom?" Alex asked, walking confidently into the interrogation room and slamming a file on the table.

Chris's head shot up from staring at the table, and he turned white as a ghost the second he heard her voice. "You're… dead. You're supposed to be dead."

Alex smiled conspiratorially and sat down across from him, folding her hands on the table and leaning in. "Turns out that was just a government conspiracy. I'm actually very much alive. And you know what's really bad luck for you? I'm a sex crimes prosecutor. Which means I put rapists like you in jail Every. Single. Day." She pressed her lips together and stared.

"I didn't rape anybody," he said.

"No?" Alex asked. "Because usually when a girl wants it, she cries 'Oh, yes!' instead of 'No, stop, please don't.'"

"You missed that part and misinterpreted what you saw. I gave her her first orgasm. You know. Sarah wasn't one of the cool kids. Nobody at that school would've touched her if it hadn't been for me."

"Ah, so you were being generous and doing her a favor by fucking her in the bathroom, is that right?"

—

Behind the glass, Jack held out his handkerchief to Olivia, and glanced at her sideways while touching the side of his mouth. "You're drooling, Detective," he smirked.

Olivia rolled her eyes and reached out to swat him.

"Assaulting a federal agent, in front of witnesses, are we?" Jack teased.

"Jack, leave it alone. Or, at least don't tease her about it. It's still new."

"Dating a woman, or dating you?"

"For her, both. And I don't want to scare her away."

"I don't think Alex Cabot is easily scared away from anything," Jack commented.

Olivia laughed. "You're right, she's not. But it's not really official yet. I've had a hard year, and she's
had a rough time the past few years, so we've agreed not to rush into anything."

"Eight years certainly isn't rushing. She deserves a little happiness after everything she's been through, don't you think?"

"This could be serious. At least, for me it is, so we don't want to screw this up." She turned back to the window. "I have to say, I missed this. Casey's good, but…"

Jack smiled. "Just take good care of her. And when the time comes, make sure I get an invitation."

Olivia's eyes widened at the thought, and then she glanced over at Sarah, wondering how much attention the girl was paying to the conversation about her personal life, which was much more detailed than she - or Alex, for that matter - would want anyone to overhear. But Sarah had her arms wrapped around herself and appeared to be staring off into space, not really watching the interrogation unfold in front of her.

"Sarah," Olivia said softly, putting her hand on the girl's back. "Let's go outside for a minute, okay?" She let herself be led down the hall to a corner with little foot traffic. "You don't have to listen to this, sweetie. It's not going to get you the answers you're looking for."

"He doesn't even think he did anything wrong," she said through her tears.

Olivia shook her head. "Most of them don't," she replied gently. "Or they know and they don't care. Do you think it will help you to understand why?"

Sarah shrugged a shoulder and looked down at the floor. "I don't know."

"I've been putting these guys in jail for almost ten years, and they always have their reasons, but there's never an excuse for what they do. But if you want a reason, Chris is what we'd call a power reassurance rapist. They usually have positions of power - good jobs, good salaries, in this case, he was a popular rich kid - and most of the time they even have girlfriends or wives. They don't do it for sex, they do it because they get off on overpowering women and feeling in control."

"He's a football player and really popular. He could already have almost any girl he wanted in the whole school. Except for me, because I thought he was a jerk from the second I met him."

"And that's probably part of why he targeted you, because he couldn't stand the idea that someone wasn't impressed by him being a wealthy athlete," Olivia reasoned.

"I just hate that I lost my virginity to him in a school bathroom. My boyfriend wanted to, and I told him I wasn't ready, and then…"

"Sarah, being raped doesn't mean that he took your virginity. That's yours to give. Rape is not about sex, it's about power and control. When you're ready, and you're with someone who respects you and cares about you, and you choose to have sex because you want to, that's when you'll lose your virginity, okay?"

"Nobody's going to want me. He didn't want me anymore."

"That's not true. Sarah, what Chris did to you reflects his value as a human being, not yours. He didn't rape you because you deserved it, and you're not dirty or unworthy of love and respect. Same thing for your ex-boyfriend. Not everyone knows how to handle these things and be supportive. It doesn't mean he's a bad person or that nobody's going to want you, it just means that he's a little short on empathy and he's not the right person for you."
"I should have been able to fight back. If I hadn't gone to that other bathroom…"

"Hey," Olivia reached out to touch her arm again. "That's not helpful. You know I'm a cop, right? I have to pass a physical fitness test every year for my job and I'm pretty strong compared to most women. And I was still very nearly raped last year, and I wouldn't have been able to do anything to stop it. I only got lucky because my partner came in just in the nick of time."

"Really?"

Olivia nodded. "And the man I was dating at the time didn't want to wait for me to 'get over it,' so we broke up. I don't think being an asshole is something that you grow out of. But rape can literally happen to anyone, and luckily there are plenty of people who aren't assholes and who will be supportive."

"I guess I'm lucky that Alex is still speaking to me. I've been a pretty big jerk to her." Sarah said. "I'm not sure why either of you is still being nice to me."

"That's just the kind of person Alex is. She wanted to come back and get justice for you, even though she knew it wasn't going to be easy for you or for her. And she understands what you're going through more than you think."

"Was it really that horrible for her to come back here for me?"

Olivia pressed her lips together. "I can't talk about things that Alex told me in confidence, but I think that being away from New York was difficult for her, and coming back here reminds her. I know not everything that happened during those 3 years was bad, but she's still working through it."

"She told me she attempted suicide after she was shot."

Olivia nodded, fighting back tears as she thought about their conversation from the day before. "She told me she was going to tell you. She's not someone who shares things about herself easily, especially things that painful. I think if she told you, it's because she wants you to believe that things will get better."

"But things didn't get better for her."

"Well, unfortunately having one or more bad things happen to you doesn't preclude other bad things from happening to you later. It's true that Alex has had a rough time, especially when she was away from home, but now she has her family and lots of friends who love and support her. And she's a very strong person. She's been through a lot, and she's still here, fighting, for you. So you can get justice, and heal, too."

"I don't know if I'm that strong."

"You already are, sweetie. And you've got me and Alex in your corner." She opened her arms to offer Sarah a reassuring hug. "Do you want to go back in?"

Sarah nodded, and a few moments after they reentered the interrogation room, Olivia noticed the predatory smile curl up, almost imperceptibly, on Alex's lips. "Look, she's got him right where she wants him," Olivia pointed out.

Sarah's eyes were drawn back to the window.
"They all say no, and they all cry, but after I get done with them, they're popular! Sarah's the only one dumb enough to get shunned because she cried rape and went to the police. Everyone else knows that if they keep quiet they earn their place at that school. None of them would belong there if it wasn't for me!"

"So let me get this straight. You force girls who are on scholarship to have sex with you, convince them it's not rape because you gave them an orgasm, and then blackmail them into not telling by threatening to ostracize them?"

Chris shrugged. "Hey, they know it's just part of tuition when they're on scholarship. I only have sex with the hot girls. And blackmail is a strong word, don't you think?"

Alex slid a piece of paper across the table. "And this is the list of all the 'hot girls' who exchanged sex for popularity?"

Chris nodded. "Yeah. But none of them will tell you they were raped! They knew the deal!" he called as Alex walked quickly out of the door.

—

"How's that for a confession?" she asked the EADA.

"Well, it's enough to charge him for Sarah's rape, but if we want to charge him with the others, we'll have to interview the other girls to see if their stories match his. If they do, we've got the trophy collection and the physical evidence from Sarah's rape kit, so we should be able to charge him with all 13 counts," she replied. "I'm inclined to go for the maximum on this, but even if he pleads out, he's not eligible for parole for a very long time."

"Thank you," Alex said, and they shook hands. "Now the next step is to investigate whether or not the father or anyone at the school is an accessory. Aside from the fact that I personally reported Sarah's rape to the principal and gave them copies of the police reports, I sincerely doubt that 12 other rapes happened on school property and nobody knew about it. You just have to prove it."

"We'll look into it. But the people at that school have a lot of clout."

"And the parents of the girls on scholarship don't," Alex finished.

"I'm just saying it's not going to be easy."

"Then you'll just have to build a good case. The federal prosecutor arriving on Sunday should be able to help with that. When are you going to arraign him?"

"I can bring him down now. I'll file for all 13 so I can go for remand, and then we'll try to get statements from the other witnesses over the weekend so his lawyer doesn't get them dismissed. Do you think you and Detective Benson would be willing to talk to some of the victims with Portland detectives? We only have one woman in Portland SVU, and they're not going to be able to get to all 12 other victims this weekend."

"I think that's a good idea," Alex agreed. "I'll check with Liv, but it should be fine. We both really want to get this guy."

"Alright. I'm going to bring him down now to be arraigned, and then I'll call you so we can split up the addresses and go talk to his other victims. I'm actually surprised his lawyer hasn't showed up yet."
"That would be me," a short, stout, balding man said as he entered the office. "Martin Langan for the defense… holy shit. I thought you were dead."

"Then I'm sorry to disappoint you. Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated," Alex quipped, confused for a moment before she made the connection. "Wow, Trevor Langan's little brother, all grown up. I didn't know you were in Portland. But you're a bit late. Your client has already confessed and given us the names of his other victims."

"You were talking to him without a parent or a lawyer? And you're not working for the Portland DA's office, so I don't know why you'd be talking to him."

"He's 17, so no parent necessary, Marty," the EADA said. "He waived Miranda. And Ms. Cabot is one of the eyewitnesses to one of your client's crimes."

Langan turned white. "I'd like a few minutes alone with my client, please."

Alex nodded and turned on her heels. "Please excuse me a moment," she said abruptly, rushing off to the nearest bathroom and locking the door behind her, before leaning against the wall and bursting into tears.

As Langan entered the interrogation room and demanded privacy from the officers on the other side of the window, Olivia and and a teary-eyed Sarah went back out into the hallway, looking for Alex.

"I think she went to use the restroom," the EADA commented, pointing down the hall.

Olivia pushed on the door, and knocked when she found that it was locked. "Lex?" she asked. "Are you okay? Can I come in?" She heard movement, but the door didn't unlock. After a few more tries, she decided that maybe Alex wanted some privacy. "Lex, sweetie, I'm going to be on the bench right around the corner. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

She motioned for Sarah to follow her, but Sarah leaned against the door for a few moments, then held up her fist, trying to decide whether to knock.

"Alex?" she said through her tears, knocking after a few moments' hesitation. "Can we talk?"

After a minute, the door opened to let Sarah in. Alex had stopped crying and washed her face, but her eyes were still red and puffy.

"I wanted to say thank you," Sarah whispered. She stepped forward and opened her arms. "Can I?" she asked, wrapping her arms around Alex's neck as soon as she nodded. "I'm sorry I've been a bitch to you. I know it wasn't easy for you to come here after everything that happened to you, and I'm grateful you did. I don't know how to repay you."

Alex squeezed her back. "No apologies or repayment necessary," Alex said, sniffing and wiping a stray tear from her eye. "The only thing I want is for you to work on getting better and on taking back what he took from you."

Sarah nodded into her shoulder. "I know it's not over yet, but I already feel… different, a little better, somehow."

"Hope," Alex pulled back and smiled weakly. "You feel hope."

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"Do you want us to drop you off, or do you want us to wait in the waiting room and then drive you
home so we can talk to your parents?" Alex asked once they were in the car.

"Will you come in and wait for me?" Sarah asked timidly.

Alex parked the car, and she reached over to squeeze Sarah's hand as she took a deep breath and began walking towards the therapist's office.

"Hey Sarah?" Alex said just before they walked into the office suite.

"Yeah?" she replied nervously.

"I know it's scary, and it'll be really hard, but it'll help. Just don't give up, okay?"

Sarah nodded and went back into the office as the doctor called her name.

"We'll be right here when you get out," Olivia reassured her as they both sunk down into the couch.

As soon as she was out of sight, Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. "How are you doing, sweetie?"

"Today was hard," Alex admitted, leaning down into Olivia's lap, not caring that she was probably wrinkling one of the only suits she'd brought with her.

"I know, but you were amazing," Olivia soothed, stroking Alex's hair. "I don't know how you manage to be so strong."

"I just really wanted to get him, Liv," Alex whispered, tears threatening again. "I don't feel strong. I just did what I had to do."

Olivia kissed her temple. "And that's what makes you incredible. Now I know you're emotionally exhausted and hurting, so let me hold you for a while, okay? We can talk about it later."

Alex nodded, entwining her fingers with Olivia's and bringing Olivia's hand to her lips. "I love you," she said, closing her eyes.

"I love you too, sweetie. Get some rest. I'll wake you up when Sarah comes out."

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Alex and Olivia were sitting on the couch, holding hands and reading when Sarah came out two hours later, her face drawn.

"Ready?" Olivia asked, looking up from the magazine and placing it on the coffee table. Sarah nodded, avoiding eye contact.

Alex let go of Olivia's hand as she stood up and smoothed out her skirt, slinging her briefcase over her shoulder and slipping the case file she had been reading back inside.

"Are you doing alright?" Alex asked, rushing to keep up as the girl headed towards the car. Sarah nodded again, still not saying anything. Alex reached for her hand and stopped her in the middle of the parking lot. "Look, we don't expect you to talk about it. But do you think she's a good fit, or would you like to meet someone else?"

"She's fine," Sarah said flatly, letting go of Alex's hand and getting into the back seat of the black Audi.

Alex handed the keys to Olivia and slid into the passenger seat, turning around to face Sarah, her
mouth open as she tried to figure out what to say.

"It's been a long day, huh?" she finally said, a bit lamely. Sarah nodded again. "We don't have to talk to your parents right now if you're not up for it. I know therapy can take a lot out of you."

"Let's just get it over with," Sarah said, looking out the window.

—

As soon as they were back in the hotel room, Alex leaned against Olivia and buried her face in her neck, her arms wrapped around Olivia's waist, needing to be held. Content to inhale Alex's scent, Olivia stroked her hair and rubbed her back gently with the other hand, waiting for Alex to relax.

"Do you want to talk?" Olivia murmured, guiding Alex towards the couch, where she laid them down holding each other, with Alex facing in.

"He felt no remorse, Liv. He didn't even think he'd done anything wrong." Alex finally said.

"He felt entitled," Olivia supplied, kissing Alex's forehead. "How many times have we seen the same thing before?"

"Just like Robert," Alex said, flinching slightly when she said his name.

"And he'll get what's coming to him and end up in prison, just like Robert," Olivia reassured her.

"Are you sure you're up for interviewing more girls tomorrow, sweetie?"

"I have to. I said I would."

"Lex, the only things you have to do are take care of yourself and testify at Keating's trial. You're doing way more than you have to and I'm worried about you."

"Liv, it's helping, I promise. If it gets to be too much, I'll stop. But this is something I need to do."

"Sweetie, I don't know how you define 'helping,' but you woke up three times with nightmares last night, and you've had what, five flashbacks in the less than two days we've been here?"

"Six," Alex admitted, tearing up. "Liv, I can't stop the flashbacks or the nightmares, and I can't stop hurting, but I know that helping as much as I can to fix this case will help me. I just need you to trust me, okay?"

"I just hate to see you hurting, Lex."

"I'm going to hurt anyway."

"Can I help?"

"You're already helping, Liv. More than you know. But you have no idea how guilty I feel about this, and I have to fix it."

"Lex, I understand what you're trying to do and I agree that it's important, but prosecuting this case isn't going to resolve your feelings about Witsec any more than having the abortion resolved your feelings about what Robert did to you. And putting more rapists in jail, however satisfying, isn't going to magically heal you, or Sarah, either."

Alex jumped to her feet and paced angrily around the room. "So what do I do, Liv? Sit around and twiddle my thumbs until I suddenly feel all better? Until I don't want to run screaming any time a
man comes within ten feet of me or someone sneaks up behind me? Until I don't want to claw out of my own skin every time I try to imagine the woman I love touching me sexually? Until I don't feel his mouth on me every time I close my eyes and wake up feeling like I was just raped all over again?"

Olivia sat up and reached out a hand for Alex's, but she pulled away. "Lex, I…"

"I'm trying really hard to trust you and let you in, but I can't keep justifying myself to you, Olivia." And just as she burst into tears, she ran into the bathroom and slammed the door.

Olivia felt tears welling up in her own eyes, and grabbed one of Alex's pillows from the bed. She hadn't been trying to talk Alex out of anything, she'd just wanted to gauge whether or not Alex was trying to avoid her feelings by stressing out about the case. She wanted to nail everyone involved too, probably as badly as Alex did. No, not as badly as Alex did. It was personal for Alex. But as badly as she would if it were her own case back in New York.

The part that really stung, though, was Alex's admission that she wanted to crawl out of her own skin. Did she feel that way when Olivia touched her? Had Olivia misread the signs? Had she allowed her own need to be touched override her better judgment about how ready Alex was? She thought she'd been careful to be gentle with Alex and to make sure that she was comfortable every time she'd touched her, but maybe she hadn't been careful enough.

She barely registered the sound of bathwater running, and though she'd wanted to give Alex only a few minutes before apologizing, it was more like half an hour before she realized that Alex was still in the bathroom with no water sounds.

Wiping the tears from her puffy eyes, Olivia cleared her throat and knocked gently on the door. "Alex? Alex, I'm sorry. Can I come in?"

It was unlike Alex not to answer at all; Olivia expected at least a 'go to hell' if she wasn't up for talking, but no response worried her. After a few knocks, Olivia's detective skills got the better of her, and she opened the door.

Alex was laying in the bathtub, her eyes squeezed shut and her open mouth hovering just above the water. Her arms gripped the sides of the tub, and she shook. Olivia caught her by the elbow and pulled her out of the tub just before her mouth sank into the water, and she sputtered and coughed, spitting water in Olivia's face as her eyes flew open and, stiff as a board, she began to shake and cry harder than before.

Olivia had witnessed most of Alex's flashbacks, but this was by far the worst. It took Olivia a moment to realize exactly what she had done, and she immediately tried to reach for Alex's robe to cover her, but Alex clinging to her arms prevented her from reaching the hook on the back of the door. So she stood, terrified, trying not to move, until Alex finally collapsed against her, sobbing, a long time later.

When she could finally maneuver a bit, Olivia wrapped the robe around Alex, and they both cried for what seemed like forever, soaking wet in the middle of the bathroom.

"Don't scare me like that, Lex," Olivia said through her tears when she could finally get words out again. "I can't lose you again."

"I had a flashback," Alex whimpered into Olivia's shoulder. "I know after everything I told you yesterday you probably think I did it on purpose, but I swear I didn't. I thought a bath would be okay, and as soon as I got in… I couldn't get myself out of it. And then when you pulled me out, it
was like him all over again…"

"I'm sorry, Alex. I was too scared to think before I did that, but I'm not sure what else I could have done."

"I keep coming back to that moment," Alex whispered after a while. "He had pulled me out of the tub, and I dropped my wine glass, and everything started happening in slow motion, and I realized that there was no way I was going to be able to stop him but I wasn't going down without a fight." She swallowed a lump in her throat and looked into Olivia's eyes through their tears. "I think that's something we all have in common. All victims, I mean. That moment when we know what's about to happen and that we're helpless. That terror."

"I wasn't…"

Alex put her finger on Olivia's lips. "I know you weren't raped. But he got pretty close before Fin got there, didn't he? You had one of those moments, too."

Olivia nodded, her eyes widening as she flashed back to the moment Lowell Harris had pinned her. She'd been afraid as soon as he'd started heading towards the basement, and again when she saw the dirty mattress on the floor, but that was the moment she'd known that she wasn't going to be able to escape him. "For me it was when he had me up against the chain link gate and was about to handcuff me to it," Olivia admitted quietly. "I could see his erection. He got it up chasing me around that basement."

"That's what I need to feel better, Olivia. I need that moment back. I need to heal that moment." She leaned in to kiss Olivia, slowly, gently, and she felt Olivia's mouth respond to hers as Olivia's arms tightened around her waist. Slowly, she took Olivia's hand and held it for a minute at her side before bringing it up to her chest.

Olivia pulled away slightly and studied Alex's face. "What are you doing?" she asked softly.

"Rewriting history," Alex replied, leaning into Olivia's touch and pressing their mouths together again.

Olivia held her hand in place, not wanting to contradict Alex, but worried about the conversation they'd had less than an hour before. "Lex," she whispered when they broke for air. "You just told me that me touching you makes you want to crawl out of your skin. I can't do this to you."

Alex shook her head. "Liv, it's complicated. And I didn't say it was you touching me. I said it was me imagining you touching me sexually," she clarified, blushing. "It's just… I've thought about… more intimate touching, of fingers, and, uh, other parts, and… I want to be, but… I'm not ready for that yet." She buried her face in Olivia's shoulder, embarrassed.

"You think about us making love?"

Alex nodded into Olivia's shoulder, aware that she was turning bright red all over. "How can I not?" she asked, frustrated. "You're the only person I've ever felt… that way about."

Olivia smiled. "I think about it too," she whispered into Alex's ear. "I told you I'll wait as long as I need to."

"I don't want to wait a long time. I don't want to give him one more second of my life. Just trust me, okay?" Olivia nodded as Alex pulled back and looked into her eyes. Alex kissed Olivia again, deeply, and pulled her arms back around her waist until Olivia was holding her tightly again, and started walking them backwards towards the bed.
She stopped when her legs hit the edge of the bed and adjusted her robe, closing it around her and tying the belt, and then laid back, pulling Olivia over her on all fours.

"Lex, what are we doing?" Olivia whispered as Alex made eye contact again and gave her another kiss.

"Relax, Liv, we're not having sex."

Olivia smiled and touched her forehead to Alex's. "I didn't think so. Besides, I don't consent."

Alex rolled her eyes. "See, this is what it should feel like. Easy."

"Are you saying I'm easy, Lex?" Olivia raised an eyebrow.

"I'm saying that this, right here, is what I want to replace that moment with. Being held and brought to bed by you instead of by him."

"Me too, Lex," Olivia murmured, kissing Alex again and staring into cloudy blue eyes. Alex stared back and reached up to tuck Olivia's hair behind her ear. She opened her mouth to speak a few times, but the words didn't come out. "What is it, Lex?" Olivia asked gently. "Tell me."

"Liv, you're dripping on me."

Olivia looked down at her soaking wet clothes and gathered part of her shirt in her hands, wringing it on the exposed part of Alex's neck and chest, causing her to shriek and squirm away.

"All of this came from you, sweetie," she retorted, sticking out her tongue. She pushed off of the bed and grabbed her pjs, heading into the bathroom to let the water out of the tub and dry off with a towel.

When she emerged, Alex was lying on the bed in her own pyjamas, an unopened journal next to her. Olivia was glad to see that she was comfortable wearing a simple cotton nightgown with a camisole, a far cry from the layers of t-shirt and sweater and bathrobe she'd worn over thick sweatpants just after her attack.

"Does this mean we're doing dinner with Jack tomorrow?" Olivia asked, laying down next to her.

"Yeah, he said tomorrow would be better." Alex curled into Olivia and leaned her head on her shoulder. "And I don't know about you, but I'm pretty tired."

"Lex, I'm sorry about earlier. I trust you to know what you need. And I know how important it is to you to put this kid in prison." 

"It's okay, Liv. I overreacted."

"Still, I wasn't as supportive as I should have been." She gestured towards the journal. "You writing down your flashbacks for Caroline?"

Alex nodded. The doctor had asked her to write down what triggered her flashbacks, how long they lasted, and how she got out of them, as well as what happened generally during her trip. Since she was missing two therapy appointments and having more flashbacks than usual, she was filling up her journal pretty quickly.

"How about I go get some pizza or something while you do that, and then we can watch a movie?" Olivia asked.
Alex nodded. "Pizza's good. And beer?"

"Corona okay?" She kissed Alex on the cheek and went to her suitcase. "I guess this means I have to put a bra back on. I think I'll keep the yoga pants, though."

"That is an advantage of small boobs. I can go braless on occasion."

"Yeah, I can't really get away with that, unfortunately." Olivia slipped the bra on under her shirt and grabbed her keys and her wallet. "I'll probably be gone what, 45 minutes or so, depending on how long the pizza takes? Text me if you think of anything else I should get."

Olivia returned just under an hour later with the food to find Alex laying on the bed, deep in thought. "Penny for your thoughts?"

"I'm just thinking about Sarah, wondering how she's doing with her parents."

"Why didn't she tell them when it happened?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't know. She wouldn't even let me call them from the hospital. I encouraged her to when I brought her home, but she refused, so we made something up about how I thought she had been drugged."

"I was wondering if maybe we should call social services. The mother seemed pretty strung-out. It can't be easy taking care of her wheelchair-bound husband and a teenager with emotional problems. No wonder Sarah's been having a hard time. Maybe a social worker will be able to give her some resources for caretakers."

Alex sighed. "Yeah, we can call on Monday. That's probably a good idea. At least Mom didn't seem opposed to the idea of therapy, just to its potential cost. So if it's being paid for, Sarah should be able to go."

They ate their pizza in relative silence and laid back on the bed to flip through the channels, finally settling on a movie that neither of them was really watching.

"Lex, I mean what I said about not being able to lose you again," Olivia murmured. "I don't think I'd survive it."

"I'm not going anywhere, Liv, I promise," Alex said, taking Olivia's hand. "This is not an experiment, and it's not some 'I hate men' reaction to being raped or a 'you rescued me' thing. This is real for me. What do I have to do to convince you?"

"That's not it, Lex. It's not you I'm worried about. I just... it's... I don't know if I can explain it."

"Try? Please?" Alex turned off the TV and rolled onto her side, facing Olivia.

"I guess I'm just used to being alone," Olivia started. "I thought I was in love before. Twice. The first time, I was 16, and he was almost 30. He broke it off when my mother threatened to have him kicked out of his grad program when she found out. That was the biggest fight I ever had with her, and it involved a broken vodka bottle. I was devastated." She looked at Alex, whose neutral expression was impossible to read, but Alex squeezed her hand in encouragement.

"The other time was when I was in the Academy. Her name was Rebecca. She was the first woman I did anything with, and it was really fast and really intense. I was a little more experienced by then, but the sex was amazing. And three months later, she was gone. She decided that being a cop wasn't good enough for her and left the Academy to go to med school. Barely even said goodbye. She
broke my heart and she wouldn't even answer my phone calls or tell me why." Olivia shook her head. "She's a shrink now. Came back last year to consult when Huang was away. Cragen even had her evaluate whether Elliot and I should stay partners after a rough case. He had no idea we had a history, of course."

"Did Elliot know?"

Olivia nodded. "I told him, but I think he figured it out first. It was pretty clear that I wasn't very… receptive to her presence."

Alex snorted. "Yeah, I bet that went well. Being shrunk by your ex?"

Olivia laughed. "We had an argument and sort of declared a truce. I got to say what I couldn't say all those years ago, which she admitted she deserved. But Lex, after she left, I sort of shut myself off. I've had a not insignificant number of meaningless one-night stands, and a handful of relationships that have lasted a few months, mostly been with people I knew I'd never develop strong feelings for. And... I've never really let anyone in since."

"Like Kurt and Jenna," Alex supplied, reaching up to touch Olivia's hair. Olivia nodded. "And after Sealview you didn't want to do casual."

"I couldn't do casual. At first I just acted like nothing happened… because nothing did happen." She paused to swallow the lump in her throat and wipe away a tear.

"Except that something did happen," Alex said quietly.

Olivia sniffled and nodded. "You know the rest. I tried to sleep with Kurt like nothing had happened and I couldn't even let him take my shirt off before I freaked. Tried a few dates after that but was too chicken to go home with anyone. The touching exercises we've done… you're the first one to touch me like that in almost a year." Olivia admitted, avoiding eye contact as she started to cry.

"Shh, Liv, it's okay," Alex soothed, bringing Olivia's head to her chest and holding her.

"Lex, I mean it. This 'feelings' thing is new to me. Or, at least, I've been out of practice for almost 20 years."

"I haven't exactly been the poster child for healthy and honest relationships either. I can't promise I won't screw up." Alex laughed cynically. "God, I've spent the past however many years not having feelings and now that's all I have all the time, and I can't control them, and it sucks. Too many feelings."

"Not letting your feelings interfere with your work isn't the same thing as not having them. Maybe in Witsec you let yourself go numb, but I never thought you didn't have feelings." Olivia ran her thumb over Alex's fingers in their still-entwined hands. "Or, at least, I didn't think that for very long," she said wryly.

"Can I ask you something?" Alex asked abruptly, pulling slightly away to look at Olivia.

"Anything," Olivia agreed.

"When did you know you had feelings for me?"

Olivia bit her lip and pulled Alex in again, kissing her temple. "'God, what a bitch' feelings or warm fuzzy feelings?" she asked a twinkle in her eye. Alex swatted her playfully.
"I think I had feelings for you from before I met you - when Cragen was telling us about your breakfast meeting, and I thought, 'Man, she's got some nerve.'" Alex cringed. "But I wasn't really acknowledging feelings at the time, and you were straight anyway, so I didn't recognize them until I was sitting in the hospital covered in your blood and they were telling us you didn't make it. That's when I knew," Olivia explained as she started crying again.

Alex clung to her as her own tears threatened. "I think that's when I knew, too. I mean, I didn't know I knew, but I knew I couldn't leave you without saying goodbye. Without you knowing that I wasn't really dead and that you weren't responsible."

Olivia swallowed and waited until Alex was looking into her eyes. "Lex, what we've had the past few weeks... I've never been this intimate with anyone before, emotionally or physically." She saw Alex's surprise at the last part. "Even though we haven't had sex, the touching exercises... I almost never let anyone pleasure me, and nobody's ever... explored my body quite so thoroughly before. And we haven't even been that thorough, yet." She looked away for a moment. "It's mostly just been about sex for me. Does that bother you?"

Alex shook her head. "I knew you weren't a virgin, Liv. And I'm not naïve. You did have a reputation."

"It's not at all about sex with you, Lex. I mean, it is, because I'm very attracted to you, but it's so much more than that. And I'm not sure I understand all the feelings I have, and quite frankly, they terrify me. But somehow, I know that this is love." Olivia looked back up into Alex's eyes, not sure what she was going to see, irrationally afraid that after pouring her heart out to the only person she trusted, she'd see derision or disgust. She saw neither.

"It's about love and feelings and sex for me, too, Liv," Alex reassured her, her voice barely audible. "I promise not to break your heart if you promise not to break mine."

"Done," Olivia said swiftly, leaning in to kiss her. "Can you also promise not to get shot again?"

Alex chuckled and wrapped her arms around Olivia as they lay down to cuddle before bed. "Done."
"This better be really good," Alex answered her phone at an ungodly hour the next morning, irritated that for once, she'd been having a nice dream involving Olivia and had been woken up abruptly.

"Lexie, are you still in bed?" Bill asked, momentarily forgetting why he had called.

"Bill, it's really freaking early," Alex groaned. "Didn't I tell you I was in Portland this weekend for a case?"

"Yes, but it's not any earlier in Portland... Wait, did you mean the Oregon Portland?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "Yes, Bill, the Oregon Portland, not Portland, Maine. It's 6:30 in the morning. On a Saturday."

"Sorry. If I had known I would have called later. But Lexie has something very important to tell her Auntie Alex. She's very excited."

Olivia kissed Alex's forehead as she rolled out of bed to throw on some clothes. 'Coffee?' she mouthed, grabbing her room key and her wallet. Alex nodded.

"Auntie Alex!" her niece's voice came through the phone, and Alex smiled. "Why my daddy is calling you Lexie? That's my name!"

"We have the same name, remember? And I'm Alex and you're Lexie, but sometimes your daddy calls me Lexie when he's being silly. He always called me that before you were even born."

"When I was in Mommy's tummy?"

"Yup, and even before that, when I was small like you."

"I not small! I big! I go to preschool."

"You are big," Alex agreed, smiling wistfully. "What did your daddy want you to tell me?"

"He says I gonna be a big sister."

"Really?! Wow!" Alex replied.

"Yeah, he says there's a baby in Mommy's tummy like I was."

"That's so exciting, Lexie. Are you excited?"

"Not reawwy. I like being the only kid."

Alex laughed. "I bet you'll like being a big sister, too. Do you want a baby brother or a baby sister?"

"Wewl, what I reawwy want is a kitty or maybe a puppy, 'cause they cute. And Daddy says babies go potty in diapers and they smell bad. But if I have to, I guess I want a brofver."

Alex chuckled. "That's a good choice. I like having a brother."

"You have a brofver, Auntie Alex? Who is he?"

"Your daddy is my brother, silly. That's why I'm your auntie."
"Oh. Okay. I gotta go now. Bye!"

"Lexie, you still there?" Bill asked, picking up the phone that had been discarded on the table.

"I'm still here," Alex confirmed. "Congratulations," she said warmly. "I'm so happy for you. How far along is she?"

"Eleven weeks," Bill said. Alex did a quick calculation and realized that she would have been ten weeks along if she had decided to continue her pregnancy. "Michelle had two miscarriages at six and seven weeks, so we wanted to wait a bit. We had our first ultrasound yesterday and everything looked good, so we're just telling you, Dad, and Michelle's parents for now."

"I'm sorry, Bill, I didn't know," Alex admitted.

"I know you didn't, Lexie. The second one was right after you came back, and we kept it quiet and stopped trying for a while."

"Well, I'll cross my fingers that everything works out this time. Is she feeling okay?"

"She had pretty bad morning sickness and was really tired but she's doing better. How are you doing, Lexie?"

"I'm getting there. Have you talked to Dad?"

"Yeah, he still doesn't get what the big deal is," Bill replied, sighing. "I'm sorry, Lexie."

"Don't be sorry. It's not your fault. He just couldn't get past the fact that we were engaged and that therefore, it wasn't possible for him to rape me."

"He'll figure it out eventually. In the meantime, let me talk to him and don't let him interfere with you getting better."

"Thanks, Bill." Alex said, a tear rolling down her cheek. "I mean, I see this all the time. I just didn't think it would be my own father, you know?"

Olivia slipped back into the room at that moment and put a cup of coffee in her hands before sitting behind her and wrapping her arms tight around Alex's stomach, her chin resting on Alex's shoulder.

"You're still staying with Olivia, right? She taking good care of you?"

"Yeah. She came to Portland to help with the case, too." Alex took a sip of her coffee and leaned back into Olivia's arms.

"Well, I'm glad you have someone to be supportive. You know you can always come up here, but I understand if it's too hectic for you."

"Thanks. I do want to come up to visit again soon. I'm sorry I missed Opening Day, but I just wasn't ready to be out in that kind of crowd," Alex said. It was a long-standing tradition to go to Fenway's first weekend home game together, and she'd been disappointed to miss the first once since she'd returned from witness protection. "And I wouldn't want to impose when I'm... jumpy and emotional. It wouldn't be good for Lexie."

"You're never an imposition, Lexie, you're my little sister. And cuddles from a little girl who adores her auntie are the best medicine there is."

Alex smiled. "Well, Dr. Cabot, if you write me a prescription I'll come up soon to fill it."
"Gladly." He paused. "Alex, did I ever tell you why Lexie is named after you?"

"Because I was dead when she was born?"

"No, Lexie. That FBI agent told me about witness protection when Mom died because I'm the executor of your estate, and of hers, and they wanted to preserve your assets. I was sworn to secrecy, and not even Michelle knew, but that's not it."

Alex was surprised by the revelation. She had never thought about the fact that her inheritance from her mother would have been compromised if her estate hadn't gone into probate. "Oh, I didn't know you knew," was all she could say.

"She's named after you because you're the strongest, bravest person I know," Bill said quietly. "I can only hope she grows up to be half as headstrong and tenacious and smart as you. Defender of man, right?"

Alex swallowed a lump in her throat. "Bill…"

"You don't have to say anything. I just thought you should know."

"Thank you," Alex said softly. "Bill?" she said after a pause. "There's something I have to tell you, too."

"What is it, Lexie?"

Alex squeezed Olivia's hand and took a deep breath. "Olivia… has become more than a friend." She rushed through the revelation and held her breath.

"I hope that means you'll bring her the next time you come to visit," Bill said. Alex breathed a soft sigh of relief. "She's much better for you than that prick who shall not be named. It was obvious that she cares a lot about you."

"She does. And I… care a lot about her, too."

"Then I'm happy for you. Just take care of yourself, Lexie, okay? And come up to visit soon. Preferably with Olivia."

"I will. And tell Michelle congratulations for me?"

"Of course. Bye, Lexie. Give Olivia a kiss for me. And I'm sorry I called so early."

Alex chuckled. "Bye, Bill."

Alex hung up and put the phone and her cup of coffee on the night table, leaning back into Olivia's arms. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back as Olivia held her hands and placed light kisses up and down her neck.

"Good morning, sweetie," Olivia murmured. "Did you sleep good?"

"I did until Bill woke me up. He thought we were in Maine."

"So I gathered."

"I'd kill him if he weren't so damn nice to me."

"He took it well, then?"
"I was nervous, but I thought he would. He wants you to come up with me next time. Says you're much better than 'the prick who shall not be named.' And he's been running interference with my father and trying to get him to 'get it.'"

Olivia responded with another kiss. "What were you congratulating him for?"

"Michelle's 11 weeks pregnant. Apparently she had two miscarriages around the time I got back."

"Oh."

"Liv, I know what you're thinking, and I'm okay. I still don't regret it. And it doesn't mean I can't be happy for them about their wanted, planned pregnancy."

"That's not what I was thinking, Lex. I was thinking that 11 weeks is still early to be telling people if she's had two miscarriages." They could have the 'do you want kids' talk later.

"Oh. Well, he said they're just telling immediate family for now." She turned to give Olivia a kiss on the cheek. "That's from Bill, by the way."

"He told you to give me a kiss?"

Alex nodded, then pressed their lips together. "And that one's from me," she whispered. Olivia smiled and kissed her back. "I was having a really nice dream, you know. You were there."

"Oh yeah?" Olivia pulled Alex back onto the bed beside her. "What was I doing in your dream?"

"Well, we were kissing."

Olivia kissed her gently on the lips. "Like this?"

Alex pushed back and pressed her tongue to Olivia's lips. "More like this," she said.

"Then what?" Olivia asked when they broke for air.

"You were… touching me. Like this." She brought Olivia's hand to her chest and placed it on her breast, then reached over to slip her own hand under Olivia's shirt. They kept kissing and touching, and Alex grew frustrated that Olivia was touching her through three layers of clothing. She made eye contact with Olivia and blushed. "And then I… we were just in our bras and panties."

Olivia stopped what she was doing and looked at Alex, and her smile widened into a grin. "Alexandra Cabot," she said mockingly. "You were having a sex dream."

"No I wasn't!" Alex turned bright red and hid her face in Olivia's shoulder.

"Yes, you were. Admit it," Olivia replied, pinching Alex's side, grinning.

"No, I wasn't," Alex insisted.

"Uh, you totally were."

"It wasn't a sex dream," Alex protested, more forcefully this time.

"Yet," Olivia specified.

"Fine," Alex huffed. "It wasn't a sex dream yet. I got woken up before it ended."
Olivia pulled back from Alex until she could look at her, and smiled. "This is a good sign," she said quietly. "It means you're getting your sex drive back. It means you're healing."

Alex smiled back, the pink blush fading. "I didn't know I had a sex drive before."

Olivia smirked. "Okay, then you're getting one now. Good for you. I'm happy to take credit for that, though, if you want." Alex giggled. "You're feeling okay, though? And you felt okay when you woke up?"

Alex nodded and kissed Olivia again. "I figure we have an hour if we both want to take showers before we go."

"Remind me to thank Bill for waking us up when we see him," Olivia said, wrapping her arms around Alex. "Do you want me to take your nightgown off?" she asked gently. "We don't have to do everything that was in your dream."

Alex nodded. "It's okay," she said, and she took the hem of Olivia's shirt, asking for permission before pulling it up over her head.

Olivia found the bottom of Alex's nightgown and pulled it up slowly, first over her head, then over her right arm that she couldn't lift up past her shoulder. "Pants too?" she asked, unbuckling her belt and sliding off her jeans when Alex nodded again.

She pressed their bodies together, Olivia in a bra and panties, Alex with a lined camisole and panties, and ran her hands up Alex's back, kissing her softly on the mouth. "What did I do next?"

Alex pressed their foreheads together and kept her eyes on Olivia's as she took her left hand and brought it to her right shoulder, pressing it against her scar.

Olivia kissed Alex again and kept their eyes locked as she traced the scar lightly with her index finger, first, the two puckered entry wounds just under her clavicle, then, tears filled her eyes as Alex flinched when she brushed her fingers over the rough, webbed exit wounds that took up a large part of her back shoulder blade. "You're so beautiful," she said, never breaking eye contact as she kissed Alex again and then brought her mouth down to kiss the two scars. "I love you."

She rolled Alex onto her back and hovered over her, leaning in to kiss her mouth as she gently touched the sensitive spots on Alex's arms and ran her fingers up and down her sides. She felt Alex's breath quicken as she pressed kisses to her neck and along her collarbone, and Alex gasped as she kissed each nipple through her shirt.

Olivia made eye contact with Alex again as she lowered herself to Alex's thighs, and ran her fingers over the dozens of tiny scars carved into the flesh of her lap, before bringing herself back up to Alex's level and entwining their bodies again.

"Was that okay?" Olivia asked, holding Alex close when she noticed a few tears running down her cheek.

Alex nodded. "You're better than my dream, Liv," she whispered, before rolling Olivia over and kissing her.

When she stepped into the shower a while later, Alex was pleased to find herself sensitive and aroused, although she still couldn't insert her pinky finger past the first knuckle without pain, in spite of her natural lubricant, and she still recoiled a bit when she had to wash herself. And as much as she thought it would feel good, she didn't dare touch herself and risk another flashback that would ruin such a nice morning.
Olivia, though, was grateful for the high-pressure shower head when it was her turn, and Alex blushed when she thought she heard a soft moan coming from the bathroom.

When they finally arrived, the EADA was already there, ready to pair them up with the male Portland SVU detectives so all 12 potential victims could be interviewed by late afternoon.

Olivia's first interview was with Isabel Ritter, a graduating senior and a cheerleader who, according to Sarah, was Chris's girlfriend for the past three years.

"Isabel, I'd like you to tell me about your relationship with Chris," Olivia began, aware that she would have trouble admitting if he sexually abused her and they were still together.

"He's been my boyfriend since the Fall Ball sophomore year," Isabel explained. "He didn't do anything wrong. If Sarah said he did, she's lying."

"Okay," Olivia said. "We're just trying to figure out what happened. Were you with him at the Spring Fling the night Sarah said she was raped?"

"Yeah, we went together. He was with me practically the whole time."

"And when was he not with you?"

"He went to the bathroom at some point, but he wasn't gone very long. He came back angry and said that she had come onto him in the bathroom, and got angry when he turned her down. Before she left, she started a rumor that they'd had sex, but he told me he'd never cheat on me."

"How do you know all this?" Olivia asked.

"He told me as soon as he came back, because he wanted me to hear it from him before the rumors started. We left right after that and went back to his place."

"Okay, what happened next?"

"He said that when she wasn't able to steal him from me by pretending they'd had sex, she accused him of rape for revenge."

Olivia nodded, her expression inscrutable. "Do you know if this has happened with any other girls?"

"He says it happens to him all the time. But I believe him. The other girls are just jealous that he's with me."

"I see." Olivia pulled out a piece of paper from the file she had on the table. "When Sarah went to the hospital after the Spring Fling, the nurse did a rape kit, and found pre-ejaculate inside her and on her thigh," Olivia explained, sliding the report over. "The DNA matched Chris."

She watched Isabel's face as the girl shook her head. "You're lying."

Olivia took out another piece of paper. "Isabel, this is a list that Chris kept in his room of names and dates. Do you recognize any of them?"

She pressed the button on the tape recorder and Alex's voice filled the room.

"So you've had sex with all the girls on this list, and not a single one will tell me she was raped?"

"That's right. Because I didn't rape them. They begged me for it."
"And you, Chris, being such a nice guy, gave it to them, even though you have a girlfriend?" Alex asked.

"How could I refuse? If a girl just offers me sex, I'm not going to say no. And every single one of them had their first orgasm because of how good I am."

"And not a single one said no?"

"They all say no, and they all cry, but after I get done with them, they're popular! Sarah's the only one dumb enough to get shunned because she cried rape and went to the police. Everyone else knows that if they keep quiet they earn their place at that school. None of them would belong there if it wasn't for me!"

Isabel's face dropped and she began shaking her head as she listened to Chris admitting to the rapes. "No… he couldn't have… he loves me."

Olivia reached out to touch her hand. "Isabel, I have to ask you this. Did he ever force you to do anything that you didn't want to do?"

She started to cry. "I wanted to wait longer. I thought I should be at least 16, and on the pill, and that we should be dating for at least 6 months before we had sex. But after our second date, he started pressuring me, and telling me that everyone was doing it, and that if I loved him like he loved me, I would sleep with him, or he would find someone else who would."

"Sweetheart, that's not love," Olivia said quietly. "Can you tell me about the first time?"

"It wasn't even a month after we started dating. I went home with him after a football party, and his dad wasn't home, so he got some beer out of the fridge and we drank it. I was a little tipsy after just one because I hadn't really had beer before, and he brought me up to his room. He said he hadn't done it before but he wanted me to be his first because he loved me so much."

"I told him I wasn't ready and I didn't want to, but he just kept pushing me on the bed and telling me to relax and I'd like it. I tried to get up, but the beer made me dizzy."

"Isabel, I need you to tell me exactly what he did to you."

"He took off my clothes and got on top of me, and he started kissing me and touching my chest. I tried to push him off and tell him no but I couldn't get up, and I couldn't cover myself, even though I tried. He pinned me down and put his fingers inside of me, and I told him to stop because it hurt, but he just told me he was going to make me feel good."

"Then what happened?" Olivia asked, handing her a tissue.

"He started touching me… down there, until something happened, and then he put it inside of me."

"Okay, I know this is hard, but can you tell me where he touched you specifically? I need you to use clinical terms." Isabel glanced over at the male officer in the corner, who was observing without saying a word. "Ignore him, and talk to just me, okay?"

She spoke quietly. "He touched my clitoris until I had an orgasm," she clarified, turning red.

"And then what did he put inside you?"

"His penis. He started having sex with me."
"And what did you do?" Olivia asked gently, touching her hand again.

"I told him to stop and started crying, because I didn't want to and it hurt, and he told me that I knew he wanted it because he made me come. And I just laid there because I thought it might hurt less."

"Did he use a condom?" Olivia asked.

Isabel shook her head. "He said it felt better without one and that it didn't matter because I couldn't get pregnant the first time. I didn't think that was true, but… I went on the pill after that and I didn't get pregnant."

"Isabel, why did you sleep with him again after that?"

"Because he was my boyfriend, and besides, we had already done it anyway. It sort of didn't matter after that, and I wasn't going to say 'no'."

"Isabel, for the record, you can get pregnant the first time you have sex, and you do have the right to say no at any point, even to someone you've already had sex with." Olivia clarified. "But I know he didn't listen when you told him no. Did he ever force you to do anything else you didn't want to do?"

Isabel looked at her hands in her lap and started to cry again. "He wanted to try something new this year for his birthday. I told didn't want to, but he sort of did it without asking."

"What did he do? Can you tell me when and what happened?"

"It was the Friday after Thanksgiving, right after his birthday. His dad was working. I thought we were just going to watch movies, but… he… went in the back door."

"Anal sex?" Olivia clarified, and Isabel nodded.

"I didn't know he was going to do that, and he didn't use anything, so it hurt, a lot."

"Okay. Did you tell anyone about any of this, or write it down anywhere?" Olivia asked, holding out another tissue.

Isabel nodded. "I have a diary that I wrote in. And the first time, I went to the guidance counselor at school, because I wasn't sure what happened. But she told me that since I had been drinking and I didn't fight back, that it wasn't rape."

"Isabel, she was wrong. All you have to do is say no, and it doesn't matter if you were drinking, even if you were underage. Rape is still rape." Olivia shook her head in anger. "It would be helpful if you could show us the diary entries that will help us prove what happened to you without physical evidence. Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

Isabel shook her head.

"Thank you. I know that was hard, but I have one more question for you." She pulled out the stack of photos of the girls' accessories that had been found in Chris's room. "Do you recognize any of these items?"

Isabel nodded. "He said he bought them as gifts for me, but he wanted to keep them at his place for when I came over, because we always had sex at his house. He liked me to… wear one of them when we were intimate, usually."

"Okay, thank you, Isabel." Olivia said, standing up and shaking her hand. She put her hand on the
girl's back to guide her out to the squad room, where Sarah was sitting on a bench.

Olivia watched as Isabel approached the girl cautiously, her eyes still red and puffy. "I'm sorry," she whispered, looking down at her feet. "I believed him and you were telling the truth. I'm so sorry."

Sarah stood up and glanced back at Olivia, then at Alex, who had just come out of the next interview room with another girl. She hesitated for a moment, and then slowly, tentatively, reached out and hugged Isabel, who was taken by surprise before she returned the hug, and both girls began to cry.

"It's not your fault," Sarah whispered.

"What he did to you… he did the same thing to me." Isabel admitted.

"I know. But it's his fault, not yours."

Five hours later, they had twelve more complaining witnesses, each telling a similar version of how Chris had cornered her at a school event, or in an empty classroom, or in the locker room, and one angry and fired up EADA.
Olivia finished her interviews first, and went over to sit on the bench next to Sarah, who had stayed the whole day and talked to each girl, reassuring them before they left that they weren't alone and that they were believed.

"That's a pretty incredible thing you did," Olivia said softly. "I know some of those girls haven't been very kind to you, especially Isabel."

Sarah shrugged. "I was thinking about something Alex said to me the other day. That some of them might not have believed what happened to me because they were in denial about what happened to them. And it just... it made me feel sorry for them, you know? Like maybe they didn't know that what he did to them was wrong. At least I was honest about what he did to me, even though I've felt angry, and ashamed, and like it was my fault. I wonder if some of them felt that, only... worse?"

"Maybe," Olivia agreed. "I think some women find it difficult to call what happened to them 'rape', and that's part of why it's such an underreported crime. And then they think if they don't report it right away, nobody will believe them."

"I wanted them to know that I believe them."

Olivia nodded. "We believe them, too."

"And a jury will believe them," Alex said, joining them. "EADA Stanton is going to run down and amend the charges now. 13 counts rape in the first degree, 13 counts unlawful imprisonment, 13 counts petty larceny, and 4 counts contributing to the delinquency of a minor for the charges that included alcohol."

"Wow," Sarah said. "All of that."

"All of that," Alex confirmed. "Now, he probably won't be sentenced to life without parole. The Supreme Court ruled in Miller v. Alabama and Jackson v. Hobbs that mandatory life without parole sentences for juveniles constituted 'cruel and unusual punishment' and violated their 8th amendment rights. SCOTUS didn't say that judges could never impose that punishment, but of course, if they do, the case is ripe for appeal on constitutional grounds. But I tend to find that in cases like these, especially if they're highly publicized, the judge will impose consecutive sentences, not concurrent sentences. Which means that if he gets 10 years for each rape, he won't be eligible for parole until he's 83, and by then, his balls will be all shriveled up and the only thing he'll be raping is the eyes of his home care workers when they have to change his diapers."

Olivia smiled widely, and looked from Alex, to a shocked Sarah, and back again. "She's ba-ack," Olivia sang. She got up and gave Alex a hug, placing a quick peck on her cheek.

Alex looked around, confused. "What?" she asked.

"That's the most Alex thing I've heard you say in a very long time," Olivia replied, still beaming. "I think we've figured out where she went."

Alex chuckled and looked at her watch. "I think if we want to make our reservation we'd better get going. Sarah, would you like to join us for dinner? We're meeting Jack in an hour at La Scala."
"I have to be at the school by 7:30 for the concert at 8:30."

"We can get you there in time. The reservation's for 5:30, and it's not too far from the school. And Jack's going to come with us to the concert."

Sarah smiled. "Sure. As long as what I'm wearing is okay. It's kind of a fancy place, isn't it? I've never been there before."

"You're not in jeans, so it's fine," Alex said. "We just need to stop back at the hotel so Olivia can change out of her jeans and then we'll meet him over there."

Alex took off her suit jacket but kept her black pants, cerulean blue silk blouse, and black heels, and offered Sarah a soda while they waited for Olivia to change in the bathroom. Sarah looked around, becoming more aware that either Alex or Olivia - probably Alex - came from a lot of money. She was surprised that she hadn't noticed when Alex had been her teacher; Alex was sensitive and down-to-earth, so unlike the rich people at her school.

"How did it go with your parents after we left last night?" Alex asked as they sat on the sofa.

Sarah shrugged. "Okay," she said noncommittally.

"Just okay?"

"I didn't drink or cut, even though I wanted to."

Alex smiled. "Sarah, that's great. I know that wasn't easy for you."

"I think my mom believes me but she's not sure why it's such a big deal two years later. I think she thinks I should be over it by now, even if it did happen."

"Sarah, we talked about why it's perfectly normal that you're not 'over it.' Seeing him get arrested and starting therapy are just the first steps. It's going to take a lot of healing." Alex squeezed her hand.

"What about your dad?"

"He… thinks that I shouldn't have gone to that bathroom in the first place, and that if I really didn't want it, I could have hit him or kicked him in the balls or something to stop him."

"We both know it's not that simple," Alex reassured her. "God, people can be such idiots."

"I still live with my dad. I can't just ignore him." Sarah said.

"No, but you can talk to your therapist about how to deal with him and you can focus on people who can help you. I think your parents have been so caught up in your dad's illness for so long that they don't have a lot of emotional energy for processing what happened to you."

Sarah nodded. "Maybe."

"On Monday, Olivia and I are going to call social services and see if they can send a social worker to talk to your mom about your dad's care."

"They're not going to take me away, are they?"

"No, of course not. You're not being abused or neglected, and it's not CPS. It's just someone who may be able to help your mom find resources for getting other caretakers for your dad, helping both of them cope with his illness, things like that. And maybe some therapy too. Do you think it would be good if your mom got some help?"
Sarah nodded. "I haven't been very fair to her. She's had a rough time too."

"So we'll try to get her some help, too. I would have done this two years ago if I had known."

"Two years ago it wasn't so bad."

—

They sat down at the table and ordered drinks, and Alex hesitated to order a bottle of red wine until Olivia reached over and rested her hand on Alex's knee, reassuring her. Alex had had a flashback free day so far and didn't want to ruin it, but she'd worked up to taking sips of wine at Olivia's and thought she'd be okay.

"How'd it go today?" Jack asked, spreading his napkin on his lap.

"Well, aside from my brother waking us up at an ungodly hour because he thought we were in Portland, Maine, it went pretty well. All the girls agreed to testify and the charges were amended. The grand jury will be scheduled for next week, and she's going to put us on on Monday morning since we're not sticking around." Alex explained.

"Good. I've got to be in Mobile next Wednesday. New witness," he explained.

Alex nodded. "Good luck with that."

Jack smirked. "I don't need luck. Most of them are a lot easier to deal with than you were, Cabot."

Alex rolled her eyes as Olivia laughed. "She was really that bad? She's made you out to be some kind of fascist. In a loveable kind of way, of course," Olivia joked.

"Well, she scared off more than one rookie," Jack commented.

"No, it was just the one," Alex retorted. "And he deserved it." She looked at Sarah, then Olivia. "It was some young kid who did my Portland identity. First day with a security clearance or something, I think, and he clearly had not read my file, because if he had, he wouldn't have made Kristen Walker's birthday the day I was shot."

"Ouch," Sarah commented, sipping her lemonade.

"Yeah. They liked to set up birthdays a few weeks after you get to a new place, with the idea being that you'll go out to drinks with coworkers and it'll help you get to know people. It worked in most places, sort of, but I have to say, I didn't really appreciate all of the birthday wishes."

"Well, he was chewed out by me, recommended for more sensitivity training, and transferred to a task force investigating white supremacist militia in Montana," Jack explained.

"Were you allowed to do anything fun?" Sarah asked.

"Allowed? Not officially. I don't think Jack knows what "fun" is," Alex said, making quotation marks with her fingers. "In 2004, when the Red Sox played in the World Series, I drove an hour and a half to Madison to watch the game in a Boston themed bar and stayed overnight in a hotel. It wasn't like being at Fenway with my brother, but..." Alex trailed off.

"I can't believe you did that! You never told me," Jack laughed.

"To be honest, we were so fed up with each other at the time that I was starting to worry you were going to shoot me yourself," Alex smiled.
"Oh, believe me, I wanted to," Jack teased. "Unfortunately assassinating our own witnesses is frowned upon."

"Wouldn't you have been able to get away with it, though?" Sarah asked. "I mean, if someone was already in prison for killing her, double jeopardy would have applied."

"Well, he was convicted of attempted murder, not murder," Alex explained. "But, based on the number of times he faked my death, I'm sure he could have gotten away with it."

Jack laughed as Alex reached over to swat him. "Are you thinking about law school, Sarah? What are your plans for after you graduate?"

"Well, I wanted to go to Columbia or Brown and then go to law school, but I'm not sure if my grades are good enough."

"We're going to talk about that tomorrow at brunch with Abbie," Alex said. "We have some ideas. And I hope this fall you'll come out to New York and stay with me to visit some of these places."

The waiter arrived with the bottle of wine and showed the bottle to Alex, who nodded, and he poured a small amount into her glass. Olivia made eye contact with her and smiled gently, reaching over to take her left hand under the table and squeeze it as Alex lifted her glass, swirled it around, and took a sip. She breathed a sigh of relief as Alex put down the glass and nodded at the waiter, who was oblivious to the tension before him.

"So, did you really give Antonio the bullets from Liam Connors's gun for his science fair project on forensics?" Alex asked after they had ordered their entrées.

"I did," Jack confirmed. "Pretty cool, huh? He was so excited."

"He was thrilled when he told me about it. Apparently all his friends now think he's a superhero with a secret identity and want him to show off his scar. He was asking me if my friends thought my scar was cool."

"And do they?" Jack asked, amused.

"I don't exactly go around showing it off," Alex said.

"Can I see it?" Sarah asked. Alex looked uncomfortable for a minute, and looked at Olivia, who raised her eyebrow and shrugged. "I'm sorry, that was rude of me. Never mind."

"It's okay," Alex said, taking a deep breath. "I'll show you if you want. In the ladies' room, though. I'm not going to partially undress out here."

Sarah followed her back to the restroom and Alex held her breath as she undid the top three buttons of her blouse, uncovering the lacy white camisole she wore underneath, and she pulled it down over her right shoulder.

"There it is," she said quietly, her voice shaky, as Sarah stepped in to examine it. "Two rounds of a 9 mm handgun, shot from 25 feet, that caused me to bleed out and be declared officially dead at 1:42 on the morning of September 30, 2003."

"Do you ever… think that maybe there's a reason you didn't die?" Sarah asked as Alex buttoned up her shirt. "Like there was other stuff you had to do before it was your time?"

Alex leaned back against the sink. "Sometimes," she admitted. "Other times, I'm not so sure. And
I've tried to work out the 'everything happens for a reason' bit, and I haven't managed that, either."

"Maybe you had to come to Portland because you were supposed to help me. To help us."

Alex smiled. "Maybe. It doesn't hurt to believe that, if you want to. But I think it's more likely that
the reason is that Liam Connors was a murderer for hire who shot me."

"Still. They could have sent you anywhere. Why here?" Sarah asked.

Alex shrugged. "I don't know," she answered truthfully. "But I'm glad to be able to help."

"And I'm glad you didn't die," Sarah said, giving Alex a hug. "Thank you."


—

"I told him that when he comes back to New York he should have Alex take him to the crime lab to
show him how they do ballistics testing," Jack was saying to Olivia as Alex and Sarah sat back
down at the table.

"O'Halleran will love that," Olivia commented. "I'm sure he'll be much better than that new tech we
have."

"Stucky? Yeah, he's obnoxious." Alex agreed.

"Bing, bang, bong." Olivia mocked, rolling her eyes.

"So, do you think I can I get my bullets back? Connors has been extradited, so you don't need them
for evidence anymore, right?"

"What are you going to do with yours? Do you have a science fair project?"

"I was thinking about making earrings with them," Alex said. "Wouldn't that be great? I could wear
them in court."

"Earrings made from the bullets you were shot with?" Sarah asked. "I'm not sure 'great' is the word
I'd use."

"It would horrify my father. But I bet Liz would get a kick out of it."

"I bet she would," Olivia agreed. "I don't know, I kind of like it."

"I'll wear them with my Dorothy heels. They're the only things I kept from my Witsec wardrobe."

"Dorothy heels?" Olivia asked.

"Her last identity, when she lived in Charleston, was Emma from Topeka," Jack explained. "She
bought these bright red high heels, and every time I met with her, she'd wear them, and click her
heels together three times."

"There's no place like home," Alex murmured, her eyes closed.

"And she'd occasionally ask me to call her Auntie Em," Jack laughed.

"Hey, it worked, didn't it? It seems like I'm finally home."
Olivia looked into her eyes and smiled, squeezing Alex's hand again under the table. "You most certainly are home."

Sarah rushed into the school a few minutes late, while Alex and Olivia stood outside Portland Prepatory School holding hands. Jack had gone in to use the restroom, but Olivia suspected that he had left as much to give them privacy.

"Do you know where you are, Lex?" Olivia asked gently, as Alex clutched her hand and stared at the brick building in front of them.

"I'm not having a flashback, Liv," Alex replied. "I just don't know if I can go in there."

"We don't have to if you don't want to. I'm sure Sarah would understand."

"We're going," Alex said firmly. "In a minute."

"Okay," Olivia agreed.

Olivia slid her arm around Alex's waist and waited for her to be ready, and a few minutes before the concert began, they walked in and slid into the seats Jack had saved in the auditorium.

The first part of the concert was mostly pop and classical music, and the choir was quite good for a high school group. Near the end of the program, which was mostly spirituals, Alex held Olivia's hand through *Ain't Got Time to Die*.

Alex wasn't really paying attention to the song after that, until she leaned over to Olivia to comment. "This one's actually pretty difficult. The time signature keeps changing."

Then, she noticed the words.

"I would not be a back slider. I'll tell you the reason why. 'Cause if my Lord were to call on me, oh, I wouldn't be ready to die."

"I would not be a lawyer. I'll tell you the reason why. 'Cause if my Lord were to call on me, oh, I wouldn't be ready to die."

Alex and Olivia looked at each other, eyes twinkling, until they both bolted out of the auditorium. As soon as they hit the foyer, they both started laughing. They laughed, and laughed, leaning against the radiator. "I think they meant 'liar,' Olivia gasped at one point, and Alex nodded and started laughing again.

"I wouldn't be ready to die," Alex quoted as she paused to breathe, and they burst into giggles again.

They laughed until their sides hurt, and tears were streaming down their faces as they held each other, not caring that people were starting to spill out of the auditorium at the end of the concert. By the time Jack and Sarah found them, they were laughing and crying simultaneously, clinging to each other in the corner.

"What happened?" Sarah asked, not sure if she dared approach and interrupt the intimate moment.

"That, I think," Jack replied, "is catharsis."
The song I referred to in the last chapter is a spiritual called My Good Lord's a-Done a Been Here. The Morehouse Glee Club has a good version on Youtube if you want to hear it. We sang it in my choir, which is what gave me the idea. It's NOT the classical song in the first few results.
Olivia and Alex walked into the restaurant holding hands, exhausted but completely relaxed after spending the night talking about Velez, and everything about witness protection, and the Connors trial, and Alex returning to New York, feeling, for the first time, that everything was out in the open.

Sarah followed them in, hanging back while Abbie jumped up to give Alex a hug. "Teflon!" she said warmly, squeezing tight and rocking Alex back and forth before planting a kiss on her cheek. "You're a sight for sore eyes. Love looks good on you."

"Good to see you too, Abbie," Alex blushed and pulled back, before putting her hand on Sarah's back and guiding her forward. "This is Sarah Williams, one of my former students; Sarah, this is Assistant US Attorney Abigail Carmichael. We went to college and law school together, and then she worked at the DA's office with me for a few years before moving on to bigger and more glamorous things."

"Please, call me Abbie," she said, shaking Sarah's hand. "Any friend of Alex's is a friend of mine."

Sarah smiled. "Nice to meet you, Abbie."

Abbie stepped over to hug Olivia. "Good to see you too, Liv," she said. She leaned in and whispered in Olivia's ear. "We need to talk."

"Don't worry, Abs, I'm not going to hurt her," Olivia replied quietly.

"I believe you. But we still need to talk." Abbie pulled back.

They followed the waitress to the table and ordered drinks before going up to the brunch buffet.

"Alex, how come Abbie calls you Teflon?" Sarah asked when they sat back down at the table.

Alex smiled; "It was just a nickname one of the detectives from Olivia's squad gave me after a tough case."

"Because nothing sticks with this one," Abbie said, sitting down next to Sarah. "It was after this case where a 7 year old shot a 6 year old on a school playground. People are ready to riot, and our boss, Charlie Philips, calls a press conference. He wants to run for DA, so he basically hangs Alex out to dry. Cabot, of course, comes out smelling like a rose, keeps her job, earns the complete respect and admiration of her squad, saves the political future we're all still waiting on..."

Alex groaned at the bad pun. "Yeah, and you're forgetting the part where Elias went home and got shot by a 12 year old. It wasn't really a happy ending." She took a sip of her coffee. "I had only been at SVU for a few months then. That case was when they started treating me like one of the team instead of like their babysitter."

"You had more than proved yourself by that point," Olivia said, putting her hand on Alex's knee.

"Anyway, so one of the detectives started calling her Teflon, and ironically, it kind of stuck," Abbie said.

Alex groaned at the bad pun. "Well, it was better than a lot of the other things they were calling me, so I figured I should let it slide."
"Hey, let the record reflect that I have never called you 'Ice Princess' or any other unkind nickname," Olivia protested.

"And Elliot?"

"Are you really going to make me rat out my partner?"

"Oh! That reminds me," Abbie said, pulling out her briefcase. "I have a present for you."

"A present? It's not my birthday," Alex said, eyeing the package suspiciously.

"Actually, two presents. This one's a coming-back-from-the-dead present. You know, since I haven't seen you since you got back to New York."


"I was looking for a gift for my 12 year old nephew and saw it. I had to get it." Alex started opening the wrapping paper of the other gift. "Uh, you might want to wait and open that one back at the hotel," Abbie said mischievously. "It's a for a different reason."

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Abbie, is this going to be a really awkward thank you note?" she asked warily. She took a peek at the book spine, concealing it from Sarah, and turned bright red. The Whole Lesbian Sex Book: A Passionate Guide for All of Us. Olivia took the partially unwrapped gift from her hand and smirked when she saw the contents.

"Olivia can thank me for that one," Abbie said, winking.

"I hate you. Why do you do this to me?" Alex whined.

"Because I love you. And because nobody else I know turns that bright shade of pink." She turned to Sarah. "At Harvard, we used to call her Crimson because this one time—"

"Abbie, if you tell that story, I will kill you. And no jury will convict me," Alex said firmly, kicking her under the table.

"Another time," she whispered to Sarah and Olivia as Alex put the books in her purse and picked up her phone, which had started to ring.

"EADA Stanton is going to come meet us," Alex said as she got off the phone. "She said there's a new development in the case."

"Okay. Why don't we start by talking about the lawsuit, then, and I can talk about the federal charges once she gets here?"

Alex nodded. "Sarah, I mentioned this, but we haven't really discussed it yet. By law, the school should have protected you after your attack. I made sure they had the police reports and the statements we both made, and they refused to investigate and take action, gave me an official reprimand for taking you off school grounds during the dance, punished you… they covered it up, basically, and protected the school's reputation over the safety of their female students. I'd like to file a suit on your behalf to recover your tuition, make them pay for your therapy, and get a settlement for pain and suffering that should help you pay for college and law school."

"Then, I want to file a second, separate lawsuit on behalf of all of Chris's victims to allege that the
school took hush money and knew about the attacks. We'd go after the people who knew, as well as the school board, to make them acknowledge wrongdoing, change their policies on sexual assault, and enable all of you to do makeup work to improve your grades if your academics suffered because of him. And we'd get them to again, cover therapy for all of his victims and get a cash settlement, too."

"You can do all that?" Sarah asked.

Alex nodded. "Sure. They're responsible for the fact that he continued to victimize girls at that school for four years. You weren't his first victim, and I think we can prove that someone at the school knew about it before you were attacked. We've got a strong case."

"I don't care about the money," Sarah said. "But I do want to make them take responsibility. And I want to make up a few of my grades, if I can. I won't get into a good school with the grades I have now, and he shouldn't get to ruin my whole life."

"Okay," Alex said. "The only thing is that we would have to use the emails you sent me as evidence. So if you don't want them shared, we shouldn't move forward. I can show you the draft of the lawsuit documents if you want, and some of the other girls have kept diaries or online Livejournal or MySpace pages that we're going to use as evidence in both the criminal proceedings and the lawsuit. This won't necessarily go to trial, but other people - lawyers - will read everything."

Sarah took a deep breath. "I've thought about it a lot since Friday, she said, pushing her food around on her plate. "And seeing your flashback, and your article in the freaking New York Times about being raped, and all of his other victims yesterday… it made me realize that I don't have anything to be ashamed of. He's the one who should be ashamed, not me."

Alex smiled and reached over to squeeze her hand. "You're exactly right, sweetheart."

"Hey, anybody in your situation would have had a hard time coping," Abbie added.

None of them noticed the EADA walking up behind them, until she put her hand on Alex's shoulder and Alex promptly froze.

"Good morning," EADA Stanton said cheerfully.

"Careful, don't touch her," Olivia instructed them as she motioned for Stanton to sit down and fished an ice cube out of her water. Slowly, she slipped it into Alex's hand, open on the table where Sarah had withdrawn hers, and folded her fingers over it. "Lex? Come back to us, Alex," she encouraged, watching as Alex's glassy eyes blinked slowly and she came back to the present.

Alex took a deep breath and a sip of her water.

"Geez, Cabot, welcome back to the land of the living," Abbie joked.

Alex rolled her eyes. "Well, that was bound to happen sooner or later. I didn't have any yesterday," she said. "First day since… in a while."

"Flashback?" Abbie asked.

"What happened at the school, then?" Sarah asked. "I mean, if you don't mind me asking," she added quickly.

Alex shook her head. "It was just… it's silly, really. One of the songs, it was about not being a liar because you wouldn't be ready to die… and we both thought it sounded like you sang 'lawyer.' And
I don't know, we both found it hysterical for some reason. We couldn't stop laughing."

"Jack said something about catharsis," Sarah commented.

"Could be," Alex said. "I hadn't laughed that hard in a long time. It felt good, even though it was a bit ridiculous."

The EADA cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry, I'm being rude," Abbie said, introducing herself.

"I just wanted to drop by to give you a quick update," she said. "Keating's lawyer dropped this by this morning." She held out a folded up blue piece of paper, which Alex took.

Her eyes widened and she snorted. "It's a motion for an affirmative defense. His 'affluenza' prevented him from understanding the difference between right and wrong, because Daddy always got him out of trouble using his money. You've got to be fucking kidding me, right?"

"I wish I were," Stanton replied.

"This is a typical Langan defense. We went to school with his brother, and I deal with this all the time. He likes to get creative, but I doubt Martin's anywhere near as smart as Trevor, and I wipe the floor with him almost every time. They're pretty easy to take apart even if you get a judge who lets this kind of bullshit through. And no jury is going to sit there and listen to 13 girls testify and not want to throw the book at him themselves. In fact, I'll call Trevor. I wouldn't be surprised if he helped his brother come up with this defense."

"Well, it doesn't matter. He took a deal."

"He did what?!" Sarah cried.

"He plead guilty to 13 counts of aggravated sexual assault, sentences to be served consecutively. 40 years."

"He'll be out in 28!" Alex said, fuming. "He should have gotten at least 10 years for each count!"

"Well, I just can't risk some jury buying this defense and letting him off. It would be a disaster."

"And letting him off with a slap on the wrist because you're afraid of arguing his defense is any better?! Now you're going to have every defense attorney in town trying to pull stupid shit like this because they know they'll get a better deal from you."

"Hey, 40 years is hardly a slap on the wrist. Hopefully he'll be rehabilitated in prison for his adolescent mistakes. You're lucky I'm planning to run against Rollins next term, or this case wouldn't have even gotten an indictment."

"Rollins not believing rape is a violent crime is not an excuse for you pretending that 40 years is adequate punishment for the hell that kid put these girls through. 13 rapes are not mistakes, they're the work of a violent predator. Guys like him go to prison and get more violent, not rehabilitated. I give him 6 months after he gets out before he commits another rape, and my money's on her ending up dead and with no DNA evidence because he learned to be more violent and cover his tracks in prison. But of course, you'll be retired by then, right?"

"I've got news for you, Ms. Stanton: defense attorneys are going to pull sleazy shit all the time. But you know what? Juries hate cases when defendants claim they have no personal responsibility. I
prosecuted a guy whose mother had been raped, and he claimed that his genes made him do it. If I'd lost, it would have been a complete shit show. So I made sure I won. You can't let fear of what defense attorneys might do prevent you from doing your job, which is speaking for the victims. It might help you win an election if you're pandering to the rape apology vote, but I'm not sure how it'll help you sleep at night."

Alex got up and headed towards the restroom. "And 68% is not an 'excellent' conviction rate!" she called over her shoulder as she disappeared into the ladies' room.

"Well, I didn't come down here to be insulted," Stanton said. "He allocutes tomorrow at 10. I'll ask about the father's payments to the school and what he knew about him, and forward you the files on the potential corruption charges." She stood up to shake Abbie's hand, nodded at Sarah and Olivia, and stalked off.

As soon as she was out of sight, Abbie burst out laughing. "God, I love that woman," she said. "Do you think she's okay?"

Olivia chuckled. "You heard her. Sounded like she was better than ever. I think she just wanted to make a dramatic exit, but we can check on her in a minute if she doesn't come back."

A few minutes later, Abbie looked back towards the restroom to see Alex peeking her head out to see if Stanton had left, and motioned her to come back.

"Well that was pathetic," Alex said, sliding back into her seat. "She must have a low conviction rate because she pleads out all of her slam dunk cases."

"Well, Cabot, some of us are just mere mortals," Abbie said. "Not everyone can be perfect like you."

Alex rolled her eyes.

"Besides, I have something to make you feel better," Abbie continued. She pulled out a manilla folder from her briefcase and held it across the table, opening it in front of Alex.

"Ugh!" Alex exclaimed, turning her face and covering her eyes. "Can't you warn a girl before you shove porn in her face, Abbie? And how is that supposed to make me feel better?"

Abbie chuckled. "All the crime scenes you've seen and a little BDSM makes you squeamish, Crimson? Maybe you have lost your touch."

Sarah leaned over to look in the folder, which Alex turned away from her.

"As it turns out," Abbie said, "Principal Flaherty and the elder Mr. Keating have known each other for years as members of the Oregon Republican Party, then the Tea Party, and Focus on the Family, and at basically every socially conservative fuddy-duddy event you could possibly imagine. Now, as
best I can tell, Flaherty was sitting on some pretty important committees up until about 5 years ago - on abstinence-only education, brainstorming TRAP laws - and then, all of a sudden, he just stopped." Abbie paused to pull another folder out of her briefcase.

"Wait, what's a TRAP law?" Sarah asked.

"Target Regulation of Abortion Providers," Alex explained. "More and more states are passing laws requiring women who want abortions to have long waiting periods, or see an ultrasound to see the embryo, and they're also regulating clinics and requiring them to meet strict requirements for surgery units or requiring doctors to have admitting privileges at local hospitals to force more clinics to close. Happens more in red states, but it's becoming more and more common."

"Hmm, imagine having to jump through hoops to end a life," Abbie mused.

"We're not having this argument again, Abbie," Alex said firmly. "Tell us what else you've got."

"So, consider this your public service announcement: don't use your government-issued email address to send your porn, folks. You don't own your email."

"Sure, now you tell me," Olivia quipped.

"Anyway, about 5 years ago, Flaherty was reprimanded by the governor's office for 'unauthorized use of taxpayer-funded materials. Now, as public employees, we're not supposed to use anything paid for by the government for any personal political end, but we all know that line can be blurry. What's interesting is that he wasn't the only one reprimanded, but he was the only one who started being let go from committees that Keating was also on."

"So you think Keating found the pictures in his email?" Alex asked.

Abbie nodded. "Somehow, he found out about Flaherty's... proclivities. And then when the young Mr. Keating started school and needed some help getting out of trouble, Flaherty clawed his way back into politics because he finally had some leverage. If Keating kept quiet about the kink and made donations to the school, Flaherty would help keep the kid's disciplinary record clean. I have the email correspondence to prove it. Don't try to blackmail anyone with your government-issued email, either. It's not smart." Abbie winked.

"So what about the others, though? The school administrators who knew? The police who didn't investigate more?" Sarah asked.

"I'm still looking into it, but as far as I can tell, they didn't do anything illegal; they just suck. The school had a loyalty clause in its contract that basically made saying something potentially damaging to the school's reputation a fireable offense. Which is why Alex got a reprimand letter when she took you to the hospital. I pulled your personnel file, and they weren't going to renew your contract the next year because of that 'insubordination'. And the financial aid officer was threatening to tell, which is why she got a nice settlement when she left."

Alex nodded. "I figured as much. It's already hard to get rapes reported and to have people believe victims. So he basically used rape culture to convince faculty that it was worse to hurt the school than to hurt these girls."

"And the Portland PD has a pretty dismal track record for investigating and prosecuting sexually based offenses, so I'm fairly confident it's more an issue of incompetence than willful negligence."

Abbie finished.

"Somehow, I don't find that comforting," Olivia commented. "But it's true that when I was here,
there was a murder and they didn't even recognize it as a sex crime."

"So what happens now?" Sarah asked. "Will he go to jail?"

Abbie nodded. "I'm meeting with Keating this afternoon to see if he'll roll on Flaherty. As much as I hate to do it, the case against him is far more solid. Plus, with either one of them, the testimony will be tainted by their status as co-conspirators. So it'll be much easier to find corroborating witnesses in the case against Flaherty than the other way around."

—

Olivia pulled Alex into her arms when they got back to the hotel room. "Are you alright?" she asked. "I know that didn't turn out the way you wanted."

Alex sighed. "I just hate when people don't take this seriously. He should have gotten a lot more time."

Olivia nodded. "I agree. You sure told her, though."

"Lot of good it'll do."

"Maybe she'll think twice the next time." Olivia swayed back and forth. "I'm sure that Sarah's grateful, regardless."

"Yeah, hopefully she'll have some support now and be able to get better."

"You did good, Lex, even if they didn't." She kissed Alex's temple and ran her hands gently up and down her back. "What do you want to do now that we have a free afternoon? Go for a walk? Go down to the pool? Relax up here? Up to you."

"I've always wanted to go to the state park," Alex said. "I always meant to go when I was here, but I never found anyone to go with me. And I didn't want to go alone because it sounded too dangerous. I didn't want someone finding my body somewhere."

"Dangerous because of bears, or psychopaths?" Alex looked at her pointedly, and Olivia chuckled. "I'll bring my gun, just in case."

Alex needn't have worried, as the short trail they took was relatively well-traveled, and it seemed unlikely that any serial killers would have been able to drag them into the woods unnoticed. When they reached a peak with a nice overview, they sat on a rock and looked out over the city and the lake, holding hands and leaning against each other.

"So, is this our first date?" Alex asked, intertwining her fingers with Olivia's.

"I don't think so, sweetie. You'll know when I take you out on a date." Olivia smiled and leaned over to kiss her temple.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yup. It will be so disgustingly romantic you won't be able to handle it."

Alex laughed. "I didn't know you were such a romantic."

"Just for you, love. You deserve it." Olivia said.

"I wish we could have done this like 8 years ago. Before everything. Before Robert."
Olivia wrapped her arm around Alex's waist. "I hate everything you had to go through so that we ended up here," she began. "But I'm not sure we would've made it if we'd done this 8 years ago. I don't think I was ready for a serious relationship. And it was still pretty risky business being a gay public figure. Massachusetts hadn't even legalized gay marriage yet. I'm not convinced you wouldn't have been too concerned with politics to be in a relationship with a woman, even if you had been aware of your sexuality."

Alex nodded. "Maybe. Probably."

"And I don't think I would've been able to not screw it up." She laughed. "I'm still not sure I'm going to be able to not screw up."

"Me neither. I'm still not sure I'm going to be enough for you," Alex admitted.

Olivia pressed a kiss to the back of her shoulder and touched her chin to turn her face, smiling. "Au contraire, I think you're perfect. And possibly way more than I can handle in my old age."

They climbed back down to the car and stopped for food on the way back to the hotel, mostly making small-talk with bouts of reflective silence.

Alex fidgeted the whole way back, and up to the hotel room, until Olivia reached over and touched her hand to still it. "Sweetie, are you nervous about something? What's wrong?"

Alex sat down on the bed and gripped the edge with both hands. "Liv, can I ask you something? For your help with something?"

"Of course, sweetie. Anything."

Alex went over to her suitcase and pulled out a small cloth pouch, before sitting back down on the bed. She passed it back and forth between her hands a few times, blushing pink, before looking away from Olivia.

"I'm supposed to… for my condition… use these, and I can't, and I was wondering if you could help me."

Olivia took Alex's hand with one hand and the pouch from the other, looking inside. "These are for the vaginismus?" she asked gently, squeezing Alex's hand as she nodded. "You're supposed to put them inside of you?"

Alex nodded again. "I'm supposed to start with the smallest one, and leave it in for 5 minutes, if I can, and then try the next one. But I haven't been able to get it in at all. It hurts too much."

Olivia smiled sympathetically and brushed Alex's cheek. "What would you like me to do?"

"I want to make out a bit, until I'm relaxed, and then get under the covers and try putting it in while you hold my other hand. I've tried myself, and I just can't do it. Please?"

Olivia nodded. "Okay."

"Okay? You sure?"

Olivia took out a dilator the width of a pencil and a small bottle of lube. "This is the smallest one?" Alex nodded, and Olivia dabbed some lube on the end and placed it on a tissue on the nightstand.

"Let's just forget about it for now, okay?" Olivia soothed, pulling Alex into her arms and kissing her,
slowly, gently, until she felt Alex's pulse slow slightly and her body loosen up. "It's just you and me, sweetie," she reminded her, as she laid Alex back on top of the covers and began to kiss her body, hovering over her as she pressed soft kisses to her neck and collarbone and ran her fingertips gently across soft skin.

She pulled their shirts off after seeking permission, and pressed their bare skin together. "You're tense, Lex. I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Liv…"

"Shh, sweetie, you're shaking and your heart is pounding. If it makes you this nervous, we're not going to do it. Remember what I said about not pressuring yourself to do things before you're ready?"

Alex let out a frustrated sigh and turned her head to the side. "I just want to be normal, Liv."

"I know, Lex." Olivia said, lying down next to Alex and caressing her cheek gently. "I know."

She pulled herself in closer and pulled a sheet over them, tracing patterns on the bare skin of Alex's back with her index finger.

"Sweetie," she said, when Alex's breathing finally began to slow a bit. "You're aware I don't have a penis, right?"

Alex tilted her head and looked at Olivia, confused. "Uh, yeah. In fact, I consider it one of your better qualities," she replied, smiling.

"Gee, thanks," Olivia said. "I'm glad that's all it takes to impress you nowadays. It's not my devilish good looks, my quick wit, or my charming personality. It's just my penis-free genital region?"

"Mostly," Alex said, pressing a kiss to her shoulder. "Why?"

"I just want you to make sure you know that you don't have to push this for me. I'm in no rush to have sex before you're ready, and I… there are plenty of things we could do that don't involve penetration if it's uncomfortable for you."

"I know that, Liv, and I love you for it. But it's not just about that. Part of it is practical - I'm dreading having to sit through court in pads if I can't put in a tampon. And part of it is just… it's something he took from me. I can't even… this shouldn't even be an issue, dammit."

"Okay," Olivia said. "I agree that the tampon thing is pretty important, but just try to relax on the rest, okay? I know you want to get him out of your head and your body as soon as possible, but you can't rush it."

"That's what Caroline keeps telling me," Alex said wryly.

"Have you stopped to think that maybe she's right? That maybe she's been doing this a long time and knows what she's talking about?"

"I'm just used to getting things faster than everyone else."

"Sweetie, there's nothing to 'get' here. I thought I could heal faster from my assault because it wasn't that bad and hey, we see worse everyday, right? Unfortunately it doesn't work like that," Olivia said. "How about a massage instead?"
Alex nodded. "That would be nice," she said, turning over onto her stomach.

Olivia kneeled over her, rubbing up and down her spine and gently massaging her shoulders. "Does this hurt, Lex?" she asked gently, pressing her thumb into Alex's right shoulder blade, earning a hiss.

"I think I might need to go back to physical therapy."

"Okay, I'm not going to touch it, then." She kissed the scar and continued massaging, until all of the tension she had felt earlier was gone.

When she finished, she kissed the base of Alex's neck and flipped her over to cuddle. Alex, breathing slowly, reached over to the side table to take the dilator, pulling away when Olivia reached out a hand to stop her.

"It's okay, I'm relaxed now," she said. She brought it under the covers and wiggled as she removed her panties just enough.

Olivia continued to hold her as Alex brought it to her entrance and scrunched up her nose, anticipating pain.

"Shh, sweetie, if you act like it's going to hurt, it probably will," Olivia said, kissing her. "Just go slow and gentle."

"Will you do it?" Alex whispered.

Olivia held out her hand. "Put my hand where you want it. I don't want to surprise you," she replied.

Alex held her hand and brought it down to the end of the dilator between her legs. Olivia kissed her again and applied just a bit of pressure.

"Is it in the right place?" she asked, and Alex nodded, locking her eyes on Olivia for reassurance. "Tell me if it hurts and I'll stop."

Olivia maintained eye contact, watching for signs of pain, as she gently, slowly slid it inside Alex, who breathed a sigh of relief as she felt it painlessly enter her. When it was in all the way, Olivia brought her hand up to Alex's cheek, caressing and kissing her until the five minutes were up and it could be removed.

"Thank you," Alex whispered, pulling up her pants and preparing to go wash it off in the bathroom.

"You're welcome, sweetie. I'm glad it didn't hurt this time."

"Now we just have to do that a few dozen more times until I can get a tampon in by myself," Alex quipped, releasing nervous laughter.

Olivia smiled. "Yeah, somehow I doubt Cragen would let me come down to give you a massage and a make-out session every time you need to change your tampon. And it might back up the courts a bit."

Alex turned on her side, allowing Olivia to spoon her. "I love you," she whispered, holding Olivia's hand.

"I love you too, sweetie."
Chapter 32

Olivia awoke in the middle of the night to Alex shaking, her eyes tightly shut, and tried to rouse her gently. Alex moaned, and Olivia caught a glimpse of her hard nipples, and suddenly wasn't sure whether Alex was having a bad dream or a very good dream.

She wrapped an arm around her and Alex took her hand, still asleep, gripping it tightly as the shaking and moaning got more intense, until she burst into sobs and began saying 'no' over and over.

Once she realized what had happened, Olivia immediately pulled Alex to face her and pressed their bodies close together, pressing her arms into Alex's back.

"Shh, sweetie, wake up. It's okay. You're okay," she whispered into Alex's ear, until Alex woke up enough to try to push her away.

"Don't touch me. You don't want to touch me," she cried, but Olivia kept her close and kept rocking her. "I just… he… I feel dirty, don't touch me."

"You're not dirty, Lex," Olivia soothed, refusing to let go. If Alex had pushed back or panicked, there was no question she'd let her go, but Olivia suspected she was reacting from shame and embarrassment rather than a desire for Olivia to leave her alone.

"He was in my dream… he…”

"Shh, babe. You're okay. He can't hurt you anymore. It's just me, and we're going to stay like this and cuddle until you get a nice, big dose of cuddling hormone and it helps you feel better, okay?" She held Alex's head to her shoulder and rocked her until her breathing returned to normal a few minutes later. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She felt Alex's head shake as she sniffled into Olivia's shoulder.

"Okay. We don't have to. But I love you, and you're not dirty, I promise. You're beautiful, and amazing, and brave, and kind, and loving, but not dirty. Never dirty."

"I thought I was finally getting somewhere," Alex whispered after long moments of Olivia calming her.

"Hey, you are getting somewhere," Olivia soothed, running her fingers through Alex's hair. "We're both here with no shirts on, which is a huge step, we've had some really nice makeout sessions over the past few days, with no flashbacks, and you managed the dilator last night without pain. All those things are signs you're healing, even if you still have flashbacks or nightmares sometimes. You just have to keep reminding yourself that it's not going to happen overnight. This is just a little setback."

—

Olivia followed Alex and Sarah into the courtroom gallery as they filed in to listen to Keating’s allocution and sat down on the first bench behind the prosecution table.

"Your parents didn't want to come?" Alex asked gently.

Sarah shrugged. "It takes a lot to get my dad out of the house in his wheelchair, and my mom can't really leave him alone… it's not that big of a deal."
"I'm sorry, sweetheart," Alex said, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

"It's okay."

"No, it's not," Olivia replied.

Sarah was stoic as they listened to Keating, in handcuffs and an orange jumper, recount his crimes and receive his sentence, his father notably absent from the defense side. She didn't cry until he had been ushered out and the judge and most of the other victims had left the courtroom.

Alex put an arm around her and offered her a tissue as Sarah turned to cry into her shoulder, Olivia's hand light on her back.

"It's over, sweetheart," Alex said. "You're going to be okay."

—

"I changed our flight to tonight since I don't need to testify," Alex said as they finished up lunch in a nearby diner. "But I'll have to come back to sign paperwork with the school when they settle the lawsuit, probably in a few months. And starting in June, I'll officially have a place to live again, so I hope you'll come stay with me to visit colleges sometime."

"I'll have to see if they'll let me make up my grades. Otherwise they're not good enough to get into any of those schools."

"Sarah, we both know those grades don't reflect your ability. It's perfectly normal for you to struggle a bit academically. But even if last year's grades stay the same, your exam scores are great, and a little personal essay about bringing a serial rapist to justice would help your chances at any school."

"We'll see. But I do want to go far away for school."

"We'll talk about it, okay? I'm happy to help you with your applications," Alex said. She pulled a folder from her briefcase. "There's something else I thought might look good on your college applications, if you're interested. It's a little project I may need some help with."

Olivia raised an eyebrow. Alex hadn't mentioned anything to her.

"I have $10 million to give to charity," Alex said, and Sarah's eyes widened. "Well, I have more than that if I need it, but that's a start. It was part of the plea agreement my ex-fiancé signed. And I'd like to use it to start a scholarship fund for victims of SVU crimes, to encourage people to report them and press charges. Any person, of any age, who's been a victim of rape, sexual assault, domestic violence, a hate crime based on gender or sexual orientation, or any other sexually based offense could apply for funds to help pay for their secondary education, on the condition that they've reported the crime and agree to share part of their story. What do you think?"

"Are you going to do all this in your *spare* time?" Olivia teased. "It sounds perfect, Lex."

"That's why I need help. Of course I'll have my attorney set it up, and my accountant will handle the paperwork for the non-profit aspect, but I'll need some help setting the criteria, and getting publicity, and choosing winners. Would that be something you might be able to help me with?" She asked looking at Sarah. "You can say no, or change your mind. But think about it, please?"

"I think that's something I'd like to do. If other girls had reported Chris…" she trailed off.

"The average rapist has 6 victims before he's caught," Olivia added. "I'm not sure that the existence
of a scholarship fund will encourage women to report rapes. I don't know if they're going to think, 'Oh, well, now I'm eligible for that scholarship,' but if you can get enough media coverage, which I'm sure you'll be able to do, knowing you, it might help reduce the stigma, which in turn will lead to more reports."

"Exactly," Alex said. "I think the more women tell their stories, the less victims feel embarrassed about coming forward. It'll take a while to get set up, but we can talk about the details and what your role could be once I've met with my lawyer."

—

"That felt good," Alex said as they checked in their luggage at the airport.

"Yeah?" Olivia asked, taking her hand.

"Homicide, training baby ADAs… it's not like this. It's less raw, less viceral… and a lot less satisfying."

"How much did you ask for?"

"Well, for Sarah's lawsuit, I asked for $5 million, which, if it went to trial, we could certainly get, given the criminal negligence, the pending bribery charges, and the fact that the school knew about his previous offenses and had two eyewitnesses and did nothing. I think they'll settle for at least $2 million. For the others, it's a bit trickier, because there was no clear pattern of behavior until the third attack, and the first two victims never reported it to the school. So, I asked for $10 million between the 12 of them, and hopefully we'll get half of that. The plea and the allocation will help, and Abbie said it looks like Ray Keating is going to take a deal as well. Once he's been adjudicated, our case becomes much stronger because his testimony won't be tainted by his status as a co-conspirator, so I bet they'll rush to settle before the ink is dry on his paperwork."

Olivia smiled. "I love it when you're scary. I feel like we've got the old Alex back this weekend."

Alex buckled her seatbelt and leaned into Olivia's shoulder. "Part of her, maybe. But I don't want all of her back."

"No? I think she's pretty great, personally."

"Yeah, and she was stupid, and way too stubborn, and got herself shot for a case and then engaged to a rapist. And before you say anything," she held up her finger to Olivia's lips to stop her from protesting, "I'm not blaming myself. I'm just recognizing that sometimes I should trust my intuition and my heart a little more and worry about politics and what people think a little less."

"I don't think anyone could ever say that Alexandra Cabot is a coward," Olivia said.

"Not at her job, anyway. Just with her heart."

Olivia leaned over and kissed her temple.

"I don't want to be afraid anymore, Liv. I want to do things that scare me. I want… I'm trusting you with my heart. I want everything with you."

"Everything?" Olivia whispered.

"Anything and everything. Hot, passionate lovemaking. Vacations in Europe or at my house on the Vineyard. Cuddling up by the fire when you're sick. As many kids as we think we can handle.
Growing old together. Liv, I've never wanted any of this before."

"Kids?"

"If you want," Alex blushed and looked away. "I want your kids."

"I never though… Jesus, Alex, that's asking so much of you."

"You're not asking, though. I'm offering."

"How about we cross that bridge when we come to it?" Olivia said gently. "We can start at the beginning of your list. When you're ready, of course."

"Liv, I want to try for my birthday."

"That's really soon, Lex," Olivia said. "It's only a few weeks. I thought we decided not to rush it. I'm not sure you can put a deadline on your recovery like that."

"I want to try. If it doesn't work out, we'll deal. But I want to have something to work towards. Something to look forward to."

"Let's talk about it with Caroline and see what she says, okay? I promised I'd go with you when we got back."

Alex nodded. "Friday, then?"

Olivia pulled Alex onto her chest and kissed the top of her head. "Friday."
Chapter 33

Olivia and Alex went home for just long enough to shower and change before meeting Casey and Elliot at the precinct.

"How'd it go in Portland?" Casey asked, smiling as Alex handed her a hot cup of coffee they had picked up on the way over.

Alex smiled. "We got him. He only got 40 for 13 rapes because the DA was eager to plead him down, but a few people from the school will be going to jail, too, and we should get a nice settlement for the girls." She gestured towards the whiteboard. "What have we got on the Simmons case?"

Elliot looked grim. "The mother's in really bad shape, and Casey's hearing is this afternoon. The doctors don't think she'll make it through the end of the week anyway, but we haven't told Laura yet. We decided to wait until both of you were back, just because it's so bad. But he's still not talking. Oh, and it turns out that thing you found on the bathroom floor was an IUD, but Warner said it didn't have any DNA on it. So we don't think that's why they were fighting."

Olivia nodded slowly, recalling the layout of the bathroom where the attack had started. "Who's had a crack at him? Everyone?"

Elliot nodded. "We thought Munch was getting somewhere for a while, but he mostly kept his mouth shut. Didn't say anything useful; just kept calling her a slut and a whore."

Olivia pressed her lips together, and turned to face him. "El, you know how an IUD works, right?"

"Well, yeah, of course. It goes… inside, right?"

The women exchanged amused looks.

"What?"

"El, it's not like a tampon. You can't just pick one up at the pharmacy and put it in yourself. A doctor has to do it. But, they can provide effective birth control for 5 to 10 years. They can, however, be expelled on their own, accidentally. Do you see where I'm going with this?"

Elliot looked thoughtful, then shook his head. "Not really."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Warner probably figured that as an SVU detective, you'd at least know something about an IUD. What I'm saying is that there was probably no DNA on it because her uterus expelled it, probably into the toilet or bathtub. She probably didn't even notice it happened, and he found it."

"So her DNA got washed off," Elliot concluded. "What does that mean?"

Olivia nodded. "Do you have it? I'd like to go in and take a crack at him."

"Liv, Langan's in there and he hasn't said a word all weekend. But you're welcome to try it."

Olivia took the evidence bag into the interrogation room and sat down across from Simmons and Langan.

"Detective," Langan said. "My client has invoked his right to remain silent."
"Oh, he can remain silent," Olivia said. "He just has to listen. You see, I know what happened." She leaned in close and lowered her voice. "You see, I know the other detectives have been in here all weekend trying to get you to talk. But they don't know what you were angry about, and I do."

She put the evidence bag down on the table and slid it over in front of him as his eyes widened. "You see, they don't get what this means. That she told you for years that you were the reason you never had more children after Laura. That there must be something wrong with your little swimmers." She hit the table, hard. "And then you find out, purely by accident, that she was jerking you around all along. You weren't the one with the problem. She was using this, to basically have an abortion every single month. Because that's what one of these does, right? Prevents a fertilized egg - a person - from implanting. And only God can decide how many children she was supposed to have. Not to mention the fact that she accused you of not being manly enough to get her pregnant. That made you angry, didn't it? To find out, after all these years, that she was emasculating you? And who knows? She could have even been using it to screw around on the side, too. Because you know that's what happens when there are no consequences for having sex. Women turn into insatiable whores. She was probably having affairs the whole time. Do you even know if Laura is yours? You had to teach her a lesson, didn't you? Abortion and adultery are mortal sins."

Simmons slammed his fists on the table and jumped up. "That bitch! I prayed for years for more kids. We were supposed to have a whole house full of missionaries for God. And instead of being an obedient wife, like God commands, she betrayed me by killing our children! She had to pay!"

"And you made her pay, didn't you?" Olivia said softly.

"I did. The bitch deserved it. And she'll burn in hell for her sins."

"That's enough!" Langan cried. He had been trying to get his client to calm down, but to no avail. Olivia smiled. "And you'll rot in prison for yours," she replied, exiting the interrogation room.

Olivia, Elliot, and Alex drove in silence to pick up Laura and bring her to the hospital, and waited outside the window as Laura went in to sit at her mother's side.

"Lex, why don't you sit with her for a few minutes while we go get some coffee and a hot chocolate, and then we can all talk to her about her father and what's going to happen?" Olivia said, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

Alex nodded and went into the room, touching Laura's shoulder gently before sitting on a chair in the corner, not saying anything.

Elliot looked sideways at Olivia as they walked down the hall to the cafeteria. "How was Portland?" he asked. "I see that you and Alex have gotten close."

"We were always close, El," Olivia said dismissively.

"I'm a detective, Liv. What's going on between you two?"

"If you're a detective, detect," Olivia replied.

"She has feelings for you," Elliot stated. "She's just been through a major trauma. She's going to become dependent on you."

Olivia rolled her eyes a little as she prepared their coffee. "Are you taking over Huang's job now?"

"Liv, I'm serious. You're going to be in trouble later if you don't set boundaries."
"Elliot, my relationship with Alex is none of your business. Please leave it alone."

"I'm just looking out for you."

Olivia shook her head and paid for the drinks. "I don't need you to look out for me."

Elliot stopped in his tracks and turned to face her. "You have feelings for her, too, don't you?"

"Elliot, stop. We're not going to do this. My personal life is personal, and I'm not taking relationship advice from you. I never have, and I'm not going to start now. So leave it alone."

She didn't wait for him as she walked back towards the ICU.

—

Alex sat in the corner of the room while Laura held her mother's hand, until she noticed the girl's shoulders were shaking, and she pulled up a chair to sit next to her and put her hand on Laura's back to support her.

Laura gave no sign of acknowledging Alex's presence for the longest time, and didn't speak until a while after she stopped crying.

"I… we… we slept together. I mean, I had sex with her," Laura said, barely audibly, looking up at Alex. "Sorry… I just felt like I had to tell someone. And since there's nobody else to tell… it was amazing. I didn't know it could feel like that. I wanted to feel something. Something other than this." She gestured to the hospital bed and around the room. "She's not going to make it, is she?" Laura whispered.

Alex bit her lip, saying nothing, and rubbed Laura's back. She looked up and saw that Olivia and Elliot had returned with the coffees, and motioned for them to come in.

Olivia stood in front of Laura's chair and held out a cup. "I got you a hot chocolate," she offered, speaking softly. "We have some things to talk about, but we can do it in here if you don't want to leave her. Is that okay?"

Laura nodded, and Olivia grabbed a chair, angling it between Laura and the hospital bed.

"Your father confessed this morning," she began gently. "He found out that your mother was using birth control since she had you, and he was angry and attacked her. He's going to go to prison for a long time."

Olivia looked at Alex, silently asking her how to break the news about the hearing.

Alex nodded and took a sip of coffee. "Laura, right now, your father can only be charged with attempted murder. But your mom… she's not in good shape. She's suffered brain damage and she had an infection over the weekend. The doctors don't think she's going to make it." She paused to rub Laura's back as she began crying again. "Right now, your father holds medical power of attorney. He can keep her on life support long enough to avoid being charged with her murder. Casey has a hearing this afternoon with a judge to ask him for permission to withdraw life support and allow her to die peacefully."

"No!" Laura cried, shaking. Olivia took the cup from her hands and slid a plastic bin in front of her right before she vomited.

"Deep breaths, sweetie. Take a sip of water, put your head between your legs, there you go," Olivia
soothed. She held the bin out to Elliot.

Alex kept rubbing her back and encouraged her to breathe. "Sweetheart, your mom's not in there anymore. She can feel pain, but she isn't going to wake up. We wanted to tell you now so you have time to be with her and say your goodbyes. I'm so sorry."

"Can I have some time alone with her?" Laura asked, her voice shaking.

"Of course," Olivia soothed, getting up from her chair. "We'll be right outside if you need us, okay?"

Alex and Olivia stood in the hallway outside the room, while Elliot left to answer his phone.

Olivia looked around briefly and pulled Alex towards her. "Are you okay? I hate this part of the job," Olivia said softly.

Alex nodded. "I just wish I'd gotten to say goodbye to my mom. I can't imagine what she's going through right now."

Olivia pressed a kiss to her temple and rubbed her back gently.

"What's up with Elliot? He's been eyeing me suspiciously all morning."

Olivia chuckled. "He's concerned that you have feelings for me and he's 'looking out for me'."

Alex stood up and smoothed her skirt. "And why, exactly, is this 'concerning' to him?" she asked.

"I wasn't really clear on that," Olivia said. "I asked him if he was taking over Huang's job and told him that our relationship was none of his business. I think he just knows that if there were something between us, it would be serious, and he's jealous. He's always considered himself very important in my life, so if I were to actually get it together and have a serious relationship, he'd lose his self-appointed VIP status."

"Oh," Alex laughed.

They turned around to see Elliot walking back with Munch and Fin.

"Good morning, ladies," Munch said, tipping his hat. "We stopped by to let you know we found the aunt. She married her partner in Canada and changed her name, but she's living in Cherry Hill. She's in the waiting room right now. We thought Alex should talk to her about the guardianship issues."

Alex nodded and picked up her briefcase, following Munch back towards the waiting room.

"So, you and Benson, huh?" Munch said, grinning.

Alex blushed.

"Good for you. Just don't hurt our girl."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Alex confirmed.

They led her to a short, plump woman with short brown hair sitting in the corner of the waiting room.

"Alex Cabot," Alex said, sticking out her hand. "I'm sorry we have to meet under these circumstances."
The woman nodded and shifted in her seat. "Kate Duran," she replied, sticking out her hand. "I hear you have something on the bastard who hurt my sister."

Alex smiled sympathetically and sat down next to Kate, going over the details of the case and the pending criminal charges briefly. "I'm not involved directly with the criminal investigation, but I knew your niece before and offered to serve as her court-appointed guardian. She's been staying with a friend from school temporarily, but in light of your sister's condition and the likelihood of your brother-in-law going to prison, we need to find a more permanent solution, hopefully that doesn't involve foster care."

Kate shook her head. "We'll take her. It'll be a bit tight, since my wife and I have three kids, but of course we'll take her. She's never even met her cousins. I don't know if she even knows they exist."

Alex shook her head. "I don't think she does, since she never mentioned them to me."

"I tried to stay in touch with my sister after she started seeing that asshole. He would make all these comments about us, but I ignored him because I thought my sister would wise up and leave him eventually, and I wanted to be there for her and Laura. When Laura was 7 or 8, we registered as domestic partners and called it 'getting engaged', even though gay marriage wasn't legal anywhere. He through a fit, and then I got pregnant with our oldest..." she trailed off.

"He threatened you?" Alex asked.

Kate nodded. "That's part of why I changed my name. We moved, too, although I told Kelly where we were in case she wanted to get out. But I couldn't keep going around there and endangering my family. I was afraid he might try to hurt me while I was pregnant. I felt bad about leaving them alone, but..."

"I understand," Alex said gently.

"And Laura... is she...?" Kate's voice trailed off. "I can't take her if she's..."

"Homophobic?" Alex supplied. "No, she's not. She's a good kid. I knew her through a Presbyterian church that's about as liberal as you can get while still being called a church," she explained, smiling. "I don't think her father knew she went there sometimes. She told me about you and your wife, and she had a pretty good idea of why you stopped going over there."

Kate shook her head. "I never should have abandoned them. Maybe if I had been there, my sister would have left him... she thought I didn't care."

"Hey," Alex said. "Don't think about it like that. You're here now, and you can help your niece. Now, in terms of the paperwork, things are still a bit up in the air since Mr. Simmons hasn't been convicted yet. My job is to represent your niece's best interests in front of a judge, so we'll have to discuss things like Laura's schoolwork and what her living arrangements would be if she were to move in with you. Since she's older, her own preferences will be taken into account as well, but as far as we know, you're her legal next of kin. Her father might send his lawyer to object, but fortunately judges in Manhattan don't give much weight to confessed murderers. Or to anti-gay 'child endangerment' arguments, for that matter."

"Thank you," Kate said. "I just want to call my wife and talk her through everything. I'm sure she'll agree to take Laura, and there's plenty of room at our house, but I just want to give her a head's up."

"Of course," Alex said. "You may also want to hire an attorney for the hearings."

"My wife is an attorney, actually. Criminal defense for white collar crimes, but she'll be able to
represent us, I think."

Alex nodded. "Talk to your wife, and let one of us know when you're ready for me to bring Laura out, okay? It's probably better to have your reunion out here, than in the ICU. In the meantime, can I bring you a cup of tea or coffee?"

Alex rejoined the detectives outside Kelly Simmons's room, the blinds drawn to give Laura some privacy. Munch and Fin had left to work on another case, and Olivia and Elliot were thinking about doing the same.

"I'm only going to stay long enough to get them reacquainted, and then I'm going to go into the office for the afternoon. If Casey wins her motion, I'll come back for a bit this afternoon, but I do need to check up on all my cases and make sure Jim hasn't staged a coup," Alex said to Olivia as they were getting ready to leave.

"Okay, well just text me and let me know where you'll be. Unless we get called out I'll pick you up on my way home if you're ready."

Alex nodded, and seeing that Elliot wasn't in sight, she kissed her quickly on the cheek. "Be safe, Liv. I love you," she said quietly.

Olivia smiled. "I love you too. See you soon."

Alex went into Kelly's room and sat down next to the bed. Laura was in bed with her mother, arms wrapped around her, alternating between singing and talking in low tones.

"Laura, there's someone here to see you," Alex said. "We found your Aunt Kate. She's in the waiting room."

"Am I going to have to go live with her?" Laura asked, leaning her head on her mother's shoulder.

"That hasn't been decided yet," Alex said carefully. "But she lives right outside the city, in Cherry Hill. And she's married now, and she and her wife have three kids."

"I have cousins?" Laura asked. Alex nodded. "Will I have to change schools? What will happen to our apartment and all of my stuff? Do they even have enough space for me?"

"We haven't worked out any of those things yet," Alex said. "Right now she just wants to meet you and be here for you, and everything else will be worked out with a judge later, okay? Can I take you to meet her?"

Laura nodded and kissed her mom on her forehead before getting out of bed. Alex put a hand on her back to guide her out to her aunt.

Kate's eyes filled with tears as she saw her niece for the first time in years. She held her arms out tentatively for a hug, and after looking at Alex for reassurance, Laura stepped into her aunt's embrace. "You look so grown up," Kate said through her tears. "Just like your mom."

"I'm going to let you two get to know each other," Alex said, backing away. "I'll be in your mom's room, and I'll come get you if anything changes."

Alex sat with her laptop, going over evidence for an upcoming trial, until Casey showed up a while later.

"Oh good, you're still here," Casey said. "I got the order. Want to help me deliver the bad news?"
Alex nodded, pressing her lips together grimly, and followed Casey into the waiting room. She introduced Casey to Kate.

"Laura, a judge granted an order to remove your mother from life support based on her doctor's recommendation," Casey said softly. "I'm so sorry."

Laura began crying again, and Kate wrapped her arms around her, rocking her.

"The doctor is going to come down in a few minutes and unhook the machines. You can go in now and say your goodbyes, and stay with her as long as you want. Until she passes," Casey clarified. "It might take a little while after the machines are turned off."

Laura swallowed and wiped her tears away with the back of her hand, and stood up, following Casey stoically into the ICU.

"You can sit with her," Alex encouraged, nudging her towards the bed.

Laura climbed in and put her arms around her mother, stroking her hair, as the doctor came in.

"We're going to give you some privacy," Alex said, taking a card out of her briefcase to hand to Kate. "Here's my number in case you need anything, and I'll be in touch about the hearing."

"Wait," Laura said. "Will you stay just for a minute?"

Alex looked at Casey and nodded as the doctor began unhooking tubes and turning off machines.

"I want to say a prayer," Laura said quietly, her voice shaky. "Will you pray with me?"

All three women folded their hands and bowed their heads.

"My mom's favorite was Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still pastures. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness, for His name's sake."

Alex reached over to take one of Laura's hands as her voice quivered. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

Laura started to cry in her mother's arms, and when she couldn't continue, Casey finished. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Alex squeezed Laura's hand. "Let me know if there's anything I can do," she said softly. "I'm so sorry."

Casey sighed as they left the ICU and walked towards the elevator, wiping a tear from her eye. "I hate this part of the job," she said.

Alex wiped away her own tear and reached out to squeeze Casey's hand. "Me too."

That night, Alex held Olivia tight, needing as much physical contact as possible, until the call came at 1:48 AM to say that Kelly Simmons had passed away ten minutes before.
Alex slid into the armchair in Caroline's office on Friday afternoon and sighed, then sat up straight.

"Hi, Alex," Caroline said warmly as she shuffled in behind her and closed the door. "I see you brought Olivia with you today. Is she going to come in?"

Alex nodded. "At the end."

"What would you like to talk about today?"

Alex took a deep breath and sat up straight. "I want to have sex for my birthday."

Caroline nodded. "And when is your birthday?"

"May 16. Two weeks."

"And how did you choose that day?"

Alex looked over into the corner and shrugged. "It seems like a good goal. Last year, I was just coming back from Witsec and nobody knew I was in town except for my godmother and my brother, and I… I had gotten my whole life back, but I didn't feel like I had a lot to celebrate. This year… I don't know. I guess I want it to be the start of something new. Something good."

"And having sex is the answer?"

"It's something I've never been very confident about, except with Olivia I think I could be. Everything we've done so far… I haven't felt too shy about… participating instead of just letting her do stuff to me and… holding back. I think it would… I want to feel her and not him."

Caroline nodded, and when Alex grew quiet, not adding anything else, she asked the next question. "And have you decided what you mean when you say you want to 'have sex'?"

Alex looked confused. "What do you mean?"

"Have you thought about, or have you and Olivia talked about what your first time will look like? Will it include penetration? Oral sex? Toys? Will each of you have an orgasm?"

Alex blushed and bit her lip, focusing on the pattern on the rug. "We didn't really talk about it, but… I don't think I'm ready for oral sex. Fingering, probably? Penetration if it works… I know she wouldn't do anything without making sure it was okay first. But I don't know… how will I know when I'm ready?"

Caroline nodded and got up from her chair, to take a tray from behind her desk. The tray contained five translucent jars in different colors, labeled 'Now,' '1 month,' '1 month - 1 year,' '1 year,' and 'Never.' She placed it on the coffee table between them and took a small pile of laminated cards, flipping through them before handing them over to Alex.

"I'd like you to try an exercise," Caroline said, as Alex looked at the words written on the cards. "Each of the cards has a different physical touch or sex act on it. I'd like you to go through each one and think about whether it's something you're comfortable doing with Olivia now, never, or in less than one month, sometime in the next year, or in more than one year, and put it in one of the jars. Then we'll take everything out and you can see where you're at. I'd like you to consider each thing
individually, and not think too much about the distribution between the jars, okay? Just go with your instinct."

Alex nodded and turned over the stack, considering the first card.

**Kissing.** Now.

**Being tied up.** Never.

**Undressing your partner.** Alex imagined slipping Olivia's leather jacket off her shoulders, pulling her shirt over her head, unclasping her bra… Less than one month.

**Cuddling. Holding hands. Hugging.** Now.

**Penetration - penile.** Alex made a face. Never.

**Penetration - finger(s).** She stopped to consider. Olivia had been so gentle with the dilators. Maybe not a month, but maybe not much longer than that?

Alex shook as she slid the last card, **Receiving oral sex,** into the More than one year jar, and grabbed a tissue. She blinked her eyes deliberately and took a deep breath as she tried to push out memories of her hips being held down… of struggling to get away from his mouth on her.

"Alex? What's going through your mind right now?" Caroline said, leaning forward in her chair and speaking softly.

Alex opened her mouth to speak, but only a choked sob came out.

Caroline waited a few moments to see if Alex could calm herself, but the shaking didn't stop.
"Would you like me to get Olivia?" she asked.

Alex nodded and sniffled, trying, unsuccessfully, to control her breathing. A minute later, Olivia was standing in front of her, arms open, asking Alex if she wanted to be held.

Olivia looked over Alex's shoulder as she rocked and soothed her and ran her fingers through Alex's hair. She looked first at Caroline, who sat back in her chair, and then down at the jars, immediately understanding what had triggered Alex.

"Lex, sweetie, you're okay. There's no rush for any of this. No rush at all."

"Alex, this exercise isn't meant to overwhelm you with all the things you're not ready for. It's meant to help you evaluate what you might be ready for soon and what your next steps could be, sexually. Your answers would be different if you did the same exercise tomorrow, or next week, or next month. There's no shame in being where you are."

"Then why did you have her do it?" Olivia asked, rubbing Alex's back as she glared at the doctor.

"Liv, it's okay," Alex whispered. "She's right. I wanted to go too fast and I needed the reality check. Now I've got one," she said bitterly. "I'm sorry."

Olivia lifted Alex's chin with her finger and brushed away tears with her thumb. "You have nothing to be sorry about, Lex."

"I think for today we should stick with looking at the contents of the 'Now' and the 'Less than 1 Month' jars," Caroline said.
Alex shook her head. "No, Olivia deserves to know what she's getting herself into." She pulled away and sat back down in her chair, shrinking into the back and wrapping her arms around herself, staring at the jars.

Olivia pulled another chair right next to Alex's and sat down, but when she reached out to touch Alex's arm, she flinched and pulled away, her tear-filled eyes still fixed on the line of jars. Olivia slid out of the chair and crouched down in front of Alex, taking both of her hands. "Alex," she said quietly, gently rubbing her thumbs over Alex's hands. "Alex, look at me, please."

Alex swallowed and slowly turned her head towards Olivia, tears running down her cheeks.

"Alex, I know exactly what I'm getting myself into, and it has nothing to do with sex," she began, smiling softly. She withdrew one of her hands and reached up to brush Alex's tears away again. "I'm getting into this," she tapped Alex's temple with her index finger, "and I'm especially getting into this," she said, tapping her finger over Alex's heart. "Everything else can come in time. Or never. But we've talked about this. Putting pressure on yourself, or a deadline, is going to stress you out more. Wherever you are right now is okay. There's no rush, I promise."

Alex nodded and Olivia squeezed her hand. "Do you want to go through these, or do you want to go home?"

"I want to go through them." Alex said quietly.

Olivia nodded. "Do you want me to stay, or go back out to the waiting room? It's up to you."

"Stay."

Olivia sat back down next to Alex, still holding her hand, and waited for her to reach for one of the jars.

"Are you going to go through all of the jars, or just the first two?" Caroline asked, as she stopped Alex from opening the first jar. "If you want to do all of them, I suggest we start with the 'Never' category, and work our way back into what you feel you are ready to do. At the end, we can talk about what your next steps might be and how you can support each other through the process."

Alex nodded and wordlessly took the 'Never' jar off the table. She released Olivia's hand, who moved it to her back, and took out the stack of cards, laying them out on the table in a column below the jar. When the last jar had been emptied, Alex let out another audible breath, and Olivia took back her hand as she committed the layout of the cards to memory.

"What are you thinking right now, Alex?" Caroline asked after a moment. "Is there anything you'd like to move now that everything's laid out?"

Alex shook her head and let out a breath through her teeth, chewing on her lip. "I've got a long way to go. I'm sorry, Liv."

Olivia squeezed her hand. "Some of these things you told me you weren't comfortable with before the rape," she said, pointing out a few of the cards to Alex. "So imagining that you'll be comfortable enough with me in a few weeks or a few months is major progress. So are all of these things," she pointed to the 'Less than one month' list. "We don't have to do everything at once."

"It's normal to feel some frustration," Caroline said. "But think about where you were when you first came in here a few weeks ago. What's changed?"

"The first time we kissed, I freaked out, and now… we can make out, and I don't have as many
nightmares. And I don't flinch when she touches me."

"So you've been easing into more physical and sexual contact, and it hasn't triggered any flashbacks?"

Alex shook her head. "I told you about my flashbacks and the nightmares I had in Portland, and none of them were triggered by Olivia. But I feel like every time we we want to do something, it's this whole ordeal. I can't just relax and enjoy it; I'm constantly worrying about whether I'm going to react badly to something, or pull away and hurt Olivia's feelings, or even worse, if something I do is going to trigger her. To the point where we spend half the time asking each other if we're okay, and it just triggers my anxiety."

Olivia smiled and squeezed her hand again. "Lex, we did both work sex crimes and we both know what it's like to be violated. I think it's normal that we would always want to make sure we always have each other's consent."

"I know, but don't you think it's exhausting?"

Olivia held Alex's eyes for a moment. "I'd rather take a few seconds to ask if you're okay than go too far and hurt you unintentionally."

"Liv, I trust you to stop if I ask you to."

"I know you do," Olivia said under her breath. She bit her lip and looked to the doctor, then back to Alex. "I'm just worried that you're so eager to 'get over it' and be 'normal' that you'll push yourself too hard, and... I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if I hurt you."

Alex's anger flared, but she said nothing.

"Alex? Any thoughts?" Caroline asked.

Alex shook her head and remained silent.

"What if you discuss what steps you wanted to take beforehand, and then check in with each other if one of you says 'stop' or when you've completed all the steps? That might help Olivia to worry less about crossing boundaries and Alex to feel less like she's being scrutinized. Is that something that could work for you?"

Olivia nodded slowly, watching Alex. "I think we'd have to be very explicit, at least in the beginning, but I think we could try. I just... the last thing I want to do is hurt you."

"Alex, you may find that the healing process isn't linear. You'll likely have setbacks. More communication might be difficult, especially at first, but I tend to find that the more clearly couples can communicate with each other, the fewer setbacks they have."

Alex nodded and stood up abruptly. "We'll try that, then. Thank you. I think I'm done for today."

She went to the waiting room and put on her jacket, and Olivia followed silently.

"I'm going to walk home alone, Olivia," Alex said. "Don't follow me."

Olivia nodded. "Be safe. I'll give you a head start." It was still broad daylight, so walking twenty blocks on the Upper West Side alone was far from dangerous. Even if she went into the park, Alex would be okay.
After Alex left, Olivia sighed and turned to Caroline. "She has a lot of anger."

Caroline nodded. "Of course she does. But if she's not ready to acknowledge it, I can't make her."

"I can," Olivia said slowly. "She's frustrated with herself for being angry and for being a victim. When that happened in Witsec, she hurt herself and got into a bad relationship, and now, she won't hurt herself, but she's trying to use me to hurt her instead of just expressing her anger."

Caroline smiled, a twinkle in her eye. "Are you a psychologist now too, Detective?"

Olivia laughed. "God, no. But I've picked up a thing or two on the job. I know victims, and even though it's hard to see Alex as one... Do you think I'm that far off?"

Caroline shook her head. "Alex seems to be someone who likes very much to be in control. Loss of identity for a few years and rape are both painful for anyone, but she's trying to control her emotional response and direct the outcome of her recovery like she's trying to put together a logical argument for a jury."

"That's Alex. Hates not being in control." Olivia smiled, then looked serious. "Do you think I can provoke her into getting angry? I don't normally like to use manipulative interrogation tactics on someone I love, but what if I let her pick a fight with me? Make her lose control in a safe place, our apartment? Do you think it will be cathartic, or will it damage her more?"

"I suspect she's going to pick a fight with you regardless," Caroline said, mulling over the question. "Push back, but avoid saying anything hurtful. Let all the anger come from her."

"Of course," Olivia nodded. "I'd much rather she take it out on me than on herself."

Caroline walked Olivia to the door. "She has my number if she needs to call me tonight. She's lucky to have such a supportive partner."

"Ten years of sex crimes, and nothing prepares you for it being your own girlfriend. Thank you, Dr. March."

Olivia took the elevator down and hailed a cab back to her apartment, hoping to arrive before Alex. She changed into jeans and put her badge and gun in the lockbox in the closet, then poured two glasses of wine and sat down on the couch with an array of takeout menus. She'd leave the house to order food if Alex needed space.

She had only taken a few sips when she heard the door slam, and she took a deep breath. Hopefully, this wouldn't backfire.

She met Alex at the door and held out the glass of wine. "Hey, sweetie," she said warmly. She reached out to touch Alex's arm, but she pulled away.

"Liv, I need you to stop treating me like I'm broken." Alex said harshly.

"Okay," Olivia said carefully. "How can I do that?"

"I don't know! You seem to think I'm so fragile I have no idea what I want. Rape is about control, Olivia. Witness protection took it away from me, he took it away from me, and now you are."

"Lex, I'm just worried about going too far too fast and hurting you."

"I told you I trust you to stop when I ask. What more do you want? A signed consent form?"
"Lex, listen…"

"No, Olivia, you listen. I'm all for talking about things ahead of time, but I can't deal with you asking me EVERY SINGLE TIME you touch me if it's okay like this or like that. Every time you do that, it reminds me what happened, and I have to go back through those memories to see if it's okay. I have to worry about it not being okay, and I have to remember that I'm a victim and I can't even enjoy the simplest thing without reliving the worst thing that's ever happened to me, and you make me do it. That's why I need you to let me just say stop."

Olivia spoke evenly, avoiding raising her voice in response to Alex. "Alex, has it ever occurred to you that I'm not sure I can trust you to say stop? That you'll keep going even if something's hurting you because you want to prove that you can do it, or worse, because you think it'll make me happy?"

"And in case you've forgotten, I'm in this relationship too. I'm not just a tool to help you recover. As much as I want to help you, I also have hangups, and I also need to get used to this… not just being in a sexual relationship again, but being in love for the first time. And if we can't deal with my stuff, too, I don't know what we're doing."

"What do you mean, you don't trust me to say stop? What makes you think that?"

"You do! Aside from all your eagerness, you've told me that you've had sex when you didn't want to and allowed your partners to do things that made you uncomfortable in the past. How do I know you're not going to do that with me? That doesn't have anything to do with you being raped, that has to do with relationships that you were a voluntary participant in. When we make love, Alex, I want it to be because you want to and it feels good for you, and not be wondering if you're just doing it out of some sense of obligation or to prove something."

Alex's jaw dropped as though Olivia had slapped her. "What do you want me to do, Olivia? Please, tell me your criteria and how I can prove to you that my emotional recovery is sufficient for your pre-approved level of physical contact."

"Alex…"

"Don't 'Alex' me. I know you think you're the expert on this, and that you know exactly what I need and how to help me, but you don't, Olivia! I don't even know what I want or how to feel even a little bit better, so I don't know how you can. So stop fucking pretending you know what to do and fucking listen to me for once!"

"I am listening to you, Alex, and I'm on your side. You're not angry with me. You deserve to be angry, and upset, at Robert, at the situation, so get angry. Yell. Cry. Scream. Hit something. Take it out on me, if you want, but I'm not…"

"And now you're telling me who I can be angry with? Are you fucking serious? I am angry with you. You know what? Just go. Leave me the fuck alone."

Olivia held back tears as Alex fled to the bedroom and slammed the door, and she heard loud sobs. "I'm sorry, Lex," she whispered as she picked up her jacket and her phone and headed out the door.

Olivia walked to the park and sat down on a bench to cry for a while. She saw Alex crack. She knew getting angry would be good for her in the long run, but man, it hurt. Hopefully Alex would forgive her.

After awhile, Olivia looked at the time on her phone, and called to place a takeout order and sent a text to Alex. "I'm sorry. I'm picking up food and I'm on my way home. I love you."
When Olivia arrived home nearly two hours after the fight, she put the food in the kitchen, seeing no signs of Alex other than the crooked pictures on the wall from when she had slammed the door. She approached the bedroom slowly and knocked on the door.

"Lex?" she called. "Can I come in?" When she heard no response, she twisted the knob and slowly opened the door.

Alex was laying on the bed, curled up in the comforter. Her eyes we closed, her face was stained with tears, and the whole room was covered in down feathers. Olivia smiled as she laid down beside Alex and wrapped her arms around her.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie," she whispered in Alex's ear, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Alex whimpered a little as she came to, and cuddled into Olivia's arms. "I'm so sorry. I was frustrated. I didn't mean any of it."

Alex shook her head and tried to pull back, but Olivia held her close. "No, you're right. I'm sorry. I'm not being fair to you. And I…"

"Shh," Olivia soothed. "We'll talk, but not right now. I think we're talked out. So we're going to go eat some Chinese food, and cuddle up on the couch, and maybe watch something on TV. And then we're going to come to bed, and not do anything sexual except for some cuddling. And tomorrow, we'll start to figure this out. Okay?"

Alex nodded. "Liv?" she asked, picking a feather out of Olivia's hair. "I'm sorry about your pillows. I'll get new ones tomorrow, I just… I was yelling into one, and I started hitting it, and it broke… and then once I started I couldn't stop until they were all gone. And then I fell asleep."

"It's okay. I'm glad you took your anger out on my pillows. They couldn't hurt you back and they're easy to replace. We just might have sore necks tomorrow."

Alex smiled sheepishly as they sat up, bits of feather covering their clothes. Alex ran her fingers through Olivia's hair and then her own, trying to brush out some of the feathers, and they looked at each other and started laughing hysterically.

"I'll get the vacuum," Alex said, starting to get up.

Olivia pulled her back down on the bed and kissed her lips gently. "Don't worry about it. Let's eat, then cuddle, then worry about the mess later."

Alex nodded. "I'm sorry. And I love you," she whispered.

Olivia held Alex and ran her fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry and I love you, too."
Olivia woke up the next morning with a crick in her neck from the couch throw pillows they had slept on, and Alex in her arms, half on top of her, making small noises in her sleep.

"Liv. Liv," Alex moaned softly.

"I'm right here, baby," Olivia whispered, rubbing her back and kissing the top of her head. "Right here."

Alex opened her eyes a few minutes later, and looked around.

"Hey," Olivia said softly, brushing the back of her hand against Alex's cheek. "Feeling better this morning?"

Alex nodded. "Liv, I…"

"Alex…" Olivia stopped to let Alex speak, but Alex looked at her expectantly. "I'm glad you didn't leave. I was so worried about you last night."

"I thought about it," Alex admitted. "I called Liz to ask if I could stay with her. But she didn't answer her phone, and when she called back, I had just finished destroying your pillows. She suggested that you might freak out if you came home and there was a mess and I was gone, but that she would come get me after you got home if I still wanted her to. And then I calmed down a bit and realized that you were right. I'm not angry with you, and I don't know what I'd be doing without you. I'm taking my frustration out on you partly because I know you'll take it and be so damn understanding."

"Sweetie, I knew you were angry and that you needed to let it out. It's normal to be angry; God knows you've got plenty to be angry about. And I'd much rather have you take it out on me, or even on my poor, innocent pillows, than on yourself." Olivia rubbed Alex's back with one hand and simultaneously massaged her scalp with the other. "Are we okay, though?"

Alex looked into Olivia's eyes and nodded. "We're okay."

Olivia kissed her forehead. "Good. Does that mean I can still take you on our first date tonight?"

"I wouldn't miss it. Where are we going?"

Olivia chuckled. "I'm not giving it up that easily. The only thing I'll tell you is that it's definitely casual, and you need to wear comfortable shoes. We'll be doing some walking."

"Okay. I'll change after lunch with my father. And I'll pick up some new pillows."

"Good luck. Hopefully Elliot and I will just be doing paperwork all day, so give me a call or drop by if you need me, okay?"

—

Olivia looked at the clock for approximately the gazillionth time since she'd arrived. 1:30. She sighed and pulled out the next file in her stack. She'd already called to confirm the dinner reservations and gone over the evening's itinerary in her mind.

She tapped her foot nervously on her desk.
"Hey," Elliot called out, throwing a crumpled up piece of paper at her. "You look distracted. Want to go grab a cup of coffee?"

Olivia nodded and pushed up from her chair.

"So, how's Alex doing?" Elliot asked as they walked down the steps in front of the precinct.

"Better," Olivia replied. "She's getting there."

"That's good. Any word on her apartment and when she'll be able to move back in?"

Olivia shook her head. "I haven't asked. But it's not like I'm in a rush to get rid of her. I kind of like having her there."

"Liv, I told you to be careful…"

"Yeah, I know, El, but I care about her, alright?"

Elliot opened and closed his mouth a few times, then grabbed his coffee and took a sip.

"Are you two…"

"I'm taking her out on a date tonight. Our first date."

"Oh. I was under the impression it was already serious."

"It is serious, El. She just hasn't been up for going out on dates yet."

"And you're sure all of this isn't because she's relying on you and you're enjoying taking care of her?"

"You're an ass, Elliot." Olivia snapped. "Of course not. I've cared about her for a long time. I just didn't know she felt the same way until recently. Neither did she."

"So that's it, then?"

"El, how did you know that you were going to marry Kathy?"

Elliot looked into his coffee cup and thought for a moment. "I think i'd have to say it was the first time I kissed her."

Olivia raised an eyebrow.

"You two are already making out?"

"Elliot, that's none of your business. But yeah, we've kissed, and it feels… different. Right, I guess," she said softly.

Elliot nodded, looking off into space. "I don't know, Liv. It's my job to watch your back, and I think this is a bad idea. You're going to get hurt."

"Yeah, El, your job is to watch my back. Not my heart." She smiled at him and stood up, throwing her coffee cup in the trash, and walked quickly back to the precinct, with Elliot rushing to keep up.

—

Alex tapped her foot nervously as she waited at the table in the small upscale restaurant her father
had chosen, facing the door as always. She sipped a glass of wine nervously, figuring it might help her to relax before he arrived, just in case he wasn't as conciliatory as her brother had led her to believe.

She pressed her lips together as she saw him headed towards the back of the restaurant, and stood up to greet him.

"Alexandra," he said warmly, enveloping her in a bear hug. He didn't seem to notice that she flinched slightly at the use of her full name. "It's good to see you."

"Daddy," she said, hugging him back. "It's good to see you, too."

He motioned for her to sit down, and ordered a drink.

"Alexandra, I..." he studied his daughter for a moment and tried to find words as she swirled her wine glass, avoiding eye contact. He swallowed and settled on, "Liz called me."

"Oh," Alex said. She smoothed the napkin in her lap and folded her hands, resting her wrists on the edge of the table.

The elder Cabot looked intently at his place setting and straightened out his silverware, then swallowed a sip of his drink and looked up at her again, reaching over to take her hand. "I didn't want to believe it," he said quietly. "You know how long we've known that family for. I didn't think it was possible. I wanted to believe it was all a misunderstanding. I'm sorry."

Alex took a steadying breath and looked up at her father. "If there's one thing I've learned in my job, it's that anyone can be a rapist. And anyone can be a victim." She laughed uncomfortably. "What did Liz tell you?"

"She reamed me out for not supporting my daughter. And she was right. I should never have tried to be neutral."

Alex nodded and used her free hand to straighten her own silverware. "He was uh, pretty controlling and abusive even before the rape. It started slowly, but this wasn't an isolated incident." She withdrew her hand from her father's as the waiter placed their appetizers on the table, and tilted her head. "You still haven't said whether you believe me now."

"I don't think you're a liar, Alexandra. I just went from being thrilled that my daughter was alive and engaged to marry the son of one of my oldest friends to shocked that he could do such a terrible thing. I wanted to stay out of it, but that doesn't mean I didn't think you were telling the truth about him hurting you."

"That's not what it felt like," Alex said quietly, looking at her lap. "It felt like my dad was defending my rapist."

"I just thought you'd want me to give you space while you were sorting things out. I didn't mean for you to interpret it that way." He stopped eating and waited for her to make eye contact. "Forgive me, Alexandra."

Alex nodded slightly as a single tear rolled down her cheek. "I spent three years away from home with no identity and no family, Daddy. I want to be able to count on my family. I want to know my father supports me. But this felt like a betrayal. It's going to take time for me to forgive you, but I will."

The elder Cabot placed his knife and fork on the side of his plate to indicate he had finished eating.
"I understand. But I hope you know how glad I am that my little girl is back."

Alex pressed her lips together and tried to force a smile. "I'm glad to be back too, Daddy."

They ordered coffee and dessert and talked about random topics. "You're moving back into your old apartment soon?"

Alex nodded. "My tenants are moving out June 15, so I'll be back in there by the beginning of July. I'll have to go up to Amherst to get some of my furniture, and buy some new things. Then maybe Bill and I can start talking about selling Mom's house."

"Your friend has been very kind to let you stay with her for so long. I'm surprised you didn't end up going to stay at a hotel, or with Liz."

Alex nodded and looked away. "Olivia has been very generous," she agreed. She took a few breaths, trying to decide how best to tell him. This was clearly her opening. "Daddy, there's something I need to tell you about her and I'm not sure how you're going to react."

Mr. Cabot smiled and patted Alex's hand. "I know she was there when you were shot and helped save your life, and I know she's been a good friend to you since the whole Robert fiasco. I'm not sure what you could tell me about her that I wouldn't like."

Alex decided to go for the simplest explanation. "Olivia is taking me on a date tonight."

Mr. Cabot, the person who'd taught Alex everything she needed to know about having a poker face, didn't react. "A date, as in… a romantic date?"

"How many kinds of dates are there, Daddy? Yes, a romantic date."

Mr. Cabot cleared his throat and took a sip of water, and Alex waited what felt like an eternity for him to acknowledge what she'd said. "But Alexandra, you're not a lesbian," he finally said, shaking his head slightly. "And you have plenty of options. Word just hasn't gotten around that you're available yet."

Alex waited to make eye contact, folding her hands on her lap, and spoke softly. "Daddy, this has nothing to do with Robert or having other options. I've come to realize that I am a lesbian. And I'm going on a date with Olivia because of how I feel about her."

"And how do you feel about her?"

"I love her," Alex said simply. "The way I feel about her… it's the way I should have felt about Robert, a man I had agreed to marry."

Mr. Cabot continued looking at his daughter and took another sip of water. "After everything you've been through, it's normal to be confused, Alexandra. Give it time. You'll meet a nice man…"

"I'm not confused," Alex said harshly, her voice low. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes, cross her arms, and retort, *You just don't get it, do you?* like a petulant teenager.

"Okay, let's not make a scene," Mr. Cabot said calmly.

"I'm not confused, and I'm not going to wait to meet a 'nice man'. Obviously Olivia and I have to start dating, and we need to take things slow, but I'm pretty sure about her, Daddy. I hope you can support that."
Mr. Cabot signed the credit card receipt and sighed. "You're my only daughter, Alexandra, and I'll always support you. But I'm going to need some time to get used to the idea."

Alex nodded, accepting that this was the best he could do for now. "We'll just have to give each other some time, then," she said.

She got up to leave the restaurant, and her father stood, wrapping her in another hug and kissing her cheek.

Alex kissed his cheek back and returned the hug, then leaned out slightly to look at her father. "Daddy, I'm not the same person I was four years ago. I know... I know you're not either. And I know you miss Mom. But, it was hard for me to leave, and hard for me to come back. I've changed a lot, and I'm still changing. Olivia has been supporting me through everything."

The elder Cabot smiled at his daughter and nodded. "Take care, Alexandra," he said, squeezing her hand. "And have a good time on your date."

Then, she walked swiftly out of the restaurant to buy some pillows and get ready for her date.
Chapter 36

Olivia ran her fingers through her hair one more time and double-checked the bouquet of flowers in her hand at precisely 6:00. She'd decided to bring her clothes and get ready at the precinct, buying the flowers on her way out and then circling back to take a shower and get ready in the crib after Elliot had left.

She took a deep breath and then rolled her eyes at how nervous she felt, walking up to knock on her own apartment door. Get it together, Benson. It's just Alex, she thought, but she could still feel her heart pounding. Despite the fact that Alex had been living there for more than two months, that they had shared a bed, that they had kissed and touched and talked about doing more, this was no ordinary first date. This was Alex.

She raised her hand and knocked on the door, and waited anxiously for a few minutes until Alex opened the door, putting the chain on.

"Oh, it's you," Alex said, laughing and shaking her head. She closed the door and took the chain off to let Olivia in. "I was wondering who would be knocking."

Olivia grinned. "I told you I'd pick you up," she said, holding out the flowers. "I don't know, I wanted it to feel like a real date."

"Thank you," Alex said, blushing as she took the flowers and set them on the coffee table. Since Olivia had told her there would be walking involved, she was wearing flat sandals with her blue sundress, and she'd curled some waves into her hair.

Olivia leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. "You look beautiful. Are you ready?"

Alex smiled and grabbed her purse. "I'm ready. Where to?" she asked, taking Olivia's hand and following her out the door.

"Uh-uh," Olivia admonished. "You're not getting it out of me that easily."

Olivia gave an address Alex didn't recognize to the cab driver, and Alex looked confused as it pulled up in front of a building on Wall Street. Since the stock market wasn't open and the financial crisis had gutted lots of businesses, the area looked half abandoned, and there was a large empty lot with a construction barrier around it.

"Uh, Liv? Are we in the right place?" Alex asked, looking around for a restaurant, a bar, something that resembled a date-like destination.

Olivia smiled. "Yup. Come on," she said, crossing the street and turning a corner. "Do you know where we are?"

"Where George Washington was inaugurated?"

Olivia laughed. "Well, yeah, but that's not why we're here." She pushed a revolving door into a smaller office building and flashed her badge to the security guard, then pressed the button for the elevator. When they arrived on the eleventh floor, they stopped.

The floor was dark, but the Radial Velocity logo was still engraved on the frosted window.

"My first SVU case," Alex said, remembering.
"The company doesn't exist anymore. Apparently investors don't like pedophile CEOs who use national security as a smokescreen for child rape. They went out of business right before 9/11, oddly enough. They might have survived if they'd held on a bit… But I digress. Do you remember that case?"

"Of course," Alex murmured. "The kid wouldn't admit he'd been molested until the Grand Jury because he was afraid of Prince. And it was the first of many ridiculous favors I called in to get my detectives out of trouble."

Olivia smiled. "I remember being in your office and Elliot and I were trying to convince you not to charge him. And sometime during that case, you realized the SVU was going to be different. Harder than you thought. But I think you also realized how much potential there was for you to do good. Real good, and help real people."

She took Alex's hand and pressed the elevator button again to go down, and a cab brought them up to midtown and let them off at a park entrance.

Olivia led them to the Central Park Zoo, which was closing for the evening, and walked around the perimeter.

"Katie Tolliver," Alex said, and Olivia nodded.

"We got a Christmas card from them last year. Her little girl started first grade and is doing great," Olivia said. She stopped Alex along the path and took both of her hands. "You put helping the victim before pursuing the case. You jeopardized the rape case to stand up for Katie's rights."

"Is this the tour of How Alex Cabot Became A Good Person?" Alex asked, swinging their arms as Olivia turned down a path heading slightly uptown. "Or How Alex Cabot Became Worthy of SVU?"

Olivia stopped and turned to face her. "No," she said, smiling. "You already were a good person, and you didn't need your delinquent SVU detectives to know that. This is a tour of the times I saw your heart. Really, truly saw how beautiful you are. Here." She tapped above Alex's heart to make her point, and Alex's lip quivered. "I could have brought you to a million places and dragged you all over Manhattan to show you those times when the mask slipped and I saw what was underneath it. We could talk about the time you got the Romanian diplomat's immunity revoked based on his orchid plants, or the time you turned 'getting thrown under the bus by your boss' into a call for tolerance and forgiveness when the boy shot that little girl in Harlem. All of these places are where I fell in love with you, without even knowing it was happening."

They exited the park at 63rd street and walked over to Madison Avenue. This time, Alex knew where they were.

"Sam Cavanaugh's building," she said quietly as they stopped.

"They don't live here anymore," Olivia said. "Sam's doing well. He's living in a group home and has a job in a grocery store. Last I heard he even had a girlfriend."

Alex shook her head and looked away. "I was so awful on that case," she lamented.

"No," Olivia said. "You didn't give him the pills, Lex. You weren't the reason he needed antidepressants in the first place. You stuck up for him. You put everything on the line and got yourself suspended so he could see his abuser go to jail."

"You know why that case got to me, Liv. It wasn't about Sam. It was selfish."
"We all react strongly to certain cases for personal reasons, Lex. This was the case that showed me - showed all of us - that you put your heart and soul into SVU. That it wasn't about politics anymore, not even remotely. I think this case was when you figured out why you became a prosecutor."

"And why is that, oh wise detective?" Alex asked, pushing against Olivia's shoulder.

"Why did you become a prosecutor, or why did it take you until Sam's case to figure it out?"

"Both," Alex replied, curious to know what the detective's conclusions were.

"Well, I think it took you until Sam's case to finally admit to yourself that you couldn't not be affected by SVU cases. You were affected before. I know you were. But you played it close to the vest and didn't let it show until this case. And you became a prosecutor not just because *you* always want to be right, but because you always want everything to be right. And to make everything right."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Lex, that you have a beautiful soul. You feel everything. Other people's pain hurts you. And that's why you want to fix things. To even the score. To help other people heal. You can't stand the thought of someone getting away with hurting another person. It's why you fought for Sam Cavanaugh and Livia Sandoval and it's why not going back to help Sarah was never an option for you. You know that helping people to tell their stories, and face their abusers, and see justice, helps them to heal. So you stand up for them, and you give them their voices back."

Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex as she started to cry, and kissed the top of her head. "And it's why you had to come back to New York to be a prosecutor again," she whispered in Alex's ear. "Because these are the places where Alex Cabot lives."

After a moment, Olivia guided Alex over to the sidewalk and hailed a cab, holding her hand as they went back downtown to Max Brenner for dinner.

Alex's eyes were still glistening as she sat down across from Olivia.

"Save room for dessert," Olivia said, smiling. She reached out her hand and put it on top of Alex's. "Are you okay? Was that too much?"

Alex swallowed, then dabbed a tear away from her eye and smiled. "This sure beats every other date I've had," she joked, the pulled her hand away to place her napkin on her lap.

"Just wait 'til the chocolate crêpes," Olivia retorted, grinning as their eyes met. "Did you doubt me?"

"Not for a second," Alex replied, before becoming serious again. "Thank you, Liv. For… remembering for me."

"How could I forget?"

—

They walked part of the way home and held hands, Olivia slipping her leather jacket over Alex's shoulders since it got a bit cool after dinner.

"I'll walk you up," Olivia said playfully as they reached her building. She held open the door for Alex, and took the elevator up to her floor.
Olivia stopped Alex in front of the door to her apartment, and pulled her in close, looking deep into her eyes. "I had a great time," she said softly. "Would you go out with me again sometime?"

Alex smiled shyly and nodded. "I'd love to. I had a great time, too."

Olivia hesitated for a second, still smiling at Alex, then cupped her cheek and slowly leaned in to kiss her gently on the lips. It was soft, and sweet, and Alex closed her eyes and leaned in, tingling as Olivia wrapped her arms around her waist and then pulled away, smiling when Alex frowned at the loss of contact and opened her eyes a second later.

"Good night," Olivia whispered, brushing her thumb against Alex's cheek.

Alex smiled coyly. "Would you like to come in for coffee? Or tea?"

Olivia chuckled and pulled out her keys to let them back into the apartment. "I'd love to, but you should know that I don't put out on the first date."

Alex turned around and arched an eyebrow, then pointed her finger accusingly. "That, I believe, is a lie."

"Not really," Olivia blushed. "I couldn't do that with you. I'm too serious about this. About us."

"I don't even know when I'll be ready anyway, so…" Alex looked away and bit her lip.

"Hey," Olivia said, interrupting her. "I thought we said we weren't going to talk about that tonight."

Alex smiled and went to the kitchen to boil water for tea. "Well then let me tell you about this really hot date I had tonight…"

"Oh?" Olivia asked, smiling.

They curled up on the couch to drink their tea, and Olivia asked Alex about the conversation with her dad, and told her about her discussion with Elliot. Olivia watched Alex out of the corner of her eye, amazed that after so many hours of walking through New York and eating dinner together, they still had so much to say, and that she was still fascinated by everything Alex said.

When Alex's eyes started to droop under the influence of the wine from dinner and the sleepytime tea, Olivia helped her up out of the couch and led her to the bedroom, where they both changed into their pyjamas and cuddled into bed.

As Alex drifted off to sleep, cuddled into Olivia's arms, Olivia pressed gentle kisses to her face and ran her fingers gently through her hair.

"Thank you again for tonight, Liv," Alex murmured, her eyes closed. "I love you."

"I love you too, sweetie," she whispered back, just before falling asleep herself.
Alex woke up early to Olivia's arm wrapped around her back and her head tucked into Alex's shoulder, a contented smile on her face. She cupped the back of Olivia's head, fingers in her hair, as she went over last night's date in her mind, touched by how Olivia showed she really got her, thought the best of her… truly loved her. Nobody else had looked into Alex's soul like that before, but then again, she had never seen another person's soul as clearly as she saw Olivia's.

She felt the softness of Olivia's body pressing against hers, holding her close as if to protect her, and wondered, not for the first time, how this would feel if they were naked and had spent the whole night making love. Her body tingled at the sudden thought of seeing Olivia orgasm, and she blushed and looked away, unable to push thoughts of pleasuring her out of her mind. She wondered what she could realistically try.

Olivia sighed into Alex's neck and opened her eyes slowly, pulling Alex in closer as she stretched. "Good morning, beautiful," she whispered, kissing her on the cheek. "How are you this morning?"

"Good," Alex said, running her fingers down Olivia's neck and resting her other hand on her side. "How are you?"

"Perfect, like this," Olivia answered.

Alex blushed and kissed her on the mouth, then pulled back to look into her eyes. "I want to touch you," she whispered, bringing her fingers around Olivia's neck to her collarbone. "I want to go back to what we were doing before my... meltdown the other day. Touching exercises, but this time, with no shirts on." Alex clarified.

"I'd like it that," Olivia said, smiling as she brought her own fingers up to caress Olivia's cheek. "Tell me how far you want to go."

Alex bit her lip and blushed. "The next things on the list are getting undressed... well... undressing each other..."

Olivia pressed the pad of her thumb to Alex's mouth. "Don't talk to me about the 'list.' This isn't something where we're going to go through and check off all the boxes in order. Talk to me about what you want right now."

Alex nodded and brushed her fingers along the hem of Olivia's shirt. "I want us to undress each other, but keep panties on. And when we make out, I want you to touch the inside of my legs. Not… there… just, kind of close, okay?"

Olivia kissed her gently. "Okay," she agreed quietly. "Do you want just touching with my fingers, like the exercises we've been doing? Or can I kiss, too?"

Alex quivered at the thought. "Kissing is fine," she whispered. "Then afterwards I want to cuddle for a while."

"And you'll let me know if you need me to stop, or wait?" she confirmed.

"I promise," Alex agreed.

Olivia nodded and sat up cross-legged, pulling Alex into her lap to straddle her and wrap her legs around Olivia's waist. She ran her fingers up Alex's shirt and held her back, then brought one hand
around to gently stroke Alex's abdomen as they kissed. After a few moments, she began lifting Alex's t-shirt, and Alex lifted her arms, then reflexively brought them back down to cover her chest, blushing pink in shyness.

"Lex?" Olivia murmured, careful to look into Alex's eyes. She caressed Alex's back and pulled her close. She held her for a moment, inhaling Alex's scent, as she waited for her to relax in her arms. "Do you want your shirt back?" she asked finally. "It's okay if you do."

Alex shook her head and slowly untucked her arms, wrapping them around Olivia's waist. "Liv, it's just… nobody's seen me naked before, except for… Robert. And when you pulled me out of the tub. And he… I'm not…"

Olivia kissed Alex's forehead and looked into her eyes. "Lex, you're perfect," she murmured, playing with her hair. She leaned Alex back gently and pressed a kiss to the scar on her shoulder, then to her collarbone. "Beautiful."

"I'm… small," Alex conceded, and Olivia shook her head.

Olivia leaned Alex back again with one arm, bringing her right hand to Alex's left breast, and stroked it gently with her fingers as she leaned in for a deep kiss. When she felt the nipple harden, she brought her mouth down and suckled, flicking the tip with her tongue as Alex gasped. When she finished, she kissed Alex's mouth again and looked into her eyes.

"Does that feel good?" she asked, still brushing Alex's breast with her fingertips.

Alex gaped for a moment before finding her words. "God, yes."

"Then you're perfect, and it doesn't matter what size you are." She leaned Alex gently back on the bed, and Alex tangled her fingers in her hair as she kissed all over Alex's body, occasionally making her giggle by tickling a sensitive spot with the tip of her tongue.

Soon, Alex flipped Olivia over and returned the favor, gently pressing kisses over her body. Olivia gasped as Alex teased her breasts. She settled in between Olivia's legs, and her eyes flew open as Alex's thigh pressed between her legs.

"Oh, Lex," she croaked. "You have to move your leg. Please." It was all she could do not to pull Alex in closer.

Alex smiled. "Feel good?"

"Lex, no," she whispered. "If you keep that up, I'm going to… This feels amazing, but I want us to wait and do this together."

Alex moved her leg and settled on top of Olivia. "Sorry," she whispered. "I just want to make you feel good."

"You do," Olivia replied, smiling. "A bit too good," she said wryly. "And we're not ready to feel quite that good yet."

Alex nodded. "Soon," she promised.


She sat back up on the bed, cross-legged again, and held Alex as she sat in her lap, resting her hands gently on Alex's waist, brushing her sides with her thumbs. Alex wrapped her arms around Olivia's
neck, and Olivia kissed her gently, for a moment, then pulled back and held eye contact, getting lost in blue eyes as Alex took a few deep breaths.

When Alex gave a subtle nod, Olivia brought her right hand down to Alex's left knee, and began caressing the inside. She stilled her hand when Alex inhaled sharply and held her breath, eyes closed, the muscles in her legs and abdomen contracting as she tensed up.

"Alex," Olivia said softly, not moving a muscle. "Open your eyes, love, and look at me. You're safe, sweetheart," she whispered. "Breathe in, and out, and relax your muscles," she coached.

She waited for Alex to breathe again, open her eyes, and look into her own, before she brushed her fingers along the inside of Alex's thigh, about two-thirds of the way up. Then, she rested her hand, stroking only with her thumb, as she studied the emotions that played out on Alex's face. After a few moments, she removed her right hand back to Alex's waist, and brought her left hand down to Alex's other knee, caressing softly in the same way. Alex broke eye contact, but since she didn't seem distressed, Olivia finished her caress and brought her left hand back to Alex's waist as well.

She kissed Alex's forehead, and they stayed like that for a few minutes, Alex wrapped around Olivia, until Alex took Olivia's right hand in her left, and flattened her palm. Olivia looked at her questioningly, tilting her head, as Alex looked into her eyes and swallowed.

"Please," Alex whispered. "Don't move your hand."

Olivia nodded, and Alex brought Olivia's hand down to cup her sex. After Olivia's hand was in place, barely touching her, she brought her own hand back up to hold onto Olivia's shoulder, in a tight grip.

It was Olivia's turn to hold her breath, not daring to move a muscle. She felt Alex's entire body tense, and watched Alex close her eyes, furrow her brow, and bite her lip as she breathed, shakily. Her body alternated between wanting to pull away, and then relaxing as Alex willed herself to focus on Olivia.

Olivia finally remembered to breathe, and held herself as still as possible as Alex struggled, finally closing her eyes and sending I love you, I love you, I love you through her hand, over and over.

After a few long minutes, Alex reached her own hand down to withdraw Olivia's, and grasped it tightly, as she buried her face in Olivia's shoulder and let herself cry.

—

"Do you have a minute?" Alex asked, knocking on Liz's door mid-Monday morning.

"Always," Liz replied, motioning for Alex to take a seat.

Alex shut the door behind her and sat down, folding her hands on her lap. "I want to go back to SVU," she stated. "I don't belong in homicide, I don't like being bureau chief, and SVU certainly has enough cases to keep two ADAs busy."

Liz nodded slowly. "Do you think you'll be able to handle SVU right now? Recovery from rape can take a long time, and even though I understand where you're coming from, I don't want you to be affected on the job."

"Of course I'll be affected on the job," Alex countered. "I always have been. When I started SVU I cried every day for months But that didn't mean I wasn't able to do my job properly. It made me more motivated to get convictions. And besides, if you want to see how I've dealt with rape cases
recently, there was the micropenis guy who plead out, and I was fine when I went to Portland."

"Fine?" Liz repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Alex groaned. "OK, so, not fine fine, but I was still able to separate my feelings about the case and limit being emotional to the hotel room with Olivia and a few minor flashbacks that did not occur at any point when we were working. So professionally, they're none of your business."

"You're right," Liz conceded. "Professionally, none of this is my business, but personally, Alex, I'd like to be sure this isn't going to set you back before we talk about whether it's even possible in the budget to have two ADAs for SVU."

"It doesn't have to be right away. But ideally it would be before the end of the year."

"I'll talk to Branch and see what I can do."

"Which brings me to another point," Alex said. "If... I were to go back to SVU, what would be the implications of being in a relationship with one of the detectives?"

"I assume you mean Olivia?"

Alex nodded. "Would we have to disclose, officially? Should we keep it on the down-low?"

"The down-low?"

"Fin's term," Alex explained. "The SVU squad already knows, or at least suspects, that we're in a relationship or will be soon. I'm done with trying to be someone I'm not, and as much as I like to keep my personal life personal, I'm not particularly inclined to stay in the closet, either. I just want to know how this might affect my job."

"Romances between the DA's office and the NYPD are hardly unusual, although I suspect same-sex relationships are more rare. But that's not as shocking now as it was even 5 years ago. Of course, you remember that Serena Southerlyn thought she was being fired for coming out as a lesbian - which, by the way, isn't true."

"I know that's not why she was fired. At least, I'm aware that the very public lovers' quarrel she had at the Christmas party was only tangentially related to her being fired, but that her low conviction rate and the fact that she screwed up a few big cases in a row had a lot more to do with it."

Liz nodded. "That being said, what's unusual about SVU is that it's a very small team. You'll have a lot more professional interaction with Olivia than, for example, a homicide ADA might have with a homicide detective, since it's a much bigger department. In other departments, it's a lot easier for detectives and ADAs to avoid working together if there's a conflict of interest. The same-sex aspect might bother some, but really it's the team size that will get you subjected to a lot more scrutiny if you go back there."

"I understand. Obviously we want to avoid the appearance of impropriety. You know I've never given so much as an inch when they've come to me with unfounded warrants."

Liz smirked. "No, but you've certainly crossed the line in other ways over the years. And you don't want anyone to suspect that it's because of your relationship with Olivia, even if you were just friends before."

Alex conceded the point.
"The good thing is that you both have good reputations. I'll talk to Arthur, but I think as long as she doesn't swear any warrants for you, you'll be fine. It might also be better if Casey puts her on the stand, but there, a defense attorney can cross-examine her."

"Defense attorneys can play dirty, though," Alex frowned. "A mention of our relationship could be used to discredit her testimony even if my objection is sustained."

"We have some time to think about it and strategize. But I think you're brave."

"It's not about being brave, Liz, and I don't intend to make my relationship political."

"Still, a lot's changed in the past 30 years. I told you how the DA called my husband before he assigned me to homicide to make sure I had his 'permission.' That's just how it was back then."

Alex laughed. "I can't imagine anyone thinking you'd ask permission for anything."

Liz smiled wistfully. "I was one of 5 women in the office, and it was before the EEOC existed, so I wasn't about to rock the boat and lose my job. Hell, getting a divorce was just coming into vogue. I do wish I'd been braver, though, like you."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say…" Liz looked away. "Missed opportunities for happiness and leave it at that. So regardless of the politics of coming out, don't make the mistake I did and sacrifice something good for your job. You've already done plenty of that."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know. Is it too late?"

"It's all water under the bridge by now. I don't think she'd be swayed by any amount of groveling."

Liz immediately realized her mistake and covered her mouth, blushing in embarrassment.

Alex raised an eyebrow. "Are you saying…"

Liz pointed her finger at Alex and shook her head vigorously. "I'm not saying anything. You didn't hear that." She stood up and walked around her desk to open the door, visibly flustered. "I'll let you know when I talk to Arthur. Thanks for stopping by." She shooed Alex out of the room and closed the door.
Alex took a seat at the prosecution table next to Casey and turned around to smile at Laura and her aunt, who were sitting in the first row on the prosecution side. A group of people Laura didn’t recognize sat silently in the seats behind her father, wearing pro-life t-shirts, some with her mother’s face and others with slogans about contraceptives and abortion.

Casey turned around, too, as the bailiff brought her father into the courtroom, restrained and wearing an orange jumpsuit. He only looked up for a moment, and his nostrils flared in anger when he noticed the woman sitting next to his daughter. Laura followed him with her eyes as he shuffled towards the defense table, but he looked back down at the floor and refused to make eye contact.

"Did you prepare a victim impact statement?" Casey asked.

Laura nodded and squeezed her aunt’s hand.

"All rise for the Honorable Lena Petrovsky," the bailiff announced.

"Mr. Simmons, the People of New York have found you guilty of one count murder in the second degree, one count rape in the first degree." Petrovsky began. "Before I determine your sentence, is there anything you’d like to say for yourself?"

The defendant cleared his throat. "I'd just like to say that I'm sorry for this terrible misunderstanding that led to the death of my devoted wife. Unfortunately, she was not strong enough to resist the temptations of this licentious city. Before the State of New York took her life, I forgave her for violating her marriage vows to honor and obey, and I believe, in spite of her sins, that you have sent her to Heaven. May God have mercy on your souls, and the souls of everyone…"

Petrovsky banged her gavel. "Mr. Simmons, you are being sentenced for the murder of your wife, as her death is the result of a vicious physical and sexual assault you perpetrated. If you would like to dispute these facts, you have one last chance today to change your plea to 'Not Guilty' and have your day in court to present an alternative theory of the crime. Otherwise, my courtroom is not your soapbox, nor is it a platform for victim-blaming. You have the opportunity to express remorse and address your daughter prior to sentencing, both of which may influence my decision about the length of your prison term. Would you like to try again?"

Alex smirked and shook her head. "Arrogant bastard," she coughed under her breath.

"Ms. Cabot, something to say?" Petrovsky challenged, glaring at her over her glasses.

Alex shook her head again. "No, Your Honor."

"Mr. Simmons, last chance," Petrovsky invited.

"I do not recognize the moral authority of the court that killed my wife and of the corrupt state that allows thousands of young, innocent lives to be taken every year! You will all suffer…"

Petrovsky banged her gavel again. "Mr. Langan, control your client. Mr. Simmons, that's enough. You're done."

Alex couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw Petrovsky’s face soften slightly as she turned to address Laura.
"Ms. Simmons, would you like to address the court?"

Laura nodded meekly and stood, her hands shaking as she took a folded up piece of paper out of her pocket and approached the podium. Placing the paper on the table she gripped the sides and took a deep breath, then looked to her aunt and to Alex, who smiled gently and nodded, before beginning.

"I've been asked to prepare a statement about how my mother's murder has impacted me," she began, her voice shaky. She fixed her eyes on the plaque with Petrovsky's name on it on the front of her bench. "And the truth is that I can't think about that yet. Because every time I think about the fact that my mom won't be there when I graduate from high school and college, and she won't help me try on wedding dresses, and she won't visit me in the hospital when I have my first baby, I can't... she...."

Laura stopped to swallow and wipe off her tears, then crumpled up the paper she was holding and turned to face her father. "Here's the truth. I can't figure out how to hate you, but I know you hate me, your own daughter. How do I know? Because I've done lots of things you hate. I'm not a virgin. I had an abortion. And I like girls. I'm a lesbian, Daddy. Before, I thought if you knew any of this, you'd kill me, and I thought I was being dramatic. But the only reason I can say any of this is because I know you'll be in jail for a long time. And I'll be much better off without you." She looked up at Petrovsky briefly. "Throw away the key. Thank you."

Before Petrovsky could say anything, she turned around and hurried out of the courtroom.

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"Who do you think it is? Do you think it's someone we know?" Alex asked Olivia, pouring two glasses of wine as Olivia hung up her leather jacket and put away her badge and gun.

"I know you like to know everything," Olivia said, smiling and taking a sip. "But don't you think you should give her some privacy? If the relationship happened more than 20 years ago, it's not really relevant now. Especially if things ended badly between them."

"Still, that would have been when I was around 10 or 12, after she divorced her second husband. I was old enough to notice if she had a boyfriend or girlfriend. And I stayed over her house all the time."

Olivia kissed Alex on the cheek and sat down at the counter. "Did you even know what a lesbian was at 10 or 12? I didn't know until high school. And even then it took me until college to figure out that my mom's friends who were 'roommates' weren't living together to save rent or because of their cats. I think that *if* Liz had her girlfriend around you, you wouldn't have thought they were anything more than friends. Especially if she was trying to be secretive about the relationship."

"Maybe," Alex conceded. "But if she really thought I was gay all those years ago, you'd think she would've said something."

"I'm not surprised she didn't mention it," Olivia replied, shaking her head. "It's not easy to come out now, and gay marriage is legal in some states. It was harder ten years ago, and I'm sure it would've been impossible 25 years ago. You've seen some of the things that have happened to gay cops. At the very least, it would have made her career very difficult."

"Liz has always been so tough. I just have trouble imagining her caring about what someone else thinks, or her being afraid of something."

"Lex, she's still human. Just support her, like she supports you, and maybe she'll be able to figure it out. Besides, if Liz "let it slip" in front of you, she wants you to know. You know Liz doesn't say..."
anything unintentionally. That was her way of coming out to you, without actually having to come out."

Aled mulled over the idea. "I hope so. She deserves to be happy."

"I agree," Olivia said. "And she's probably made it to the point in her career where people don't give a fuck who she sleeps with. So if she works out her issues with this woman, she should be safe."

Alex looked down into her wine glass and swirled it around slowly before taking a sip. "What about you? Will you be safe?"

Olivia shrugged. "Probably. Most of the danger is from having a partner who doesn't have your back, and Elliot found out not long after we started working together. The only reason Munch and Fin didn't know was because I don't talk about my personal life at work, not because I thought they'd have a problem with it. If more people at the precinct find out, I doubt it will be any worse than the crap I've already gotten from some of them for being a female cop."

"As long as we're professional and our coworkers aren't catching us making out, I don't really care who knows," Alex said. "I'm glad things have changed, because I love you, and I'm proud to be with you."

Olivia leaned over and kissed her. "Me too, sweetie. Me too."

They had just finished eating dinner when Alex's phone rang. "Cabot," she said crisply, although the call wasn't from any of her work contacts.

"Alex?" the voice on the other end spoke timidly, and Alex thought she heard tears. "It's Sarah. Am I interrupting?"

"Sarah, hello," Alex said warmly, slightly worried. "Not at all. How are you doing? Are you okay?"

"Um, not really," Sarah said, struggling to speak without crying.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong? Did something happen?" Alex raised her eyebrow at Olivia and headed towards the bedroom, where she sat down in an armchair to focus.

"My parents…" Sarah started. "My mom…"

"Take your time, sweetie."

"My mom found the paperwork about the lawsuit," she croaked. "I came home and it was on the kitchen table. She went through the stuff in my room."

"You didn't tell your parents about it? Why not?"

"Because I knew how my mom would react. She made the court case all about her and how upset she was, even though she didn't care about what happened to me. It's the same way she makes my dad's illness all about herself and how awesome she is because she takes care of him, even though he gets disability payments and the state pays her to be his fulltime caretaker. She turned it into a Mother of the Year thing."

"I'm sorry, sweetie," Alex said. "Did she say anything to you?"

"No, but I heard her talking to my dad about how the money could pay off the house, and how they deserved to go on a vacation because of everything I 'put them through.'" Alex heard Sarah roll her
eyes before she started crying again. "I mean, you know I don't care about the money, but... they can't take it, can they?"

"No, they won't be able to if we set it up right," Alex reassured her. "First of all, if your dad is getting disability payments, most states have an asset limit, meaning that if they did have access to your money, they'd no longer be eligible for whatever services he's getting. So I doubt it's in their best interest to take your money."

"It sounded like they thought they could just live off the money and they wouldn't need the disability anymore," Sarah explained. "Uh, I may have eavesdropped for a while when they were talking. I was so upset I couldn't even...

"I understand. I wasn't going to bring this up until we were actually negotiating with the school, but what we can do is set up a trust with you as the sole trustee. That means the money will be yours, but it won't technically be in your name. The trust will have investments, pay taxes, and make distributions to you. We can set it up to pay for your education and a certain amount for living expenses so you don't have to work and you can get unpaid internships if you want. And your accountant will be able to tell you how much you can take from it each year to make sure the money lasts."

Sarah sniffled. "I don't really even care about the money. But it's mine, you know? They can't just take it from me."

"No, they can't, sweetie. I was going to recommend the trust and help you with it even before you told me about your parents, but it'll be especially important now that we know what they have in mind. We'll have to be prepared for them to be angry when they find out they're not going to get any money. Now, as your lawyer, my only job is to look out for your best interests, not your parents'. You can make me the bad guy if you want, but I've got your back, okay?"

Sarah was quiet for a moment. "I have shitty parents, don't I?" she asked finally, her voice barely a whisper.

Alex opened her mouth to answer, but couldn't think of anything to say that was both comforting and true. "Sweetie..." she decided on.

"I mean, they weren't so bad when I was little. But ever since I started high school... my dad's gotten worse, and my mom's gone nuts. I can't wait to get out of here and go to college. I want to get as far away as I can."

"It's normal to hate your parents when you're a teenager," Alex said slowly. It wasn't her place to agree that Sarah's parents were pieces of work. "It sounds like your parents have had a rough time, too, with your dad's illness. That doesn't excuse them, and I know you've cut them a lot of slack, but they're still your parents, and I'm sure they love you."

"They mostly love that they have a smart daughter who gets good grades and makes them look like good parents. Then when something happens to me they can get sympathy and play up the support and look like Parents of the Year. My mom had the social worker totally fooled. They suck. I just want to get away from them, and from this place."

"You're still going to therapy, right, sweetheart?"

"Yeah. It's alright, I guess."

"Are you drinking or thinking about hurting yourself? I need you to be honest with me."
"No."

"Okay," Alex breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so sorry things aren't going well with your parents, but this won't last forever."

"Do you think I can come visit this summer?"

"If it's okay with your parents, you can come and we'll do a college tour. You should check and make sure the colleges you want to visit do tours in the summer, though. Hopefully I'll be back in my own apartment by the beginning of July, and then I usually go up to my place on Martha's Vineyard for the week of the 4th. We can work out the dates after you've figured out what schools you want to visit and talked to your parents."

"Okay. Thanks, Alex."

"You're welcome, sweetie. Call me if you need anything, okay? And I'll be in touch if I hear anything from the school."

Alex hung up the phone and sighed, and picked up her glass of wine to go cuddle with Olivia on the couch.
Chapter 39

"Jesus, Cabot," Olivia said under her breath as Alex pulled into the driveway of a massive - in Olivia's eyes anyway - beachfront house in Edgartown, Massachusetts, a few minutes after driving off the ferry. It was Friday morning, Alex's birthday, and Olivia had agreed to go away for the weekend with the stipulation that Alex wouldn't pressure herself into furthering their physical relationship. Alex had agreed, and since it was supposed to be warmer than average that weekend, she had invited her brother's family down for a beach day on Saturday.

Alex blushed. "It was my grandparents' summer house," she said. "It's been in my family for ages. My grandfather wanted me to have it since I spent the most time here when I was younger. It became mine when my mom died."

"Wow. I guess I knew you had means, but I didn't realize…" Olivia trailed off.

Alex put the car into park and pulled the keys out of the black Audi, and turned to face Olivia. "I hope this doesn't this make you uncomfortable, Liv. I know things can get awkward when there's money involved, and you wouldn't be the first person to…"

Olivia leaned over to kiss Alex, interrupting her. "Lex, you know I'm not judging you because of your money." Her eyelids fluttered as she looked sideways and then back. "I just… I can't offer you anything like this. You know that, right?"

Alex nodded. "I don't care about money either, Liv. But, now that I'm myself again, I never have to worry about it," she said, smiling. "I'm not spoiled, you know."

Olivia looked at her for a second, and reached over to put her hand on Alex's. "I never thought you were," she said gently. "Do you think I think that about you?"

Alex shrugged. "No," she said. "I just..."

Olivia smiled. "You don't have to explain to me that you know how the other half lives. Lex, your finances aren't any of my business. Remember, I love you for this," she touched her fingers to Alex's heart, "and this," and kissed Alex's forehead. She looked into Alex's eyes. "Everything else is just icing on the cake."

They sat there for a moment, in silence, before Alex pulled the key out of the ignition and opened the door, going around the back to get their bags to bring into the house.

"Am I going to get lost in here?" Olivia teased, catching up to Alex with a heavier suitcase. "Don't go too far!"

Olivia followed Alex up the stairs and to the right, into her bedroom, which was decorated in white wicker furniture and shades of lavender and mint green. After they put the suitcases down, they sat down on the edge of the bed, then Alex got up and pulled back the curtains to reveal French windows, which she opened onto a small balcony looking out onto the beach.

She closed her eyes and smiled as she breathed in the salty air, and Olivia got up and stood beside her.

"Should we have some lunch and take a walk on the beach?" Olivia suggested, reaching over to put her hand on Alex's back.
Alex leaned up against her and shook her head into Olivia's shoulder. Olivia saw the tears in her eyes, and gently ran her fingers through Alex's hair and rubbed between her shoulders, soothing her as Alex let out a few shaky breaths.

"I feel safe here. With you," Alex whispered.

"I'm glad," Olivia replied. "Me too." She combed the fingers of her right hand through Alex's hair, and caressed her cheek with her thumb as she pressed their foreheads together.

Alex leaned in to kiss Olivia, and slipped her fingers under her shirt, touching her skin.

"Liv, I want to try," she whispered, looking up to search brown eyes. "Do you think you're ready?"

Olivia nodded. "Are you sure?"

"I want this, Liv. I want you. I don't want to feel like a stranger in my own body anymore. I want you to show me how good it can be."

"You know I can't promise you'll feel good," Olivia whispered, and Alex nodded. She was well aware that the first time would be fraught. "But I'll try my best. And I'll be gentle."

Olivia kissed her gently and guided her to the bed, sitting down next to Alex and intertwining their fingers. "Let's go over the plan one more time," Olivia requested, bringing Alex's hand to her mouth and kissing the back.

Alex let out a breath. "We stay within the previously negotiated parameters. We check in with each other. Either one of us can say 'stop' at any time, and we stop."

"Right. And what are we not going to worry about?"

Alex mumbled, blushing.

"Come again?"

"Orgasms," Alex whispered, a little louder. "We're not going to worry if I can't… have one."

Olivia nodded and turned to face Alex, tucking her hair behind her ear. "It might happen, or it might not. We'll focus on what feels good and try not to stress out about it."

She got up and went over to her bag, fumbling in the side pocket until she found what she was looking for, and held up the bottle to show Alex before placing it on the side table. "Just in case we need it," she explained.

Olivia stood in front of Alex and held out her hands, pulling her up, and wrapped her arms around her. "I love you," she whispered, looking into Alex's eyes before she kissed her.

"I love you too," Alex answered, tugging at the hem of Olivia's shirt. "Can I?"

Olivia kissed her again and nodded in agreement, allowing Alex to pull her shirt up over her head slowly, then smiled as Alex ran her fingers gently along her collarbone, down between her breasts, and over her abdomen.

They undressed each other slowly, reverently, kissing each time one removed an article of clothing from the other, caressing soft skin. When they were finally in just their panties, Olivia cupped Alex's jaw with both hands and pressed their foreheads together.
"You are beautiful," she whispered, looking straight into Alex's eyes.

"Liv," Alex began, but Olivia silenced her with a kiss.

"Shh," Olivia whispered. She laid Alex down on the bed and knelt over her, smiling gently as she combed her fingers through Alex's hair and lowered herself to Alex's side. "You are perfect. Just amazing," she whispered, as she touched Alex all over, brushing lightly with her fingertips.

Olivia caressed Alex gently, pushing their chests together as they kissed, and finally slipping a leg between Alex's. Alex's mouth hung open, and she rolled her head back, closing her eyes.

"Look at me," Olivia whispered, touching the back of her head. "Keep your eyes open, sweetheart. Let's stay together."

Alex opened her eyes and tightened the grip of her arms around Olivia's back, pulling her closer, and kissed her.

"You okay?" Olivia asked, as she dragged her fingertips down Alex's arms.

Alex nodded. "Are you?"

"I'm perfect." Olivia kissed her and hovered over her, intertwining their fingers, and pressed kisses down her neck. She stopped to lavish attention on Alex's breasts, teasing her nipples before kissing down her abdomen.

"Liv," Alex breathed, squeezing Olivia's hand when Olivia pressed a kiss at the top of her panties. "Liv, I don't want… your mouth… there."

Olivia brought her face up to Alex's and smiled reassuringly, touching her hair. "Of course, sweetheart," she confirmed, searching Alex's eyes to make sure she was still comfortable. "I wouldn't do that without asking."

"I know, I just… I'm sorry," Alex said, looking away.

Olivia turned on her side and propped herself up on her elbow, and caressed Alex's cheek to turn her back to face her. "There's nothing to be sorry for, love," she soothed. "Are you still okay? We can stop any time."

"No, I'm okay. I'm better than okay," Alex turned on her side to face Olivia. "Can I…? I want to touch you, too."

Olivia nodded as Alex pushed her gently onto her back. She held onto Olivia's right hand with her left, and kissed down her neck and breasts, imitating what Olivia had done to her moments before.

Olivia moaned in appreciation as Alex massaged her breasts, and looked down to see Alex focusing intently. "You feel so good, Lex," she whispered. "Relax, though, sweetie. You can't make a mistake. Everything you're doing is amazing."

The corner of Alex's mouth twitched. "I just thought… I want you to feel good," she explained. "I'm not sure…"

"I do feel good," Olivia reassured her. "I promise. Just do what feels natural and we'll both enjoy it."

Alex took a deep breath and tried to relax, putting the research she had done in the days leading up to their trip about pleasuring another woman to the back of her mind. Instead, she focused on the
woman in front of her, who was being so open, so loving, so understanding towards her… She kissed Olivia, then tentatively pulled one of Olivia's nipples into her mouth, enjoying the sounds Olivia made.

She settled in between Olivia's legs, and became increasingly aware that Olivia was squirming below her, although she was trying to be discreet.

Alex dragged her fingertips down Olivia's sides, to her panties, and looked up for permission. "May I?" she whispered, pressing a kiss to Olivia's hipbone.

Olivia nodded. "If you touch me, I'm not going to last long, Lex," she said as Alex slowly pulled the panties down Olivia's legs.

After dropping the panties on the side of the bed, Alex ran her fingers up the inside of Olivia's thighs, and pushed her legs slightly apart. Olivia was swollen and wet, and Alex could see the tip of her clt poking out. Alex bit her lip in concentration and watched Olivia's face as she very lightly pressed a fingertip to her entrance, and ran it through Olivia's folds. Her movements were tentative, and unsure. Not used to being a novice, Alex hesitated.

Olivia gasped, afraid she was going to come right then. "Oh, Lex…" she moaned. "Please, touch me, sweetie."

Alex began exploring with her fingers, occasionally coming close to penetrating, but not quite, and occasionally brushing near her clit, but at first, she shied away from touching it directly. She felt fluttering in her chest, nervousness or anxiety, she wasn't sure which, as she realized

Olivia didn't know if it was Alex, or her gentleness and curiosity, or the fact that she hadn't been touched in almost a year, or both, but she was on fire. The second Alex looked up at Olivia for confirmation, then moved her thumb to intentionally brush her clit, Olivia exploded, gripping Alex's right hand as she looked on.

"I'm sorry," Olivia said when she finally caught her breath, blushing with embarrassment. "I'm not usually that easy," she joked. "But you were amazing."

"Liv, you don't have anything to be sorry for," Alex reassured her, as she settled down, next to Olivia. "I, um,... wow," she said, trying to process, not quite sure what she was supposed to do. She didn't feel... she closed her eyes, trying to let go, and figure out what she felt. Identify what she felt. It was different from every previous time, but... Alex thought she'd feel more. Detachment. Better than a flashback, but, not what she wanted to feel with Olivia.

She laid on her back, and sighed. "Liv, I didn't... I barely... did anything," she finally settled on, not sure she really deserved the compliment of "amazing" for what she had done.

"But you did," Olivia said, pulling her close to cuddle. "You love me, for starters."

"That's pretty easy," Alex said, kissing her cheek.

Olivia blushed again, hiding her face in Alex's neck. "And you… you get that I need gentle," she whispered.

Olivia held Alex close as she recovered, running her fingers gently up and down Alex's spine, content to breath together.

"Lex?" she asked, after her breathing had slowed and she had pressed a kiss to the top of Alex's head.
"Mmm?"

"Can I touch you? I want to make love to you."

Alex hesitated, and lifted her head off of Olivia's shoulder to look into her eyes, nodding slowly. Olivia rolled slightly, holding Alex close, until they were both on their sides, and touched her sides with her thumbs.

She hovered over Alex and resumed kissing down her neck and her abdomen, whispering words of love into Alex's skin, lingering on her scars. She held Alex's hand and squeezed as she pressed a kiss just below her naval, then on the inside of Alex's thighs. Olivia could smell her arousal, and she made eye contact with Alex, asking for permission to slide the panties down her legs and toss them over the side of the bed.

Olivia slid up Alex's body again and ran her fingers through her hair. "So beautiful," she whispered. After a moment, she slipped her thigh between Alex's legs, rocking against her gently, and Alex wrapped her arms around Olivia's neck.

"I want to hold you in my arms, like the last time. Is that okay?" Olivia asked, gently. When Alex nodded, she sat up on the bed and crossed her legs, pulling Alex up gently and guiding her until she was sitting on Olivia's lap, safely in Olivia's arms with her legs around her waist.

Alex could feel her heart pounding, but Olivia smiled at her and held her tight, whispering soothing words in Alex's ear as she ran her fingers up and down Alex's arms and back, then stopped to hold her hand against Alex's heart, and look into her eyes.

Olivia waited for Alex to make eye contact, and for her breathing to slow.

"Do you feel safe?" she whispered, and Alex nodded, slowly, and swallowed.

"Do you want this?" she asked. Alex broke eye contact momentarily, then took Olivia's hand in hers.

"I want this. I want you," Alex answered, at barely a whisper, choking up.

Olivia held eye contact for a moment longer, reading the permission on Alex's face, and kissed her, slowly, gently, before caressing Alex's face with her thumbs. Then, Alex surprised both of them by arching her back and letting out a low moan as Olivia leaned her back to kiss her breasts.

"Liv, touch me," she said, finally.

Olivia gave her one last kiss on the mouth and nodded, pulling her right hand away. "Take my hands," she whispered, holding Alex's right hand with her left and waiting for her to take hold of her other wrist. "Bring my hand where you want it," she said.

Olivia held Alex's gaze as her fingers touched the wetness that had accumulated in Alex's folds. She touched tentatively, grazing with one finger, until Alex pressed her hand closer.

"It's okay, Liv. I want this," she whispered.

Olivia fingered her and teased her entrance, tracing her fingers slowly, in and around Alex's most intimate parts, and when Alex nodded, she slipped in her index finger to the knuckle, slowly moving in and out, pressing forward, before removing it and circling around her clit.

Alex let out a breath and let go of Olivia's hand, wrapping her arms around her neck and holding on while Olivia touched her. She pulled in closer to Olivia, closing her eyes as she buried her face in
Olivia's neck, their chests brushing together as she tried to focus on Olivia's scent and the sensations she was feeling in her body.

It was only when Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex's back and laid them back down on the bed that Alex noticed there were tears in her eyes.

"That was beautiful," Olivia whispered in her ear, choking up a bit.

"I think that's what it's supposed to be like," Alex replied, reaching up to tuck Olivia's hair behind her ear. "Thank you… I'm sorry I couldn't…"

"You were perfect," Olivia said, kissing her again. "Maybe next time. The most important thing is that everything felt okay."

"It felt... I feel loved, Liv," Alex reassured her, as she tapped her fingers on Olivia's chest.

A few hours later, after they had napped, showered, and dressed, they were walking along the beach when Alex's phone buzzed.

"That was Liz," Alex explained, looking at her phone. "She talked to Arthur, and they're budgeting two ADAs for SVU for the new fiscal year. As of July 1, I'll be back."
I've been traveling for the past few days (NIGHTMARE at the airport - thanks Mercury retrograde!). Might be a couple of days before the next update.

This chapter has also been extended/edited from the original version.

Enjoy! xx

The sunrise and the sounds of the ocean woke them up early the next morning, their limbs intertwined. It was cooler now, and they wore only light tee-shirts and slept under a bedsheet.

Alex was exhausted. Nightmares had awoken her several times during the night, frustrating her that she couldn't enjoy Olivia's touch without her subconscious reminding her about Robert.

"Stay in bed," Olivia whispered, kissing Alex on the forehead. "I'll make coffee and bring you some."

Alex looked over at the clock radio, and shook her head, sliding over to the edge so she could put on some running shorts.

"Nah, if we hurry we might be able to get some chocolate chip muffins fresh out of the oven. They're the best," Alex said.

They weren't the only ones waiting outside the bakery when it opened its doors at 6:30, and Olivia had to agree that the muffins were some of the best she'd ever had. They ate two apiece with their coffee, and brought home half a dozen muffins and some donuts for Bill's family, who were all coming for the day.

They sat on the porch swing with a second cup of coffee, holding hands and reading, or talking, until Alex heard Bill's car pull into the driveway, and they went to the entryway to greet them.

"Auntie Awex!" Lexie exclaimed as they got out of the car, dropping her Hello Kitty backpack by the entrance and running into Alex's open arms.

"Hi, sweetie," Alex said, giving her a hug. "I missed you! It's so good to see you again."

Olivia held out her hand to greet Bill, who put a suitcase and a few grocery bags on the floor, but Bill opened his arms and took her into a big hug.

"Olivia, how nice to see you. I hope you're taking good care of my sister," Bill whispered into her ear, and Olivia nodded.

Bill let go and went over to Alex, putting his hands on her arms and leaning back to look at her.

"Lexie," he said softly. "Can I?" he asked, holding his arms open.

Alex nodded and allowed Bill to wrap his arms around her tightly and rock her back and forth.
heard a sniffle or two, but Alex hugged his waist.

"So, I see you finally brought home tall, dark, and handsome," Bill quipped, pulling back to study Alex again as they all laughed. "Although I didn't expect you to bring home someone prettier than you."

Alex smiled and smacked him playfully on the arm.

"Lexie, this is Olivia," Bill introduced them, taking his young daughter's hand. "You don't remember her, but she met you when you were a tiny baby. She's a police officer and she's the one who gave you the set of police toys that you play with sometimes."

"Cool! Thanks, 'Livia. I use them to catch the bad guys! But one time, I broughted them to school because there was this boy, George, who kept pulling my hair. And Mommy said it was because he liked me, but he was being bad because I kept telling him to stop and he didn't, so I 'rested him. But then I got in trouble."

Olivia knelt down to say hello to Lexie, and raised her eyebrow at Bill. "You arrested George for pulling your hair?" she tried not to laugh as Lexie nodded vigorously.

"My mommy and my teacher said that only real police officers can 'rest people, though, and they can't 'rest kids."

Olivia nodded. "That's true. Did George get in trouble and stop pulling your hair?"

Lexie jumped. "Yes! Now, will you come play Pretty Pretty Princess with me and Auntie Alex? She won the last time, but I have to win this time because I'm the pretty princess!"

"Wait a second, Lexie. First, you need to go put your bag upstairs in your room instead of leaving it on the floor in the hall. And it looks like Auntie Alex got muffins, so we can have some breakfast," Bill said.

As soon as Lexie was bounding up the stairs, the adults burst out laughing.

"Did she really try to arrest a kid at preschool?" Alex asked, her hand covering her mouth.

Bill nodded. "Michelle got called into the school on Thursday and had to go get her. Apparently he pulled her hair during playtime, and she took the handcuffs out of her backpack and cuffed him to the chair, and told him that her auntie was going to put him in jail. Then I guess she offered him a plea bargain and agreed that he wouldn't have to go to jail if he apologized and never pulled any girl's hair again."

"Hm, I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Olivia commented.

"Where's Michelle?" Alex asked, noticing her sister-in-law's absence.

"She's been tired and not feeling well, so I told her I'd take Lexie, and she could spend the day getting a pedicure and a prenatal massage and doing other girly things that I don't know much about. She says hello, though, and was sorry she wasn't going to get to meet Olivia again."

Lexie came bounding back down the stairs and took Alex and Olivia's hands, dragging them both into the living room.

"It's time to play Pretty Pretty Princess," she said, taking the box out from under the coffee table. "Now, I'm going to be pink, and Auntie Alex can be purple, and 'Livia, you can be blue. And you
have to get all of the jewelery and the crown to win, but you can't have the black ring! Any questions?"

"Can I play, Lexie? I can be green," Bill suggested, sitting on the couch.

"No, Daddy! You're not a princess, you're a daddy. You have to be married to a princess."

"Oh, right," Bill said. "But I'm already married to a princess."

"No, you're married to Mommy. She's a mommy, not a princess."

"Silly me," Bill said, taking a sip of his coffee.

They kept playing, until they had almost acquired all of the pieces of jewelery, and Lexie was wearing the crown, which was the only thing Olivia was missing. When it was Olivia's turn, she spun a five, and tried to count a space twice to avoid taking the crown away.

"Now, Livia, no cheating!" Lexie cried, having caught her attempt at miscounting. "You only moved four spaces. It's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. You're on the crown. Oh, man!" she exclaimed as she placed the crown on Olivia's head. "Auntie 'Livia is the pretty princess," she pouted, in classic Cabot style, clearly hating to lose as much as her aunt.

"OK," she said, brightening up as she dumped her jewelery back in the box. "Now put on your bathing suits. It's time to go swimming!"

"You're awfully bossy," Bill said. "Why don't you ask Auntie Alex and Olivia nicely if they would like to go swimming with you?"

"I'm not bossy, I'm assertive," Lexie explained. "It's just that I know what I want. Auntie Alex, can we go down to the water?"

Alex looked at Olivia, and nodded. "Sure. Let's go get our bathing suits on."

They went up the stairs, and laughed as soon as they closed the bedroom door behind them.

"Wow, she is just like her Auntie," Olivia said, kissing Alex on the cheek. "'I'm not bossy, I'm assertive.' Did you teach her that?"

Alex looked off to the side. "Uh, maybe... Do you think I can wear this?" she asked, holding up a one-piece suit. "I need a coverup."

"I think you'll look great," Olivia reassured her.

"I didn't really think... what should I tell her about my scars if she asks?"

Olivia took Alex's hand and kissed it gently. "Well, you can just tell her you got hurt but you're all better now," she suggested. "You don't want to scare her. But she's little. She might not even notice."

Alex nodded, and pulled on shorts and a coverup, and they headed towards the beach, holding hands.

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Olivia sat on the porch swing, watching Alex and Lexie jumping in the waves. Earlier, they had swam, buried Lexie in the sand, and picnicked on the beach; now, Alex held the girl's hands as she jumped over the breaking waves and threatened her with throwing her out to sea as she shrieked with
laughing. Olivia had joined in the beginning, but then went to grab a bottle of water in the kitchen, and stopped to enjoy the scene from the porch.

At first, she was struck by Alex’s maternal side. At work, they only ever interacted with kids who had been abused, in a setting that was intensely emotional. Here, she got to see Alex play with a child who clearly adored her, and she was glad Alex was able to relax and have some fun. The night before had worried her, but Alex seemed to be doing okay.

Olivia, however, wasn’t so sure how she felt, and she let out a shaky sigh as she swung back and forth, pushing off the porch with her toes. She had been so worried about triggering Alex, and although she hadn't been triggered herself, she couldn't help but ache for some reason she couldn't quite identify. Alex had been perfect. Everything had felt right. And yet, she felt like she was mourning something.

She crushed the water bottle she had just finished and tossed it in the recycle bin in the kitchen.

"Hey Bill?" she asked, to Alex’s brother who was sitting at the counter with a book and his third cup of coffee. "Tell Alex I'm going for a walk if she comes back, okay?"

Bill nodded without looking up. "Have fun," he muttered.

Olivia walked toward the water and turned left, walking along through the waves until the beach ended, and she climbed onto a big rock and looked out at the ocean. She took a few deep breaths, and with each one, she felt tears bubbling to the surface. As she wiped an eye, she thought back to all the things Alex had made her feel - things she hadn't felt in a long time, and the things she knew they both had wanted to feel - and couldn't.

She didn't know how long she'd been there, crying, when she felt Alex sit down beside her, silently, and slip a hand into hers. Olivia sniffled and wiped her eyes, then swallowed and smiled through her tears at Alex.

"Hey," Alex said softly, pulling Olivia in to her chest. "When are you going to learn that it's okay to let me be here for you, too?"

"I just needed a minute. You were playing with Lexie," Olivia explained. "You looked happy, and I didn't want to ruin that for you."

"Liv, if I were upset about something, would you keep playing happily? Or would you want to know so you could help?"

Olivia shook her head and sighed. "I'm sorry, Lex. I'm just not used to... this."

"To having someone care about you and support you?"

Olivia shrugged. "The only time Elliot's seen me cry is when you... died. We don't talk about emotional stuff."

"Liv, I've told you before that I don't want you making decisions about what I can and can't handle. And if we're going to be together, I want us to be equal partners. That means if something's bothering you, you tell me and we talk about it, or I hold you when you're upset, just like you've done for me, okay?"

Olivia's eyes gushed with tears again, and she closed her eyes and nodded. "Okay."

"Are you... okay with everything we did?" Alex asked.
"Of course," Olivia replied. "It was beautiful…and a bit overwhelming. It felt amazing, but it was scary. I was afraid one of us was going to get hurt. And then we didn't sleep very well, and I just got…emotional, watching you with Lexie."

"Yeah, sorry about that…" Alex shifted away and looked out over the water.

"You've got nothing to be sorry about, Lex. Honestly, I'm amazed it went as well as it did, for both of us."

Alex nodded, still looking away. "I just… I just kept reminding myself that it was you. And that you were safe. It helps that when you touch me, I… I don't know. It feels like… I know you're not doing it to make my body do something… I mean, it might sound silly. But it almost feels like when you touch me, you're telling me you love me."

Olivia blushed. "I am," she admitted quietly. "I thought... I thought it might help if I focused on that when I touch you. I thought it might help, uh, both of us."

"Did it help you?" Alex asked, curious.

Olivia swallowed a lump in her throat. "It helped me to remember… that neither one of us has anything to prove."

"No regrets?"

Alex shook her head. "None."

They sat in silence for a while, looking out at the water, and Olivia leaned her head on Alex's shoulder, her eyes still filled with tears.

"What aren't you telling me, Liv?" Alex asked, finally, sensing that Olivia was still holding something back.

Olivia swallowed her tears and shook her head.

"It's okay, Liv," Alex soothed, brushing her fingertips at the nape of Olivia's neck.

"I'm angry," she said simply. "I am so fucking angry. And I don't know how... I don't know what to do. I hate him. I want to go to Rikers, and pluck his pubic hairs one by one, and saw his balls off with a screwdriver."

Alex leaned her head on Olivia's shoulder. "I wouldn't be opposed to that," Alex said, sighing. "I'll defend you."

They sat for a few minutes, as Olivia cried silently. "I can't... I hate what he did to you. I hate that this is so hard. I hate that I can't make love to you all the ways I want to. Like you deserve. And I..." Olivia shut her mouth and looked away. "This isn't fucking fair," she whispered.

"No, it's not," Alex said. "But, nobody ever said it would be."

When the tide started to come in, they had to get up off the rocks and start walking back to the house.

"Lexie is a trip," Olivia said as they walked, hand in hand. "She's just like I imagine you were when you were little. And you're so good with her."

"She's great," Alex agreed. "I love her to bits. I'm trying to make up for all the time I missed when I was in Witsec. And it's nice to be around normal kids."
Olivia nodded. "I would have liked to have been a mom," she said quietly. "Adoption never worked out, and I wasn't sure I wanted to have a biological child. I'm half alcoholic and half rapist, so it didn't seem like a good idea."

"Liv, say what you want about the people who donated your genetic material, but you're a wonderful person and you would make an amazing mom."

"Lex, I'm too old now."

"I'm not."

Olivia stopped, and Alex turned around to face her.

"Look, I know we haven't talked about it, but I think... I couldn't have Robert's baby. But maybe I could have yours."

"Are you sure? Lex, 3 months ago you didn't know you were a lesbian and we hadn't talked in almost 3 years. Don't you think we're jumping ahead a little?"

Alex shrugged. "I think... when it feels right, it's right." She smiled and stepped in to lean her forehead against Olivia's, then kiss her lips gently. "And this feels right."

Olivia kissed her back slowly, then cupped the back of her head and held it to her shoulder. "It does feel right. Let's just see what happens, okay? Take some time to heal and explore this relationship before we rush into having kids."

When they reached the house, holding hands, Bill was on the deck with Lexie, shucking corn, and four lobsters were wandering around with their pinchers shut tight with elastics.

"Mmm, Lobster," Alex commented, taking an ear of corn from the bag. "Do you like lobster, Liv?"

"Love it," Olivia said. She pulled out a sketchbook from a messenger bag she had left on the deck, and sat down at the table with the pad and a pencil.

"So, Dad called me," Bill said, as he hoisted a big pot of water onto the grill.

"Oh?" Alex replied. "I haven't talked to him since we had lunch."

"How did he, uh, take the news?" Bill asked.

Alex shrugged. "I'm not really sure. All he said was he might need some time to get used to the idea of me going on a date with a woman. Did he sound like he was used to it yet?"

"You know how Dad is," Bill sighed, gathering the lobsters. "He's hard to read. I think he was fishing for information on how your date went, but he didn't want to ask directly," he said, glancing at Olivia.

"I think it went pretty well. What do you think?" Olivia interjected, glancing over her pad and smirking.

Alex smiled. "I think... I think it went pretty well too. Did you tell him anything?"

Bill shook his head. "That's not my business to share, and he knows it. I'm not getting in the middle if he doesn't want to go directly to you."

"Well, he didn't call to say 'happy birthday,' so either I'm on a time out because he's unhappy that I'm
dating a woman, or he hasn't called because he doesn't know how to approach it. Or because he thinks I'm still angry at him about Robert. Which did it sound like?"

"I think he thinks you're still angry about Robert and you're using dating a woman to get back at him. Just ignore him, Lexie. He'll come around eventually."

"Or he won't. Of course he thinks this has something to do with him. Everything's about him."

"Lexie…"

"No, it's true. Bill, I was dead for 3 years. I'd barely been back a few months when I started dating Robert because he orchestrated it. Didn't look good for him to have a single, eligible daughter, and it just so happened that his business partner's son was also single because he was secretly an abusive rapist fuck." Alex covered her mouth and looked over at Lexie, who was playing with a lobster. "Sorry."

"Lexie, he just wants you to be happy."

"No, he wants himself to be happy. We're just extensions of him that exist to make him look good."

"Lexie, just because he didn't jump on the pride bandwagon right away doesn't mean he's not going to. I support you completely, and I told him that. He just… I think he doesn't know how to approach it, and doesn't want to screw up after the whole Robert thing. He loves you, Lexie. He doesn't want to lose his daughter again."

"Well, he can start by telling me that himself," Alex said.

"He should," Bill said. "I told him I didn't want to get involved, but that you're my sister, and Olivia is good for you, and I'm on your side. I mean, he's in favor of gay marriage, for goodness sakes. I assume that whatever issue he has, he'll get over it eventually."

"Thanks, Bill."

Olivia followed Alex into the kitchen when she went inside to make a salad, and Olivia grabbed a couple of beers out of the fridge.

"You okay?" she asked Alex as they got inside.

Alex nodded.

"You don't have to be, you know. Coming out isn't always easy. The people who should support us don't, always."

Alex shrugged. "I just don't know what his problem is. First the thing about Robert, now he hasn't talked to me since we had lunch, and he didn't even call for my birthday."

Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex and kissed the top of her head. "Maybe it's not about you coming out. Maybe he feels guilty about pushing Robert on you. I bet he feels at least partly responsible for what happened to you, and for being a jerk about it afterwards."

"Maybe," Alex said. "I won't know until I talk to him."

Alex picked up her phone off the counter and checked the voicemail, then turned to Olivia and smiled.

"Nadia left me a voicemail."
"Robert's first ex?"

Alex nodded, smiling deviously. "She changed her mind about the case. She wants me to file for child support for her son."
Chapter 41

It was almost one AM when Olivia slipped out of bed and tiptoed down the stairs, to find Alex still sitting on the porch swing, staring out at the ocean, where Olivia had left her nearly three hours earlier. Aside from the now-empty wine glass on the table, Alex's position had hardly changed; one leg dangled off the front of the swing so she could push forward and back with her toes, and the other leg was bent at the knee, so Alex could hug it into her chest.

"Hey," Olivia said softly, not wanting to startle Alex, but not wanting to interrupt her private moment, either.

Alex nodded in acknowledgement, and it was only then that Olivia noticed the tears on her cheeks.

Olivia sat down next to Alex on the swing and studied her for a moment, holding out her hand, and when Alex made no move to take it, she reached over to brush Alex's cheek with her thumb and tuck a lock of hair behind her ears.

"Lex, sweetie, are you okay? Are you going to come to bed? It's late," Olivia said gently.

Alex shrugged and kept staring out at the water.

"Sweetie, are you upset with me about something?" Olivia asked after a few more moments of silence.

Alex shook her head.

"C'mon, Lex. Let's go upstairs." She put her hand on Alex's back and guided her to their bedroom, where Alex began shaking as Olivia went to embrace her. Olivia pulled back, sensing her discomfort. "Lex, sweetie, what's wrong?"

Alex stood with her fists clenched, staring off into space, as her face contorted and she let out a muffled sob. She shook in place, backing away when Olivia tried to hold her, until she curled up in fatal position on the bed. Olivia kept repeating soothing words, and knelt down in front of Alex to stroke her hair and reassure her. Finally, she climbed into bed next to her, being careful not to touch until Alex had calmed down and she had rolled over to face Olivia.

"Can I hold you?" Olivia asked softly, reaching out once Alex's breathing had steadied.

Alex nodded, and Olivia approached slowly, and kissed her cheek.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Alex shook her head vigorously. She briefly made eye contact, then hid her face in the pillow, and latched on to Olivia's hand.

"Okay," Olivia whispered. She held Alex's hand gently, stroking the back with her thumb, until Alex relaxed again and uncovered her face, laying on her side to face Olivia, who was propped up on her elbow and waiting patiently, a mix of kindness and concern on her face.

"I'm sorry," Alex murmured, her eyes gushing again.

Olivia watched Alex as she gently withdrew her hand and brushed her fingers to Alex's cheek. "You have nothing to be sorry for, love. But did I do something? Why didn't you want to come to bed?"
Alex shrugged and shook her head. "I just… got scared."

"Scared?" Olivia asked. "Of me?"

Alex shrugged again. "I mean, we did it once, and you… you know, and I thought you'd want to do it again, but I'm not sure I can yet, and I didn't want to disappoint…"

"Hey, Lex, slow down a minute," Olivia said, continuing to caress Alex's cheek with her thumb. "You could never disappoint me, sweetie. And just because we've done something once, doesn't mean we have to do it again unless you want it 110%. I enjoyed last night, but I don't expect anything from you, tonight or any other night. Everything we do together will be a choice, every single time. Are we clear?"

Alex nodded fighting back tears. "I'm so sorry, Liv. I know you wouldn't pressure me, but I…"

"Shhh, sweetie. It's okay. You're okay."

"I love you," Alex finally said, softly, curling into Olivia. "Thank you for understanding. For putting up with all this bullshit."

"Not bullshit," Olivia whispered, touching her fingers to Alex's lips. "And I love you, too." She kissed Alex gently on the cheek, then on the lips. "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

Alex nodded and rolled onto her back, and Olivia began her nightly ritual of kissing Alex's scars. She started by gently pressing kisses to the top of Alex's thighs, then one just below her navel. She took each hand in turn and kissed the inside, where the now-faded bruises from the ligature marks had been, and folded Alex's hands on her stomach. Then, Olivia kissed her fingers and brushed them gently over the back of Alex's shoulder as she kissed the two entrance wounds on the front. She finished by pressing a kiss to the top of Alex's sternum, near her heart, before kissing her again on the mouth, gently, and smiling. She kissed Alex's tear-dampened temples before settling back down on her side, facing Alex.

Alex laid still for a moment. The routine she didn't quite understand calmed and intrigued her. At first, she had been embarrassed that Olivia paid so much attention to her scars, but now, it seemed natural.

"Liv?" she asked, turning to face Olivia. "Why do you always do that? Why do you want to kiss my scars?"

Olivia bit her lower lip, trying to put together a coherent answer.

"And don't give me some cliché, like the 'oh, they're beautiful and they make you who you are and prove you're strong' crap."

"Cliché though it may be, all of that is true," Olivia said. "You're the strongest, bravest person I know."

Alex raised an eyebrow, giving Olivia the trademarked Cabot stare.

"Do you think I'm lying? Do you think I have a scar fetish or something?" Olivia asked.

Alex giggled and shook her head.

"No scar fetish. Pinky swear," Olivia said, holding out her pinky. Alex hooked on with hers and shook. "But I'll tell you the real reason. It's not because your scars are a part of who you are. If
anything, the injuries that caused these scars were *attacks* on who you are. Attacks on the best, strongest, bravest parts of you. "Olivia's fingers lingered on the gunshot scar. "So part of the reason why I love these scars is because I want to protect and heal the parts of you that have been hurt so badly before." Olivia said simply.

"And the other part?" Alex asked, whispering.

"And the other part of the reason is the other side of the same coin. The scars are the parts of you where it's hardest for the love to get in. Where it's hard for you to be vulnerable and to allow me to see you. So I need to give them extra love."

Alex buried her head into Olivia's chest and clung to her. "I'm so lucky I have you," she whispered.

"Me too," Olivia whispered back.

—

A week later, Alex knocked on the door to Liz's office as she opened the door, surprised to find Liz hunched over her paperwork, smiling and humming.

"Liz?" she asked, when the woman didn't acknowledge her presence.

"Oh! Alexandra, come in," Liz said, smiling widely. "I didn't hear you knock."

"Clearly," Alex murmured, thrown by Liz's cheery disposition. She had never known Liz to hum.

"You wanted to talk to me about SVU?"

"Yes, have a seat," she offered. "How are you?"

"Fine. I was on my own this weekend, since Olivia had to work. I got a lot of personal stuff taken care of. How are you?" Alex was almost afraid to ask.

"Great! I had a very relaxing weekend. Hardly worked at all." She flipped open a new file on her desk. "Now, I talked to Arthur about transferring you back to SVU, and he agreed that we can budget for 2 positions there starting on July 1, when the new fiscal year kicks in. Now, I know you're not a fan of the bureaucratic aspect of the Bureau Chief job, but how do you feel about taking it on for SVU? Since Casey is the only other attorney, it'll be a lot less paperwork than for Homicide. And I'm concerned that if we transfer you from Bureau Chief of a large department back down to ADA of SVU, even if it's what you want, people will think that we're questioning your ability to do your job, which we'd like to avoid.

"We'd rather frame your transfer as a promotion in recognition of how you shaped the SVU department, and give you more autonomy in how SVU cases are handled. Ultimately, we'd like to put Domestic Violence under the SVU umbrella, because we think that will improve how those cases are prosecuted. What do you think?"

Alex nodded slowly.

"Obviously since you're only working with Casey, you'll have to negotiate which cases you'll each be assigned a bit more delicately than in Homicide. But we think they two of you can work well together, and if we move the Domestic Violence unit, we'd put some attorneys under Casey as well. But that may be a ways off."

"That would be great, Liz. As long as I'm still spending most of my time in court, and helping victims, that sounds perfect. It's the paper-pushing aspect of the Bureau Chief job that I hate. With a
couple dozen attorneys, I hardly get any time to try cases. It's been too long. I want to get back in the game."

Liz nodded and smiled. "I understand. You always did like being in on the action."

Alex blushed.

"Alright. I'll talk to Branch again, but I think we're going to make the announcement on June 1, so that gives you just over a week. In June, we'll have you supervise the quarter-end reports with the new Bureau Chief of Homicide, so that person can learn the ropes before you transfer over."

"Do you know who that's going to be yet?"

Liz smiled. "Well, we talked about a few possibilities, including transferring someone from Narcotics or White Collar. But I think it's going to be Jim Steele or Tracey Kibre."

Alex rolled her eyes, and Liz chuckled.

"Wonderful. So he'll be gloating, AND he'll be all up in my ass for a whole month while I train him."

"You can deal with him. He's the one I'm worried about, here. And he can gloat all he wants, but he's only getting the job because you're getting something you want more, right?"

Alex smiled. "Right. OK, well I've got to go drop these motions off to Judge Petrovsky." She waived the blue forms she'd been holding at Liz. "But thanks for having my back in this. I'm looking forward to getting back to SVU."

Liz nodded. "Oh, would you mind taking this to Lena? Since you're going there anyway?" She held up an envelope with a wax seal on the back.

Alex held out her hand. "Sure, no problem."

Alex made her way to the judge's chambers and knocked, waiting until she was invited in.

"Alexandra, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Judge Petrovsky asked. With her serious tone, Alex had trouble determining whether the 'pleasure' part was sarcastic.

"Your Honor," Alex began. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I just had these motions to drop off for the Robinson case. Oh, and Liz asked me to drop off this," she said, handing over the papers with the card on top.

For a brief moment, Alex thought she saw Petrovksy's eyes light up and a smile spread across her face, but the judge quickly controlled herself and nodded abruptly. "Oh, thank you," she said, her expression neutral. "Will that be all?"

Alex smiled, noticing the bouquet of flowers on her desk, and trying not to gawk as she recognised the handwriting on the card peeking out of the top. "Yes, Your Honor. Nice calla lilies, by the way. They're Liz's favorite."

She nodded and left the judge's chambers quickly, ducking into the nearest ladies' room and pulling out her phone to text Olivia.

_I need a detective. I think Liz is sleeping with PETROVSKY!_
"Nadia, thank you for meeting with me here," Alex said, standing up from the table to shake her hand. "I've got about 2 hours before I have to be back in court, and then I can go file your paternity and child support motions."

Nadia smiled shakily and sat down, and picked up the menu.

Alex sat back down and took a sip of her Perrier with lemon.

"I started going to therapy," Nadia said quietly, looking down at her menu.

"Good for you," Alex replied.

"It's hard," she continued. "But I started a new job a couple months ago, and my insurance covers it, and I just… I thought about what you said. I just kept thinking it wasn't really that bad, you know? And that so many women have it worse than me… but… it's helping, I think."

"Nadia, I've worked with a lot of women over the years who have been in your situation, and who have been through a lot worse. And it doesn't do anyone any good if you minimize what happened to you and try to gaslight yourself into thinking it wasn't that bad. It doesn't help other women who have been victims, and it doesn't help you to heal. It makes it harder." She swallowed and smoothed the cloth napkin on her lap. "I've been a victim twice, and I can tell you that it's very difficult to move on if you haven't acknowledged what happened to you. Therapy helps."

Nadia nodded. "I was just so afraid he'd find me before, and take my boy away. Now that he's in prison I feel like I can breathe a little, you know?"

Alex nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. And he should be in prison for a long time."

The food they ordered arrived, and they ate in silence for a few minutes, until Alex pulled out a thick file of paperwork to go over. "Now, in addition to the paternity paperwork, I've filed for sole legal custody with no visitation and child support based on the amounts that were in our prenuptial agreement. The prenup was prepared by my attorney, and I've included a copy with my assets redacted so the court can see his full net worth, which is more than $100 million. Child support is usually 17% of income per child, so I've asked for a one-time payment of $17 million, since obviously he won't have any income for the foreseeable future, unless he makes licence plates for $1 a day. We can request that the amount be put into a trust for George's education with a monthly payment to you to cover expenses until he reaches 18. That way, it doesn't look like we're doing a money grab, and George will have money to pay for college and an apartment when he gets older. How does that sound?"

"So, I wouldn't have access to the money?"

"You would have access to some of the money to contribute to household expenses, but the majority would be set aside for George. The other possibility is that we file for monthly support, which would end when he turns 21. And since Robert will probably get out of prison before George turns 18, he'll have a lot more leverage to file for visitation or even partial custody. The court won't sever his parental rights unless someone else does second parent adoption, and George will be vulnerable and easily manipulated when he becomes a teenager. He might idealise the father he's never known, and the court will take into account what he wants at that age. What do you want to do?"

"If you think that's best."
Alex shrugged. "I do. But what we ask for is your decision. I'm just telling you what the court will find reasonable, because ultimately it's the judge who will decide what to award. If he thinks you're being greedy, it could backfire."

Nadia nodded.

"Now, the one thing I'm concerned about is grandparents' rights. New York is very liberal with awarding visitation to grandparents, even if there's no preexisting relationship, and you could be forced by the court to have visitation with Robert's parents if they file a suit. And they've got money too, so even if they didn't get much, they could bury you in legal filings. If you can, I would very strongly recommend moving to New Jersey or Connecticut in the near future. Robert's parents always wanted grandchildren and went a little insane when his brother had kids. I can see them filing for visitation or even partial custody as soon as the ink on the paternity suit is dry."

"I've never heard of grandparents' rights. Is that really a thing?"

Alex nodded. "It is. It's pretty new, and the original intent was to allow family members like grandparents to easily take temporary custody of children in cases when Child Protective Services intervenes, or if the custodial parent isolates the children from the other parent's family in case of death or divorce. But the New York law is very ambiguous, and courts have awarded grandparents visitation in lots of different cases, and one parent being in prison is a criterion for awarding visitation."

"Those people raised a sick man. I don't want them anywhere near my kid, brainwashing him about how wonderful his piece of shit father is."

"Robert is a 'victim' of an overzealous legal system to them, so yeah, I would try to avoid them getting visitation. Can you move over the bridge?"

Nadia nodded. "I guess I'll have to. It might take me a while, though. When should I try to move by?"

"I'd try to go after we file, but before we get the results of the paternity test. They can't file anything until Robert is proved to be George's father, so it's best to have established residency in another state before then."

—

Olivia tapped her pen on the file she was working on, distracted. It was almost 4, and as long as a new case didn't come in before 6, she was going home for dinner with Alex.

"Cup of coffee, Liv?" Elliot asked from across the table, pulling her out of her thoughts.

Olivia nodded and closed the file, grabbing her leather jacket off the back of her chair. "You buying?"

Elliot followed her out of the precinct to the deli around the corner, the nearest place to get a decent cup of coffee. "What's on your mind, Liv? And don't tell me 'nothing.' You've been distracted all week."

Olivia took a sip of her coffee and looked out the window. "Alex's tenants move out tomorrow."

"Ah," Elliot said, leaning back in the chair. He put his hands on the table. "And so Alex is moving back into her apartment, and you got attached. I told you that would happen, Liv. She wasn't going to need you forever, and three months is a long time to put your life on hold for her."
"We haven't really talked about what Alex is doing. I know she's planning on getting a moving truck to get her furniture and the rest of her stuff from her mother's house in Amherst, but I have no idea when that's happening. I guess she's planning on moving out, but we've both been avoiding the subject."

"Liv, that's good for her. She's got to live on her own again sometime. She can't stay with you forever. Just think - you'll be able to go out on dates again. Maybe you should call that woman you went out with a few months ago. What was her name? Jen?"

Olivia shook her head, a slight smile on her lips at her partner's obliviousness, and continued avoiding eye contact. "Yeah, I guess I'll have to go out on some dates," she said.

"Besides, maybe you can bring Alex out to clubs or something with you. Show her the ropes, or something."


"Well, yeah. I mean, I don't know how it works or anything, but maybe she'll need tips. Or a wing-woman. Or something. And you can screen her dates to make sure they aren't bitches."

"So, you're appointing me Alex's bouncer?"

"I'm sure she'd appreciate having someone looking out for her."

"I'm sure she would," Olivia said, still smiling to herself.

"But then the only problem is what if you wanted to go home with someone?" Elliot mused. "You need to get back out there too, Liv. It's been almost a year since whatever happened at Sealview, and you've hardly dated since then. I know we've been busy with cases and then you've been helping Alex the last few months, but you're not getting any younger, Liv."

"Thanks for reminding me, El. Why are you so interested in my personal life, anyway?"

"I'm just looking out for you. I told you you were going to get too attached to having Alex with you, and it wouldn't be healthy."

"I appreciate your concern about my mental health, El, but I assure you, it's unnecessary. I'm doing great."

"You know, you've been different the past few weeks since Alex has been living with you. I just don't want you to go back to how things were after Sealview. Are you ever going to tell me what happened?"

Olivia shook her head. "No, that's none of your business."

"I'm your partner, Liv. You should be able to tell me these things. It affects your ability to do your job."

"I do have other people to talk to besides you, you know. And I don't owe you any information about anything. What I choose to share with you is that - a choice. If you can't respect my boundaries —"

Elliot chuckled. "Liv, we spend upwards of 80 hours a week together."

"I know you like to think you know everything about me, but you're not my husband, you know."
"Might as well be. I spend more time with you than I do with my wife, most days."

"And when you confide in someone, it's Cathy - or at least, it should be. It's not me. I told you before, Elliot. Your job is to watch my back. Not my heart. You take care of yourself, and I'll take care of Alex. And myself."

"You'll take care of Alex? Liv, you're not going to keep taking care of her after she moves out, are you? She's a big girl. At some point, she's going to have to take care of herself. Or is this a codependency thing? You need everyone to need you, but don't want to lean on anyone yourself. I get it."

"Elliot, I'm not codependent and I'm not taking care of Alex because I want her to need me."

"Then what is it, Liv? I don't get it." He paused to drink the last of his coffee, and mid swallow, he nearly choked, his eyes popping out of his head. "Wait - does that mean you're —? You and Alex are —?"

"Still none of your business, El. But stop worrying about me."

—

Olivia knocked on Alex's office door at quarter after 6, entering to find Jim Steele sitting across from her. "Hey," Olivia said, smiling genuinely for the first time that day. "Oh, sorry to interrupt. Do you want me to come back later?"

Alex smiled too, and shook her head. "No, Jim and I were just finishing up. I'll only be a minute. Sit on the couch?"

Jim stood up and took the thick file off of the corner of her desk. "Well, Alex, I wouldn't want to make you late for your date," he said sarcastically. "I'll take a look at this over the weekend and get you a draft report by the middle of next week."

"Alright. Have a good weekend, Jim." Alex picked her suit jacket off the back of her chair and began organising the piles on her desk, willing herself not to roll her eyes. "Ready for our 'date'?"

she asked, grinning.

Olivia stepped closer and smiled, then kissed Alex's cheek. "Always," she said.

Alex locked her office as Olivia slung her briefcase over her shoulder, and as they walked by Jim's office, Alex reached out and grabbed her hand.

Olivia glanced sideways and raised her eyebrow, and Alex smiled back.

"What?" Alex asked. "Let's give 'em something to talk about. I'm not ashamed, Liv. Do you want this to be a secret?"

Olivia shook her head and smiled as they stepped into the elevator, and as soon as the doors closed, she pulled Alex in for a kiss. "Not at all," she whispered, then pulled away and laughed. "Elliot's being surprisingly dense, though, even for him. He took me out for coffee today and told me I should start dating again now that you were moving out."

Alex shook her head. "Munch and Fin figured it out when we were at the hospital with Laura Simmons's mother. Why didn't Elliot?"

"He likes to have his own internal narratives about how I need him and he's the only one who
understands me and is there for me. His alternate reality is that I'm sacrificing myself and foregoing an active love life while you take advantage of my kindness and he convinces me to put myself first and lean on him for support.” She rolled her eyes.

"Oh." Alex pressed her lips together.

"He's delusional, Lex."

Alex shrugged. "He's kind of right, though. I can't… I haven't… given you anything since we went to the Vineyard, and that was almost a month ago. You should be with someone who can give you… more than I can."

Olivia held Alex's eyes for a moment, and kissed her on the cheek again. "Nothing about loving you, or being with you, or waiting for you to be ready is a sacrifice, Lex. I told you, it takes as long as it takes. I'm in no rush."

"I don't deserve you," Alex whispered.

"You deserve a lot more than just me," Olivia replied, as she opened the door to the squad car for Alex to get in. She took a deep breath and walked to the other side to open her own door, and turned to face look at Alex once she put the key in the ignition. "Alex, can I ask you something?" she asked, taking a deep breath.

Alex nodded.

Olivia pursed her lips together. "When we... make love... and, anytime we touch, really," she began. "Do you... do you think of that as you 'giving' something to me?"

Alex swallowed and looked at her hands, folded in her lap, and shrugged one shoulder. Her face began to turn pink, and her skin warmed with embarrassment.

Olivia reached over to touch Alex's hand on her leg, but Alex pulled her fingers away. "Sweetheart, I'm not judging. I'm just asking," she tried to reassure Alex. "And... what I give to you in return... is it lovemaking too? Is that something we give each other? Or... is it the emotional support and the relationship itself?" she asked, almost whispering. "Or is it love?"

The knot in Alex's chest tightened, and the flush of embarrassment and shame was deafening as her eyes filled with tears. "Liv, I..."

Olivia glanced over at Alex, her hands on the steering wheel. "Alex, sweetheart," she soothed. "What if we looked at it as something we share? An experience we create together, for us both to enjoy?"

Alex nodded slowly, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Or what if it's something I give to you, because I love you for who you are, and I want to show you how beautiful you are? Because I want you to feel good?"

This time, when Olivia reached over to touch Alex's face, and brush a tear off her cheek, she didn't pull away.

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They sat down at a candlelit table in the back of the French restaurant, Olivia holding Alex's hand across the table while they sipped on red wine.
"So, uh, we should probably talk about what happens after tomorrow," Olivia said, looking down at her napkin in her lap, avoiding eye contact.

"Liv, nothing changes tomorrow if we don't want it to. The only difference is that I won't be depending on you, and if we're together, it's because that's what we're choosing." Alex squeezed her hand. "I appreciate everything you've done for me, Liv, I really do. But you know I hate being dependent, and once I have my own space again, we… I've got to figure out how to live on my own again, so if we live together again, it's something we both decide and not something that happens by default or because I'm afraid to be on my own. Do you understand?"

"If that's what you need, Lex," she said, an errant tear in the corner of her eye. "I'm just going to miss you."

"Well, I'm afraid you're not getting rid of me quite yet. My tenants move out tomorrow, but the whole place is going to have to be cleaned, and I'm probably going to need to repaint and do some repairs. Then I've got to get my furniture from my mom's house in Amherst sent down, and get a bunch of new stuff since I don't have enough to furnish the whole apartment. It'll be a few weeks before it's liveable. But I thought… maybe we could pick out some things together?"

Olivia nodded slowly.

"And I thought… I hope I'm not being too presumptuous with this… but I thought that maybe, since I own my apartment and it's quite a bit bigger than yours, that maybe, when we're ready to move in together, that you might consider moving in with me? I mean, I know you love your place, and I don't know when your lease is up, and if you want, we can find a new place together, but…"

Olivia leaned over the table and kissed Alex abruptly. "My lease renews in March," she said. "So why don't we see how we feel in February about whether you still want some independence or whether we're ready to live together for real. That gives us six months to figure things out."

Alex smiled. "Sounds like a plan, Detective."
"Lex, if you don't want to, it's okay," Olivia whispered for what felt like the thousandth time since they had shared their feelings for each other. "Are you sure you want to, or do you just want to want to?"

"I… I don't know," Alex answered, curling up on the bed and burying her face into the pillow.

"Even if you just want to want to want to, that's okay too," Olivia said. "But we shouldn't do anything more until you're sure you want to. And 'I don't know' means no, you're not ready."

Alex sighed into the pillow. "Now you're just being ridiculous."

"I'm completely sincere," Olivia answered. "There's a big gap between wanting to make love and wanting to want to make love, but not quite actually wanting to. I know you want to want to, but that doesn't mean you're ready to want to. And even when you're ready to want to, it doesn't mean that you'll actually be ready to do it."

"How many times have you given that speech before?"

"That particular speech? None," Olivia said. "Every woman is different, Lex. I specialise in personalised platitudes."

"I can't imagine anyone else being as patient as you are. Thank you."

"Alex, I care about you. Therefore, I will always put your comfort and wellbeing and pleasure first. And I really don't think it's that selfish of me to want to wait until we can both enjoy it. I don't want mere 'consent' as if you would be passive; I want to hold out for enthusiasm. And it's okay if it takes a while."

Alex curled up into Olivia and slipped her hand under Olivia's shirt, tracing shapes on her stomach and ribs with her fingers. "Liv?" Alex asked, after they had laid in silence for a while. "Why haven't you told Elliot about us?"

Olivia shrugged. "I've had to severely limit Elliot's access to information about my personal life. The man has no boundaries."

"Oh. What did he do?"

"Remember I told you about my ex coming to work for the department for a while and shrinking us?" Alex nodded. "That didn't go over so well. And any time I date someone he's overly critical and wants way more information than I'm comfortable sharing. He got in the middle of our argument and I was really upset with him. It was completely inappropriate and embarrassing. Munch and Fin aren't up each other's butts like he's up mine when he gets even a whiff of any personal issue I have. I made the mistake of telling him something she said right before she left the Academy without even saying goodbye. It was pretty awful, and she knew it, and apologised for having said it, and he still completely blew it up, and made me feel so much worse."

"It must have been something horrible."

Olivia shrugged and turned on her side, away from Alex, and Alex felt her body tense up.

"Liv, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."
Olivia took a breath and tried to keep her voice from shaking. "We were in bed," she began, intertwining her fingers with Alex's on her stomach. "And we were just talking about random things. She asked about my father, why I never talked about him. And I told her. She was one of the first people I had ever told. And without even skipping a beat, she blurted out, 'Oh, so that's why you like it rough.'"

Alex gasped. "Liv," she whispered, squeezing Olivia's hand.

"It took me years to get over the damage she caused by saying that. And then three days later she had moved out and left the Academy without saying goodbye. She told me when she saw me again that part of the reason she never said goodbye was because she was horrified by what she'd said and too embarrassed to face me and apologise. She said she just didn't think."

"And the thing is," Olivia continued, sniffing, "I really had no idea what I was doing. I was just following her lead and doing what I thought she liked. I didn't tell anyone else until I had to disclose before I joined SVU, and then I told Elliot. The rest of the team found out during the Guan case."

"Liv," Alex repeated. She pulled on Olivia's arm, encouraging her to turn back around. "Liv, look at me."

Olivia let out a shaky breath and rolled over, avoiding eye contact until Alex kissed her forehead, ran her fingers through her hair, and put a finger under her chin, gently.

"Liv, I'm so sorry she hurt you like that. But whatever you like sexually has nothing to do with how you were conceived or what your father did."

"I know it's stupid," Olivia choked out. "I know logically that it's not true, but…"

"Olivia, you're the kindest, gentlest person I've ever met. Including every single time you've touched me since we've met, and especially including the past few months. What he did, it's not a part of you."

Olivia shook a bit in Alex's arms, and Alex wasn't sure she was crying until she took a huge breath and let out a quiet sob.

"Liv," Alex whispered, holding her close. "Olivia, you're a good person, and you don't have to atone for your existence. You don't have to be sweet and gentle and patient every second to prove that you're nothing like him. I love how sweet you are, but only as long as it comes from you, and not from being afraid that something about you is wrong or a mistake. Because nothing is wrong with you, Olivia. You're a beautiful person."

"If I'm not a mistake, that means that what happened to my mother wasn't a mistake, either," Olivia whispered.

Alex kept rubbing Olivia's back absentmindedly as her breathing slowed, wondering what she would be able to do if her girlfriend really did like rough sex. She'd had pretty rough sex before with someone she didn't really care about, and then with Robert, but would it trigger her? And what exactly did Olivia mean by 'rough', anyway? Fast and hard, or with toys? And did she like giving or receiving rough sex, or both? Or had Olivia really meant it when she'd said she preferred gentle and that nobody knew that about her?

"Liv, we'll figure it out, okay? But you don't need to prove how gentle you are. I already know your heart."

Olivia swallowed and nodded into Alex's shoulder.
Anyway, when Rebecca came to evaluate us, it was to see whether we should stay together as partners, because Cragen thought we were too enmeshed and were putting each other before the job. I wasn't even sure I wanted to keep him as a partner, but I didn't really want to get used to anyone new, either. She recommended he keep us together, and then we just kind of rugswept everything. He made it pretty clear that he had my back after he overheard what she'd said, but after that, every time I went on a date, he made inappropriate jokes. So I just started changing the subject whenever he'd ask me questions about my personal life. When I dated Kurt, the only reason he found out was because of a case we were working where they thought I had leaked info to him because I had called him before an article was published."

"Ah."

"So yeah, I'm not really sure I'm up for hearing any jokes from him about us. Or worse, getting advice. Especially given how badly I ended things with Jenna."

"He's going to figure it out eventually, Liv. And probably be pissed that you didn't tell him, if I know Elliot."

"Probably. But for the moment I'm kind of enjoying the fact that he's really dense."

Alex snorted. "Well, yeah, for a detective, he doesn't seem too bright right now."

"But I should probably tell him sooner rather than later."

"It's completely up to you. I'm in no rush for him to know, but he is a big part of your life."

"Maybe he'll figure it out when he comes to pick me up in the morning at your apartment. And I kiss you goodbye."

Alex giggled. "Or you bring me lunch in my office and kiss me good luck for a case. Or I kiss you good luck and stay safe before you go out with a warrant."

"All of those sound good. He'll feel so dumb for not figuring it out that he'll be too embarrassed to make jokes about our sex life."

"Liv, if he makes you uncomfortable, you should ask for a new partner."

Olivia shook her head. "We work well together. We've been partners for over 10 years. I think he's trainable if I set good boundaries. The problem is that when we started working together I wasn't very good at that. I had the whole codependent-daughter-of-an-abusive-alcoholic thing going on. It took me a while to learn how to set boundaries after she died, and it took him a while to get used to it. And I don't know... the cop thing makes it hard, too. I can't be seen as weak, or let him get under my skin, or I'll take a lot of crap for it. Female cops have enough trouble being seen as equally competent, and if I ask for a new partner because of a couple of inappropriate jokes, it's going to cause problems, especially in a team as small as ours."

"Okay. However you want to handle it is fine with me. He's your partner. But if he's being disrespectful, I hope you call him on it."

"He wouldn't dare disrespect you in front of me. Or in front of Munch, Fin, or Cragen for that matter."

"I meant you, Liv. He disrespects you when he makes those comments. And you don't deserve that."

Olivia kissed Alex's forehead and pulled her close. "I'll handle it," she said. "Now what's the plan for
tomorrow?"

"Well, I need to go over and get the keys back from my tenants, and see if there's any work that needs to be done before I schedule movers to pack up my stuff at my mom's house in Amherst and bring it down. Do you... have any objection to going furniture shopping with me? I know I need a new bedroom set, and furniture for the living room. I haven't had a TV since before Witsec. And I need sheets and towels and things. When I moved out, I brought a lot of my stuff to the Vineyard house, and donated a lot of the older kitchen stuff. The sheets and towels went to an animal shelter."

"It sounds like you pretty much need to replace everything, then."

"More or less. The stuff at my mom's house is my desk, my piano, about 40 boxes of books... There's a bedroom set and a dining room set that I'll keep, and some nice china that's been in my family. The bed is only a queen, though, so it'll go in the spare bedroom. Lots of momentos and photo albums. But most of the furniture I'll end up donating, but it'll be good to stage the house to sell it. It's been nearly 4 years since she died, and the market is starting to recover up there, so Bill wants to sell. The estate is still paying taxes on it and hasn't completely been settled yet."

Olivia hesitated.

"Liv, um, I want you to help me pick things out and decorate based on the assumption that we'll be living together for real at some point in the near future. And if there's stuff that you want to bring with you, we can leave space for it. And if you change your mind, I can always get more furniture later."

Olivia smiled slightly and leaned in to kiss Alex's nose. "I'm not going to change my mind. I just don't want to go too fast," she said quietly.

"Well, we'll decide that together," Alex replied, snuggling on top of Olivia's body. "I love you," she whispered against Olivia's neck, running her fingertips down Olivia's chest. "Thank you for trusting me."

"I love you too, Lex." Olivia murmured wrapping an arm around her tightly as she drifted off to sleep.
"Hi, sweetheart. How are you doing?" Alex asked, cradling the phone as she set down the paintbrush from repainting her bedroom a light shade of blue.

"Hi, Ms. Walk—. Sorry. Alex. I'm okay. How are you?" Sarah asked.

Alex smiled. "Better. I'm getting my apartment ready to move back in. Olivia and some work friends are helping me repaint and do some repairs before I get some new furniture delivered tomorrow. What are you up to now that school's out?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing at all? Not even a job scooping ice cream or whatever it is you kids do these days?"

"Well, I don't have a car, and there's no place close enough to walk. I ask my mom to drive me places sometimes, but she's usually too busy with my dad. He doesn't like when she leaves him alone. It's better for both of us if I just try to get out of the house when I can, by myself. There's a little park with a path through the woods not too far from my house, so I go there and climb up in a tree to read a book. I'm going to do some writing this summer, too, but I have to come up with a good place to do it so my parents won't find out."

"Ah." Alex rolled her eyes and shook her head at Olivia, who bit her lip.

"Do you think we'll hear back soon? About the lawsuit? My mom's been asking when *we're* getting *our* money."

Alex sighed. "Well, they have until the 31st to respond, and I think they'll wait until the last minute to drag it out. They know they're not going to win, but if they do everything at the last minute, they can hold onto the money longer, and they might assume we'll have cooled off and will fight less hard the longer it takes. Which won't happen. If anything, it will annoy me and make me push harder. And once the final judgment is made, it will take a few weeks for the money to be paid out, so it won't be before the fall." Alex hesitated. "Honey, when do you turn 18?"

"Not 'til October. Why?" Sarah answered.

"Sarah, it... concerns me that your mother is expressing so much interest in this money. For one thing, if you father is receiving disability and your mother is being paid by the state to be his caretaker, they very likely have an assets cap, which means if they suddenly get money, they might have to start paying for care."

"I think my mom thinks she's going to retire on this money," Sarah said bitterly. "It's not hers."

"Sarah, even if you get $5 million, you know that's not enough money for you to live on forever, right? You're still going to have to work. It will pay for your education, and be a nice safety net if you want to take some internships, or maybe a long maternity leave when you have kids someday. If you were 65, you could retire on it, but not 18."

"I know. I wasn't planning on not going to college or not working. And I'm not giving it to my mom. She was talking about taking a trip to Las Vegas for her 40th birthday in November and having me take care of my dad. I told her it wasn't happening and she pretended she didn't hear me. It's like she doesn't hear the word 'no.'"
Alex sighed. She wasn't about to start diagnosing personality disorders, but seriously. Half the people she prosecuted were narcissists. "Honey, I'm not your parent and I can't interfere with your relationship with your parents. But maybe we should talk about money at some point. I have cousins who blew through their inheritance, and it might be a good idea for you to see an independent financial advisor so you don't make the same mistakes. Maybe your mom can go with you so she understands that the money is for your future and meant to be a safety net, not a Vegas fund."

Sarah snorted. "No, she'll probably whine about how much she's done for me and for my dad, and how hard her life is, and how much she deserves it. Because, you know, what happened to me was so hard on her."

"That's not normal, you know. Parents are supposed to take care of their children, and your mom taking care of your dad might be hard on her, but it's a choice she makes. Neither of those things entitle her to your money, which is supposed to compensate you and penalize the school for wrongs that have been done to you. Have you talked about your parents in therapy?"

"I talked about it a little, but the therapist told me that I'm her only daughter, and she's not perfect, and lots of people don't know how to react to trauma, and she's already so overwhelmed taking care of my dad constantly, and I shouldn't be so hard on her. Like I was wrong for wanting support when... when I was raped, and when you... died."

"Sweetheart, it sounds like your therapist thinks faaaaaamly is important because you share DNA. Unfortunately, in my line of work, it's usually family that kids need protection from the most. I can't tell you the number of times I've heard the parent of a victim say, 'Well, I thought it would be okay, because he's faaaaaamly.'"

"So what do I do? Do I have to tell my parents that the Vegas trip and the sexy nurse aren't happening? My mom'll flip. Or she'll just ignore me and plan it anyway."

"Wait, sexy nurse? What sexy nurse?"

"Oh, my mom told my dad that when she goes to Vegas, she'll hire him a sexy nurse to come and take care of him while she's gone. I would do the health stuff and give him his meds, and the nurse would take care of his, uh, 'other needs.' So gross. Worse than when he watches porn in the den."

"Sarah, does he do that when you're around?"

"Yeah, all the time. I just go up to my room and close the door. He's a pig."

Alex paused. "That's completely inappropriate. If you were younger, it would be sexual abuse. I'm not convinced it's not sexual abuse, but I'd have to look at the Oregon statute."

"Well, now it's summer, so I can get out of the house and do stuff. But I guess I can't come to visit colleges with you on the East Coast if I'm not going to get anything until the fall. That's a bummer. I was kind of looking forward to getting out of here for a bit."

"Sarah, I can't make plans for you to visit me without talking to your mom. You're still a minor. But if she agrees, and all you need is money for a plane ticket, I can lend it to you, and you can pay me back when the money from the lawsuit comes through. Normally I wouldn't recommend spending money you don't have yet, but visiting colleges is important for your future, and it'll be harder to do it once school starts."

"Can I ask my mom and have her call you?"

"Sure. And I'll mention to her that we're going to work out the best way to set up your account to
protect your parents' state assistance and to protect your ability to get financial aid for college. You
don't have to explain why you're not financing her trip to Vegas, but it's probably better to wait until
you're a legal adult and can move out if you need to. It's not worth it to try to seek emancipation for
only a few months."

"I wish I had better parents," Sarah said quietly.

"I'm sorry you don't, sweetheart," Alex replied. "But we're not going to let them spend your money.
Have your mom call me, and we'll arrange a trip. Maybe two weeks or so around the beginning of
August? I probably won't be able to take the whole two weeks off, but I don't have any trials
scheduled until the end of the month, so I'll be able to work from home a bit. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good. I hope she lets me come."

"Me too. And hang in there, sweetheart, okay?"

Alex sighed as she hung up the phone and turned towards Olivia, who had put down her paintbrush
on the splatter tarp.

"How's she doing?" Olivia asked, slipping her arms around Alex's waist.

Alex shrugged. "It's really hard for me to bite my tongue when she talks about her parents. But she's
a minor, and it's probably not a good idea for me to start diagnosing them with personality disorders
when I've only met them briefly three or four times."

"It sounds like she already knows they're toxic assholes," Olivia said. "I knew my relationship with
my mom wasn't normal when I was maybe 12 or 13, but I didn't figure out how messed up she was
until a couple years after she died. If Sarah gets away for college and spends time with people who
care about her, she'll turn out okay."

"If she's lucky, maybe her parents will stop talking to her when she doesn't hand over $5 million,"
Alex said wryly. "That's how Bill and I got away from our heroin-addict cousins who shot up a $25
million inheritance and then got pissed when we didn't invite them to the family reunion at my house
on the Vineyard and didn't lend them money."

"25 million dollars worth of heroin? How … Is it even possible to use that much? How are they still
alive?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't think it all went to drugs. The point is, even a lot of money can be gone very
quickly if it's spent frivolously. That's why all those athletes with multimillion dollar contracts are
broke within a few years of retirement. People think they're set for life and don't realize how fast the
money can go, especially if they don't make good investments. It's also why I only ever touch the
interest, and even then, most of it is reinvested."

"Well, I hope you're able to protect her money from them. Although I can't imagine they'll be happy
about it. If they think it's rightfully theirs, she could be in trouble."

"Best case scenario, I'm able to convince them that the money needs to be in a trust until she
graduates college so it won't affect her financial aid for college based on their low income. Worst
case scenario, they decide to kick her out because she won't hand over the money, and she lives on
her own for her last year of high school. I won't know which scenario is more likely until I talk to her
mom."

"I wish someone had protected me from my mom's crazy when I was her age. Instead, I spent 15
more years chasing her and trying to get her to love me," Olivia said. "I'm glad she has you looking
"Liv, I'm sure your mom loved you," Alex whispered, putting her own arms around Olivia and leaning her head on her shoulder.

Olivia shook her head sadly. "No, she didn't. She couldn't look at me without being reminded of the worst thing that happened to her. Not every mother loves her kids, Lex. Some people have kids without meaning to, and we see what happens to the worst cases. Then there are lots more that don't get to us. I don't think it's a case of 'Sarah's mom loves her but is focused on taking care of her dad and burnt out.' I think it's a case of 'Sarah's mom loves Sarah's mom, and likes Sarah when she makes her mom look good or has something she wants, and ignores her the rest of the time.' Which is still better than my mother, I suppose, but not very healthy for Sarah."

Alex wrapped her arms a little more tightly around Olivia's waist, and made a small frown with her mouth.

"Liv, we're pretty much done in this room," Alex said, after holding her for a minute. "Why don't we call it a night? Go back home and get washed up?" She brushed Olivia's hair behind her ear, and leaned in to press a gentle kiss to her mouth.

"Cabot, we finished the library, where do you want me to put —Liv!" Elliot exclaimed, entering the room. "What are you… Are you two… Why didn't you…" he sputtered.

"Aw, hell, man," Fin shook his head as he entered from the living room. "You acting like you didn't know or somethin'. You're her partner. Why you so outta the loop?"

"I take it Olivia had wisely decided to keep Elliot in the dark about her relationship with our esteemed ADA. Or she didn't rub his nose in it and he remained oblivious."

Olivia chuckled. "Yeah, that's more like it. Anyway, I think we're going to head out before the commentary from the peanut gallery begins."

"Thanks for your help today, guys," Alex said, smiling sincerely as they escorted a still-incoherent Elliot towards the door.

"See you Monday, El."

Olivia smiled as Alex shut the door behind them, and kissed Alex again.

"Ready to go home?" Alex asked, gently scratching the back of Olivia's neck.

Olivia nodded. "That's twice," she said. "You called my apartment home."
Olivia took a sip of her wine, looked at her watch, and then down the hall at the bedroom door. It had been 25 minutes, longer than Alex had intended to be in there. She didn't hear anything, but didn't want to intrude on Alex if she still needed time to get herself together.

Alex's first day back at SVU in over four years had been relatively uneventful. Casey had two open cases inching towards court dates, and was dealing with a few motions and trial prep, but after Alex had been brought up to speed on the squad's current caseload and looked over their open cases, she didn't have much to do.

Captain Cragen had given her a big hug and a warm, 'Welcome back, Counselor. I hear congratulations are an order,' and treated her for lunch, and Elliot, still annoyed that he had been the last one to know about her relationship with Olivia, gave her a stiff nod of acknowledgement before imposing the silent treatment. After lunch, she went to court to watch Casey do an arraignment for one of Trevor Langan's clients.

Of course, Trevor couldn't contain his enthusiasm for Alex's return to SVU, and stopped to say hello.

"So I hear you're back at SVU, now," Trevor said, approaching Casey and Alex outside Petrovsky's courtroom. "I'll be looking forward to seeing more of you."

Alex smiled. "You mean to seeing more of the bottom of my mop when I wipe the floor with you again? Casey seems to do a fine job holding her own against you; I'm surprised your ego isn't wary of the hit to your W/L ratio."

Trevor rolled his eyes. "I appreciate a good intellectual challenge, and I know you'll give me a run for my money. Just because we're on opposite sides of the aisle doesn't mean we can't be friends. It's good to have you back, Alex. SVU needs you."

"Thank you," Alex said, blushing. "It's good to be back. I feel like I'm *really* back this time."

"Well, let me know when you're available and I'll take you out to lunch. A little 'welcome back' gesture from a friend and colleague. I never did offer when you came back to New York last year. I figured you were overwhelmed and I wanted to give you space."

"Thanks, Trevor. I'd like that. Your girlfriend won't be jealous? What's her name? Sophie?"

Trevor shook his head. "No, I broke up with Sophie not too long after your engagement party. Smart woman, Casey is," Alex retorted. "I knew that girl had sense."

"Oh, come on, Alex," Trevor said. "I'm a catch and you know it. But anyway, even if Casey were to come to her senses, I've already got another date lined up for this weekend. Her name is Alyssa, and I met her on OKCupid."

"Online dating? How do you know she isn't a 50 year old man?" Alex teased.
"She's not a 50 year old man."

"Well, I hope it goes well for you," Alex said sincerely. "I'll look forward to hearing about her when we go out to lunch."

Trevor nodded. "Unless you want to go out with me again?"

Alex laughed and shook her head. "Thanks, Trevor, but you know I think we're much better as friends. You're just not my type."

"Speaking of surprising types…" Trevor looked around and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I saw Liz Donnelley coming out of Petrovsky's chambers this morning right at the end of morning recess, and she had her shirt on inside-out. And it wasn't on inside-out this morning when I saw her in the elevator."

Alex opened her mouth, and closed it again, saying nothing.

"Now, I'm not going to say anything to anyone else or start any rumours, but I thought, you know, since you're close to Liz… she should be careful if she doesn't want anyone to find out. I mean, everyone pretty much knows about Lena…"

"Wait, knows what about Lena? I don't know about Lena," Alex interrupted.

"Oh, you don't know about Lena? It happened… oh, I guess it happened right at the beginning of your time off in March. She was apparently dating a corporation counselor from family court, a woman I don't know. Someone saw them kissing somewhere back in March, and it was all over the courthouse by the end of the day. Petrovsky took a few days off, and rumour has it that the other woman resigned and left New York."

"She resigned because she was outing?" Alex asked.

Trevor nodded. "I guess so. I mean, nobody dared say anything to Lena; you know how she is. And nobody cared, either. It was more that they were surprised than anything. She was married at one point and has kids, so it came as kind of a shock. Anyway, she was brilliant. She found the most gossipy clerk - you know, Lynn Campbell - and made sure she overheard something about how this wasn't the first woman she'd dated and it wouldn't be the last, and she was never hiding who she was, just keeping her personal and professional lives separate. And that got around to everyone before the end of the day, and nobody gave her any crap."

Alex smiled. "Well, good for her. And I will let Liz know about her shirt… just in case there's anything going on there."

By 5:30, she was more than ready to leave, and she packed up her briefcase and headed back to Olivia's apartment, picking up some groceries to make dinner on the way. By the time Olivia had gotten home and they had eaten dinner, with Olivia asking about her first day back, Alex was exhausted. As she often did in the evenings, she asked Olivia for space, and closed herself in the bedroom, set a timer for 20 minutes, and began to cry.

Timed crying was a practice she had implemented when she'd been working at SVU. If she shut everything out and never got emotional, Alex was afraid of not being able to empathise with the victims or have meaningful relationships that required having human feelings. But of course, in order to do her job effectively, she had to look at evidence and be objective, and of course crying would be considered highly unprofessional in court. When the cases first began to get overwhelming and the stories were just too sad, Alex had started setting aside 15-20 minutes after dinner - not before bed -
to shut herself away from the world and feel. She didn't always cry, and she rarely cried for the whole time, but she found it almost meditative. Reserving a window of time to allow herself to sob uncontrollably and curse the world without judging herself freed her to keep tight control over her emotions during the day.

During Witness Protection, she had occasionally practiced this technique as well, allowing herself a limited amount of time to feel sorry for herself, and especially to remember what Alex Cabot was like, before wiping away the tears, reapplying her makeup, and going back to the real world. Nearly four months after she had been raped, she no longer felt shaky and unstable all the time, she could control her reaction if someone got too close to her, and outwardly, she appeared to have recovered. She wanted to keep up that appearance.

So, after dinner, she told Olivia she needed a few minutes, and she went into the bedroom and sat cross-legged on the bed. She picked up a pillow for her lap, squeezed it - nonviolently - and relaxed, until tears washed over her. She rode a few waves of sobs, and face contortions, and calm, sometimes desperately wishing she had allowed Olivia come to hold her, and sometimes glad that Olivia wasn't there to see her like this.

After a few minutes, she wiped the tears from her face and took deep breaths through her nose, and finished the glass of water she'd brought into the room. When she was done, she sat for a moment at the edge of the bed with her feet on the floor, collecting her thoughts, and slipped into the bathroom. She sniffled in the mirror, realising how ridiculous she looked with the mascara streaming down her eyes, and washed her face.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and by the third ring, she had composed herself enough to clear her throat, sit down on the closed toilet, and answer. "Cabot," she said crisply, without looking at the caller ID.

"Ms. Cabot, it's Eileen Stanton, the EADA in Portland who worked on the Chris Keating rape case. I hope I haven't caught you at a bad time?" It wasn't really a question.

"No, of course not. What can I do for you?"

"I have some information about the case that I thought I should pass on. Isabel Ritter passed away late last night. The preliminary investigation suggests that she committed suicide, and that she was around 5 months pregnant."

Alex was silent for a moment. "Do the other girls know?"

"No. The family hasn't announced her death publicly yet. The school was going to make a robo-call in the morning to notify the student body."

"I'm going to call Sarah to make sure she's okay. I think it would be better if the girls found out from us rather than a message on their answering machine. Some of these girls were friends with her."

"You have the girls' contact information from the lawsuit, I assume? I'll just let you contact all of the girls, since you're in contact with them anyway about the lawsuit."

Alex let out a breath. "Yes, I can contact all of the girls' families. We have been in contact about the lawsuit, although it's been a while since I've spoken to any of them."

"I'll let you do that, then, and I'll let the Ritter family know. Thank you for taking that on."

Alex rolled her eyes. "Please keep me posted on the situation. I'll be sending the Ritter family my condolences, but I'll probably send a note rather than bother them with a call. I'm sure they have
Alex hung up her phone without saying goodbye, and wiped her eyes again. Fuck this, she thought with a deep sigh as Olivia knocked on the door.

"Come in," Alex said quietly, and Olivia opened the door slowly and took Alex into her arms.

"Did something happen?" she asked, and Alex explained the situation. "Want me to help make some phone calls? I can call the girls I interviewed if it makes things easier for you."

"Let me get the phone list."

Alex downed the last of her glass of wine from dinner and pressed the 'Call' button on her phone.

"Hi Sarah, it's Alex," she said when the girl answered the phone.

"Hi Alex. What's up?"

"Is your mom there? Can I talk to her for a minute, please?"

"Um, sure. Hold on. Mom!" she called, holding the phone not-quite-far-enough away from her ear. "Alex is on the phone and wants to talk to you." She paused. "I don't know what it's about. My trip in a couple weeks, I guess."

"Hello?" Linda Williams asked. "Sarah, honey, you can hang up now."

"Mrs. Williams, hello. This is Alexandra Cabot, your daughter's attorney."

"Are you calling about the lawsuit? Have they said how much money they'll give us yet?"

"Um, no, actually. I'm calling on another matter. I'm still waiting to hear back from the school's lawyers on the negotiations for the lawsuit. They have until the end of the month to get back to me."

"Is it good that they're taking that long?" she asked. "Are they stalling because they have to give us a lot of money? How much do you think we'll get?"

"Ms. Williams, we do have to talk about the money for the lawsuit. It's in Sarah's best interest not to have a lot of money in her name, because with your low income and your husband's illness, she should qualify for financial aid when she applies to college. And it would also affect your eligibility to get services from the state for your husband. I've discussed it with Sarah, and we're going to set up a trust with the money, to pay for her education. As a separate entity, it can contribute to her educational costs without preventing her from getting grants and subsidised loans from the school."

"Oh, well of course, Ms. Cabot. We all want what's best for Sarah, of course, especially after all we've been through. But surely we'll be able to spend some of it on something fun?"

Alex rolled her eyes. "It's Sarah's money, so I won't tell her how she can or can't spend it. But if she saves it, it will be a good cushion for whatever she wants to do while she's in school - pay her living expenses so she doesn't have to work, take an unpaid internship, study abroad - I'd advise her not to spend anything until she speaks with a financial advisor and knows how much she can spend without running out of money."

"Well, I'm sure you know that we haven't been able to do anything fun or take any trips the past few years, what with my husband being so sick. It would be nice to be able to take a break for once and do something nice for Sarah before she goes off to college. I think I'll plan something to surprise her
"Ms. Williams, I understand that we'll need to have a conversation about Sarah's money at some point, but I'm actually calling about some news I just got from the attorney who prosecuted Chris Keating, and I wanted to let you know in case Sarah needs some extra support this weekend. Sadly, Isabel Ritter, one of the other young women involved in the case, passed away sometime last night. Investigators suspect she committed suicide. Unfortunately I don't have more information at the moment, but the EADA has promised to keep me posted."

"That's terrible," Sarah's mother replied. "I don't think I've heard that name before. I don't think she was friends with Sarah?"

"No, I don't believe they were friends. But I expect that Sarah might still be upset about losing her classmate. You may want to have her go to an emergency therapy session if she needs it."

"Oh, therapy? I don't know… does she still do that? She must, but I'm not really involved with any of that stuff. She takes care of it. Alright, I'll put Sarah back on the phone. I just hope she doesn't get any ideas. God knows we've had enough trouble with her the past few years, you know?"

Alex didn't reply, and after a minute, Sarah came back on the line.

"Hi sweetheart," Alex said softly, hoping she hadn't heard her mother's cutting remarks.

"What's wrong?" Sarah asked.

"EADA Stanton called me a little while ago, and I told her I'd pass on some news. Isabel Ritter passed away last night. I know you weren't friends, but she was Chris's victim, too, and I thought you might prefer to hear it from me."

"How?" Sarah asked simply. "Did she… was it?"

"They're pretty sure it was suicide. She was a few months pregnant."

"Was it because of him?" Sarah's voice was barely audible. "Did he do this to her?"

"Sweetheart, remember when you said that you felt bad for the other girls because they didn't realise that what Chris had done to them was wrong?"

"Yeah."

"Well, sometimes, when someone has been abused, they start to realise that what'd been happening isn't normal, and it brings back lots of memories of abuse all at once. If that happened to Isabel, and she didn't have a good support system to help her process everything, she might have been overwhelmed by the pain. She didn't know how to cope."

Sarah was silent for a moment, and Alex waited for her to speak. "I don't know if I can… if I'm strong enough," she said finally, her voice cracking. "These things just keep happening and…"

"Hey, shhh. You've just got to take it one day at a time, okay? You've overcome so much already, sweetheart. Things are going to get better, it's just going to take some time. But you're going to be here in two weeks so we can look at colleges, and then you'll be in your last year of high school, and you'll be moving away from home before you know it. I know it seems impossible to imagine now."

"I just… every time I think I'm getting better and I'm going to be okay…" she struggled to hold back tears.
"Healing isn't linear," Alex said. "It's normal to feel a little better, then to feel a lot worse. It's also normal to feel guilty sometimes when you do feel better, unfortunately. Then, someday, you'll just feel better, and you won't remember how long it's been since you felt this way."

"But what do I do now?" Sarah whispered.

"Well, it would probably be a good idea to call your therapist and ask for an emergency session or two before you come to visit. Tell her what happened over the phone so she can try to fit you in."

"Isabel wasn't really my friend, you know. I hated her for a long time because of what she said about me. I wished she would die because she kept defending him and blaming me."

"Sarah…"

"I didn't mean it, but…"

"Sarah, I know you didn't mean it. And you didn't know that he was victimising her, too."

"No. What did he do to her anyway? Was it as bad as what he did to me?"

"Honey, you know I can't share the details of her interview. But you know Chris and what he was capable of," Alex said gently. "It's okay to be upset about this, and it's okay to have a lot of different feelings, as long as you're dealing with them in a healthy way. Now, when we get off the phone, you're going to call your counselor, right? And what else can you do?"

"Yeah, I'll call her. I'll probably go for a long walk to get out of the house. Maybe I'll go get ice cream downtown. I won't drink and I won't hurt myself, so don't worry about me."

"Of course I'm going to worry," Alex said. "Considering everything that's happened. But I'm glad to hear that. Call me, okay? And we still have to talk about what schools you want to visit when you come."

"Okay. I'll make a list. I better go."

"Okay, sweetheart. Hang in there."

"Thanks, Alex. Bye."

Alex sat on the couch with the phone in her hands, tearing up again, and Olivia came to sit next to her and wrap her arms around her.

"You okay?" she asked quietly, and Alex gave her a sad smile.

"It's so sad," she replied.

"She was in a lot of pain," Olivia said.

Alex shook her head. "It could have been Sarah. I never would have forgiven myself."

"It wasn't Sarah," Olivia reminded her. "Sarah will be okay. She's still hurting, but she knows she has things to look forward to and people to help her."

"I know."

Olivia's phone buzzed in her pocket as they sat there holding each other.
"Benson," she answered without checking the screen. "OK, Cap’, I'll get down there as soon as I can."

Alex leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Go," she said.

"I've got a vic at Mercy," Olivia explained. "I shouldn't be home too late, but don't wait up for me, okay?"

Alex nodded.

"You going to be okay?" Olivia asked.

Alex nodded again. "I'll order takeout."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. But I'll be okay. Let me know when you expect to be home, and stay safe. I love you."

Olivia kissed her again and left for the hospital.
Olivia hopped out of the cab in front of the hospital, and Elliot waved at her from the lobby.

"What've we got?" Olivia asked, catching up with him.

"Woman in her thirties. Nurse told me she says she was out at O'Malley's, had a couple of drinks. Guy she was talking to walked her home, forced his way in, and raped her."

"O'Malley's? That's a cop bar," Olivia replied. "I really hope this wasn't a cop."

"Well, other people go there too sometimes, Liv. We won't know more until we talk to her. Let's go."

They walked over to the nurses station, taking out their badges, and the nurse, looking up, pointed them down the hall. "Room 15. You know where it is," she said.

Olivia knocked and opened the door slowly. The exam table faced away from the door, and the curtain in front of it was pulled.

"I'm Detective Benson and this is my partner, Detective Stabler," she began, approaching the patient, who was sitting on the table in a gown. Her clothes were on a large sheet of paper on the other side of the curtain.

"Olivia?" she said, turning her head.

"Jenna," Olivia replied, surprised. "I'm so sorry this happened to you." She pulled up a stool next to the table and sat down.

Jenna sniffled and wiped her nose. "I'm so glad you're here. It was awful," Jenna said, near tears. "I asked for you when they called. I was hoping you would come."

"I bet it was awful," Olivia replied. "But Jenna, I can't be involved in your case. I wouldn't be able to testify in court, so my partner is going to take your statement, okay?"

"But you helped on the case with that other woman," Jenna said.

"Alex?" Olivia asked, and Jenna nodded. "Alex and I had a professional relationship and a personal friendship for several years, and I took her statement and then recused myself from the case. I did that because she was staying with me, not because of the nature of our relationship. If I work on your case, and testify for you, the nature of our previous relationship would come out on the stand."

"And you don't want that to happen."

Olivia paused. "No. Not because it would bother me that people knew. It's not a secret. But because it would distract the jury, and the defense attorney would argue that I'm biased and saying what you want me to say. I can't be an impartial witness."

Jenna started to cry again. "I'd be much more comfortable telling a woman," Jenna said, and sobbed, her hand covering her mouth.

Olivia exchanged a look with Elliot. "I'm sorry. We don't have any other women at SVU for the moment, but let me call the Captain and see if we can borrow another detective to interview you."

She pulled her phone out of her pocket. "I'll just be a minute, okay?"
Jenna sniffled again. "No… It's okay. I just want to get this over with. But will you… could you hold my hand during the exam?"

Olivia nodded and sat back down on the stool. "Okay."

"Jenna, I'm going to sit back here, so I can't see what's happening," Elliot said. "We'll both ask questions, and I'll write everything down. At the end, we'll ask you to sign your disclosure, and we'll take it and the rape kit down to the precinct to be tested. Do you have any questions?"

"No," Jenna said, laying back on the table. "Let's just get this over with."

"Alright, why don't you tell us what happened, starting with where you were tonight."

Jenna took a deep breath. "I went out to get a drink at a bar in my neighbourhood after work. Irish bar. Cochran's. There was this guy, Joe. Tall, dark hair. He bought me a drink, and then I said I wanted to go home, and he said he'd walk me back to my building so I was safe. I thought he was going to just make sure I got in the door, but he followed me inside."

"What happened next?" Olivia asked.

"He raped me," Jenna said quietly.

"Where?" Olivia asked.

"In my… wait, you mean in the apartment? In the bedroom."

"Okay, how did you get from the front door to the bedroom?"

"He brought me there."

"Had he ever been in your apartment before?" Olivia asked. "How did he know where it was?"

"I mean, he made me bring him," Jenna corrected.

"How? Did he threaten you? Did he have a weapon?" Elliot asked, raising an eyebrow at Olivia.

"Jenna," Olivia said reassuringly, "if you brought him into your bedroom willingly, that's okay. It's what happened afterwards that's important."

Jenna took a breath. "Um, I'm not sure. It happened so fast, and I…"

"Okay. Okay," Olivia reassured her. "Just tell us what happened next. Did he wear a condom?"

Jenna looked confused. "No, I don't think so," she answered. "He wouldn't have had time to put it on."

"Okay. The doctor will test for STIs and give you plan B if you want it. Did he ejaculate?"

Jenna swallowed and looked away. "Yeah. He was, um, pumping pretty hard and he came."

Jenna finished describing her attack, and Dr. Logan finished administering the exam, and Olivia finally let go of Jenna's had so she could go get dressed into clean scrubs behind the curtain.

"Detective, a word, please?" Dr. Logan addressed Elliot as she closed up the rape kit box and sealed it, before they stepped outside to let Jenna get dressed in private.
Once they were out in the hall with the door closed, Dr. Logan looked at Olivia, then at Elliot, then back at Olivia. "Detective Benson, do you know the victim personally?" she asked delicately.

"Yes, we dated briefly earlier this year," Olivia confirmed. "We had a very short relationship, and we didn't even…" she looked at Elliot. "Well, why do you ask?"

Dr. Logan looked at Elliot. "If Detective Benson isn't going to be investigating the case, perhaps she shouldn't be present for this conversation."

Olivia crossed her arms indignantly. "We no longer have a personal relationship, and my objectivity isn't compromised. I'm not investigating for her sake, if there's ever a trial, not because I couldn't."

"Say what you need to say, Doc."

Dr. Logan nodded. "Take this with a grain of salt, because there's no physical test to determine whether or not a woman has had sexual intercourse. But I'm not sure there's any evidence of forced penetration. She has no injuries consistent with fighting back, yet she has no secretions consistent with arousal that would have protected her from injury. She claims he didn't use a condom, and there are no micro abrasions on the interior walls of the vagina, which would confirm that. But I doubt he ejaculated inside of her, as she claimed, because there was very little fluid present."

"Maybe she washed up before she came in. We'll have to ask her. But anyway, all victims react differently, and it's not unusual for them to forget details or misremember parts of their assaults," Olivia said. "She might have been trying to fill in the gaps of what she didn't remember."

"Since her apartment is the crime scene, we'll have CSU meet us and grab the sheets as evidence," Elliot said. "It can't hurt."

"You don't believe her," Olivia accused.

"I didn't say that, Liv," Elliot replied. "I said more evidence wouldn't hurt. I will say, though, that she told us the names of two different bars."

"Maybe the nurse got it wrong. El, women forget or omit details all the time. It's not a big deal."

"The case is already going to be hard because you dated her. She's not making it any easier. If she washed up or forgot a bunch of stuff, I'm not sure we're going to be able to help."

Olivia walked back towards the exam room and knocked on the door before opening it. Jenna was sitting on the table, now dressed, and she turned when Olivia approached her. Olivia gave her a soft smile.

"Are you ready to go?" she asked. "We're going to have CSU go to your apartment, since it's a crime scene. They might be able to get DNA from your sheets or see signs of a struggle - fingerprints or things knocked over, stuff like that. We might even be able to get footage from the security cameras to help ID this guy."

Jenna's eyes flickered with surprise and she looked away, briefly, but enough for Olivia to notice.

"I understand if you don't want to stay in your apartment," Olivia said. "Is there somewhere else we can take you? A friend you can stay with for a night or two?"

Jenna clutched the exam table with her fingers, and shook her head without looking up. Olivia noticed her swallow, hard, and take a deep breath, before breaking out into another sob. "I don't know who I can call," she cried.
Without thinking, Olivia touched her palm to Jenna's back, and Jenna leaned into the touch. "It'll be okay," she said. "I'll call the Belleclair on 77th to see if you can use the city's discount for a night or two until you're ready to go back. You'll be close enough so you can go to get some of your things if you need to. But I really suggest staying with someone for a few days or having a friend come to stay with you. Maybe your sister in Long Island City can spend a few nights with you?"

Jenna shook her head. "I was kind of hoping..." she said through a sob, "that maybe I could stay with you."

Olivia was taken aback by the request. "Jenna, I don't think that's a good idea," Olivia said gently, flashing back to how vulnerable she'd felt when she'd fled Jenna's apartment the last time.

"Why not?" Jenna sniffled. "Just for a couple of nights, until I can get my apartment cleaned up and get back to normal. Please?"

Elliot, who had entered the room a few minutes before and held the keys to the squad car in his hand, observed.

Olivia shook her head.

"You let that other woman stay with you when she was attacked," Jenna pointed out.

"Alex? Alex has been my friend for a long time, and..."

"Am I not your friend?" Jenna said, crying. "She needed a place to go, and you let her stay with you even though I was your girlfriend, and now I don't - I can't go back home, and..." she sobbed again.

Olivia looked at Elliot, mouthed, "Help me," and backed away from Jenna slightly. She was trying very hard not to let her emotions interfere with her ability to treat Jenna with compassion, but she was having a hard time forgetting the pain of Jenna not empathising with her own assault.

"Is she still staying with you?" Jenna asked. Olivia opened her mouth, then closed it again. "She is, isn't she?"

"Jenna, where can we take you?" Elliot intervened. "Detective Benson's apartment is not an option."

"I guess I'll just go home, and..." Jenna sniffled again. "Try to sleep on the couch or something."

Elliot nodded. "Okay. Let's go. We've got a couple of unis waiting at the building with the security footage and a couple of CSU guys who will be in and out of your apartment as fast as they can."

Jenna looked panic-stricken. "They're already there? In my apartment?" she asked.

"No," Olivia reassured her. "They're in the building and outside your door, securing the crime scene. It's important that they're there as soon as possible after the crime takes place, so the evidence isn't tampered with."

"Oh," Jenna said. "Well, I'm not sure you're going to find anything in the apartment. I put the sheets in the laundry before I came here so I wouldn't have to deal with it when I got back."

Elliot sighed and rubbed his forehead. "Okay," he said, clenching his jaw. "Liv, why don't you drive."

Olivia caught the keys that Elliot tossed to her.

"She can't sit with me?" Jenna asked, pausing before getting into the back door that Elliot had
"We both have to be up front," Elliot said. "Standard procedure."

Jenna sniffled some more, and Olivia tried to shake the nagging feeling in her gut that something wasn't right. She wished Alex were here. She normally didn't have trouble compartmentalising, but the more Jenna cried, the more she felt herself going into flight-or-flight mode. The more she was reminded of the burning shame she'd felt when Jenna had responded to her sharing about her assault by downplaying and trying to seduce her. A tiny voice in the back of Olivia's mind said something Olivia had never, ever thought about a victim before: *now she knows what it's like to feel violated.* Olivia gripped the steering wheel with one hand and covered her mouth with another, not turning to look at Elliot.

They arrived on Jenna's street, West 82nd, and Olivia pulled the squad car in front of a fire hydrant to park, with the lights on.

"Jenna, why don't you give us your keys and stay here while we take care of CSU?" Elliot asked, reaching behind him.

"Can Olivia stay with me?" she asked, in almost a whine.

Elliot looked at Olivia, who didn't reply, and answered for her. "I'll send over a female officer to wait with you."

Jenna nodded and began crying again, as Elliot grabbed Olivia's elbow and walked them towards the front of the building.

"You okay, Liv?" he asked, his voice low. "She's very… needy."

Olivia nodded. "I'll be better as soon as I'm back home. Things between us didn't end well, and this… is stressing me out. I can't be involved in this case, for my own sanity."

Elliot smiled at her and nodded. "What've you got?" he asked, shaking the hands of the unis who were waiting for them at the security desk at the building's entrance. He handed off the keys to Callahan, who was waiting with another investigator, so they could go grab any evidence from Jenna's apartment.

"Nothing," Officer Calkins said, pointing to the screen. "We've gone through the whole thing, twice. Camera shows a male, late 30s, walk with Ms. McFarlane to the building, around 9:30 PM. They pause at the door, talk for a minute, then she goes in, shuts the door behind her, and he leaves. He doesn't appear on any other cameras in the building. We even checked with the building across the street, to see if they had anything pointed at the fire escape. There's nothing."

Elliot nodded slowly. "Is there any other way he could have gotten in?"

Olivia put her hand over her mouth and shook her head. "She was pretty clear that he walked her up to her door. If she got into her apartment and he came in a different way, she would have said something…"

"Liv," Elliot said gently. "When Alex was raped, did you touch her at all?"

Olivia shook her head slowly. "No. I never touch a victim - I held out my hand and she took it." She snapped her head up to look at Elliot. "I touched her back earlier, twice, and she didn't even flinch."

"You said it yourself, Liv, you'd never touch a victim."
"She's... not a victim. Why do you think she's doing this? To manipulate me somehow?"

"She knows how supportive you were of Alex, and it led to the end of your relationship with Jenna," Elliot pointed out. "Does she know you're together now?"

Olivia raised an eyebrow. "Do you know we're together now?" she asked, jokingly. Elliot had never acknowledged their relationship directly. "No, she doesn't."

"Because she seemed to think she'd be able to stay with you and you'd be supportive of her as well."

"You think she faked a rape to manipulating me into getting back together with her?"

"I don't know, Liv, but her story doesn't add up."

Olivia's nose flared, and she opened and closed her fists at her sides. "El, I can't do this," she said quietly.

Elliot nodded. "Do you mind walking home from here? If you want to go, I'll take care of wrapping this up."

Olivia nodded. "Thanks, El," she whispered, then walked home, and, without a word, curled up in bed next to Alex.
After Olivia had left, Alex had forced herself to eat some dinner, spent some time looking at her case files, and even tried to watch some Parks and Recreation on TV. In a funk from the news about Isabel, and from a curt brush-off from Liz when she'd tried to bring up Petrovsky when she'd stopped by before heading out of the office, she had a hard time finding it as funny as she usually did. Halfway into the first episode in her Netflix queue, she sighed and shut her laptop. It was barely 10:30, but she did have to get up in the morning, after all. Since she'd hit 30, she no longer considered it a virtue to go to work on as little sleep as possible. Without Olivia, though, she wasn't sure how restful her sleep would be.

She looked at her phone to see if Olivia had messaged her with her ETA, but hadn't received anything. She plugged the phone in and set it on the nightstand, and uncapped the essential oil diffuser next to it. Pouring in some water, she opened a few vials, and put a few drops of lavender, chamomile, and Frankincense in before turning it on and breathing deeply to relax.

Alex was reading poetry in bed with a glass of wine after having a good cry, her second of the day, about Isabel when she heard the door open, and Olivia came into the bedroom, put on her pyjamas, and slipped under the covers next to Alex without a word, burying her face in the pillow.

Alex took off her glasses and placed them on the nightstand, and bit her lip slightly. She reached over and put her hand on Olivia's shoulder, then reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. Olivia wasn't crying, yet anyway, and Alex really couldn't tell what was going through her mind.

"Bad case?" she whispered, leaning in to kiss Olivia's temple.

Olivia shrugged a shoulder and swallowed hard, and Alex slipped an arm under her and pulled Olivia over, until her head was resting on Alex's chest.

They stayed like that for a while, Olivia resting quietly on Alex, who rubbed her back, until Olivia's phone buzzed a few times. She pulled it out of her pocket, read the texts, and it was then that the tears came.

Alex held her while she cried, occasionally running her fingers through Olivia's hair, and trying not to let her curiosity get the better of her. Olivia would talk about it when she was ready. If not, she'd hear the details of the case on Monday in the office.

Finally, Olivia pushed gently off of Alex and sat up, her knees bent in front of her, and wiped her tears, then wrapped her arms around her legs. She looked over at Alex and nodded, croaking out a soft 'thanks' and trying to prevent the tears from coming again.

"Do you want some tea?" Alex said softly, shifting until she was sitting cross-legged facing Olivia.

Olivia grunted. "What I want is a stiff drink," she said, her tone unreadable. "But some tea would probably be better," she added, making eye contact with Alex for the first time since she'd arrived home.

Alex kissed her cheek and went to make a cup, and when she returned, Olivia was sitting in the exact same position, staring off into space.

"Can I do anything else?" Alex asked gently as she handed Olivia the cup and sat back down next to her.
"I don't know, can you go back in time about 8 months and slap me?" she asked, taking a sip.

Alex tilted her head, confused. "Only if you'll do the same for me. And talk me out of giving up my apartment to move in with Robert."

Olivia swallowed. "The vic was Jenna," she explained, unlocking her phone and pulling up the most recent text messages.

"I'm so sorry, Liv. How is she doing?"

"She's okay. Crazy, but okay. She thought I would let her stay with me because I let you stay with me, and she's sent half a dozen text messages about how could I abandon her."

"I'm sorry. Do you want her to stay? If she needs a place to stay because she can't go back to her apartment, she can stay here and we can go stay in my place. Or she can stay in my place while I'm waiting for the rest of the furniture to get delivered."

Olivia shook her head and leaned over to kiss Alex on the cheek. "You're so sweet. But no, I told her it wasn't going to be possible for her to stay with me. El and John brought her back to her apartment." The next part was barely audible. "I didn't believe her," she whispered, almost too low for Alex to hear.

"What do you mean, Liv?"

Olivia tried not to start crying again. "She was so hysterical and adamant about staying with me… Angry that I helped you and not her. She asked for me when she called to report. And there were some details that didn't add up. I thought she made the whole thing up as some kind of ruse to get back together with me. You know, like she thought if she could just come stay with me for a few weeks, I'd fall in love with her instead of you."

"Clearly a flawed plan," Alex said lightly, and Olivia nearly smiled.

"I've never - never doubted a victim before," Olivia whispered. "Not right off the bat like that. And my own ex - I didn't believe her. So basically I just feel like a piece of shit right about now."

Alex pulled her lips between her teeth, then reached out to take Olivia's hand and intertwine their fingers. "Liv, listen to me very carefully." She paused and waited for Olivia to look at her. "Jenna hurt you very deeply. She showed her crazy the last time you saw her. You are not objective in this case. And given everything you know about her, your reaction is normal and human. Did you call her a liar?"

Olivia shook her head. "Of course not."

"Did you blame her? Tell her you were glad something happened to her?"

"I thought - for a second - I thought that now she'd understand about - what happened to me. And what happened to you."

"Olivia Benson," Alex said firmly, in her best courtroom voice. "Your reaction - to cast doubt on the story - is your job. It's your job to check the details and to question things that don't add up. No matter who the victim is. And unfortunately, because of your experience with Jenna, you reacted more strongly than you might otherwise have done. None of that makes you a piece of shit. It doesn't mean you don't feel sorry for what happened to her. It just means you're human."

Olivia considered what Alex had said. "Still, who lies about being raped? Why would I think that?"
"Liv, women have to be pretty damaged by something to lie about being raped. You know that. I think it says a lot about her and how unhealthy of a person she was if your instinct was to not trust her."

Olivia rubbed her forehead, and didn't speak.

"Olivia, look at it this way. How many of the people we put away are manipulative AND have had some kind of assault or abuse happen to them?"

"Almost all of them."

"So you saw both, and reacted to the manipulation."

Olivia shrugged.

"Liv, you're the kindest, most empathetic person I've ever met. Please don't beat yourself up over this."

Olivia swallowed and wiped her eyes again, and slowly looked up to make eye contact with Alex. "Thank you," she whispered.

Alex held on to Olivia's hand and leaned her head on her shoulder, until Olivia freed an arm and wrapped it around Alex, rubbing her back and touching her hair.

"What did you do while I was gone?" she asked, running her fingers through.

"Not much," Alex said. "I was pretty upset about Isabel. If I'd've gone back sooner, she might not've…"

Olivia leaned over and pressed a kiss to Alex's mouth to stop that sentence. "Lex, the only people responsible for what happened to Isabel are Chris, for what he did to her, and Isabel, for not seeking help."

"I know. I just…"

"I know."

Olivia cradled Alex in her arms and they began to kiss, slowly at first, touching each other gently. Alex was the first to untuck Olivia's shirt and slip her hands up underneath the back, unclasping Olivia's bra. Olivia pulled back slightly to look at Alex.

"Is this okay, Liv?" she whispered. "I want to make you feel good."

Olivia nodded. "I already feel a lot better," she replied, kissing Alex again. "Thank you."

"I want to make love," Alex clarified, blushing. "I think I'm ready this time. Do you want to?"

Olivia nodded again. "I want to. Tell me if I need to stop?"

Alex nodded, and pulled Olivia's shirt up over her head.

They kissed and touched, undressing each other slowly until Olivia pulled them down on the bed, side by side, and rested her hand on Alex's hip.

Alex rolled on top of Olivia, kissed her from above, and smiled. She massaged her breasts, drew a giggle when she caressed Olivia's ticklish stomach, and slowly drew her hand down, across Olivia's
legs, settling her hand on the inside of Olivia's thigh, caressing gently.

"May I?" she asked softly, looking up for permission.

Olivia nodded, and took Alex's right hand in her left.

Alex brought Olivia's hand to her mouth and kissed it, then kissed her mouth, and finally, began to touch Olivia.

"Wow," she whispered against Olivia's mouth, touching her fingers to the wetness that had accumulated. Olivia gripped her hand, and her legs automatically opened wider. "Is this all because of me?"

"Only for you, sweetie," Olivia replied, rolling her head back into the pillow. "That feels so good."

"I've hardly touched you," Alex murmured.

"I know," Olivia said.

Alex continued to touch and caress, spreading around her arousal, enjoying the soft noises Olivia was making, until she tentatively put a finger at Olivia's entrance, and hesitated.

Olivia thought she was going to die. "Inside, Lex, please," she whimpered, and Alex complied, moving down between Olivia's legs and slowly gliding her index finger inside her lover. Olivia gasped, and Alex pulled out slowly, pressing her finger up against the front wall. After a few pumps, she began brushing her thumb over Olivia's clit, and watched, amazed, as Olivia came undone.

She slowly pulled out her finger and kissed the inside of Olivia's thigh, then her hip, before Olivia grabbed her other hand and brought Alex back to lie on top of her. Alex smiled, and buried her face in Olivia's neck, wrapping her arms around her back to cuddle her.

"Feeling pretty smug, are we?" Olivia asked, peeking out from under her mostly closed eyelids.

"Shouldn't I?" Alex retorted, pecking Olivia's cheek.

"Definitely," Olivia said. "That was amazing. Just give me a minute."

Olivia rubbed Alex's back, and kissed her deeply, before rolling them over and kissing down her body. She started at Alex's neck, and continued down her collarbone to her breasts, then down the center of her stomach. Gently, she began to separate Alex's legs, and felt her stiffen, but she stopped, looked to Alex's face to see if she wanted to stop, and started to kiss her again. As Alex relaxed into the kissing, Olivia slid her hand down between her legs, staying attuned to Alex's reaction.

Alex was a little damp, but not nearly as wet as Olivia had been. Olivia gathered some moisture on her fingers, and Alex stiffened again, looking away.

Olivia stopped and brought her hand up to brush Alex's cheek gently. "Are you alright?" she murmured.

Alex opened her mouth, but didn't say anything, blushing.

"Lex, it's okay," she whispered.

"Liv, don't stop. I'm fine," Alex said.

"I don't want to hurt you," Olivia said, kissing Alex's cheek. "And I want you to be better than 'fine'
when we do this. Can I try something?"

Alex nodded, and Olivia held her hand while she gently lifted one of Alex's legs to bend it at the knee and positioned herself between Alex's legs, gliding over Alex and lubricating her before she pressed their clits together. Alex gasped, and gripped Olivia's hand.

"Is that okay?" she whispered, and Alex nodded again. Olivia leaned over to kiss her as she continued to rock against Alex, slowly, until she felt Alex push back up against her and let out a breath.

Alex looked away, but Olivia kissed her brow and began whispering in her ear as she glided her fingertips over her breasts and collarbone. "Look at me, sweetheart. You're beautiful. This is beautiful, you and me."

A moment later, Olivia felt Alex's body stiffen slightly, but this time, Alex's eyes widened in surprise and she let out a soft, 'oh!', tightening her grip on Olivia's hand, as Olivia felt another peak. After, Olivia laid down gently next to Alex, just in time to gather her into her arms as the look of happy surprise gave way to tears.
Chapter 48

Olivia lowered herself gently onto Alex and rolled them onto their sides, facing each other, and brushed Alex's temple with her thumb, hoping to prevent her from going into hiding in Olivia's shoulder.

"Hey," she whispered gently, closing her arms around Alex and kissing her forehead. She waited for Alex to make eye contact, and held her gaze for a moment. "Did you just..."

"Yeah," Alex replied, blushing. She tried to turn away, but Olivia stopped her.

"Stay with me, sweetie," Olivia whispered, and she wiped the tears that had begun to form in Alex's eyes, then brushed her fingers through her hair. "That was beautiful. Don't hide on me now." They held each other for a few long minutes, not speaking, and Olivia finally let Alex retreat a minute and bury her head in Olivia's neck.

"How do you feel?" Olivia asked gently, running her fingers up and down Alex's spine. "Okay, I hope?" She didn't think Alex was crying, but was almost afraid of the answer.

"Better than okay," Alex murmured, barely audible. "I... Thank you, Liv."

Olivia was confused. "What for?" She asked.

"For making me feel how it's supposed to feel. For making me feel loved. For being patient when I can't... For caring how I feel." She shrugged. "Take your pick."

Olivia kissed the top of Alex's head and paused a minute, thinking. "I don't think I deserve extra credit for treating you how you should be treated. I love you," she began. "I'm so sorry nobody's been good to you before. But I'm the one who should be thanking you."

Alex lifted her head to look at Olivia, confused. "What for?"

"For trusting me. For allowing me to love you. And for giving me the gift of being the first person to please you."

"Liv, I'm sorry you're not the first person to... um, pleasure me." Alex whispered, and tears threatened to spill from her eyes.

Olivia wiped away a tear on Alex's cheek with her thumb. "The other time wasn't pleasurable for you," Olivia say quietly.

"No," Alex replied.

"Then this is the first time you've willingly placed trust in a partner and allowed that person - me - to give you an orgasm," Olivia explained. "That's no small thing, Lex, especially after all you've been through. And I don't just mean Robert, I mean all the times you've been hurt and let down by people who were supposed to love you."

Alex rolled onto her back and pulled the covers up over her chest, looking at the ceiling instead of Olivia, and nodded. "You're easy to trust," Alex said. "I just wish it had been you before."

"Me too," Olivia said.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to forget," Alex said.
"I doubt you are, sweetie," Olivia replied. "So sometimes this - making love- will be hard, and we won't be able to. And that's okay. What we have to hope is that over time, we have fewer hard days and more easy days, when making love is fun, or a source of comfort." Olivia kissed Alex's head again, and took her hand.

"I've been doing a lot of work in therapy on trying to my hangups about sex. Caroline... Thinks my relationship with Alan was abusive."

"I'm inclined to agree with her," Olivia replied. "People in healthy relationships don't pressure their partners for sex or enjoy things that make them uncomfortable."

"I'm starting to remember a lot of things from that relationship that weren't okay. It was before SVU and I just... Didn't know any better. She thinks that my relationship 'normal meter' was broken I was trying to cope with all of my emotions about being back by... faking a normal life and falling into an old pattern."

"That makes sense," Olivia murmured. "And she's going to help you break the pattern and get used to a 'normal' relationship?" Olivia asked.

Alex nodded. "She's given me a bunch of exercises to help me figure out my emotions and heal them. I guess they've been working, because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to..."

Olivia smiled gently and ran her fingers through Alex's hair again. "That's fantastic, sweetie," she said softly. "I'm so glad she's helping you. And for the record, I think you're so strong to be able to do all of this hard work. I really admire how self-aware and committed to healing you are. I trust you to work with Caroline on this, but I want you to know that whatever your timeline is, it's okay. And if you go backwards, it's okay. Just talk to me."

"Thank you for being my rock and for getting me through everything."

Olivia shook her head. "Oh, I'm not your rock, sweetie. YOU are your rock. And I'm not here to get you through anything - YOU are getting yourself through this, because you're strong. I'm just there to shine some light back on the rock when it gets dark or cold. So that makes me what? A mirror. No. A puddle, maybe, or snow on the side of the mountain to reflect the sun? Or maybe I'm the tree root sticking out from the ground that keeps the rock from rolling down the mountain and off a cliff into the abyss."

They both laughed.

"My mother may have been an English professor, but I obviously didn't get her poetic genes." Olivia smiled.

Alex snuggled into Olivia again, and yawned. "Thanks for being my tree root, then. I love you."

"I love you too."

Alex awoke early the next morning after a restful sleep in Olivia's arms, but felt self-conscious nonetheless. She carefully slipped out of bed and put on underwear and pajamas, covering herself in long pants and sleeves in spite of the heat, then made a pot of coffee and curled up in an armchair in the bedroom, watching Olivia sleep.

She grabbed her phone, saw that no new emails had come in overnight, and composed a text to Liz.

Liz, I apologize for prying into your personal life yesterday. I realize it's none of my business, but I do want you to be happy. I won't bring it up again. Love, Alex.
Her finger hovered over the send button while she tried to figure out exactly how upset Liz was about her 'meddling,' which hadn't really been meddling at all.

She'd stopped by just before leaving for her therapy appointment, as Liz had asked her to check in at the end of her first day back in SVU, and declined the drink Liz offered her from the bottle of bourbon hidden behind the law books. Liz had meant to offer a toast, but Alex preferred only to drink in the office after a tough case.

"I see you've been having some fun in here, then," Alex had teased, winking, a nod to both the half-empty bottle and the bouquet of flowers on Liz's desk, which she inferred were from Lena.

Liz raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Alex pursed her lips in a half-smile. "Well, since our last conversation here, you've got flowers on your desk, temporarily had an inside-out shirt, and according to Trevor, a certain judge has been in an uncharacteristically good mood. So you tell me."

A true attorney, Liz didn't appear to react, but Alex thought she turned 3 shades lighter under her makeup.

"Are congratulations premature?"

Liz glared. "Your interest in my personal life has been noted and overruled. Do you need anything else for next week? If not, I'll see you on Monday."

"Liz, nobody knows, if that's what you're —"

"Have a good weekend, Alex. Give my best to Olivia."

Alex opened her mouth again as she got up and reached for the door, but thought better of it, and left, almost feeling like she was being scolded.

She had finished her cup of coffee when her phone buzzed with a reply. No, I'm the one who should be apologizing to you for overreacting yesterday. Can we talk later? Coffee at Zabar's?

Alex looked over at Olivia, who still hadn't stirred. Sure. I'll let you know what time after Olivia wakes up.

Seeing that Olivia still wasn't awake, Alex put her coffee mug in the sink and went into the bathroom to shower. She began to take off her clothes slowly, and caught a glimpse of her body in the full length mirror. Her mind flashed to the previous night, recalling the places that Olivia had touched her, kissed her, made her feel good, and then, just as quickly, she felt her cheeks and her ears turn warm with shame, and she turned away, touching her shoulder and looking down at the rest of her imperfections.

The last time she'd studied herself naked in the mirror, she had seen bruises and bleeding and pain. She'd been looking at a victim. And now? She wasn't sure. The scars were still there. Olivia's kisses hadn't made them go away, although the vitamin E oil was fading them. Honestly, if it hadn't been for the fact that Wisconsin had been so much worse than this… she shook her head and looked up, into her own blue eyes, clouded by tears, and studied her face.

I know you're feeling vulnerable and exposed right now, she said to her reflection, starting to tap on the outside of her right palm with the fingers on her left hand, but that's okay. This is exactly what these therapy exercises are for. Even though I'm feeling raw, and I'm having mixed emotions about making love to Olivia, I deeply and completely love and accept myself. Even though I'm
uncomfortable in my body, I deeply and completely love and honor myself. Even though I sometimes have trouble experiencing sexual pleasure, I deeply and completely love, honor, and accept myself.

She watched herself in the mirror as she tapped through her affirmations, on her eyebrow, muttering under her breath. She would’ve thought she looked crazy, and she probably did. But it was effective at reducing her anxiety and negative feelings. She’d been doing it every day, at least twice, since Caroline had introduced the technique to her (‘It's just one tool for your toolbox, Alex. Try it out for a few days, even if you’re skeptical, and see how it feels. Some of my patients swear by it,’ to which Alex had replied, ‘Can't we just do more EMDR? I've read that's the most proven technique with victims of trauma.’) and she’d immediately felt its effect.

When she finished, she took a deep breath, then touched her left hand to the scar on her shoulder and thought of that night, with the black SVU and the gunshot. I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. She repeated, then moved to thinking about the self-destructive Wisconsin Alex, then Jack Hammond. The hardest was holding Robert in her mind while she repeated the forgiveness mantra, and it wasn't long before she was crying and stopped.

She liked doing her exercises right before getting into the shower, because the hot water soothed her and washed it all away. Hopefully Olivia wouldn't mind waiting for her own hot shower.

After she had stopped crying and the water began to cool down, she turned off the tap and grabbed a towel to wrap up her hair, then another for her body, and began her morning routine of applying face cream and makeup. When she walked back into the bedroom, still in a towel, Olivia was sitting on the edge of the bed, still naked, hands on the edge of the mattress, staring off into space.

"Good morning," Alex said, blushing at the sight of Olivia's body. Olivia looked up at her, and Alex appreciated the genuine smile that appeared as she held out her arms.

Alex went and stood in front of Olivia, allowing her to wrap her in a hug, until Olivia put one hand on Alex's back and gently pulled her down onto her lap, straddling her, and Alex kissed her.

"Good morning to you, sweetie," Olivia said softly as Alex ran her fingers through her hair. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Good," Alex whispered. "What about you? How are you feeling?"

"No regrets about last night?" Olivia deflected.

Alex shook her head. "None."

"Good," Olivia said, kissing her again.

"But, um, Liv, I don't think this morning…” Alex began, and Olivia pulled back. "I'm not ready to do it again just yet."

Olivia nodded. "I'm just kissing you good morning, sweetie. I understand. Besides, to be honest, my sex drive isn't quite back up to full speed yet either."

They looked into each other's eyes for a moment, and Alex put her hands on either side of Olivia's face. "You didn't tell me how you're feeling, Liv. And I don't just mean about us."

Olivia looked away and sighed. "I'm okay. I just… I'm not ready to talk about it. I still don't know what the whole story is."

"Okay," Alex said, kissing her one last time before getting up. "I'm going to get dressed. I might go
get coffee with Liz in a bit if you don't mind. Do you want to take a walk or something this afternoon?"

"That sounds good. I'll probably try to talk to Elliot while you're gone. See if I can get the story from him. I'm going to go hop in the shower."

"Uh, you might want to wait a bit if you want hot water. There's coffee, though."

Olivia laughed as she got up and pulled on a robe. "Gee, Alex, sometimes I can't wait until you're back in your own apartment with your tankless water heater so I can have hot showers again."

Alex flung her wet towel at Olivia. "Say what you want, Detective. You'd miss me too much."

"Well, I miss hot showers an awful lot right now."

Alex finished pulling on her top and turned to kiss Olivia. "Well, as soon as the work is done on my apartment you can come over and take as many hot showers as you want for as long as you want."

"Deal."
Chapter 49

Liz was already sitting at a table in the window at Zabar's when Alex walked up to the 73rd street café at 1:30, her own Cobb salad in front of her, and a minestrone soup and side of Norwegian salad for Alex.

"How did you know I wasn't going to get something different this time?" Alex said, kissing Liz on the cheek before she sat down and cracked open the Coke Zero at her place. "Maybe I wanted the French onion soup this time."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Honey, you've been getting the same thing for the last ten years. If you really want something else, go get it," and motioned to the counter.

Alex shook her head. "No, this is fine," she conceded. "Liz, I'm sorry. I didn't realise that I was overstepping with my comment. I'll leave your personal life alone. But for the record, if you've found someone, I'm happy for you, regardless of who it is."

Liz smiled. "Well, good, because she's already put you in jail once, and I won't hesitate to let her do it again."

Alex's head snapped up and Liz laughed.

"C'mon, Alex, don't tell me you didn't guess who it was. I know you're smarter than that," Liz said quietly. "But before I say any more, whatever we discuss today stays between us. I'm not ready for the courthouse rumour mill yet."

Alex nodded. "Of course. Congratulations, Liz," she said, smiling and reaching over to touch her hand. "Was this your 'missed chance for happiness' you talked about?"

Liz nodded, and leaned in. "We, um, Lena was my mentor when I started working at the DA's office, back when there were only 4 women and they asked my second husband's permission to put me on homicide. We became friends."

"I remember you telling me about that. And I was what, 8 or 9 at the time?"

"You were 8. When your parents went on that vacation to Italy, they left you and your brother with me on Martha's Vineyard. I had just gotten divorced from Carl, and Lena came down for a long weekend. After you went to bed one night, she kissed me. And she ended up staying the whole week."

Alex nodded. "I remember we had a lot of fun that week. You were so happy."

Liz smiled wistfully. "It was a lot of fun. And then we went back to work."

"What happened?" Alex asked.

"We were busier, for one thing," Liz replied. "But, I also wasn't really ready to deal with all of the implications of our relationship. I don't identify as gay, for one. It was different back then. It probably would have ended my career."

Alex nodded. "Olivia and I have talked about what our relationship might mean for our careers. She doesn't think it'll be a problem on her squad, and she doesn't care about advancing anymore than she already has. She's got a clean jacket, so they can't really do anything to her."
And what about you?

Alex shrugged. "I'm happy where I am, it's certainly a possibility that it might come up with certain cases, but only someone like Buchanan would dare bring it up. There are other gay attorneys, even in the DA's office."

"There weren't any 25 years ago. A couple of bachelors. A couple that some suspected… but it was right after the AIDS epidemic, and nobody wanted to go there. I very well could have been fired if I had come out. And I wasn't ready."

"But Petrov— Lena was?"

"She just had this devil-may-care attitude, like you've always had. She just gave zero fucks about what anyone thought. And when I wasn't as… enthusiastic as she was about coming out, at least to our families, and embracing lesbian subculture, it started taking its toll on our relationship."

"You can't blame yourself for not being ready, Liz." Alex said. "Olivia and I talked about that, too - what if we had realised how we felt years ago - and I just wouldn't have been ready then. I was still trying to find someone my mom would have liked as much as she liked Alan."

"I never did understand why she liked him so much. I didn't like how he treated you at all," Liz said. "I was so glad when you finally broke up with him."

"Yeah, I don't know what she saw in him either. Or what I saw in him. He was not… very sensitive."

"Honey, when you lost your virginity that summer in college at the Vineyard and he bragged about it, rather crudely I might add, to the rest of your friends? That was the epitome of insensitive. You deserved better than that."

"You knew about that?!" Alex cringed and felt her ears turn red.

"I overheard him talking to Trevor on the porch," Liz said. "Who, by the way, shut him down. Gold star for Trevor."

"Trevor was probably jealous," Alex commented. "We went on a couple of dates in law school after I broke up with Alan, but we never did anything."

"Honey, I meant it when I said that I think you've finally found someone good enough for you. I've known Olivia Benson longer than you have, since she first became a detective, and she's one of the kindest, most genuine people I've met. A rare bird in our line of work." Liz smiled. "So don't break her heart, or I'll kick your ass."

Tears had begun to form in Alex's eyes. "I just wish I had more to give to her. She's been so patient, and… I wish Alan and Robert had never happened." She wiped tears away with the back of her hand, then shook her finger at Liz. "And how did we end up changing the subject to me?"

"I take it you made up?" Alex asked finally, taking a deep breath.

Liz nodded. "When I… When you came back from witness protection, I just had this feeling that I shouldn't waste any more time, but I was still nervous. And so much time has gone by… I knew she wasn't in a relationship, because courthouse gossip. But I didn't muster up the courage to talk to her until I saw how you handled everything with Olivia. You made it seem so simple, and I realised that"
I've been making it too complicated for far too long. So, thank you."

Now it was Alex's turn to squeeze Liz's hand. "What's more simple than love?" she asked, then shook her head. "I felt so stupid for not realising before. Not just... not just how I feel about Olivia. But that I didn't realise I was into women. And when I finally did realise, it just seemed so inconsequential compared to everything else."

Liz pursed her lips and tilted her head.

"Well, we're not going to be having any coming out party anytime soon, but I just... we wanted to try to make it work. I'm just lucky she seems to have forgiven me."

Alex chuckled. "I just never took Lena for the forgiving type. She held a grudge against me for a really long time. So she must really like something you're doing."

Liz blushed. "And, I think we're done with this conversation," she said, taking the last sip of her coffee.

Alex smiled and shook her head.

"How have you been doing, Alex, really?" Liz asked, setting down her mug.

Alex nodded slowly. "Good. I mean, things aren't perfect, and I've still got a lot of work to do, but things are good."

"I'm glad, honey. You've always been so stubborn and independent, but so strong. I'm just glad you've got someone supporting you. And you know I'm always here for you, too."

"I know."

**********

Alex and Olivia both groaned and reached over to the nightstand for their phones. 5:00 AM.

"It's mine," Alex said, sliding her finger to answer. "I'm supposed to be off this week, too. Cabot," she answered. Olivia leaned over to kiss her cheek and got up to put a pot of coffee on. She wasn't getting back to sleep any time soon, even if she didn't have to go in.

When Alex came out of the bedroom, she looked stricken, and Olivia set her coffee mug down on the counter and put her arms around Alex's waist.

"That was Branch. I have to go in," she said, taking a swig out of the mug. "Press conference at 9."

"I'll pick up Sarah from the airport," Olivia offered. "Elliot and I just have some paperwork to do. What happened?"

"There was a riot at Riker's last night. It started out as an attack on Cheryl Avery. She apparently learned how to defend herself, because 2 inmates have been transferred to Bellevue for life-threatening injuries. The reason they woke up Branch is that this is the second time she's been attacked, and the guards apparently got lax with her protection. It's a civil rights issue. And with all the bad press North Carolina is getting for being transphobic, he doesn't want to have problems in a reelection year."

"He's putting you in charge so he doesn't have to stick his neck out to his conservative base?" Olivia asked.
"Basically, yes. He said something about how I've already stuck up for Cheryl when I prosecuted her, and we can show 'compassionate conservatism' by being tough on crime but having respect for human rights, blah blah blah. He tacitly supports it by not shutting down the case, but doesn't have to do the dirty work of championing LGBT issues himself."

"So he's having the baby dyke give a press conference about how much the DA's office cares about trans rights?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't think it has to do with my sexuality, Liv. It has to do with the fact that I prosecuted Cheryl and now I'm going to prosecute whoever did this to her. Again. And besides, I'm not really out at work to anyone besides Liz, Arthur, and Casey. I don't think it's going to come up. And seriously, Liv? 'Baby dyke'?

"I hope you're right, Lex, but I think you have to be ready for it to be in the papers."

"I would hope that they'll focus on the actual news story and not on my personal life," Alex said.

"So should I be expecting a call to come in? I'm surprised I haven't heard from Cragen."

Alex shook her head. "They're having Munch and Fin run point since you and Elliot did the original investigation into Cheryl's murder case. Homicide is assisting because they're treating it as an attempted murder. And who knows, it could turn into an actual murder trial if someone doesn't recover."

Olivia nodded. "Okay, sweetie. I'll get Sarah and bring her back here. I can always do something with her this afternoon if you have to stay at work."

"I told Branch I was still off. While the investigation is happening we've got a Homicide ADA plus Casey to get warrants, and they're going to send me stuff by email as it comes in. Witness statements from the other inmates, injury reports from the hospital. From what Branch said, Cheryl's not going to be in any shape to talk to me for a while."

*********

Olivia waited with her hands in her pockets at JFK, scanning the crowd for Sarah. In the distance, she saw the young girl scanning the crowd expectantly, and waved. "Sarah!" she called. Sarah turned, looked for Alex, and approached Olivia, rolling her suitcase behind her.

"Hi sweetie," Olivia said. "It's good to see you. How was your flight?"

"Okay," Sarah said. "Where's Alex?"

"She had a work emergency. She'll be home around lunchtime, though," Olivia reassured her, noticing Sarah's face fall. "Don't worry. She's still planning on being around as much as possible while you're here. I just offered to come pick you up and take you back to her apartment."

Olivia rolled her suitcase to the squad car, where Elliot was waiting, and he got out of the car to open the trunk and put in Sarah's suitcase.

"Sarah, this is my partner, Detective Elliot Stabler. El, this is Sarah Williams, Alex's former student from Oregon who is here to visit colleges."

Elliot shook her hand and opened the door for her to get in the back seat. "Nice to meet you, Sarah. My daughter Kathleen is applying to college this year, too, but I don't think she's decided where to apply yet."
"If she wants to go to any colleges in New York, maybe she can visit with Sarah and Alex this week. I think they're going to Columbia, Barnard, and NYU, then Vasser and Sarah Lawrence, and maybe a couple days up to Boston to see Harvard and Simmons."

"I'll ask her," Elliot said, getting in the car. He pressed a button on the radio and turned up the volume as Alex's voice came on.

"… investigating treatment of prisoners and ensuring the New York Department of Corrections is held to the highest standards in regards to protecting the human rights of all inmates and ensuring that physical and sexual violence are eliminated. All prisoners, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, are entitled to personal safety while in state custody." Alex took a breath and let go of the podium on the DA's office steps, tapping on her hand behind the podium as she indicated that she was ready for questions.

"Ms. Cabot," a reporter spoke up, pushing a microphone towards her. "You originally prosecuted Cheryl 'Charles' Avery in 2002, and he - she - was sentenced to life in prison for second degree murder. Were you swayed by Morty Berger's defence that she was acting in self defence due to previous violence?"

Alex swallowed. "Cheryl Avery was convicted by a jury of her peers, and Ms. Avery herself admitted on the witness stand that she acted out of the fear that Joe Capilla would have exposed the fact that she had not yet had gender reassignment surgery, rather than out of self-defense. While during my tenure in the DA’s office, I have sought to act with compassion - and Cheryl Avery was also a victim in many ways - it is ultimately my responsibility to uphold the law and to seek justice for those who cannot speak for themselves, in that case, Joe Capilla. Ms. Avery's circumstances then did not excuse murder, nor do they now excuse her victimisation at the hands of fellow prisoners. She deserves justice for crimes committed against her as much as anyone else, and we also have a responsibility to send a message to ensure that gay, lesbian, transgender, and other vulnerable prisoners are not targeted in correctional facilities. Thank you."

"Ms. Cabot, does your current concern with protecting LGBT individuals have anything to do with the fact that you're currently in a relationship with another woman, a detective at SVU?"

Before she could answer, she heard a second question follow. "Ms. Cabot, how will your role in the investigation be affected if the reports confirm that your ex-fiancé, Robert Sheldon, who was convicted of raping you, was involved in the attack on Cheryl Avery?"
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

Only one more chapter after this one, and then we jump to Redemption which begins 3 years later.

You ladies have given me a lot of food for thought in the comments though, and I might want to add some scenes from the intervening 3 years at some point.

Alex pressed on her temples sitting in the back seat of the unmarked police car driving her home, trying to ward off a migraine before she arrived. She took a big sip of the water bottle in her purse, thanking the officer who walked her to the door and made sure she'd gotten into the elevator before he left. Couldn't be too careful with these high profile cases. Especially the ones that came back to bite you in the ass seven years later.

She turned her key in the lock to her apartment - which she had finally been able to furnish - and slipped off her heels, hearing talking in the kitchen. Sarah was here. She put her hand on her chest and took a steadying breath, trying to let go of the morning’s emotions that she didn't need to share with a teenager.

Olivia smiled at her warmly, knowingly, when she reached the kitchen, and Alex immediately felt some of the stress from the press conference dissipate. Olivia would understand.

Sarah straightened up on her barstool when Alex entered the kitchen. "Hi, Alex," she said, smiling before she looked down at her coffee.

Alex sighed. "Hi sweetheart. It's good to see you. How was your flight?"

Sarah nodded. "It was fine. Uneventful. I, um, I like your apartment."

Alex blushed. "Thanks, honey. I'm glad you were able to come visit." She glanced at Olivia. "Did you tell her what's going on?"

Olivia nodded. "We listened to the press conference in the car on the ride back from the airport. How are you doing?"

Alex let out a long breath. "Well, I think for starters I'm going to go take a shower. Wash the blood off from being thrown to the wolves," she smirked. "Then, I think Munch is running point with the DOC and I'm not to be involved until facts are confirmed." She looked at Sarah. "Did you manage to rest on the plane at all? Do you want to have a nap before we do anything?"

Sarah shook her head. "I want to get out to see the city. I can just lie down for a bit while you get ready. Take your time, though."

"I already got her set up in the guest room, and got her towels and everything," Olivia said.

"I'm sorry we're getting off to a rough start. Believe me, this is not how I wanted to start my week off," Alex said.
"Don't worry about it, Alex. I'm just glad to be out of Oregon. Olivia got me the wifi password, so I'll check in on Facebook. Everyone from school is super jealous, by the way, that I got to come out here to visit."

Alex chuckled. "Being friends with me has made you cool? That's unexpected."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far. I'm still not 'cool.' But, yeah, basically."

"Okay. I'm going to go hop in the shower, and then we'll have to talk about our dinner plans. I was going to make reservations for a place in the Village, but I'm not sure I should show my face down there today."

Sarah settled onto the couch with her phone, and Olivia followed Alex into the bedroom and shut the door.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" Olivia asked gently after they were in private. "Are you okay?"

Alex began to shake a little, and Olivia took her into her arms.

"You did really well this morning," she said, rubbing Alex's back.

**After a brief step back when she felt like the wind had been knocked out of her, Alex had of course replied beautifully to the reporters' questions. I am representing the City of New York in this matter because of my role as Bureau Chief of SVU and my experience prosecuting Cheryl Avery in 2003. My personal life has no bearing on the investigation. As far as allegations of which prisoners participated in the attack on Ms. Avery, the facts are unknown at the present time. If and when it is determined that Mr. Sheldon was involved in the attack, I will recuse myself from prosecuting any case involving him. At this time, a recusal is premature, and I will not comment on an investigation which is barely several hours old.**

Knowing that Sarah was waiting for her at home, she had held it together - even if by only a thread.

"How about a massage, to help you relax?" Olivia asked, and Alex nodded. Olivia undressed her slowly, until she was in a bra and panties, and ran her hands up and down Alex's arms with a featherlight touch. She laid Alex down and spooned a glob of coconut oil from the nightstand onto her back, to rub it in.

"It'll be okay," she whispered. "Even if it's true, it'll be okay."

Olivia stayed in the bedroom, reading, while Alex did her exercises again in the bathroom and took a shower, put on jeans and a tee-shirt, and climbed back on the bed to lean on Olivia, taking her hand.

"Thanks, Liv," she said softly, leaning over to kiss her cheek.

Olivia turned and kissed her back, gently, on the mouth. "You're welcome," she said. "I love you. Are you up for this visit? I can take her out if you need time alone. And you should call Dr. March."

"I think I'm okay. Munch is going to call me once he knows more."

"There's some mail on the counter from this morning. One thing looks like a card, and there's a note on it from the downstairs neighbour saying it got stuck in her mail pile for a few weeks."

"I'll take a look," Alex said. "Why don't we have some lunch and figure out where to have dinner, and then we can go to the park and Times Square to get the touristy things out of the way."
Olivia nodded. "Sounds good."

Alex took the towel off her head and ran a comb through her hair, while Olivia went out to the kitchen to put together a salad and pull out some hummus and pita bread.

"Hey," Alex said to Sarah, walking back into the living room and picking the mail up off the table. "We thought we'd have lunch and then go walk around for a bit. Does that sound good?"

"Sure," Sarah said.

Alex picked the pink envelope out of the pile, and bit her lip. Her father's handwriting. Postmarked 2 days before her birthday. And on the back, a post-it note from the neighbour, apologising for not finding it sooner.

She hesitated, and opened it, pulling out a card covered in flowers. *Happy Birthday to my daughter.* A tear sprung to her eyes as she opened the card and read the note.

*My dearest Alexandra, it began, in her father's sprawling handwriting. The second best day of my life was the day I held you in my arms for the first time, and by far the worst day was the day I believed you had died. The day I learned you were, in fact, alive, was the best day.*

*I know I have made many mistakes as a father, but the worst mistake I have ever made was to make you doubt my unconditional support and love. I am sorry for my underreaction to Robert's attack, and I am sorry for my lack of enthusiasm when you 'came out' to me about Olivia.*

*You deserve the best, and you deserve every happiness, and Olivia is a wonderful woman. I want to assure you that I will always be extremely proud of the woman you have become, and I fully support you in whatever endeavours bring you love and fulfilment. I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me for my shortcomings. I would love to get to know Olivia and welcome her into our family when you are ready.*

*I am blessed to have you as a daughter.*

*Love always,*

*Dad*

The second piece of mail was a thick manilla envelope from a law firm in Oregon.

"Sarah," she said, opening the envelope and pulling out a big stack of papers. "This is it." She handed the letter to Sarah and sat down beside her, and as she began reading over her shoulder, Sarah began to cry.

*Dear Ms. Cabot,*

*As representatives of Portland Preparatory School, we are pleased to inform you that the school board has accepted your proposed settlement in the matters of Sarah Williams vs. Portland Preparatory School and Sarah Williams, Isabel Ritter, Carolyn Green, et. al. vs. Portland Preparatory School.*

*The terms you proposed are as follows:*  

*To all female complainants: the ability to retake final exams for credit to improve their final grades following the date of victimisation, and the sum of $7,200,000*
- To all students of PPS: introduction of a consent and sexual assault curriculum as part of the 9th grade health program and the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade physical education program

- To Sarah Williams: the sum of $3,750,000.

Upon acceptance of these terms, all students must agree that they have no further claims against Portland Preparatory School, and that they will not disparage the school, its faculty, staff, or policies in the media...

The rest of the words blurred together. "We won?" Sarah said, reading the letter again. "The school is settling?"

Alex nodded and put an arm around Sarah to squeeze her shoulder. "Yes, they're settling. You won't be able to talk about the school or the settlement, but if you agree, we don't have to go to court."

"And they're paying us money? Like, real money?"

Alex nodded.

"So, I'm going to be a millionaire."

"More than a millionaire," Alex said. "If we accept this offer, you'll get over $4 million."

"That'll pay for college."

"It'll pay for any college you want, sweetheart. You deserve it."

"I wish I didn't."

"I know, Sarah. I know."
Olivia squeezed Alex's hand and kissed her forehead as they stopped in front of Melinda Warner's office. "Take as much time as you need, sweetie. I'll just be doing paperwork at my desk. Let me know if you need me."

Alex nodded and took a breath, barely hearing Olivia over the pounding in her chest. She needed to do this alone. She needed to see for herself that he was dead.

She gave a few quick taps on her collarbone (Even though I'm afraid and upset about seeing the dead body of my rapist, I love and accept myself.) and knocked on Melinda's door.

"Come in," she called from inside, and Alex opened the door, as she had done many times before, for cases. She didn't know Melinda well, but this was a pretty big favour that Fin had called in.

"Melinda, hello," she said awkwardly, trying to remain professional. "It's good to see you. How are you?" Friendly small talk. Good. Keep it light. "Thank you for letting me come down."

"Alex," Melinda said warmly, gesturing to the chair across from her desk. "I'm fine, thank you. And I'm glad I can do this for you. Just don't mention it to anyone." She smiled kindly at Alex.

"Of course," Alex said, nodding. She opened her mouth, looking for something sufficiently friendly to say, but came up blank.

Melinda got up from her chair and picked up a file off the cabinet in the corner, and brought it back to her desk. "Do you want to know?" she asked, opening the file.

"Know what?" Alex replied. "Is there something to know? I always want to know everything."

Melinda smiled. "I mean, do you want to know what showed up in the autopsy, or do you just want to see the body?"

She reviewed the notes on the body outline. Multiple fractures and bruises. HIV negative, but HIV+ semen had been found inside him, along with tearing and bleeding and evidence of abuse, probably since he'd started prison. Genpop didn't take kindly to those convicted of sexual crimes, and the pretty rich boy was no exception. Even the ones who'd initially been impressed by the guy who bragged about having his way with the bitch who'd put them in prison eventually wanted him to be brought down a notch or two. In Melinda's opinion, he'd deserved what he'd gotten. Especially after she'd concluded her report and learned that he'd been one of Cheryl Avery's attackers, looking to reassert his dominance after being the whipping boy of a couple of gang bangers from the Bronx.

She looked up over her folder at Alex's furrowed brow and bitten bottom lip. She recognised the look of concentration from court, from times when she was being cross examined by a defence attorney and Alex was looking for a way to bring her testimony back around.

"Alex?" she asked gently, not sure whether the woman was still traumatised, or whether the details in the report would make a difference.

Alex's eyes snapped open and she looked directly at Melinda.
"Do you want to know?"

Alex shook her head, firmly. "No, I don't think I do, actually," she said, at barely a whisper. "I think I know everything I need to know."

Melinda nodded and closed the file, placing it behind her in her outbox. "Okay, then. You tell me when you're ready." She handed Alex a mask and a tub of Vicks Vaporub to put on her upper lip. The morgue was cold, but the smell was still… dead.

Alex left her purse on the chair and stood up, glad the face mask went almost to her eyes. She could feel herself shaking as Melinda opened the door. She stopped at the foot of the table, and Melinda slowly lowered the sheet, then moved back to join Alex.

"Do you want privacy for a minute?" she asked, watching the normally unflappable, stoic woman next to her shake with anxiety.

"Yes, please," Alex managed to choke out, surprised that she was able to get her voice to work. Her fear was deafening, and it took all of her power not to succumb to memories of abuse when she looked over at the face on the body.

He's dead. She reminded herself. He can't do anything to you anymore.

"I'll just be in my office. Let me know when you're done. And I know I don't have to tell you this, but… there are cameras."

Alex nodded. She had already reassured Melinda that she wouldn't do anything to jeopardise their jobs, before the ME had agreed to the unusual meeting.

Melinda closed her office door, and Alex slipped off her face mask, inching closer to the body. She almost regretted not telling Caroline she was going to do this, not leaving enough time for an appointment, telling Olivia to let her do this alone, convincing Olivia that her therapist would approve…

She started by tapping on the back of her hand. *Even though I'm terrified right now, I love and accept myself. Even though I'm glad you're dead. Even though I hate you. Even though I hate what you did to me. Even though I hate myself for putting up with your abuse. Even though I'm angry, and embarrassed, and ashamed, and think I'm worthless, I love and accept myself. Even though I'm glad you probably got raped in prison and learned what it felt like. Even though I said yes when you asked me to marry you.*

Alex tapped furiously, and with each cycle, inched closer and closer to the table, no longer afraid that he was going to pop up and taunt her. Still, when she reached the edge, she reached out and felt the coldness of his chest, just to be sure. He really was dead.

She swallowed as she finished her tapping exercise, and swallowed. The next part was harder. *Connect with the emotion, forgive it, and release it,* she heard Caroline echo in her mind. *Remember, forgiveness isn't for the other person. It doesn't excuse what they did. It just allows you to heal from the anger, little by little.*

She took another breath, and was suddenly grateful the morgue was gold, but wished she had brought her bottle of water. Feeling all of the feelings was starting to give her a headache.

This time, she looked at his face, and began. *I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you.* She repeated, over and over, as she recalled the subtle putdowns, the gas lighting, the unpleasant sex.
I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. She thought about the emotional neglect, the emptiness from Witsec, the comments about her body and her weight.

I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. And as she repeated more and more, she thought of things she *was* thankful for: getting back to SVU. Reconnecting with Olivia. Figuring out her sexuality. Falling in love.

I love you. I'm sorry. I forgive you. Thank you. Was she thanking him for abusing her? No. It was merely the last in a series of traumatic events that had put her exactly where she was supposed to be: with Olivia. She still wished the path had been different, and there would be a lot still to overcome in their relationship. She wasn't thankful for the abuse or the rape. But she did thank herself for recognising, in that moment, the one person she needed to call.


Alex was already asleep when Olivia got home, having taken a cab, an aspirin, and a bottle of water to stave off the oncoming headache and healing fatigue to come. And just like Alex wanted, Olivia climbed into bed next to her and pulled her into her arms without saying a word, just providing gentle support and love. There would be more anger, and forgiveness, and intimacy issues, and insecurity, but for right now, Alex was grateful that after all of this, she had ended up in Olivia's arms.

- FIN -

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end. Thank you so much to all of you for your feedback and comments, especially AfricanWilderness and Mez64.

If anyone's interested, the exercises I refer to are EFT tapping (Emotional Freedom Technique) which you can find on YouTube, and Ho'oponopono, a forgiveness exercise. They're both awesome for dealing with feelings/trauma/anger/stress, even as everyday-life kinds of exercises. I've been doing tapping for a while now and it's fantastic.

Please enjoy the sequel, Redemption, for which I've already posted the first chapter.
Part 2: Redemption

Chapter Summary

Part 2 of the Mistakes Series: 3 years later.
I realize that you might not know that I began posting the chapters to Redemption, the second part of the Mistakes series. This is the first chapter, and please continue to the series to subscribe again!

Summary: Alex and Olivia have almost given up hope on having the family they wanted, until a health crisis and a chance meeting change everything. Follows canon through season 9-ish. Set in early 2011, 3 years after the end of Mistakes. Some story lines are better explained if you've read my first story

Content warnings: There is no physical violence taking place in this story, but there are references to past violence against main characters, as well as references to rape and sexual abuse of a child. Warning for pregnancy loss and miscarriage.

Alex yawned as she reached over to turn off the alarm clock, groaning when she had to shift slightly out from under Olivia's body to get the snooze button.

"Morning, love," she said softly when Olivia opened her eyes. She turned and pressed a kiss to the sensitive part of Alex's neck as Alex brought her hands across Olivia's bare back.

"Good morning," Olivia replied, finally pushing herself off of Alex enough to kiss her on the lips. "I hope it's a good morning."

Alex smiled. "Me too. How can it not be a good morning after last night?"

"I think you're going to be the death of me, Lex," Olivia said, smiling. "I'm getting too old for this."

"Yeah, but what a way to go," Alex retorted, stroking Olivia's breast. "But Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's not get our hopes up just yet. I want to be optimistic, but…"

"I'm trying not to," Olivia said. "I think we need to be prepared if this doesn't work out the way we want it to."

Alex nodded. "No matter what happens in there today, I love you."

"I love you, too. I know I have everything I need right here. I just…"

Alex put a finger on her lips. "Me too, Liv. Me too."

They clung to each other as they kissed, and Olivia pulled away first. "I don't think I can do this again if it doesn't work out."

"Then we won't," Alex said simply, threading her fingers in Olivia's hair and pulling their foreheads
together. "We agreed that if it got to be too much for one of us, we'd stop."

"I feel like we're giving up," Olivia whispered, choking back a tear.

"Hey," Alex kissed her, wiping her cheek. "We're not giving up yet. Let's just see what happens today, okay?" Olivia nodded.

A thump against the bedroom door and a loud 'meow!' made both of them laugh.

"I guess we better go feed the petite bête," Alex said, pulling off the sheet and out from underneath Olivia. "She's mad she didn't get to cuddle last night."

"Well, if she hadn't come in and started biting me right when I was in the middle of something, she wouldn't have gotten kicked out. I wasn't about to let her back in after that."

"She just doesn't like it when we cuddle without her." Alex explained.

"I like it better when we cuddle without her."

"Don't let her hear you say that, or she'll never leave us alone."

"She's a cat, Lex. She can deal with the door being closed once in a while."

Alex slipped into her robe and handed Olivia hers before opening the door.

"I'll put on the coffee and then I'll join you?" Olivia asked.

"Sure," Alex said, smiling over her shoulder. "And then we'll go see about our baby."

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Olivia gripped Alex's hand as they walked home under the grey spring drizzle from the adoption agency on West 86th street later that morning.

"I should call Elliot to let him know I'm not coming in." Olivia said, pulling her phone out of her pocket.

"I already told them I might be 'working from home' today. I'll email once we get back." Alex replied. "Send him a text. He knows what we were doing today; he'll understand."

Olivia nodded and stopped walking so she could write the message.

"Hey," Alex said as they approached a park entrance. "How about we take a walk through the park, head down to Zabar's for lunch, and then walk back up?"

"Yeah, that sounds good," Olivia agreed. She slipped her phone back into her pocket, ignoring the buzzing from Elliot's reply, and took Alex's hand again.

They had barely walked a hundred yards through the park entrance when Olivia stopped and stared. A dozen toddlers, all wearing bright neon safety vests, were each holding on to a handle attached to a rope, held at each end by a teacher. The walking schoolbus turned in front of them, heading into the playground, and as soon as the gate was closed, the children ran to the slides, laughing and yelling.

"On second thought, maybe we should just go home," Olivia said quietly.
Alex put her hand on Olivia's back and turned her around towards the street. "If that's what you want, Liv," she agreed.

Once they got back inside the apartment, Alex wrapped her arms around Olivia without saying a word. When she felt Olivia relax a little, she hung up their coats and put her purse and her keys on the table by the door.

"Go sit down, Liv," she said, kissing Olivia gently on the cheek. "I'll make us some tea."

When she returned, she didn't find Olivia sitting on the couch in the living room as she expected, so she headed down the hall into the spare bedroom and found the door ajar. Alex put the tray with the teacups on the side table and slid into the recliner next to Olivia, who held a teddy bear on her lap. She slipped her arm behind Olivia's shoulders and pulled her in close, and took Olivia's hand and the arm of the teddy bear with her other hand.

"Liv," she whispered, leaning her head on Olivia's shoulder. "Talk to me? Please?"

Olivia's eyes filled up with tears as she looked around the room at the cherry crib and changing table and the Winnie-the-Pooh decorations on light turquoise walls.

"We'd make good parents, Lex," she choked out. "I don't know why we're not good enough."

"Me neither, Liv," Alex agreed, rubbing her thumb over bear fuzz and Olivia's fingers.

"It's not fair. All the abused and neglected kids we see every day, and somehow we're…"

"It's not fair."

"Did they even say why? I wasn't really paying attention."

Alex shook her head. "Does it matter? I wasn't really paying attention either, to be honest. Someone was cutting off the circulation in my hand."

"Sorry," Olivia said sheepishly. She picked up the two cups of tea and handed one to Alex, taking a sip of her own.

"I'm sorry too," Alex whispered. "I'm sorry I can't give you what you want."

"Hey, don't talk like that," Olivia soothed. "You've already given me so much more than I ever wanted or thought I'd get. To be honest, I'd already given up on having kids before we got together. I'll get used to the idea again."

They sat in silence for a while. The cat pushed open the door and stretched theatrically, before she jumped onto Olivia's lap and curled up with the teddy bear, purring. Olivia scratched behind her ears and she burrowed her head into her leg.

"I guess she's forgiven you for last night," Alex said, petting his back. "Or she knows that kitty cuddles make everything better."

Olivia smiled through her tears. "Artemis kitty cuddles and Alex cuddles. I've got everything I need right here." She pressed a kiss to Alex's forehead. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too," Alex replied. She opened her arms and held Olivia for a while as she cried, going over the interview in her mind. She had screwed it up. She was sure of it.

When Olivia's breathing slowed, Alex took both empty teacups and placed them back on the table,
and ran her fingers through Olivia's hair and down her back. "Liv?" she murmured. "What do you say about going up to the Vineyard for the weekend? Neither of us is on call, and if we leave soon, we'll be up there in time for dinner, and we can take a walk on the beach, curl up in front of the fire… I think it would be good for us to have some time away to decompress and… grieve."

Olivia nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

Alex got up and leaned over to kiss Olivia. "You can stay here a bit longer. I'll pack some things for you and call Sarah to take care of the cat while we're gone."

After a few more minutes, Olivia pushed the cat off her lap and got up, replacing the teddy bear in a corner of the crib and turning off the light as she took one last look around before closing the door.

She went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face, and then went to the kitchen, pausing at the bedroom door when she heard Alex on the phone.

"I screwed up, Liz. They were asking us about the dangers of Olivia's job and I pointed out that Olivia had never been shot but that I had. It was a stupid thing to say. They probably thought we're in too much mortal danger to adopt." Alex let out a heavy breath.

Olivia crept into the bedroom and put her arms around Alex from the back, then kissed her neck from behind. "It's not your fault, Lex." She waited for Alex to say goodbye to Liz, her chin resting on Alex's shoulder. "It's nobody's fault."

Alex tossed her phone on the bed and turned around in Olivia's arms. "I don't know what we're going to do, Liv."

"Get another cat?" Olivia joked, but it fell flat. "I guess we're just… not going to have kids."

"Maybe I could try one more time," Alex suggested.

Olivia shook her head vigorously. "No, sweetie. Remember how awful it was the last time? And the doctor said it was 'highly unlikely' that you'd ever be able to carry a pregnancy to term. I don't want to put you through that again for those odds. I need you, Lex."

"My eggs are fine," Alex pointed out. "It's just my uterus that's… defective."

"You're not defective, sweetie." Olivia kissed the top of Alex's head. "Do you have everything we need?"

"I do. We can stop along the way to get some groceries before we get on the ferry, and Sarah will be here any minute to get the key—" The buzzer rang, and Olivia went to the intercom to buzz her up. "— And I just need to grab my book and my briefcase on the way out. That way we have my laptop with Netflix, and case files in case we're dying to do work."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'm just going to stick a book in here, and maybe my sketchbook, too." She pulled a few items from the book shelf and stuck them in the duffle bag Alex had prepared.

"Hi sweetheart," Alex said as she opened the front door. "Come in and make yourself at home."

Sarah stepped into the apartment and gave Alex a hug. "Hi, Alex, hi Olivia," she said, putting her purse on the table.

"Good to see you again, Sarah. How's school going?" Olivia asked.
Sarah decided to ignore the fact that both women had puffy red eyes and looked like they had been crying. "It's good. I can't believe the semester's half over. I only have six weeks of classes left before exams."

"The DA's office is meeting to do the final round of hiring for summer interns next week," Alex said, grabbing a couple bottles of water from the fridge. "So you should hear something soon."

"Good to know. I'm keeping my fingers crossed," Sarah said.

"Anyway, thanks for doing this on such short notice. We decided we needed to get out of the city for a few days."

Sarah nodded. "Of course. It's not a problem at all."

Alex handed her a key ring with their spare key. "You're welcome to stay here overnight if you want. There's some leftover takeout in the fridge that won't be good when we get back, so help yourself if you want some. As usual, no booze, no wild parties… Do you want me to put some sheets on the couch for you? Or will you be okay in the spare bedroom if you stay?"

"The spare bedroom is fine, Alex. I might take you up on that. I think my roommate's boyfriend is coming this afternoon, so they might want some, uh, privacy."

"Okay. You know where the cat food is, where the takeout menus and the remotes for the TV and DVD player are, and you have both of our phone numbers in case you need anything. Do you need anything else?"

Sarah shook her head. "I'll be fine, Alex. Go have a good weekend. You both look like you could use it."

Alex smiled. "Thanks, Sarah. If you're around this summer, we'll bring you up with us some weekend if you want."

"And if you do decide to go back to campus and it's dark, or you're up there and you want to come back here, take a cab and we'll give you the money for it. Don't be taking the subway by yourself at night. Stay safe," Olivia added, hugging her.

"Yes, Mom," Sarah joked. She sobered quickly when she noticed the hurt look on Olivia's face and the tears that started building up in her eyes again.

"C'mon, Liv, let's get going so we can get on the 5:30 ferry," Alex said softly, taking Olivia's hand. "Have a good weekend, Sarah."

They grabbed the overnight bag and Alex's briefcase and headed downstairs.

"You okay, Liv?" Alex asked softly once they were in the elevator.

"Yeah. She didn't know," Olivia replied, wiping away a tear again.

"No, she didn't." Alex agreed. "She wasn't being malicious."

"I'm overreacting."

"You're allowed to hurt, Liv," Alex reassured her, placing a soft kiss on her cheek. "Let's grab some coffees and get going. I want to curl up next to you in front of the fire and smell the ocean."

"Me too." Olivia agreed, and went to get the coffees while Alex got the car from the parking garage.
A few hours later, they were standing on the balcony of the ferry to Edgartown, and Olivia had just come back from the bar with two glasses of red wine. She took Alex's free hand again and sipped her drink, looking out onto the ocean.

They sat in silence, neither really sure what to say, until their wine was almost gone. "Lex?" she said softly, looking over to see how beautiful Alex looked with her hair whipping in the breeze.

"Yeah, Liv?"

"What if I tried it? I know we agreed it wasn't a great idea, but…"  

"You're high risk. And you have a dangerous, physically taxing job."

"So delivery would be high risk, but 'advanced maternal age' has to do more with egg quality than delivery. Like you said, your eggs are fine. Kathy had Eli at 42 and they were both perfectly fine, car accident and premature delivery notwithstanding."

"My eggs, your uterus? Whose sperm? Elliot's?"

Olivia grimaced. "Eww, gross. Don't even say that. We'd get a donor, again. Maybe even one of the ones we tried before." She looked into Alex's eyes. "Look, before your second miscarriage, before Nate, before—" she waved her hand in the air "all of this, IVF for me wasn't a great option. But it's the only option we have left, if this is what we want."

"It is what I want, Liv, but it's still not a great option."

"Well, short of some rogue judge granting us guardianship of a random unclaimed child who shows up at SVU some day, I'm not sure what other options we have. I'm healthy and in good shape, and I've still got a few years before menopause. It's not that outside the realm of possibility, is it? Why don't I get a checkup, and we can ask the doctor about the risks based on my health? And if she says it's too risky, then we'll be no worse off than we are right now."

"I just thought you didn't want to try anymore. And I'm not sure how much more disappointment we can take."

"I don't want to get rejected by any more adoption agencies or have another baby taken back from us. And I certainly don't want you to risk your health again. But if we don't at least look into this option, don't you think we'll always regret it? At least if we try, even just once, we'll know."

"I suppose. Just one doctor's appointment, and then we'll discuss it. Let's not agree to anything more than that before we know what the risks will be."  

"Deal." Olivia wrapped her arms around Alex, kissing her deeply. "You know, gay marriage is legal here," she whispered in Alex's ear.

"I'm from Massachusetts; I'm aware. But I'd rather wait until it's legal in New York," Alex whispered back. "Besides, nobody's asked me yet."

"Hm, that's too bad. You seem like you'd be quite the catch." She pressed a kiss below Alex's ear.

"Liv, couch, fireplace… Not here with an audience."

Olivia nodded and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm going to take these glasses back. Meet you down at the car? Looks like we'll be there in a few minutes."
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